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AN INVESTIGATION INTO PRONUNCIATION PROBLEMS OF HAUSA-SPEAKING LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

There is no dearth of publication on pronunciation problems of different L1-background learners in EFL contexts; however, research in ESL situations (where English is spoken outside the classroom) in general, and in the Nigerian context, in particular, is scarce. Accordingly, to fill this research gap the present study set out to investigate the pronunciation problems of Hausa speakers of English in Nigeria. To achieve the goals of the research, 60 native speakers of Hausa studying at three universities in Northern Cyprus participated in the study. The participants' pronunciation problems of English were elicited by mean of a pronunciation test that consisted of a word list, a short paragraph, and 15 individual sentences. Moreover, 15 pictures were shown to the participants to name while being audio-recorded. All the test items contained English consonants and vowels with potential pronunciation difficulties for Hausa speakers of English. The collected data were then transcribed and analyzed, and percentages and frequencies of pronunciation errors were computed. The results revealed that native speakers of Hausa face problems in pronouncing certain English vowels (i.e., /ʌ/, /ɔ:/ and /ɜ:/) and consonants (/f/, /v/, /θ/ and /ð/). Theoretically, the findings lend support to the notion of negative transfer as all of the errors were the result of mother tongue interference. The findings are interpreted to have pedagogical implications for ESL teachers and syllabus designers in general and in Hausa-speaking communities, in particular.

Keywords: Pronunciation problems, segmental phonemes, negative transfer, Hausa speakers of English.

1. Introduction

Pronunciation plays an important role in communication since serious mispronunciation can hamper intelligibility. As Morley (1991) asserts, "intelligible pronunciation is an essential component of communicative competence" (p. 488). Therefore, EFL/ESL teachers should not ignore the pronunciation problems of their students. Similarly, second-language learners should attempt to improve their pronunciation of the target language. They can do without advanced vocabulary, i.e., they can use simple words instead of difficult ones to express themselves (Tomasz, 2011). They can also avoid using complex grammatical structures when they do not feel comfortable with them and use simple ones, instead (Schacter, 1977). However, there is no such a thing as simple pronunciation. Therefore, a second language learner's mispronunciation can be considered problematic because, even if s/he uses correct grammar and advanced vocabulary, listeners may face difficulties understanding him/her (Tomasz, 2011).

One of the most controversial issues in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) is the role played by mother tongue (MT) in learning different components of the target language. Although the original version of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) has been rejected for

assigning all errors to MT interference there is sufficient evidence in favor of some degree of negative transfer. In fact, a large body of research has demonstrated that the structure of the learners' L1 has an impact on L2 acquisition. As Odlin (2005) states, "study after study has shown real effects of the negative language [negative transfer]" (p. 478). There is also general consensus that the influence of the learners' MT is most noticeable and long-lasting in the area of pronunciation, as compared to grammar and vocabulary. There is abundance of research findings that support this view (Ingram & Park, 1998; Lin, 2001; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014; Ohata, 2004; Ringborn, 1987; Sedighi, 2010; Thompson, 1991; Tsojon & Aji, 2014; Zhanmig, 2014).

2. Review of Related Empirical Studies

Many research studies have been conducted on the pronunciation problems of EFL learners with diverse language backgrounds, all pointing to the influence of the mother tongue. Some of these studies are reviewed below.

Varol (2012) investigated the influence of Turkish sound system on English learners' pronunciation. The findings of his study revealed that Turkish adult speakers of English face difficulties in pronouncing /θ/, /ð/, /ɹ/ /ɻ/ and /æ/ as these sounds are absent in their native language. Bada (2001) also conducted a study on native language influence on the production of English sounds by Japanese learners. Bada's findings confirm that Japanese learners of English experience difficulty in pronouncing some English sounds including /l/, /r/, /θ/, /ð/, and /v/ due to MT interference. Another study was conducted by Kwary and Prananingrum (2006) who investigated the influence of L1 on the production of L2 sounds among Indonesian university students. The findings showed that participants faced difficulties in pronouncing a number of English vowels and consonants due to negative transfer. Along the same line, the results of Pal's (2013) study showed that Hindi speakers of English experience major difficulties in pronouncing /s/, /ʃ/, /z/, /ʒ/ and /dʒ/ as well as consonant clusters. Hakim (2012) also found that among a few sounds he investigated, the pronunciation of English /d/ and /ð/ was most difficult for Java EFL learners. Similarly, Chan (2009) investigated the pronunciation problems of advanced Cantonese ESL learners in Hong Kong. The results showed that despite the fact that the participants were English majors and had studied English for at least thirteen years they still had problems with pronouncing English sounds that did not exist in their native language. Another study on the influence of the MT was conducted by Baloch (2013). The findings of this study showed that Arabic learners of English replace /b/ with /p/ as a result of mother tongue interference. Since Arabic lacks the consonant /p/, speakers of this language replace it with the closest sound in their native language sound system, in terms of place and manner of articulation, namely /b/.

Some studies have also been conducted in the Nigerian context focusing on English pronunciation problems of speakers of different Nigerian languages, e.g., Igbo (Linda, 2011), Yoruba (Akinjobi, 2009), Igala (Opanachi, 2013), Jukun (Tsojon & Aji, 2014), and Nguru (Isa, 2011). However, research on pronunciation problems of Hausa speakers are scarce, with the exception of Abubakar (2008), and Mohammed (2011). Therefore, to fill this research gap the present study set out to investigate the problems of Hausa speakers in pronouncing a number of problematic English sounds.

Before elaborating further on the research project, it seems necessary to provide some information about the status of Hausa in Africa, in general, and in Nigeria, in particular.

3. The Hausa Language

Hausa is one of the major languages of Africa. In fact, the largest ethnic group in Africa today are Hausa speakers. They are living in the states of Northern Nigeria and neighboring Niger. However, Hausa is also spoken widely in Northern Cameroon, and there are Large Hausa-speaking communities almost everywhere in West African cities. In fact, Hausa has more native speakers than any other language in Sub-Saharan Africa. The estimated number of Hausa native speakers is 22 million. In addition, over 17 million people speak Hausa as a second language. Most Hausa-speaking people are Muslim, and Hausa serves as a lingua franca among Muslims in non-Hausa speaking regions (Schuh, 2004).

It needs to be added that Hausa native speakers in Nigeria use English alongside their native language. English is taught in native Hausa areas in Nigeria as a subject in primary schools. Moreover, it is used as a medium of instruction in upper primary and secondary schools as well as in higher education. Mass media programs in this region use both Hausa and English extensively (Mohammed, 2011). Therefore, as Bernard (1991, cited in Mohammed, 2011) argues “the influence of one language over the other is extremely important in a situation of prolonged and systematic language contact” (p. 37). (For a comprehensive account of phonological features of Hausa see Schuh, 2004, 2008).

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. To what extent do Hausa-speaking learners of English have problems with the pronunciation of the English consonants /f/, /v/, /θ/, and /ð/?
2. To what extent do Hausa-speaking learners of English have problems with the pronunciation of the English vowels /ʌ/, /ɔ:/ and /ɜ:/?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

Sixty male Hausa-speaking students were randomly selected as the sample from three universities in Northern Cyprus. According to the information obtained through a demographic questionnaire, the participants were all raised in Hausa-speaking communities in Nigeria where there is not much interaction with native or non-native speakers of English in society or work place. The participants had not travelled to any English-speaking country, except for two students who had spent a short period of time (two to three weeks) in the United States. Their age ranged from 19 to 31 years old. It must be emphasized that only volunteers who were not majoring in English were chosen as participants in order to collect more authentic data considering the fact that English majors normally have less pronunciation problems owing to their linguistic and phonetic training.

4.2 Instrumentation

A demographic questionnaire and a pronunciation test were used as the instruments for collecting data. The objective of the background questionnaire was to obtain demographic information about the participants including age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence, and more importantly native language background and the amount of exposure to English. The participants were also asked if they had travelled to and/or lived in an English-speaking country.

The purpose of the pronunciation test was to elicit pronunciation errors of Hausa-speaking learners of English. The test consisted of a word list, a set of sentences, a short paragraph, and 15 pictures, all containing problematic phonemes for Hausa speakers of English. The content and form of the pronunciation test and questionnaire items were revised a few times to increase their validity and reliability. For example, complicated words and confusing pictures were replaced by simple and familiar words, and clear pictures, respectively.

4.3 Data collection and analysis procedures

The participants were asked to read aloud English words and sentences and describe the pictures containing problematic English sounds while being audio recorded. Each recording lasted around 5-7 minutes for each participant. The recorded data were then transcribed and analyzed after listening to each participant's pronunciation a few times. A sample of the pronunciation transcriptions was also presented to and confirmed by a Hausa-speaking professor in an English Department in Nigeria. Next, participants' mispronunciations were categorized and frequencies and percentages of both errors and correct pronunciations were computed.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

The participants were informed about the aim of the study and were assured that their identity would remain confidential. They were also informed that the data collected from them would only be used for research purposes. Furthermore, they were given the option of dropping out any time they wished.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of data analyses for problematic English consonants and vowels will be presented separately below.

5.1. Problems of Hausa speakers in the pronunciation of the English consonants /f/, /v/, /θ/ and /ð/.

The first problematic English consonant investigated was /f/. As Table 1 shows, most of the participants (86.7%) mispronounced /f/ as /p/, as in words such as 'African', which was pronounced as /æprikən/, *farm* as /pə:m/, *father* as /pə:zə/, *fan* /pæn/, *fond* /pond/, *funny* /poni/, *from* /prom/, *briefly* /bripli/. This is due to the fact that the phonetic features of Hausa /f/ differs drastically from English /f/. In English, /f/ is always labio-dental (i.e., it is produced by a contact between the lower lip and the upper front teeth), whereas in Hausa, /f/ is realized and pronounced as the voiceless bilabial stop /p/ (Schuh, 2008).

With regard to the second consonant, only 18.3% of the participants pronounced the English voiced labio-dental /v/ correctly; the rest of them (81.7%) mispronounced it as /b/, as in *moving* /mubin/, *visitors* /biziters/, *evening* /ibenin/, *coverage* as /koberedʒ/, *lovely* as /lobli/ or /lobeli/, *TV* /ti: bi:/, and *very* as /beri/. The main reason for this mispronunciation is MT interference as /v/ does not exist in Hausa. Therefore, Hausa speakers replace it with /b/, which is the closest sound to /v/ in terms of place of articulation and voicing. This finding supports the results of Mohammed's (2011) study. It is also in line with Schuh's (2008) description of Hausa consonants. Based on these results, it can be concluded that when Hausa speakers have difficulties with the English labio-dental fricatives /f/ and /v/, they rely on the existing bilabial plosives (stops) /p/ and /b/ in their native language, respectively. It is interesting to note that in the process of mother tongue transfer, the speakers maintain consistency in terms of voicing. That

is, they substitute the voiceless fricative /f/ with the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/. Similarly, they replace /v/ with /b/ since they are identical in terms of voicing.

The next problematic consonant was the voiceless dental fricative /θ/. As Table 1 illustrates, in the majority of cases (66.7%), the participants mispronounced the English consonant /θ/ as /t/ in words such as *think* /tink/, *thin* /tin/, and *thirty* /te:rti/. Normally, Hausa speakers replace /θ/ with /s/, but since younger generation of Hausa speakers, according to Aliyu (2011), tend to drift to Southern Nigerian English pronunciation (in which /θ/ is realized as /t/), this substitution has become more popular among Hausa speakers in other regions, as well. Consequently, the participants in this study, who belong to the young generation, replaced /θ/ with /s/ less frequently (28.3%). This seems to be related to the prestige of Southern Nigerian English - an interesting phenomenon which is of sociolinguistics significance and demands further investigation.

Another substitution for /θ/ was /z/, as in *'Thursday'* /zurzdei/, and *'toothpaste'* /tuzpest/. However, this pronunciation error is not significant due to its low frequency of occurrence (only 3.3%). It is worth noting that only 1.7% of the participants pronounced /θ/ correctly.

The replacement of /t/ for /θ/ has also been observed in the pronunciation of other EFL learners with different native language background. Sedighi (2010), for instance, found that her Persian-speaking participants substituted /t/ for /θ/ since this sound does not exist in Persian. Varol's (2012) participants also replaced /θ/ with /t/. He attributed this substitution to the influence of Turkish sound system on English pronunciation since /θ/ does not exist in Turkish. Likewise, Bada (2001) conducted a study on the transfer of Japanese sound system on the pronunciation of English phonemes. His participants also substituted /θ/ with /t/. Similarly, participants in Linda's (2011) study, who were Igbo speakers in Nigeria, replaced /θ/ with /t/. In the same vein, Opanachi (2013) found that Igala-speaking learners of English in Nigeria pronounced /θ/ as /t/, as in *thick* /ti:k/, *method* /metəd/. All of these findings point to the influence of learners' mother tongue in the production of the target language sounds.

The last English consonant investigated in the present study was the voiced dental fricative /ð/. As Table 1 displays, the most frequent substitution for this sound was /z/ (60%). Key words for this pronunciation include *father*, which was mispronounced as /pazə/, *further* as /pə:zə/, *there* and *their* as /zeər/. This is due to the fact that this consonant does not exist in Hausa, as a result Hausa speakers replace it with /z/, which serves as the closest sound to /ð/ in terms of manner of articulation and voicing. Less frequently, /ð/ was mispronounced as /d/ (33.3%), as in *'the'* /de/, *therefore* /derpor/, *that* as /dæt/, *this* as /dɪs/. The replacement of /ð/ with /d/ may be due to drifting towards Southern Nigerians English pronunciation by some participants. As mentioned before, Aliyu (2011) asserts that young Hausa speakers drift to Southern Nigerian English pronunciation, whose features include /t/ and /d/ for /θ/ and /ð/, respectively.

The above finding supports Mohammed's (2011) study which indicated that Hausa speakers of English pronounce /ð/ as /z/. Similarly, Jowitt (1991) and Kperogi (2013), in their descriptive studies, listed /ð/ as one of the problematic English consonants for Hausa-speaking learners of English.

The same result has been found in studies dealing with pronunciation problems of other L1 speakers of English. For example, Hakim (2012) reported that Javanese speakers of English have difficulties in pronouncing /ð/, i.e., being under the influence of the mother tongue, they replace /ð/ with a sound similar to /d/. Nosratinia & Zaker (2014) also found that their Persian-speaking

learners of English had difficulties with the pronunciation of /ð/ and replaced it either with /d/ or /z/. Along the same line, Linda (2011) observed that Igbo speakers of English replaced /ð/ with /d/. Similarly, Bada (2001) found that Japanese learners of English pronounced /d/ instead of /ð/ due to MT interference.

Table 1 below illustrates the frequency of Hausa speakers' mispronunciation of English problematic consonants.

Table 1. *Frequency of Hausa speakers' mispronunciation of English problematic consonants*

Problematic Consonant	Participants' Mispronunciation	Frequency and Percentage of Mispronunciation	
		No.	%
/f/	/p/	52	86.7
/v/	/b/	49	81.7
/θ/	/t/	40	66.7
	/s/	17	28.3
	/z/	2	3.3
/ð/	/z/	36	60
	/d/	20	33.3

Figure 1 displays the percentage of errors made by the participants in the pronunciation of English consonants. As illustrated, errors in the pronunciation of all four English consonants (i.e., /θ/, /ð/, /f/, and /v/) have a high percentage of occurrence. As mentioned before, the reason for such mispronunciation is mother tongue interference since these English consonants do not exist in Hausa.

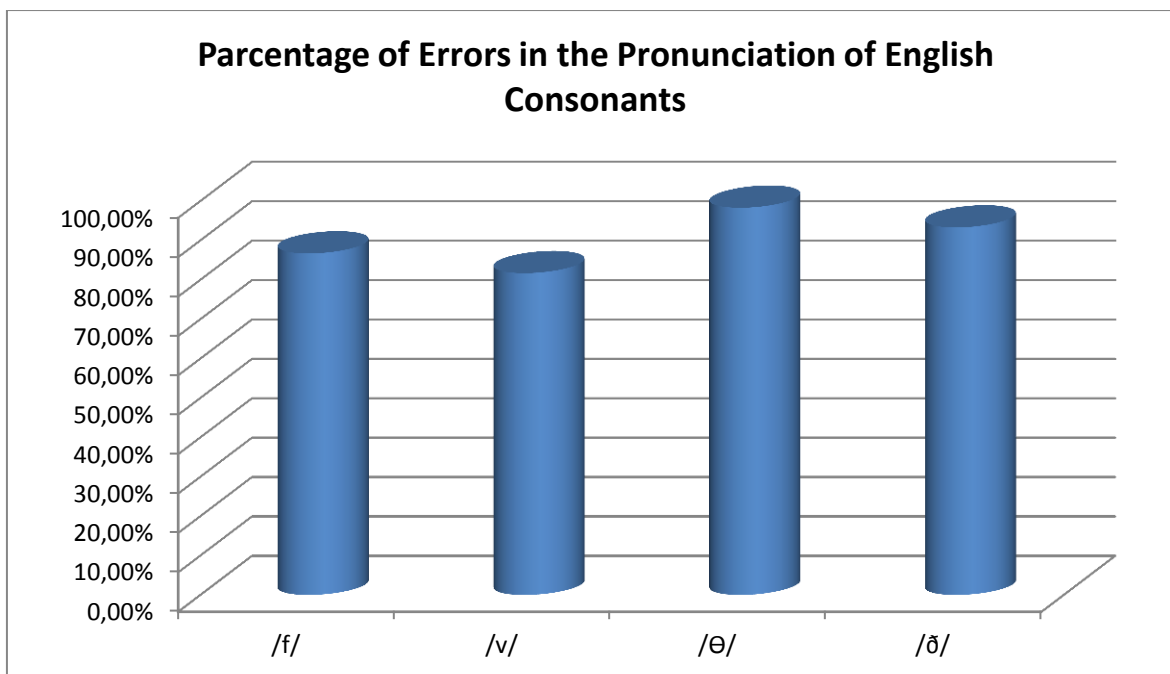


Figure 1. Percentage of errors in the pronunciation of problematic English consonants

5.2. Problems of Hausa speakers in the pronunciation of the English vowels /ʌ/, /ɔ:/, and /ɜ:/.

As Table 2 shows, the phonetic representation of participants' mispronunciation of the English vowel /ʌ/ is /o/, with 85% frequency, as in *young* /jɔŋ/, *brush* /broʃ/, *cup* /kɒp/, and *lovely* /lobeli/. This seems to be due to the fact that the vowel /ʌ/ does not exist in Hausa hence they replace it with the existing Hausa vowel phoneme /o/. This result is consistent with Mohammed's (2011) finding that Hausa speakers of English replace /ʌ/ with /o/. Jowitt (1991) also mentioned that the English vowel /ʌ/ is problematic for Hausa speakers of English.

The second problematic vowel was /ɔ:/. As illustrated in Table 2, the majority of participants substituted the English vowel /ɔ:/ with /o/ (91.7%) in words such as *water* which was mispronounced as /wotə/, *saw* as /so/, and *ball* as /bol/. The reason for this mispronunciation seems to be the fact that this vowel is nonexistent in Hausa. Therefore, Hausa speakers have the tendency to replace it with /o/, which is shorter and less open than the English vowel /ɔ:/. This finding is in line with Mohammed's (2011) study that shows Hausa speakers of English pronounce /ɔ:/ as /o/. Jowitt (1991) also listed this vowel as one of the problematic sounds for Hausa speakers of English.

The third problematic vowel was /ɜ:/. As Table 2 shows, this vowel was pronounced as /e/ in words such as *girl*, with 40% frequency, and as /o/ in words such as *slurry* and *slurpee*, with 38.3% frequency. A small number of the participants (8.3%) also pronounced /ɜ:/ as /a/ in words such as *girl* and *further*; however, this pronunciation error is insignificant due to its low frequency. The reason for these mispronunciations seems to be negative transfer as Hausa lacks the English vowel /ɜ:/. Linda (2013) also found that Igbo speakers of English in Nigeria replace /ɜ:/ with /e/, as in *girl* /gel/. The same result was obtained by Mohammed (2011) with regard to Hausa speakers of English.

Table 2 . *Frequency of mispronunciation of problematic English vowels by Hausa speakers*

Problematic Vowels	Participants' Mispronunciation	Frequency and Percentage of Mispronunciation	
		No.	%
/ʌ/	/o/	51	85
/ɔ:/	/o/	55	91.7
/ɜ:/	/o/	23	38.3
	/a/	5	8.3
	/e/	24	40

Figure 2 below illustrates the percentage of errors made by the participants in the pronunciation of English vowels. As can be observed, the vowel /ɔ:/ has the highest percentage of occurrence (91.7%), followed by /ɜ:/ with 86.6 percentage. The percentage of /ʌ/ was slightly lower than the other two vowels.

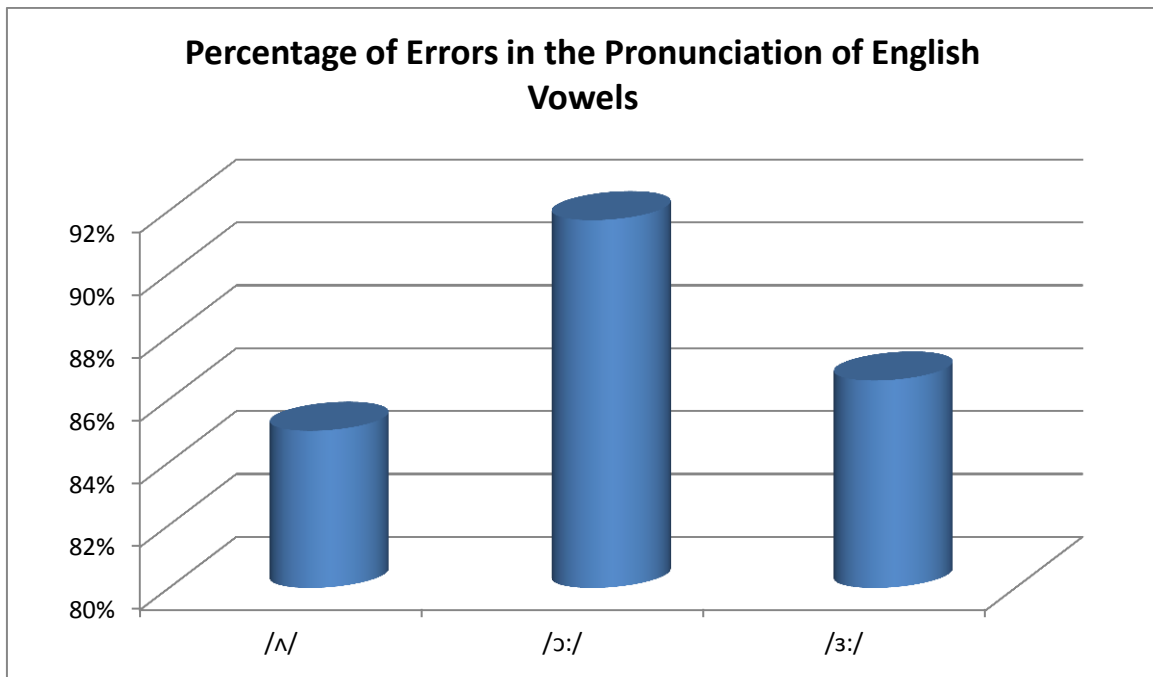


Figure 2. *Percentage of errors in the pronunciation of English vowels*

6. Conclusion and Implications

The results of the present study lend support to previous literature in favor of negative transfer and Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis in the area of pronunciation. As stated above, all of the

errors made by Hausa-speaking learners of English were due to the fact that the consonants and vowels under investigation do not exist in Hausa. Empirical studies conducted in other EFL contexts, with different L1 background students of English, have reached the same or similar conclusion. See, for example, Ingram & Park, 1998; Lin, 2001; Nosratinia & Zaker, 2014; Ohata, 2004; Ringborn, 1987; Sedighi, 2010; Thompson, 1991; Tsojon & Aji, 2014; and Zhanmig, 2014. Consequently, the critics of contrastive analysis hypothesis cannot help but acknowledge the validity of this theory with reference to the role of MT interference in L2 pronunciation.

Pedagogically speaking, since only few of the participants pronounced the English phonemes investigated in this study correctly, it can be concluded that these English sounds are problematic for Hausa speakers of English. Therefore, English teachers should receive adequate training in effective teaching of these sounds so that they can help their students improve their pronunciation in English. Students should also be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities in order to improve their English pronunciation through interacting with native or competent non-native speakers of English. However, it needs to be emphasized that the goal of pronunciation teaching should be intelligibility, and not native-like pronunciation as EFL learners do not need native-like pronunciation in order to be comfortably understood.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

Since the participants of this study were all adult university students some pronunciation errors might have been fossilized in them. Therefore, selecting samples from lower levels of education may lead to different results due to the age factor.

In this study, gender was not considered as a variable due to lack of availability of sufficient number of female volunteers. Thus, future researchers may consider the role of gender in pronunciation problems of Hausa speakers of English.

In order to collect authentic and reliable data, only students who were not English majors were selected as participants for this study. Future studies may consider comparing the performance of English majors with students from other disciplines.

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