

Challenges in English Language Learning Faced By Kokborok Students in the Context of Tripura State

Mery Rupini (rupinimery@gmail.com)

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Degree College, Khumulwng, Tripura, India

Dr. Khawlsongkim Suantak (khawlsongkimsuantak@tripurauniv.in)

Assistant Professor, Department of Linguistics and Tribal Languages, Tripura University, Tripura, India



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee JRSP-ELT (2456-8104). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License**. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). Crossref/DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.7.40.002>

Abstract: *In this modern, globalised society, English is the most influential languages in the world. Needless to say that, a person who has proficiency in this language has a greater advantage to grab the opportunities in different field than those who lack the proficiency of the language. Hence, necessity of learning English as a second language has been felt by the students in this competitive world. One would not deny the fact that learning a non-native language is not an easy task. The learner has to face many challenges in the process of learning a second language. This paper deals with the analysis of challenges face by Kokborok students in learning English as a second language from the phonological perspective.*

Keywords: ESL, Globalised Society, Kokborok, Phonology and Phonetics, Tripura State

Article History: Received: 13 Nov -2023; Accepted: 25 Nov- 2023; Published/Available Online: 30 Nov- 2023

Introduction

Tripura is one of the north-eastern states of India, inhabited by multi-cultural and multi-lingual group of populations. Linguistically, Kokborok has second majority speakers, after Bengali. The Kokborok speakers in Tripura are- Debbarma, Jamatia, Reang (Bru), Murasing, Tripura, Kolo, Uchoi and Rupini. A State, being resided by different linguistics group of populations, knowing more than one language is beneficial for communicational exchange among the populations. Hence, learning a Second language (L2) is prevailing in the present communicative world. English being the most dominant language of the world is preferred by most students to chose English as a Second language. But it is often found that students are not able to come up with excellent results, especially in the phonological systems of a target language.

A person who speaks multiple languages has greater opportunities than someone who does not in this highly competitive era. But there is no short cut way to learn anything; same is the case in learning another language. To learn a Second language is not an easy task. To come out with successful result of the task, one has to face multiple challenges in the process of learning. Second Language (L2) is any language learnt after the first language or mother tongue (L1). It is common knowledge that not all languages spoken on Earth use the same sound systems. These can cause ESL students a great deal of difficulty when they are learning to phonetically navigate their new language. If English includes a sound that was not spoken in their native language it can be very challenging for the students to learn how to produce the sound physically.

Objectives

The objectives of the study are to find out the challenges which Kokborok students face in the process of learning English. This research aims to examine the difficulties that Kokborok students encounter when learning English due to the phonological discrepancies between the two languages and emphasize various phonological problems/errors which they faces while learning English as a second language and wherever necessary, point out the cause of the difficulties and then suggest some of the remedial measures to make the learning easier.

Methodology

To carry out the present study, both primary and secondary data have been consulted and collected. Primary data has been collected by engaging Kokborok students with some reading materials to observe their performance in producing the sounds of every word in the reading materials. The Kokborok and English phonemes have been compiled from secondary sources, such as books, articles and doctoral theses.

Analysis

Phonology is the study of how sounds are organized in a language; and how speech sounds are organized in the mind and used to convey meaning. The complete sound system of every language is composed of several sounds. Some languages share many similar sounds and some do not. So to carry out the study about the differences between L1 and L2 and to examine those difficulties while speaking and writing, theoretical background of Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA) are essential. The Contrastive Analysis (CA) method, which Lado (1957) introduced, makes the assumption that errors exist, mostly as a result of interference from the native language, and then looks for potential locations for these deviations. However, in actuality and in real-world scenarios, the various mistakes highlighted by the CA do not truly exist in the strength that is presumed.

Whereas, the Error Analysis (EA) approach advocated by Corder (1967) examines speaker's competence without any pre-conceived notions as to their cause. Since the errors as specified by Corder are real and attested deviances they are non-random and systematic in nature. The errors are significant because, the Contrastive Analysis (CA) mainly lays emphasis on the teaching materials and methods while in Error Analysis (EA), the errors studied, tell us about the second language learners learning process, adopting, rejecting and reformulating different hypotheses. The errors analyzed show that majority of the errors are attributed to dialectical and first language interference, and some are attributed to other intralingual factors. While the features of the EA's result attest to the learners' actual difficulties, the CA does not account for errors caused by factors other than transfer or interference. This paper attempts to describe such attested phonological deviances and their causes.

In the light of subsequent works (Lado, 1957; Corder, 1967), this paper will confer the phonological differences between Kokborok and English and the errors made by the Kokborok students in learning English as a second language. Kokborok and English belong to different language families with diverse phonological structures. Kokborok belongs to Bodo-Garo group of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan language family whereas English belongs to the West Germanic group of the Indo-European language family. One of the major factors which causes some complexities for a Kokborok students (speakers) when learning English as L2 is because of the differences between first language (L1) and second language (L2). The lesser is the differences, the easier is to learn the language for the learners and vice versa. So, the interference from L1 to L2 is one of the basic difficulties in learning a second language specifically, in its pronunciation. Like other languages English and Kokborok also possesses their specific nature and particular habits, as a result certain type of phonetic problems are due to arise for the learners.

A student faces numerous obstacles when he chooses to start learning a new language. One of the numerous challenges is learning to recognize, classify and produce the sounds of the language he is learning. If the sounds of the language he wishes to learn are very different from the language he has grown up speaking, acquiring the new language will be more of a challenge than if the second language is phonologically similar to his first language. So, it is imperative to analyze the sound systems of Kokborok and English and detect the differences of the sound system between the two languages.

Segmental Features of Kokborok and English

Vowels: The vowels of Kokborok and English can be described in terms of the following vowel diagrams.

	Front <i>unrounded</i>	Central <i>unrounded</i>	Back <i>rounded</i>
<i>High</i>	i	ĩ	u
<i>Mid</i>	e		o
<i>Low</i>		a	

Table 1: Kokborok Vowels

	Front <i>unrounded</i>	Central <i>unrounded</i>	Back <i>unrounded rounded</i>
<i>high</i>	i, I		ʊ, u
<i>high-mid</i>	e		o
<i>Central-mid</i>		ə	
<i>Low-mid</i>	ɛ	ʌ	ɔ
<i>Low</i>	æ		a

Table 2: English Vowels

After a close observation of the vowel systems of Kokborok and English given above, it is found that the vowel systems of Kokborok and English are in some way, different from each other with unequal numbers of vowel. Kokborok has 6 vowels with two front vowels /i,e/ , two back vowels /u,o/ and two central vowels /u,a/ respectively, while English has 12 vowels ,five front vowels /i,I,e,ɛ,æ/ , five back vowels /u,ʊ,o,ɔ,a/ and two central vowels/ʌ, ə/. In Kokborok, the English front low unrounded vowel/æ/ and the mid unrounded vowel /ʌ/ is absent. And also, instead of the English back low rounded vowel/a/, Kokborok has low central vowel/a/.

The absence of low front vowel /æ/ in Kokborok leads to some difficulties in the production of this sound by the Kokborok native speakers. In most cases, this vowel/æ/ is substituted with the mid front vowel /e/. For example, the word ‘bat’ will be pronounced as [bet] not as [bæt]; ‘mat’ as [met] not as [mæt] etc.

Another difficulty the learners may come across is the position of the vowel /a/. English has the low back rounded vowel/a/ while it is a low central vowel in Kokborok. The difference in position of the same vowel can also create a great confusion for the native speakers in producing words such as ‘ calm’ , ‘ card’ , ‘ car’ , etc. That is to say that, the native speakers might end up replacing these vowel sounds with a low central vowel /a/.

It is also further noticed that, the Kokborok learner replaces /ʌ/ of English words with the low central vowel /a/. For example, the word ‘cup ’will be pronounced as [kap] and not [kʌp].

Hence, from the analysis of the above description it is clear that, correct pronunciation of the sounds of the target language is very essential. The faulty pronunciation of the sounds of the target language can cause misunderstanding or miscommunications between the native speakers and other target language speakers and vice versa.

Consonants: The differences in the consonantal phonemes between the two languages also hinders in the process of learning second language. In Kokborok there are 20 consonants but English has 24 consonants. It is obvious that the learners will face with great difficulties to deal with those sounds that are not present

in their native language and are totally new to them .The consonantal phonemes of Kokborok and English are given below:

	Bilabial		Alveolar		Palatal		Velar		Glottal
Stops	P	b	t	d	c	j	k	g	
	p ^h		t ^h				k ^h		
Fricatives		s							h
Nasals	m			n				ŋ	
Lateral				l					
Trill				r					
Semi vowels	-	w				y			

Table 3: Kokborok Consonantal Phonemes

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Glottal
Stop	P b			t d				k g	
Nasal	m			n				ŋ	
Affricate						tʃ dʒ			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z		ʃ ʒ			h
Lateral				l					
Frictionless Continuant					r				
Semi-vowel	w						j		

Table 4: English Consonantal Phonemes

After comparing the two consonantal systems of Kokborok and English, from the above table, it is noticed that Kokborok lacks the palate-alveolar fricatives /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ and it is variously replaced by alveolar fricative/s/ and palatal stop/j/ as in words such as ‘shine ’and ‘leisure’. It is also noticed that dental fricative/θ/ and /ð/ replaced by /t^h/ and /d/. For example, the word ‘then’ with an initial /d/ is misunderstood as ‘den’. Kokborok also lacks the palate-alveolar affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ they are often substituted by palatal stops /c/ and /j/. For example, the word ‘chip’/tʃip/ will be produced as/cip/.

It is also further noticed that Kokborok lacks the labio-dental fricatives/f/ and /v/. This causes great difficulty for the Kokborok learners in producing, some of the English words, with correct pronunciation. For example , the words ‘friend’ is pronounced as’ phren’ and ‘ very’ as’ beri’ respectively.

The existence of metathesis, where the position of consonant is interchanged, is discernable in the articulation of some English words, by the kokborok learners. For example, the words ‘desk’ is pronounced as ‘daks ’; ‘flask’ as ‘ flaks’; ‘risk’ as ‘riks’. This process is also a result of analogy because in Kokborok, these words due to articulatory problem have been simplified in these forms.

After analyzing the phonological contrasts of both Kokborok and English, we can assume that most of the sounds are different and do not exist in Kokborok. Some of the sounds which cause major problems for the Kokborok learners in learning English are shown below:

English	Kokborok	English	Kokborok
/f/	/p ^h /	/tʃ/	/c/
/v/	/b/	/dʒ/	/j/
/θ/	/t ^h /	/ʃ/	/s/
/ð/	/d/		

The Kokborok learners do not have any problems with the other remaining English sounds and they do not find difficulty in producing those sounds with correct pronunciation. Due to the absence of these phonemes in Kokborok, the learners use those sounds which they feel, are nearer to the English sounds.

Therefore, it is assumed that the old phonological habit cannot be changed in a short time and the new habit is often influenced by the old habit. It is therefore necessary for the students to use the Kokborok equivalents of these sounds.

Findings

From the above discussion, it has come to the light that, due to the phonological differences between Kokborok and English sounds system, Kokborok learner faces a numerous problems in learning English. They find difficult to produce those sounds which are not present in their mother tongue or native language. Interference from learners' native tongue also contributes to these. The interference of first language in the second language learning prevents the learners from producing correct speech of the target language. This leads to modifications in the English lexical forms, which also affect the semantics and occasionally even cause the meaning to be lost.

Conclusion

After the analysis of the sound system of both the languages, it has been noticed that there are some sounds that are different or absent in Kokborok. Owing to the variations in or lack of specific sounds in Kokborok, learners encounter challenges when pronouncing certain English words correctly. In order to learn a second language with ease and perfection, the learners must, first and foremost, have the mastery in the sound system of L2. The students will not be able to comprehend and pronounce sounds correctly if they do not have a working knowledge of the L2 sound native system. The faulty pronunciation sound of the words made by the learners may lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between the speakers and the target language speakers and vice versa. Thus it can be assumed that, to gain a proficiency in the target language the learner should first have the depth knowledge about the working of the L2.

Suggestions

In the light of the above discussion and findings, it is imperative to mention few suggestions for the ESL teachers that, they should check such error and give remedy for them whenever the errors occur in learner's speech. And for correct pronunciation, the teachers must stress on the sounds that are not present in the language of learners and also make them aware of the different phonological rules in the two languages. The teachers should make a phonological chart of the language and extensive Phonetic drills should be conducted in the language laboratory.

References

- Corder, S. Pit (1967). *The Significance of Learner Errors*. IRAL.
- Debbarma, Samir (2009). *The Structure of Kokborok*. (A PhD thesis submitted to Assam University, Silchar). <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/90312>.
- Debbarma, Sheela (2021). *A comparative phonology of Kokborok dialects An analytical study of literary Kokborok Reang and Jamatia dialects*. (A PhD thesis submitted to Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Tripura). <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/368085>.
- Ellis, Rod. (2015). *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Gussenhoven, C., & Jacobs, H. (2017). *Understanding Phonology* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315267982>

K. Mishra, Awadesh, et al., editors (2013). *STUDIES IN LINGUISTICS OF NORTH-EASTERN LANGUAGES*. New Delhi: Lakshi Publishers & Distributors.

Lado, Robert (1957). *Linguistic Across Cultures*. University of Michigan Press.

Roach, Peter (2009). *English Phonetics and Phonology: A Practical Course*, Fourth Edition. Delhi: Cambridge.

Singha, Kh. Dhiren (2013). "The Phonological Typology Of The Tibeto-Burman Languages Of The Northeast : A Preliminary Investigation" in AK Mishra, Melissa Wahlang & Ch. Sarajubala (eds), *Studies in Linguistics of North-Eastern Languages*, New Delhi: Lakshi Publishers and 10 Distributors, Pp. 146-160. (ISSN: 978-81-906622-7-7)

Suantak, Khawlsongkim (2013). "Phonological Variations in Vaiphei and English" in AK Mishra, Melissa Wahlang & Ch. Sarajubala (eds), *Studies in Linguistics of North-Eastern Languages*, New Delhi: Lakshi Publishers and Distributors, Pp. 189-195. (ISSN: 978-81-906622-7-7)

Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the help of my supervisor, colleagues and friends whom I had consulted while writing this paper. I am especially indebted to Dr. Khawlsongkim Suantak, my supervisor, and Dr. Biman Debbarma, Linguistic Officer, and my PhD colleague Timothy Tripura, who have been supportive and who worked actively to provide me with the protected academic time to pursue this research paper.