

An Analysis of English Pronunciation Errors among Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State Nigeria

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Abstract - *English language pronunciation errors among students in Senior Secondary Schools in Nigeria demand an intensive study because of the importance of good spoken English language for academic progress of these students. This study therefore analyzed the common English pronunciation errors committed by Senior Secondary School Students in Kwara State. The descriptive survey design was utilized. This involved the random sampling of twelve (12) schools from the Senior Secondary Schools in the state. Systematic sampling technique was used to select one hundred and twenty (120) sampled cases and students' performance in a Test of Orals (TO) was analyzed along with the demographic features using chi-square inferential statistics at 0.05 significance level. Classification of students based on teachers' gender, students' gender, types of schools, parents' educational qualification and school location provided the various parameters upon which the analysis was done. The major findings of the study revealed that most of the students {78 (65.0%)} committed segmental errors and a significant difference existed between students' pronunciation errors based on teacher's gender while students' gender, school type, parents' educational qualification and school location have no significant difference. This implies that the teachers' gender should be an important consideration when effective teaching and learning of oral English in Secondary Schools is the main concern. It was therefore recommended that segmental aspect of English Language pronunciation must be given priority in the school syllabus. Government and private school stakeholders should employ trained female oral English teachers more than male in the public and private secondary schools.*

Key words: *Oral English, pronunciation errors, segmental and supra-segmental sounds*

INTRODUCTION

The term phonology is derived from two Greek morphemes 'phono' which means sound and 'logy' which means study [1]. This means that phonology is the study of the sound systems in contrast with phonetics which studies all possible sounds that the human vocal apparatus can make. Phonology studies only those contrasts in sounds (the phonetics) which make differences of meaning within language. Most linguists define phonology in a way that captures the basic preoccupation of the discipline.

Phonology is divided into two – segmental phonology and supra-segmental phonology. The former, also referred to as phonetics, deals with vowels (monophthongs, diphthongs and triphthongs), consonants and their combinations to form syllables and words. The latter, also known as prosody, is concerned with the way in which these vowels and/or consonant combinations can be varied using

alternatives in intonation, stress, rhythm, accent speed of speaking, etc. These operate at the word and sentence levels.

The Segmental: Generally, the human language consists of an infinite number of abstract sound units that are arbitrarily combined to form words or other stretches of utterances following a pattern permissible in a language [2]. In English, the words 'cake' and 'fake' are only distinguished by the initial sounds /k/ and /f/ which causes the difference between the two words. Likewise, the words 'pool' and 'wool' are distinguishable by the consonant /p/ and /w/ which are distinctive and contrastive. By this contrast, linguists conclude that the best way of identifying the phoneme of a language is by setting up minimal pair [3].

The phonemic inventory in English language can be grouped into two main kinds: consonant and vowel

phonemes. The vowel phonemes are of two main types – monophthongs (Pure vowels) and diphthongs.

A vowel is a sound produced without audible friction of the air stream from the lungs. Gimson [4] describes vowel as central, resonant, continuant oral sounds. He viewed them as central because there is no friction in their production, as continuants because they do not involve any obstruction of the airstream and as oral sounds because they are normally produced with all the air passing through the mouth as the velum is raised except in exceptional situations where there is modification. Cruthenden [3] submits another dimension to these definitions when he says that the English vowel sounds are made with voice aggressive airstreams without an obstruction as it is in many consonant vowels.

All vowel sounds are produced with a degree of vocal cord vibration. Thus, all vowel phonemes are voiced. Vowels are also described as the central part or the nucleus of a syllable. Experts in the field of phonetics have often measured the duration of English vowels in different phonetic contexts namely; the long vowels, the short vowels and the diphthongs [5]; [6]; [3]. The monophthongs, whether long or short, are produced when the articulatory organs remain in a single position in the oral cavity.

Monophthongs are vowels with just one vowel element each, one vowel nucleus and therefore just one point of articulation. They can also be classified into long and short vowels. Monophthongs are twelve (12) in number.

The diphthong is a combination of two pure vowel sounds. The starting point of a diphthong is always the position of a short vowel sound and the direction in which the tongue glides is towards the position of another short vowel sound. The loudness and length of a glide is concentrated on the first vowel and it reduces as it moves to the second. There are eight diphthongs in English language. Three diphthongs exist in English during the production of which the tongue glides towards /i/. These are /ai/, /ei/ and /ɔi/. The tongue glides towards /ʊ/ giving the diphthongs /əʊ/ and /aʊ/.

However, Gimson [4] observes that “the diphthong /ʊə/ seems to be experiencing a progressive decline in its use, for instance, the word “poor” /pʊə/ is now pronounced as /pɔ:/.” There are five (5) closing diphthongs and three centering ones. These are /iə/, /eə/, /ʊə/, /ei/, /ai/, /ɔi/, /aʊ/ and /əʊ/.

According to Roach [6], triphthongs are the most complex of the English sounds. He posits that the three vowel sequences are generally held to be

composed of one of the diphthongs /ei/, /ai/, /ɔi/, /aʊ/ and /əʊ/ plus a schwa /ə/. Examples are: layer /leɪə/ fire /faɪə/, etc. A glide from one vowel to another and then to a third, all produced rapidly and without interruption, is known as triphthong. There are five (5) triphthongs in English language. They are:

/ei/	+	/ə/	=	/eɪə/	in
player		/pleɪə/			
/ai/	+	/ə/	=	/aɪə/	in
higher		/haɪə/			
/əʊ/	+	/ə/	=	/əʊə/	in
mower		/məʊə/			
/aʊ/	+	/ə/	=	/aʊə/	in
shower		/ʃaʊə/			
/ɔi/	+	/ə/	=	/ɔɪə/	in
royal		/rɔɪə/			

Consonant sounds are speech sounds that are produced when there is an obstruction in the flow of air through the vocal tract [7]. They are sounds produced when there is a construction of the vocal tract at some points such that it impedes the flow of air from the airstream through contact with other speech organs.

There are twenty-four (24) consonant phonemes in English language. The English consonant can be described based on three parameters, which are: the place of articulation, the manner of articulation and the state of glottis.

The Supra-segmental phonology of the English language is also referred to as the prosodic features in systemic grammar. The supra-segmental cannot be isolated in speech; they contribute in some ways to the meaning of whatever we say. These include: stress, pitch, intonation, tone, tempo, etc. [21] states that stress can be studied from the point of view of production and of perception; the two are obviously closely related, but not identical. 16]: 131) defines stress as “the degree of prominence with which a syllable is uttered.” Enaibe [2] observes that pitch is influenced by the tension of the vocal cords. If the vocal cords are stretched, the normal melodic height of sound will go up. It is like a degree of highness or lowness of one’s speech. Pitch is part of our signaling system. Although, we employ many degrees of pitch in speaking, we use only four levels of relative pitch as phones - extra-high, high, normal and low. These variations of pitch we make in speaking affect the intonation of our speech.

Tone is shown or heard in how something is being said. It is more like an attitude rather than being a voice pattern. The meaning of the word depends on its tone. Emotion has a great deal of influence to one’s

tone. By using different tones, the words in a sentence can have different meanings [3]. According to Adegbite [9] tempo of speech is the relative speed or slowness of utterance which is measured by the rate of syllable succession/movement. In English, speakers try to make the duration of pauses in a sentence between the stressed syllables. If there are three or four unstressed syllables between the stressed syllables, the unstressed syllables will be spoken faster, so that the speaker can keep the rhythm. Hence, English is a “stress timed language”.

According to Adegbite [9] intonation is the rise and fall of the pitch (the degree of highness or lowness of a voice), when we speak. Roach [6] states that any definition of intonation must recognise that the pitch of the voice plays the most important part. Driving home his point, he further adds that one of the most important tasks in analyzing intonation is to listen to the speaker's pitch and recognize what it is doing.

Researchers and experts in the field of phonetics have identified three major intonation patterns – the falling pattern, rising pattern and the compound pattern (fall-rise or rise-fall pattern) [6]. This study however concentrates on the segmental aspect of English sounds.

Despite the conscious efforts made by teachers, parents and government to cultivate good speaking habits in students right from the primary school level to the tertiary institutions, most students have failed to meet up with the expectations of articulating the English sounds well. These problems have persisted particularly when those that are expected to cultivate the knowledge fail to practicalise what they teach. Fakoya [11] discovers that even in situations where training is done, the linguistic capability of training personnel should be considered. Quite a number of them lack the requisite technical knowledge and competence that can demonstrate how the language should be used, especially in different social, official, technical and non-technical contexts.

However, several scholars and researchers [12], [13], [14] in Nigeria have examined the phonological errors in the English usage of some senior secondary school students and worked on attitudes of second language learners of English towards Oral English. But enough attention has not been given to the pronunciation errors in specific areas such as segmental and supra-segmental sounds in English by Senior Secondary School Students especially in Ilorin, Kwara state and the influence of some factors such as teacher's gender, school type school location

etc on the errors committed by the students. This gap in research brings about a knowledge gap, part of which this study intends to address.

This study would be beneficial to secondary school teachers because they would be able to identify important areas of concentration in oral English teaching. The students would also see the need for them to develop positive attitude towards oral English learning considering its importance in their academic progress. Governments both at federal and state level would see the need to give adequate support to the teaching of oral English by providing adequate support to the teachers in the process of teaching oral English. Text book writers especially in the area of English pronunciation would be better educated on the areas to give adequate coverage.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of this study is to analyze the errors of pronunciation in English Language committed by Senior Secondary School students and suggest techniques to be adopted for the amelioration of the situation at the senior secondary school level in Nigeria.

However, this study specifically intends to examine the English pronunciation errors mostly committed by Kwara State secondary school students if English pronunciation errors of students are based on the gender of the teacher; English pronunciation errors along the dimensions of students' gender if English pronunciation errors are based on the type of school attended by the students; if English pronunciation errors are based on parents' educational qualification; and if English pronunciation errors are based on school location.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The population for this study consisted of all Senior Secondary School students in Kwara State. The target population however involved all students in the Senior Secondary School Three (S.S.S. 3). Twelve (12) schools were selected from the three (3) Senatorial districts of Kwara State using random sampling techniques, while systematic sampling technique was used to select one hundred and twenty (120) students and teachers each from the twelve schools- that is, four (4) schools each from the three (3) Senatorial Districts of Kwara State (Kwara South, Kwara Central and Kwara North) using school types (public and private schools), school locations (rural and urban) and gender (male and female) as strata. The research instrument for this study was an

achievement test specifically English pronunciation. The instrument was divided into two sections. The first section (Section A) was a questionnaire which sought demographic information of students while the second section (Section B) tested students' spoken performance of the English segmental and supra-segmentals (articulation of phonemes, stress and intonation). A tape recorder was used to record the voice of the students as they read the test of orals. The statistical tool used was chi-square.

The research method adopted in this study was a descriptive survey of cross-sectional type which aimed at analysing the pronunciation errors committed in English by Secondary School Students in Ilorin, Kwara State. The population for this study consisted of all senior secondary school students in Kwara State. The target population however involved all students in the senior secondary school three (S.S.S.3). Twelve (12) schools were selected from the five senatorial districts in kwara state using random sampling techniques, while systematic sampling technique was used to select one hundred and twenty (120) students from the twelve schools that is, four (4) schools from kwara south senatorial district, four (4) school from kwara central and four (4) from kwara north sanatoria district using school types – public and private schools, school locations – rural and urban and gender – male and female as stratum. The sample consists of ten (10) randomly selected students from each school to make a total of one hundred and twenty (120) respondents.

The instrument used for the data collection was a Questionnaire which sought demographic information from respondents and Test Of Orals (TO) that tested students' oral performance of the English segmental and supra-segmental (articulation of phonemes, stress and intonation). A tape recorder was used to record the voice of the students as they read out the test of orals. The "oral reading tests" for articulatory performance was divided into four segments which include Vowels (monophthongs and diphthongs), Consonants, Stress and Intonation. Through this test of orals, the phonological difficulties usually exhibited by Nigerian English users, especially Yoruba speakers were ascertained. To validate the instruments used for this study, they were given to experts in English in the Department of Arts Education, University of Ilorin to check and approve the structure and content of the instrument in relation to the research objectives so as to establish the face and content validity. The

reliability of the instrument was determined by selecting two senior secondary schools that took part in the real experiment. A sample of twenty (20) students was employed for the test-retest technique using a three (3) weeks interval. The Pearson's Product Moment Statistics was used to process the data obtained for the reliability estimate. The reliability revealed above 0.80 which means it is reliable enough.

On procedure for data collection, two research assistants and the subject teachers of the respondents in each selected school were recruited to assist the researcher in covering the twelve (12) senior secondary schools. The test was administered at the same time in all schools, while the researcher alongside one research assistant went round to collect the data immediately after the test is being administered. The data collected from the respondents were categorized according to the variables of students' and teachers' gender, school type, parents' educational status, and school location. The chi-square inferential statistics was used to test the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Six research questions were raised in the course of this study. Research question 1 was answered using frequency count and percentage while other research questions 2-6 that have corresponding hypotheses were tested using inferential statistic (chi-square) at 0.05 level of significance.

Research question 1: what are the English pronunciation errors mostly committed by secondary school students?

Table 6: English pronunciation errors mostly committed by senior secondary school students.

Errors	f	%
Supra segmental	42	35.0
Segmental	78	65.0
Total	120	100

Table 6 indicates that 42 (35.0%) of the students committed supra segmental errors while the rest 78 (65.0%) committed segmental errors.

Hypothesis one (HO₁): there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed by senior secondary school students based on the teachers' gender.

Table 7: difference in the errors committed by senior secondary school students based on teachers' gender

Teacher's Gender	Remarks	Pronunciation Errors Supra – segmental	Pronunciation Errors Segmental
Female	Count	27	21
	Expected	16.8	31.2
Male	Count	15	57
	Expected	25.2	6.8
Total	Count	42	78
Reject	Expected	42.0	78.0

$df=1$; Calculated χ^2 value = 15.879; tabular value=3.841

Table 7 reveals that the calculated χ^2 -value of 15.879 is greater than the table χ^2 -value of 3.841 computed at 0.05 level of significance, therefore, the hypothesis 1 is hereby rejected. This implies that there is a significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on teacher's gender.

Hypothesis two (HO₂): There is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed by Senior Secondary School students based on student's gender.

Table 8: Difference in the errors committed by Senior Secondary school students based on student's gender

Student's Gender	Remarks	Pronunciation Errors Supra – segmental	Pronunciation Errors Segmental
Female	Count	25	49
	Expected	25.9	48.1
Male	Count	17	29
	Expected	16.1	29.9
Total	Count	42	78
Accept	Expected	42.0	78.0

$df=1$; $p<0.05$; calculated χ^2 value = 0.126; tabular value = 3.841

Table 8 reveals that the calculated χ^2 -value of 0.126 is less than the table χ^2 -value of 3.841 computed at 0.05 level of significance, hypothesis 2 is hereby accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on student's gender.

Hypothesis three (HO₃): There is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors

committed by Senior Secondary School students based on School type.

Table 9: Difference in the errors committed by Senior Secondary School students based on School Type

School Type	Remarks	Pronunciation Errors Supra – segmental	Pronunciation Errors Segmental
Public	Count	26	48
	Expected	25.9	48.1
Private	Count	16	30
	Expected	16.1	29.9
Total	Count	42	78
Accept	Expected	42.0	78.0

$df=1$; Calculated χ^2 value = 0.002; tabular value = 3.841; $p<0.05$

Table 9 reveals that the calculated χ^2 -value of 0.002 is less than the table χ^2 -value of 3.841 at 0.05 level of significance, thus, hypothesis 3 is hereby accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on School type.

Hypothesis four (HO₄): There is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed by Senior Secondary School students based on parents' educational status.

Table 10: Difference in the Errors Committed by Senior Secondary School Students Based on Parent's Educational Qualification

Parent's Education Qualification	Remarks	Pronunciation Errors Supra – segmental	Pronunciation Errors Segmental
Primary education & below	Count	4	4
	Expected	2.5	4.6
Sec. Edu. & its equivalent	Count	14	16
	Expected	10.0	19.5
Sec. Edu. & its equivalent	Count	7	27
	Expected	11.9	22.1
Sec. Edu. & its equivalent	Count	8	15
	Expected	8.1	15.0
Sec. Edu. & its equivalent	Count	9	17
	Expected	9.1	16.9
TOTAL	Count	42	78
	Expected	42.0	78.0

$df=4$; Calculated χ^2 value=6.410; tabular value = 9.488; p -value<0.05

Table 10 reveals that the calculated χ^2 -value of 6.410 is less than the table χ^2 -value of 9.488 computed at 0.05 level of significance, therefore, the hypothesis

4 is hereby accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on parent's highest educational qualification.

Hypothesis five (HO₅): There is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed by Senior Secondary School students based on school location.

Table 11: Difference in the errors committed by Senior Secondary School Students Based on School Location

School Location	Remarks	Pronunciation Errors Supra – segmental	Pronunciation Errors Segmental
Rural	Count	10	12
	Expected	7.7	14.3
Urban	Count	32	66
	Expected	34.3	63.7
Total	Count	42	78
Accept	Expected	42.0	78.0

df=1; calculated χ^2 value = 1.294; tabular value=3.841; $p<0.05$

Table 11 reveals that the calculated χ^2 -value of 1.294 is less than the table χ^2 -value of 3.841 computed at 0.05 level of significance, therefore, the hypothesis 4 is hereby accepted. This implies that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on parent's highest school location.

DISCUSSION

In the process of the discussions and findings, this study was compared with previous studies as reflected in the literature reviewed. Recommendations and suggestions were made for further studies based on the various results obtained.

This study analyzed the English pronunciation errors committed by senior secondary school students in Kwara state. From the data analyzed and results gathered, it was observed that most of the students {78 (65.0%)} committed segmental errors. This could be attributed to field observations that students substitute Yoruba language for English vowel sounds that are not present in any of the Nigerian languages, e.g., sounds such as /ð/, /θ/, /iə/, /ʊə/ and /ə/, /ʌ/. There are 25 different vowel sounds in English, whereas there are not up to a dozen in Nigerian indigenous languages. Nigerian learners therefore tend to collapse

the 25 different sounds into their own limited number of sounds. Specifically, the errors committed by the students include **pronouncing the “th”** sound. The “th” is one of the hardest consonant sounds to pronounce by the students. They pronounced this sound in three different ways: as a “d” (/d/) as in this, that, these, those, they or them; as the voiceless /t/ in three, thing, thought; or as a /t/ as in Thai or Thames. The pronunciation of the /t/ is especially difficult for some of the students; they often say "tree" instead of "three".

Confusing the “f” and the “v”: The “f” and “v” sounds are the stereotypical mistakes some of the students made – they pronounced "fice" instead of "vice", "fafour" instead of "favour".

Pronouncing the short “i”: The short “i” or /i/ as pronounced in words like "live", "sit", "fit", "hit", etc. is another error the students committed as they pronounced them as "leave", "seat", "feat", "heat" respectively.

Pronouncing Silent Consonant: this is one of the problems also encountered by the students. They pronounced consonants that are silent; for example, the “d” in "Wednesday", or the “b” in "womb".

Pronouncing the Schwa: The schwa /ə/ is a sound that is typical in unstressed syllables, for instance in long words like mem(o)ry, choc(o)late or short ones like th(e) or t(o). The students pronounced it /ə/ as /əʊ/, /æ/, /e/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, /i:/. For example, they pronounced "memory" as /meməʊri/, "chocolate" as /ʃəʊkəʊleɪt/, "to" as /tu:/ or /təʊ/, "the" as /di:/, etc. instead of /meməri/, /ʃɒklət/ or /ʃɒklɪt/, /tə/, /ðə/. In addition, they pronounced some words syllable by syllable, e.g. me-mo-ry, cho-co-late, etc.

The second finding revealed that there is a significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary school students based on teacher's gender. The finding corroborated that of [15] who discovered that female teachers seemed to be more positive towards the profession and especially more critical in correct pronunciation than male teachers.

The third finding revealed that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by Senior Secondary School students based on student's gender. The finding also revealed that gender had no effect on the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary students. This corroborated the work of [16] who discovered that sex has no effect on the learning of oral English, that the differences in male and female students may be due to

their interest. Furthermore, the study showed that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary students based on school type. In support of this finding, [17] study also showed that school type had no effect on the teaching and learning of oral English. The researcher therefore stated that "most teachers are not interested in teaching oral English and that either in the private or public secondary school, the attitude of the teacher to the teaching of oral English is pertinent" [17].

The study revealed that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary students based on parents' educational qualification. Studies have found out that the income level and poverty might be stronger predictors of children's cognitive outcome compared to parents' educational status. The study further showed that there is no significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary students based on school location. The finding contradicted the work of Adegbite [9] and [12] who observed that learners living in the urban areas performed better in oral English than their counterparts living in the rural areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The outcome of the analysis showed that most of the students {78 (65.0%)} committed segmental errors of oral English. This may be due to the neglect of teaching prosodic features that influence and modify segmental features, vowels in particular.

The finding revealed that there is a significant difference between the pronunciation errors committed in English language by senior secondary school students based on teacher's gender. This could be attributed to the fact that female teacher of oral English seemed to be more positive towards the profession than male teacher. However, other variables such as student's gender, school type, parents' educational qualification and school location did not significantly influence learner's error. Therefore, learner's achievement may depend on other variables such as individual interest, teachers' attitude, among others.

In view of the findings of this study, male and female teachers of English language should familiarise themselves with the teaching of oral English and also accept the importance of teaching oral English effectively in senior secondary schools. More attention should be given to the teaching of

segmental as well as supra-segmental features of English language. Importance should be placed on the practical aspect of phonology learning, since pronunciation is a crucial and integral part of communication that should be incorporated into classroom activities. It is valuable for a teacher to periodically do a detailed error analysis, to identify systematic error that should be targeted for corrective feedback. From this point, it is possible to know that there are phonic interference and mother tongue interference.

Students should strive to have positive attitude to the learning of oral English in the senior secondary schools. Students should also be aware that improvement in pronunciation is possible if they engage in listening and speaking.

Furthermore, in order to prevent lack of intelligibility and accessibility between senior secondary school students and other users of English around the world, authors of oral English language text books should focus on well-designed courses that are based on communicative tasks, communicative teaching methodology and communicative classroom interaction to avoid Mother Tongue Interference (MTI). Emphasis should be placed on the production of practical English text books for Nigerian senior secondary school students. Students should be encouraged through different practices that could enhance their improvement on oral English.

The government and the society also have enormous roles to play in ensuring that teachers are adequately trained and students well-developed to interact intelligibly with peers internationally. Government should ensure that competent, qualified and trained female oral English teachers are employed.

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