

**A STUDY OF THE PHONOLOGICAL USAGE OF THE ENGLISH  
LANGUAGE BY L2 SPEAKERS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN SCHOOLS**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to find out the phonological problems of Selected Secondary School students in the English language. In achieving this goal, 60 students were sampled using descriptive survey design, because it is aimed at collecting data on features and facts about a given population and describing it in a systematic manner.

In conclusion, this study revealed among other things that the selected speakers of English as L2 have problems in the use of English suprasegmental features. The findings however indicate that they can be assisted to overcome these problems.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Background of the Study**

English can be said to be the most widely spoken language in the world, and has become the official language of some West African countries, namely, Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra-Leone, Liberia and the Gambia. In these countries, English is a second language which has been adopted as the official language, partly because it is a colonial heritage, and because it is a neutral language among numerous indigenous languages contending for supremacy.

The most common means by which human beings communicate with one another is language which, primarily, exists in a spoken form. Any other representation of language such as writing is of secondary importance, because most human communication is done orally. A person can only claim to know a language if he/she can speak the language. Hence, second language learning, specifically pronunciation learning, demands correct perception and production of sounds in the target language. The learning process itself tends to be influenced by well-established perceptions of sound and articulatory organs in the first language.

Language is the major tool of communication in human society and speech occupies a major position in most discussions of language as a communicative medium. One of the major characteristics of man, according to Mgbodile (1999), is

his ability to use language to send messages about objects, events and situations around him. Speech is what distinguishes man from other animals. Speech is paramount to any language and knowledge of the English Language cannot be appreciably good without effective manipulation of the speech sounds, for linguistics competence, according to Chukwuma,H and Otagburuagu,E(1997), is based mainly on oracy. So, the mastery of English is highly connected to the mastery of the spoken form of it.

From the early age, a normal child responds to the sounds which his elders use to communicate with him. In his bid to communicate and get his needs identified and satisfied, the child begins to imitate the sounds which he has heard from his elders. His dire need to communicate with the adult community and his constant hearing and imitation of the language make it possible for him to acquire his mother tongue or his first language. Ogbuehi (2003) asserts that every normal child acquires the sound system and the speech patterns of his mother tongue in a normal way through imitation of sounds from adult group.

On the other hand, learning to speak a second language or foreign language usually involves some rigours and challenges because the learner has to learn the sound systems and the prosodic features of the second language against the already firmly consolidated first language in the mind of the learner. The problem is partly that some languages are tonal and syllable-timed and others are stress-timed and

various speech sounds have distinctive acoustic properties. The adjustment to these differences may lead to a mismatch and therefore the learner may produce sounds that cannot be understood by other users of the same language. OnuIgala (1990) asserts that learning to speak a second language is psychologically demanding because the learner already feels comfortable towards the phonological systems of his native language. Mackey (1965) agrees that a person who has been using only one language since early childhood has habits and thoughts which are closely tied to his habits of language, and that language is a part of his experience. He concludes that in learning a second language, the learner has to adjust his speech habits to accommodate those of the target language. This according to Otagburuagu and Okorji (2002) is because languages have their individual peculiar phonological and phonemic features which must be mastered and used by the learner for mutual intelligibility with the native speakers and other users of the language.

Many learners of a second language cannot make this adjustment successfully. They approximate the phonological features of the second or target language with those of their mother tongue. Put in another way, they allow the speech habits of their mother tongue or their first language to interfere with the speech habits of the target language. This phenomenon, according to Akindele and Adegbite (1999), is known in the language register as phonological interference.



Phonological interference is a term which refers to a linguistic occurrence in which two different languages overlap and the linguistic system of one of the languages is transferred into the other in a process of producing the latter which is the second or target language. Interference, according to Baldeh (1990) is the major obstacle in the teaching of the English language and it constitutes a great problem to the learning of a second language for it can hinder mutual understanding and intelligibility and consequently affects performance in target language. This has resulted in the variety of English language in Nigeria called "Nigerian English". Mgbodile (1999) is of the view that mother tongue interference is a great problem to second language learners of English. The Nigerian child should be taught to perceive and produce correct pronunciation, stress and intonation in the target language, which in Nigeria is English.

Teaching correct pronunciation, stress, and intonation to Nigerian children may be difficult as Nigeria is a multilingual country. William (1990) observes that teaching English to students that have different mother tongues other than English is complicated and difficult, and worse still when the learning environment is multilingual. This problem is compounded when one considers the fact that for many students, English is not really their second language but third or even the fourth language. Teaching correct pronunciation, stress and intonation becomes more complex when in a class, Student 'A' may have a problem of distinguishing

the /l/ from /r/ sounds, but this may not be the problem of Student 'B' whose speech difficulty is with the pronunciation of words like 'live' and 'leave' so that they sound differently. Student 'C's own difficulty may be that he cannot help inserting a vowel sound in a consonant cluster. From the spoken English of many Nigerians, one can identify from which area they come from. This is because different speech communities have different phonological and interference problems. Ogbuehi (2003) points out: "Today, there are many "Shibboleths (speech signs) for identifying people from different areas of Nigeria".

In a contrastive study of English and Nigerian languages, Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (2002), discovered that the Yorubas realize /v/ as /f/, e.g. 'very' becomes 'fery', /z/ does not exist in Yoruba so it is substituted with /s/ e.g. 'zeal' is pronounced, 'seal', issue is pronounced 'izzue'. Akindele and Adegbite (1999), also found out that the absence of English sounds such as the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/, voiceless and voiced labio-dental fricative /θ/ and /ð/ and the long vowels /I:/, /U:/ and /a:/ in Yoruba, for instance, make it difficult for Yoruba English bilingual to acquire such sounds. Hence, Yoruba English bilingual will produce 'pat' as /kpæt/, 'fever' as /fifa/, and 'think' as 'tink'. The obligatory /h/ are also dropped hence,

'house' is wrongly pronounced as 'ouse'  
'his' is wrongly pronounced as 'is'

‘hair’ is wrongly pronounced as ‘air’

‘honey’ is wrongly pronounced as ‘oney’

In addition, the Hausa learners of English substitute /v/ for /b/, ‘very good’ is pronounced ‘bery good’, /kw/ is substituted for /k/. So, ‘go’ is pronounced ‘kwo’, ‘come’ is pronounced ‘kwom’, whereas ‘problem’ is pronounced as ‘frobblem’. Some times /v/ is dropped in words like ‘government’ which they pronounce as ‘gworment’

OnuIgala (1990), observed that a second language learner of English that has Igala as his first language can produce ‘pit’ with relative ease, but the same learner may experience some difficulties in producing ‘split’ or ‘spit’ because these words have consonant clusters, but the Igala language has no consonant cluster. Because of this, the Igala learners of English insert vowel in the midst of the consonants. OnuIgala generalizes that Nigerian languages have no consonant clusters. In the English language, there is a regular occurrence of consonant clusters unlike the Igala language that has no cluster but has virtually regular and unchanging pattern of (consonant vowel, consonant vowel (CVCV). Folorine (1975) has the same view with OnuIgala that problematic consonant clusters are the major problem which Igala students encounter in the pronunciation of words. In his article, “The Problems of Students’ English’, he states that learners’ problems may be that the

learner either leaves out one element of the problematic cluster or inserts a vowel within the consonant cluster as in ‘penalty’ which they put an additional syllable in the word as shown below

A	B	C
penalty	/penɔ̃lti	/pena:liti/
grateful	/gretful/	/gretiful/

Group ‘B’ is the correct English pronunciation of the word in column ‘A’ whereas group ‘C’ is the wrongly pronounced Igala form of group ‘A’.

Ogbuehi, C.U (2001) points out that the vowel harmony in Igala words are transferred to the pronunciation of English words, thereby realizing a final vowel pronounced in words with consonant ending as in these groups:

A	B	C
Ball	/bɔ:l/	/Bɔ:lu/
Table	/teibl/	/tebulu/
Head	/hed/	/hedi/
Leg	/leg/	/legi/

Group ‘B’ is the correct English pronunciation of the words in column A whereas group ‘C’ is the Igala version of group ‘A’.

In the usage of English another outstanding phonological problem according to Ugorji (2007) is that some English consonant sounds are not present in the Igala language e.g. /θ/, /ð/ and /ʒ/. Because of this, the Igala learners of English

substitute /t/ for /θ/, /d/ for /ʃ/ and /s/. Consequently, Igalas wrongly pronounce these words thus:

A	b	c
thief	/θif/	/tif/
theory	/θiori/	/tiori/
them	/ðem/	/dem/
think	/θink/	/tink/
casual	/Kæ3juðl/	/kæsuðl/

Group ‘B’ is the correct English pronunciation of group ‘A’ but group ‘C’ is the wrong Igala pronunciation of group ‘A’. Some Igala speaking areas of Nigeria interchange the liquid /r/ with the lateral /l/ thus producing such funny pronunciation like

‘rook’	instead	of	‘look’
‘bred’	instead	of	‘bled’
‘flom’	instead	of	‘from’
‘maly,	instead	of	‘many’

Also the long and the short vowel contrast is rarely made in Igala as in ‘bed,’ /bed/ and ‘bird’ /b3:d/. These two words are pronounced alike by Igala learners of English. The /æ/ in ‘cat’ and /a: / ‘cart’ is also pronounced alike.

According to OnuIgala (1990), diphthongs are also reduced to single vowels by the Igala learners of English since the Igala phonemes are always single. They consequently pronounce, snake / Sneik/ as /Snek/.

In language usage Phonological problem does not only exist due to mother tongue interference (inter-lingual problem). Phonological problem can also be intra-lingual. This is the problem that is inherent in the English language itself. Intra-lingual problems result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than from language transfer. It is caused by inconsistencies of the target language itself. The English language in itself has different varieties. There are the American English varieties (AmE), the British English variety the Australian English variety which Ugorji (2007) identifies as English dialects. These different dialects have different ways of pronunciation, and this pose a great problem to the learners. The word ‘schedule’ for instance, is pronounced ‘ʃedju:l/ by the British but it is pronounced /skedju:l/ by Americans. The internal inconsistencies in English language hinder learning and usage by second language learners and users. This can also be seen in a situation where different spellings may occur in words but in production they are pronounced alike. The long /i:/ vowel sound, for instance, can be realized from different spellings e.g.

‘e’ as in be

‘ee’ as in tree

‘ea’ as in heat

‘ey; as in key

‘i’ as in police

‘eo’ as in people

One may ask, why are all these realized as a single sound /i:/ when they have different spelling symbol

Also the long vowel sound /ɔ:/ can be realized in these spellings:

al as in talk

aw as in saw

ar as in war

oar as in board

or as in sport

‘ore’ as in core

‘oor’ as in door

‘ou ‘ as in bought .

A second language learner may just know how to pronounce ‘good’, and may over generalize that every word with the spelling ‘oo’ is pronounced as /u/ which is wrong. There are still other words that have no double ‘o’ but the sound is realized as /u:/ as in ‘pull’, full’ to mention but two.

There are still words that are exactly the same in pronunciation but their spellings are different. Oluikpe, Anasiudu, Otagburuagu, Ogbonna and OnuIgala (1984)

advise that words like these need to be consciously learnt by second language teachers and distinctly taught to second language learners of English. These pairs of word are pronounced alike but they are spelt differently:

‘coase ‘	/kɔ:s/,	‘courses’	/Kɔ:s/
‘alter’	/ɔ:ltə/,	‘alter’	/ɔ:ltə/
‘fare’	/feə/ ,	‘fair’	/feə/
‘here’	/hiə/,	‘hear’	/hiə/
peace’	/pi:s/,	‘piece ‘	/pi:s/

These pairs of words pose problems to the second language learners. These internal inconsistencies in the English language pose a great problem to both the second language learners and the native speakers of the language alike.

The phonological inconsistencies in English have become so pervasive to both native and second users of the language that Ogbuehi (2003:30) citing Spencer points out,

The phonology of a second language will almost always receive some imprint from the phonology of the mother tongue .... It is a common problem with second language users of English from other areas and even with those that speak English as a first language.

This problem is compounded as some languages in themselves have different varieties called dialect. In Igala language for instance, the extent to which Selected dialect post phonological problems to the learners of the English language that



come from the area has remain a matter of wide speculation. There are about two hundred dialects, of Igala, of which Selected dialect is one of them.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There has been a public out cry about the standard of Usage and performance of the graduates of our educational institutions in Spoken English. The consensus appears to be that the level of performance in spoken and written English has fallen remarkably.

It has been observed by West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSSCE) Chief Examiners' report 2001, 2002, and 2003) that most students score little or nothing in the oral part of the English language examination. Some students find it difficult to communicate effectively, while others shy away from discussions in English. In a school excursion carried out by Comprehensive Junior Secondary School, Selected to Saint Teresa's College, Nsukka in May 2006, it was discovered that the students from Selected were not only shy but were unable to communicate well in English. Most of them got intimidated when they were called up to speak or answer questions in English.

One wonders what the problem could be. In pursuit of the possible cause of this poor performance in oral aspect of the English language, the phonological Usage of English language by selected Secondary School Students is examined.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Basically, the purpose of this study is to find out the phonological Usage of English by selected secondary school students of selected origin.

Specifically, this study attempts to:

- a. Carry out a contrastive study of English and Selected dialect of Igala.
- b. The extent to which the mother tongue interferes with the use of English stress rules by Igala speakers.
- c. The extent to which the tone pattern of the Igala language has affected the use of intonation in English by Igala speakers.
- d. The extent to which the rhythmic pattern of the English language is observed by Igala speakers of the English language.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. To what extent does the annexing or approximating of English segmental absence in Igala affect the Selected students' performance in spoken English?
2. To what extent does the differences in the speech symbols of Selected students studying English affect their performance in oral English?

3. To what extent does the absence of consonantal clusters in the Igala language affect the Selected learners of English proficiency in the oral aspect of English?
4. To what extent does the intra-lingual problem in English affect the performance of Selected students of English in their oral production of the English language?

### **Significance of the Study**

The need for the English language in Nigeria cannot be undermined. It is the yardstick with which the standard of education at all levels of school in Nigeria can be measured. Proficiency in all subjects without at least a credit pass in the English language prevents one from obtaining university education.

Curricula Planners and designers may profit from this study because it could guide them on areas to place emphasis on in planning curricula in order to improve the overall performance of those who use the language. Publishers of books on the English language may find this work helpful because it could help them to identify the problem areas for the Igala users of English so that they can focus attention on such areas in their publications. If these problems are systematically and judiciously addressed, learners and users of English as a L<sub>2</sub> will make tremendous improvement in the language.

To the teachers of English, the result of this study will provide an invaluable insight into the nature of the problems and the different ways they manifest themselves, so that they will know how to manage them.

This modest endeavour will be a positive move in the direction of increasing the corpus of knowledge and of scholarship in the area.

Above all, this study may stimulate the minds of scholars to explore more comprehensively the issues and findings that have been brought to the fore with a view to tackling decisively the problems of phonology in English of Nigerian users of the language.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This study will be carried out in Selected secondary schools in Kogi state, and it will use students of the senior secondary II. The study will focus only on the supra-segmental phonemes.