EFFECTIVENESS OF NONSENSE WORDS IN TEACHING PHONEMIC TRANSCRIPTION

Arshad Mahmood[1], Muhammad Uzair[1], Gulap Shahzada[2], Zafar Khan[3] & Muhammad Iqbal But[4]

[1]National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan
[2]Institute of Education & Research, University of Science & Technology Bannu
[3]Institute of Education & Research, Gomal University Dera Ismail Khan
[4]Government Zamindar Postgraduate College, Gujrat

ABSTRACT

Phonemic transcription discards all those letters which are not required for the pronunciation of a word though they are orthographically valid. This means phonemic transcription helps learners in improving pronunciation. But still there is a problem and that of a different nature; how to learn and master phonemic transcription, especially of a language like English that is phonologically very rich as well as fertile in being capable of producing a variety of allophonic shades in different phonological environments. Therefore, foreign learners of English often find it hard to grapple with English phonemes, especially the vowels. As a result, they commit mistakes of varying nature while transcribing English words in phonemic alphabet. The present experimental study was conducted in National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad to find out the effectiveness of nonsense words in improving learners' recognition of the phonemic alphabet and by extension their performance in the same. The study sample consisted of two equal groups- a Control Group and an Experimental Group each comprising 30 members. After the treatment phase, the Experimental Group outperformed the Control Group by scoring higher in the post test. It is suggested that foreign learners of English should be taught pronunciation through phonemic transcription.

Keywords: *Pronunciation, Phonemic transcription, Nonsense words, NUML.*

INTRODUCTION

Globalization has shrunk geographic boundaries of the countries of the world. As a result, the people of these countries have now drawn quite close to one another. This has caused an increase in the need of such a pronunciation of English that would be intelligible to and naturally acceptable by its users from different linguistic backgrounds. This means teaching of pronunciation of English words to foreign learners should be carried out in such a way which helps them break off the shackles

of habitual hearing and habitual articulation under L1 influence. Apparently, it seems to be a difficult thing to enable foreign learners of English to get hold of its pronunciation aspect, especially by teaching it through traditional methods. It is primarily because of non-phonetic nature of English. According to Schane (1970, p.137), English spelling is far from perfect, and that it is teeming with inconsistencies, irregularities, as well as out-and-out oddities. In a study on the orthographic patterns of English and Urdu, Aslam (2007) found out that English is a non-phonetic language and Urdu is a phonetic language. Phonetic nature of Urdu is the result of inherent logic that its orthography carries where each letter stands for one and only one sound in most cases.

Dickerson (1985) and Kelly (2000) also suggested that the English spelling by itself is an insufficient guide.In a study conducted by Hashmi (2011), he found out that the students were able to pronounce most of the single sounds without any problem but they were trapped by the orthography of English that hoodwinked them into pronouncing the same sound in a wrong manner. Another study carried out by Abbas (2011) suggested that Pakistani learners tend to copy the pattern of Urdu spelling system for pronouncing English words…they tend to pronounce each letter in a word. Besides orthographic problems posed by English, there are many issues related to its phonemic nature which very often trap foreign learners of it in terms of its pronunciation. A study conducted by Akram and Qureshi (2012) on pronunciation problems of Pakistani learners of English suggested that Pakistani learners often commit mistakes in the pronunciation of /ɜ:/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/ and/ ɔɪ/ sounds. They found out that Pakistani learners of English change /ɜ:/ into schwa /ə/, /ɒ/ and /ɔ:/ into something more open like /a: /. Similarly, their treatment of / ɔɪ /is also different from that of the native speakers. They produce this sound with the help of /w/ sound.

Another study carried out by Khan (2009) reveals some interesting facts about the Pashto speaking students in the area of English diphthongs. Khan (2009) further found out that the learners with Pashto background cannot correctly articulate the English diphthong/ ei / (p.80) ...cannot manage the articulation of /uə /sound(p.130)...they are badly trapped by the articulation of /boy/sound(p.91) and so on. Hashmi (2011) substantiates this claim by saying that Pakistani learners of English have the tendency to incorrectly pronounce English words mainly because of their inability to articulate the sounds of English. Dickerson (1985) refers to the same when he talks about "Hindi speakers' problem with /θ/, the Korean's confusion of /e/ and /ae/, the French speakers' loss of /h/ in words like happy*".*

Looking at the innumerable orthographic problems posed by English for its foreign learners, one may find that English spelling would not have been that difficult if the language had not been so rich in terms of vowel sounds. The very nature of vowel sounds sets them in opposition to consonant sounds. Consonant sounds are quite tangible and are produced with conspicuous place and manner of articulation mainly because of constriction of the speech organs. On the other hand, vowels don't involve such narrowing. According to Trask and Scotwell (2007, p.321) a vowel is a human speech sound which is produced without any obstruction or blockage of the air stream.

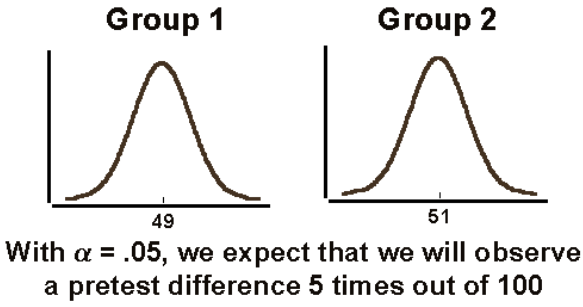
Given the richness of English sound system, one can claim that teaching of English pronunciation to its foreign learners is a hard nut to crack. Besides, it is a component that is often overlooked by syllabus designers and policy makers. According to Levis (2005), although pronunciation is part of the curriculum in many adult education programs, it is often not included in state language proficiency standards or addressed systematically in instruction. As regards practical teaching of pronunciation and factors affecting students' pronunciation of a foreign language, teachers and researchers have been conducting researches for decades to find out better solutions (e.g., Brown, 1994; Celce-Murcia et al., 2000; Gillette, 1994; Kenworthy, 1987, Kanoksilapatham**,** 1992). Teachers of pronunciation have been using different methods and techniques to teach pronunciation effectively. According to Schaetzel & Low (2009), pronunciation exercises that relate to daily use of English include, for example, role-plays of requests that learners have to make (e.g., to ask a boss for a day off or to ask a bank teller to cash a check). Some found Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, popular in the 1950s and 1960s, very useful in this regard. This hypothesis claims that the difficulties that a language learner might encounter can be anticipated by contrasting the features of two languages, (Crystal, 2003; Fries, 1952).

The present study is the continuation of the same tradition. It aims to find out the effectiveness of the dictation of nonsense words in helping Pakistani learners of English become proficient at phonemic transcription. The employment of such words is very effective since learners are not concerned with the confusing and mind boggling orthographic patterns of English. As a result, their focus is on the target language sounds and their place/manner of articulation.

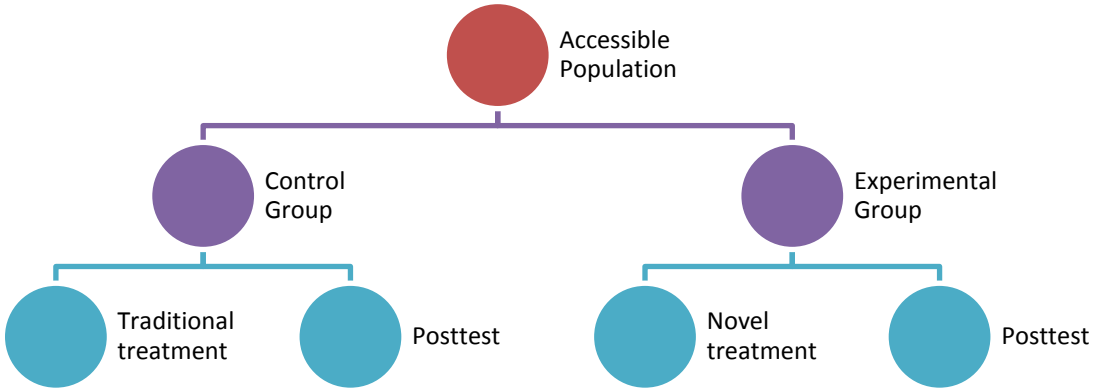
RESEARCH DESIGN

It is a two-group post-test only randomized experiment. It was not a random selection of study groups though the assignment was random and probabilistic equivalence was achieved through the mechanism of random assignment to groups. Since it was a

random assignment, it was a true experiment. The following figure shows the state of probabilistic equivalence between both the groups.



There are three essential components of an experimental study design: (1) pre-post-test design, (2) a Treatment Group and a Control Group, and (3) random assignment of study participants. The following diagram presents the step-wise explanation of the whole process of the present study.



Research Hypothesis

Learners who are taught phonemic transcription with the help of dictation of nonsense words perform better than those learners who are taught phonemic transcription through a traditional method.

Objectives

The researchers undertook the study with the aim to find out:

The effectiveness of nonsense words in developing learners' recognition of English phonemes

Research context and sampling

The study was conducted at Diploma level in the Department of English FC (Functional Courses) National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad. There were six sections of Diploma each carrying at least 30 students. Two out of these 6 sections were selected in a non-random way for the present study. However, they were randomly assigned to Control Group and Experimental Group. Each section was taught English sounds for about 3 hours a week and this treatment phase continued for 12 weeks in all. During the treatment phase, Control Group was taught phonemic transcription by giving them practice of English sounds and their transcription in the form of words and by extension sentences of varying length. On the other hand, the Experimental Group was given dictation of hundreds of nonsense words (Appendix-A) after they had recognized the sounds to some extent. The students in both the sections shared the academic background and had almost same linguistic proficiency and they were doing this subject for the first time in their academic career. Naturally, the researchers did not dispense any pre-test.

Tools of data collection

A posttest was prepared by the researchers to collect the relevant data from the study sample. The post test was dispensed among the students of both the groups at the end of the treatment phase. The test consisted of 50 marks wherein students were supposed to answer 4 different questions.

DATA ANALYSIS

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Control Group	30	15	32	23.03	5.189
Experiment Group	30	22	40	28.97	4.745
Valid N (list wise)	30				

The very first column of the table carries the names of the study groups which are Control Group and Experimental Group. The second column shows the total number of the subjects in each group. The third column presents the minimum scores obtained

by the members of the study group whereas the fourth column indicates the maximum scores of the subjects. The second last column presents the Mean of Control Group (23.03) and the Mean of Experimental Group (28.97). By comparing the performance of both the groups in terms of their Mean, we can easily judge the cumulative difference by 5.94 which are quite significant.

It means the Experimental Group outperformed the Control Group in the final performance which shows the effectiveness of the Independent Variable, which was the dictation of nonsense words, provided to the Experimental Group for 12 weeks in the form of treatment. The last column of the table displays the Standard Deviation which simply means how far the scores of post-test deviate from the Mean values (23.03 & 28.97) of both the groups. Looking at these Standard Deviation Values of Control Group and Experimental Group which are 5.189 and 4.745 respectively, we can observe that the Experimental Group has smaller deviation from the Mean. In other words, the experimental treatment caused a positive difference to the dependent variable: learning of phonemic transcription by Experimental Group. Now looking at the Coefficient of Variation for Control Group$= \frac{5.189}{23.03} \times 100 = 22.53\%$ and that of Experimental Group$= \frac{4.745}{28.97} \times 100 = 16.38\%$, we can conclude that there is lesser variability in the post test scores of the latter which shows that the treatment affected the learning of the members of the Experimental Group significantly.

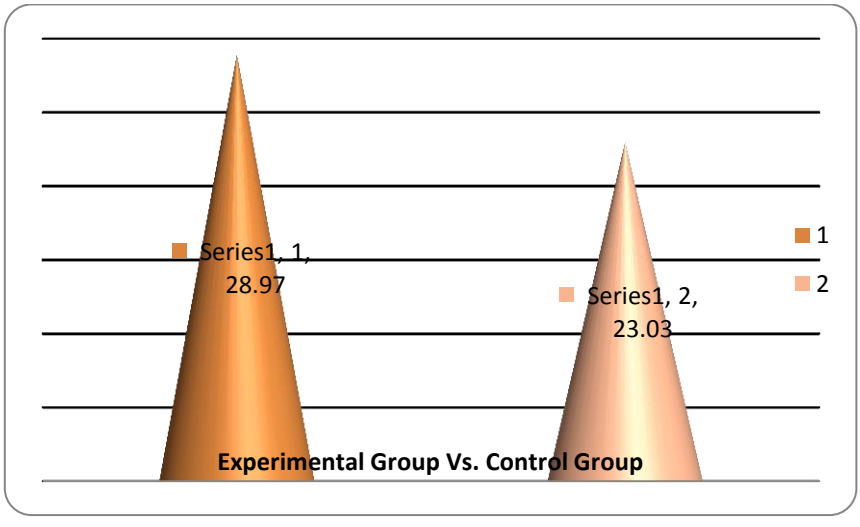


Figure 1: Graphic presentation of Scores

The figure shows the performance of both the groups with the help of the mean value of each. The left cone shows the mean value of Experimental Group which is 28.97 whereas the right cone shows the mean value of Control Group which is 23.03. The

vertical scores from 0 to 30 show the average scores of both the groups. The left cone, which is taller and higher, indicates the performance of Experimental Group whereas the right cone, which is smaller, shows the performance of the Control Group.

DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the treatment phase, students faced some difficulty in learning the art of phonemic transcription though they found it interesting and useful. The performance of both the group shows that a traditional method of teaching English transcription may not be as effective as a novel one. Breaking English sounds into two major classes of consonants and vowels, it was found that the members of the study sample were not seriously troubled by the former. What really taxed the subjects, especially the Control Group, were the vowel sounds including monophthongs, diphthongs as well as triphthongs. The analysis of the post-test shows that subjects committed different types of mistakes though the tendency was more common among the members of the Control Group. Firstly, they mixed up certain sounds. Secondly, they wrote an entirely incorrect sound. Thirdly, they were badly confused by spellings of certain words which hoodwinked them into transcribing them wrongly.

The analysis of the data gathered from the Experimental Group shows that they performed better than the Control Group. The dictation of nonsense words given to them for 12 weeks helped them tremendously in developing deeper understanding and appreciation for English phonemes. This helped them in coping with most of those sounds which did not exist in the sound system of their mother tongue. Despite better performance on the whole, the Experimental Group, like Control Group, seemed to struggle with schwa at times which shows the complicated nature of this sound. Looking at the performance of the groups, one may find that students committed these mistakes because of the fact that English is a very rich language phonologically. Naturally, foreign learners of English coming from a linguistic background remote from it face problems in learning its pronunciation in the form of phonemic transcription

FINDINGS

- The members of the Experimental Group performed better than the members of the Control Group.
- The groups show different Mean Values as well as Standard Deviation Values.
- Both the groups did not have any serious trouble in transcribing English consonants during the treatment phase though some members of the Control

Group were confused between v and w sounds ,especially in words which did not carry either of these letters, for example 'one' , 'language', 'linguistics' and so on.

- The members of the Control Group very frequently confused either two monophthongs or a monophthong and a diphthong or a diphthong and a triphthong.
- Both the groups were often trapped by schwa sound and they were deceived by the very letter used in the spelling of the given word.
- It was very common among the members of the Control Group to confuse schwa/ ə /, 'hut' sound and the so-called 'hesitation' sound.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings of the research, the researchers have put forward the following suggestions and recommendations:

- It is a very good idea to teach phonemic transcription with the help of non sense words.
- Teachers should pay more attentionto the English sounds which do not exists in the mother tongue of learners.
- Teachers should give a lot more practice of those target language sounds which learners tend to confuse,for example/ ɔ: / and / ɒ / and the last three English monophthongs,/ ʌ /,/ ɜ:/and/ ə /.
- Teachers should pronounce these nonsense words with an utmost care so that students don't get confused.
- It is better to tackle with English monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs separately at the beginning.
- Teachers should give mixed and extensive practice of all three above mentioned categories of vowels at a later stage.
- Teachers should pronounce nonsense words carrying v and w sounds with a very clear and noticeable place of articulation for these are two very confusing English consonant for Pakistani learners of English.
- It is better to coin nonsensewords carrying voiceless consonants since they seem to sound more audible and carry farther. For example, it is easier to perceive 'shosi' than 'jozi'.

CONCLUSION

Teaching of pronunciation can be made interesting as well as more productive if it is carried out through some novel method. The use of nonsense words is one such

method since learners are not bothered about the orthographic intricacies of English which is notorious for its sound vs. spelling controversy.

REFERENCES

Abbas, S. (2011). Identification of pronunciation problems regarding uttering centring diphthongs at elementary level in Pakistan navy model school. *National University of Modern Languages,* Islamabad.

Akram, M. & Qureshi, A. B. (2012). Problems in Learning and Teaching English Pronunciation in Pakistan**.** *International Journal of Research in Linguistics & Lexicography*: 1(4), 43-48.

Aslam, N. (2007). Pronunciation errors regarding English consonant clusters in the speech of the students of certificate class a NUML case study. (Unpublished Master's Thesis). *National University of Modern Languages,* Islamabad.

Brown, H. (1994). Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy. New Jersey: *Englewood Cliffs*.

Crystal, D. (2003). A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics. *Oxford: Blackwell*.

Dickerson, W. B. (1985). The invisible Y: a case for spelling in pronunciation learning. *TESOL Quarterly, 19* (2), 303-316.

Fries, C. (1952).The structure of English. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World. *Georgetown Law Center*, Washington, DC.

Gillette, G. (1994). On speaking terms: Practical guide to pronunciation for ABLE/ESL teachers. Euclid, OH: *Northeast ABLE Resource Center*.

Hashmi, M. A. (2011). Problems Faced by the Students of OPF in the Articulation of English Monophthongs (Unpublished Master's Thesis). *National University of Modern Languages,* Islamabad.

Kanoksilapatham, B. (1992). An analysis of English pronunciation of third year English major students. Silpakorn University: *Nakhon Pathom*.

Kelly, G. (2000). How to teach pronunciation, Malaysia: *Pearson education limited*.

Kenworthy, J. (1987). Teaching English pronunciation. New York: *Longman*.

Khan, S. (2009). Problematic sounds of English for the Pakhto (Pashto) speakers. A case study of Yousafzai dialect. (Unpublished Master's Thesis). *National University of Modern Languages*, Islamabad.

Levis, J. M. (2005). Changing contexts and shifting paradigms in pronunciation teaching. *TESOL* Quarterly, 39 (3), 369-377.

Murcia, M., Brinton, D., & Goodwin, J. (2000). Teaching pronunciation: A reference for teachers of English to speakers of other languages. Cambridge: *Cambridge University Press*.

Schaetzel, K. (2009). Basic Principles of Teaching Pronunciation to Adult English Language.

Schane, S. (1970). Linguistics, spelling, and pronunciation. *TESOL* Quarterly, 4 (2), 137-141.

Trask, R. L., & Stockwell. P. (2007).Language and Linguistics: The Key Concepts. New York: *Taylor & Francis*.