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Speech intelligibility problems of Sudanese learners of English : an experimental approach

Tajeldin Ali, E.M.

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Ezzeldin M. Tajeldin Ali

Speech intelligibility problems of Sudanese learners of English

An experimental approach

This is a study on the pronunciation and perception of English sounds and words by university students of English in Sudan, whose native language is Sudanese Arabic. The study aims to establish the intelligibility of Sudanese-Arabic (SA) accented English for native English (British and American) listeners and Dutch listeners who use English as a lingua franca. The intelligibility of SA-accented English is compared with that of native English. The study also investigates how well the SA students of English identify English sounds and recognize English words in simple sentences spoken by a native English speaker. The perception tests show that the intelligibility of SA-accented English is predominantly compromised by incorrect pronunciation of the English vowels. This finding was predicted from a contrastive analysis of the Arabic and English sound inventories.

The SA students of English produced the vowels, consonants and consonant clusters of English in controlled materials. Acoustic analyses were carried out in order to establish the differences in pronunciation between SA-accented and native British pronunciation. The comparison revealed substantial discrepancies between the native and non-native varieties, which can be used to explain the degraded intelligibility of SA-accented English.

Written questionnaires were administered in which both SA students of English and their instructors were asked to identify strengths and weaknesses in the students' production and perception of English sounds and words, and to speculate on the underlying causes of the difficulties. The results show that the SA students as well as their instructors have clear intuitions on where the weaknesses are, and that these intuitions correspond closely to the findings of the perception experiments and the acoustic analyses.

This book is of relevance to (applied) linguists and language teachers in general and to specialists on the teaching of English pronunciation and listening skills to university students with an Arabic native language background.

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