

Patterns of English Pronunciation among Nigerian University Undergraduates: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

The spoken English in Nigeria exhibits features that are explicitly distinctive, and thus, a cynosure for linguistic investigation. This paper undertakes a study of the pronunciation patterns of English words by final-year university undergraduates drawn from four Nigerian universities. Sixty-five (65) respondents, all of them Nigerians, were selected from nineteen linguistic groups using the stratified random sampling technique. The subjects for the study comprised Nigerians with varying sociolinguistic, ethnic, cultural and educational backgrounds. Adopting an eclectic approach for its theoretical thrust, the paper observes that the performance of the respondents poses some major challenges to L2 teachers of English in Nigeria generally. However, the researchers equally observe that there are some prospects depending on the approaches or methodologies adopted for learners and trainees. Based on this observation, the study re-emphasizes the need for appropriateness in pronunciation through the use of computer-aided programmes as teaching aids for proactive and heuristic results.

1.0 Introduction

Since the arrival of English language on the Nigerian soil about one and a half centuries ago, attempts have been made at various times to describe the variety of English spoken and written by Nigerians. The assumptions range from Standard British English (SBE), to Educated West African English (EWE), to Standard American English (SAE), and then, to Standard Nigerian English (SNE) (Babatunde, 2002). Of all these varieties, the candidate that appears to have gained prominence in the Nigerian sociolinguistic terrain, particularly, from the time the Nigeria gained independence as a nation from its former colonial masters, is the Standard British English (SBE) variety. The reason is obvious: Nigeria was an offshoot of British colonial and missionary occupation, and so, the basic language of communication used in governance, trade, education and other purposes was mainly English. This explains why testing and evaluation of academic performance in Nigerian institutions of learning have been modelled after Standard British English, the RP.

However, studies like Banjo (1971,1993), Adetugbo (1977, 2004), Jibril (1979,1982), Eka (1985,2000), Jowitt (1991), Awonusi (2004) and Josiah (2009, 2011), among numerous others, have adequately proved that using RP as a spoken model for Nigerians is merely an exercise that lacks basic justification since the variety of English spoken in Nigeria (just as in any other L2 environment) cannot be said to be truly British. In fact, judging from available documentary evidences so far, most Nigerians do not speak British English. As an extension to this primer observation, there are several unique features that distinguish the spoken variety of English in Nigeria from RP. This agrees with Jowitt's (1991) observation that the English language (particularly in an L2 environment like Nigeria) has defied nature by undergoing 'gynaecological re-processing'. This is why it is necessary to undertake a study of this nature to further investigate into the pattern of an acculturated or a hybridized version of the English language spoken by Nigerians and then propose what language teachers and examination bodies should attempt to do to improve learners' performance in classroom situation.

In a nutshell, this study re-examines the patterns of educated spoken English in Nigeria using the final-year university students in the country as exponents. It examines the spoken speeches of the respondents used for the study and isolates specific 'Nigerianness' in those utterances in an attempt to provide some teaching models for applied linguists to work with in an ESL classroom.

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It observes that the patterns of spoken English existing among the respondents used reflects the concept proposed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in what is usually referred to as “linguistic determinism and cultural relativity”: that the cultural milieu of a linguistic environment influences, and thereby determines to a large extent, the type of language that would exist.

The study analyzes the data collected from 65 respondents and concludes that most Nigerians do not speak any variety similar to RP, even among the educated class, but a model that could be described as Educated Nigerian Spoken English (ENSE).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Many Nigerian students are evaluated in institutions of learning based on SBE. Relatively, much of their pronunciations of English words are also expected to be RP-based. To what extent this expectation is realistic is what this research sets out to investigate. The work primarily attempts to find out if it is justifiable to use an exoglossic standard to evaluate a largely endoglossic learners of English. It also attempts to verify and discover if what has been tagged Standard Nigerian English (Banjo, 1971; Ekong, 1980; Bamgbose, 1982; Eka, 1985; Udofot, 2007, 2011) is adequate for the teaching of the English language in Nigeria; and to justify whether such an English variety passes Banjo’s (1971) model criteria for standardization: social acceptability and international intelligibility.

1.2 The Literature

A number of theoretical approaches have been adopted in examining what constitutes the spoken Nigerian English. One aspect of that attempt has been the use of a variationist or sociolinguistic approach (Brosnahan, 1958; Banjo, 1971; Jibril, 1982; Odumuh, 1987; Fakuade, 1998; Eka, 2000; Udofot, 2004; Olaniyi, 2010). This approach has brought about varieties differentiation to the extent that NE has been delineated into four isolatable varieties (Banjo, 1971; Fakuade, 1998; Eka, 2000; Udofot, 2004).

Another approach has been the adoption of the Contrastive Analysis (CA) model through which any deviant forms have been considered as errors, even among the highly educated class, for instance, newscasters (Aladeyomi and Adetunle, 2007). Besides, the Taxonomic (Autonomous) and/or Generative Phonology models have been used to formulate some basic rules and principles that can help explain the occurrence of certain phonemic features in Nigerian English (Awonusi, 2004; Bobda, 2007). There are also a few cases of the use of Interlanguage Theory (IT) to explain the emerging phonologies of Nigerian English (cf Jowitt, 1991; Ajani, 2007). Gut (2004) has equally made use of the Norm Orientation Theory to investigate final consonant clusters in NE.

Other approaches involves the use of acoustic devices to isolate some spectrographic details indicating the features of Nigerian English (Olaniyi, 2010; Josiah, 2011; Udofot, 2011). Several of such approaches have yielded a large number of literature on NE phonology (cf Brosnahan, 1958; Banjo, 1971; 2004; Adetugbo, 1977; 1987; 2004; Ekong, 1978; 1980; Egbe, 1979; Jibril, 1979; 1982; Bamgbose, 1982; 1995; Eka, 1985; 2000; Awonusi, 1986; 2004; Jowitt, 1991; 2000; Udofot, 1996; 1997; 2004; 2006; Gut, 2004; Aladeyomi and Adetunde, 2007; Bobda, 2007). Parallel studies have also been conducted on the written English in Nigeria (Adesanoye, 1973; Odumuh, 1981). A few others have been on intelligibility studies (Tiffen, 1974; Ekong, 1982). These are a few of the numerous literature that have emerged on the spoken English in Nigerigeria. There are obviously more that are not mentioned here.

1.3 Theoretical Issues

In contact situation, natural languages behave in a manner quite unpredictable. Ajani (2007:1), for instance, remarks that when two or more languages and cultures come into contact, “different types of sociolinguistic chemistry take place”: diaglossia, language shift, attrition, code-switching, creolization, pidginization, birth of a new language or even linguistic (i.e. death of an existing language). This situation has led some proponents of contact linguistics (cf Weinreich, 1968) to propose a phenomenal theory that explains the concept of language variation and change in language contact situations. This idea also reflects the Sapir-Whorfian Hypothesis – that the culture of a people is bound to influence, in a major way the nature of language existing in a speech community.

Four outstanding issues relatively pose several challenges to the English speaking world as a result of the contact of English with other indigenous languages. First, there is a desperate attempt by native speakers to retain the phonological intelligibility and acceptability of the mother-tongue variety of English, the RP around the English speaking world. Two, there is the growing need of English as an International Language (EIL) to accommodate the expanding circles of L2 speakers. A third challenge is the desire by speakers in L2 environments to evolve specific national varieties (an outgrowth of the World Englishes phenomenon) to complement an amorphous, and perhaps a controversial standard, the RP. A fourth major challenge is the compelling necessity for different ethnic groups within 'nuclear' English-speaking societies to set up intra-lingual standards that can serve as pedagogical models or mutually intelligible phonologies within multilingual societies, for instance, Nigeria.

In this paper, we are considering the Nigerian English as a language variety occurring as a result of the contact of the English language with other structurally and genetically different indigenous languages existing alongside with English in Nigeria. In such an instance, it is better to adopt the kind of theoretical framework that will explain the behavior of language in contact situation. One major approach to such an analysis is eclecticism. A second that could provide relevant explanation is communication Accommodation theory which tends to show the factors that could prompt variations of pronunciations at different times, particularly in language contact situation. We will briefly explain these two concepts.

Language as an object of investigation should be realistically perceived from an eclectic point of view consisting of both the view of language as an abstract system and language as a social phenomenon. Mc Carthy (2001: 48) highlights the need for this approach:

The two broad views of language are unquestionably a simplification of a quite complex cline of beliefs and approaches in current applied linguistics ... the two views can be observed operating dialectically, creating a tension that occasionally surfaces in debates between strong advocates of one line or the other.

Mc Carthy adds that it is instructive to continually allow these views to "influence the construction of grammars and the descriptions of lexis, morphology and phonology that underlie teaching materials and classroom activity". Observably, the teaching materials and "formal" classroom activities in Nigeria are largely a reflection of the fictional and unrealistic notion of the SBE assumed to be making the rounds (Babatunde, 2002). This paper thus has the ultimate goal of presenting some phonemic models that can meet the applied linguistic needs of the phonology of English in Nigeria and still satisfy the requirements of EIL.

There have been suggestions of specific pedagogical models, beside those of SBE that can serve as EIL phonologies. Celik (2008), for instance, adopts Turkish English to underscore the essence of using bilingual phonology as a model of pronunciation for International Language (IL). Questions raised include: What is intelligibility? What is the optimum number of pronunciation features for relatively successful communication between non-native speakers (NNS) and native speakers (NS)? Celik then submits that "the optimum number of phonological features, which can be called bilingual phonology" would include those sounds whose less-than-perfect pronunciation (or replacement by features present in the mother-tongue) will not break down natural communication (Celik, 2008:164). Similarly, Alptekin (2002:63) advocates that "successful bilinguals with intercultural insights and knowledge (should) serve as pedagogic models in EIL rather than the monolingual native speaker". These explications seek to prove that no monolingual phonologies suffice in EIL. This situation also holds true for a multilingual society like Nigeria.

The second important prescription this paper presents to tackle the problem of L2 phonology in NE is the adoption of Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) developed by Professor Howard Giles and popularized in Giles and St. Clair (1979), Giles and Coupland (1991) and more recently Jenkins (2000). CAT is perceived in terms of the mutual phonological intelligibility and acceptability between speakers of Inner Circle Englishes (ICE) and Expanded Circle Englishes (ECE). It is premised on the notion that speakers need to develop the ability to adjust their pronunciations according to the communicative situation in which they find themselves (Jenkins, 2000).

Specifically, in communication, "accommodation" refers to the means we adopt to adjust our way of interacting with people of different cultures in order to facilitate communication. Boylan (2009:1) elaborates more on this concept:

“an individual is said to accommodate if s/he meets his/her interlocutors on their cultural grounds by such means as adopting their phonological systems, using their habitual turn-taking procedures and observing their genre constrictions.”

The goal of accommodation is to promote interlocutors' comprehension through increased intelligibility among both NS and NNS. This implies that accommodation provides an avenue for interlocutors to express shared values meant to create bonds of mutual understanding and solidarity using such parameters as accurate pronunciation, turn-taking procedures, appropriate prosodies, and so on (Boylan, 2009). Fortunately, Bobda (2007) has acknowledged that NE shares many existing rules of English phonology (although some other rules of NE apply differently when compared to the standard accents of ICE). This provides a reasonable starting point to the proposal of a model in NE phonology. CAT can serve as a necessary bridge between the different phonologies of various heterogeneous groups in Nigeria (cf Lamidi, 2007).

1.4 Research Objectives

It is the intention of this study to:

- (i) find out if the pronunciation of English by Nigerian undergraduates approximates to that of SBE, the RP;
- (ii) discover the patterns of pronunciation of English words and expressions among Nigerian undergraduates exemplified by final-year university students from different parts of Nigeria;
- (iii) isolate observable characteristics of the spoken English of educated speakers and learners of English with final year university students as exponents;
- (iv) draw attention of English teachers to those features so identified;
- (v) propose the variety of English most suitable as pedagogical models in Nigeria based on some identifiable features discovered in the study; and
- (vi) contribute in a modest way to existing literature on the standardization and codification of Educated Nigerian English variety.

1.5 Some Vital Questions

This research will attempt to provide answers to some vital questions. These questions include the following:

- (i) Do the English pronunciations observed among Nigerian university undergraduates approximate to those of SBE?
- (ii) Are there specific features that characterize the pronunciation of English words and expressions by Nigerian university undergraduates?
- (iii) What standard model of English pronunciation do Nigerian university undergraduate need for pedagogical purposes in an ESL classroom?

1.6 Research Design

It was the intention of this work to employ relevant research approaches to find out the patterns of pronunciation that are noticeable among Nigerian English bilinguals, mainly final-year university undergraduates, and to examine its result against performance in SBE. The goal was to assist the researcher discover the needs of Nigerian teachers and their learners or trainees in classroom learning situation. To this end, a number of approaches were adopted. First, the data used for the study was a corpus containing a seventy-two-worded paragraph and another twenty-eight single words and expressions in connected speech. The intention was to get the subjects read the data into an MP3 player, which would be used for the analysis. The data was later loaded into a Window 7 laptop computer, first for some acoustic investigation, and second, for perceptual analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis was adopted for in insightful result.

Again, the study made use of two groups of respondents. The first was the experimental group (EG) while the second was the Control. The latter was employed as the standard to measure the performance of the former. The Control was made up of one native speaker of English. Born, bred and educated in Britain up to Master's Degree, this respondent admittedly speaks a variety of RP fluently. The EG comprised Nigerian undergraduates from four Federal Universities: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria; University of Ilorin, Ilorin; Federal University of Technology, Minna and University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt. This arrangement was to enable the researcher have a wide coverage of many linguistic groups so that the result could be adjudged as truly widespread. This way, generalization is possible.

The respondents used for the research were 65 final-year university undergraduates studying twenty-six courses which cut across different fields of study in the university: Social Sciences, Engineering, Law, Education, Arts, Sciences, among others. A total of twenty-one (21) linguistic groups were represented in the exercise. The groups comprised the following: Yoruba (13), Hausa (11), Igbo (13), Ijaw (3), Igala (3), Idoma (3), Ibibio (2), Tiv (2), Igbira (2), Esan (2), Jugun (1), Jabba (1), Izon (1), Ikwere (1), Ogori (1), Ninzong (1), Isoko (1), Annang (1), Ogba (1), Kagoro (1), Igada Ekeno (1). It should be noted that we had intended the Hausa speakers to number up to thirteen (13) like the other major group languages, but we found out after the elicitation process, that those who spoke Hausa fluently and claimed Hausa as their mother tongue belonged to some other linguistic groups after all. Thus the Hausa speakers were left at eleven. Again, out of the figure presented here, thirty of the respondents belonged to the male gender while twenty-nine (29) of them were females.

1.7 Data Presentation, Analysis and Results

From the transcription and acoustic analysis carried out in this study, the following data were extracted from the respondent's performance. Table one shows the respondents' performances on single word items tested. Table 2 represents the respondents' performances on the items tested on expressions illustrating connected speech. The two tables are presented at the end of the article (see Pages 16 and 17).

1.8 Discussion

From the data presented on Tables 1 and 2, some specific details on the pronunciation patterns of English words by the respondents used for the study become visible. Table 1 displays the performance of the respondents on the single word items examined. One apparent fact from the table is that the number of the subjects who were able to pronounce the Standard British English (SBE) variant of the words correctly appears low compared to those who could not do so. For instance, only four (representing 6.2%) out of 65 respondents produced the word 'secretary' appropriately. The rest of the 61 respondents representing 93.9% could not. Except for the word 'warned', which recorded the highest token of 70.8%, the performance in all other items are all below 50%. That of 'warned' may be accounted for from the perspective of purely articulatory constraints that characterize the process of nasalization. The implication is that many Nigerian undergraduates, who, by and large, represent Educated Nigerian variety (that is, Variety 3) of speakers of English, according to Banjo's (1971) and Fakuade's (1998) classification, could not produce the SBE variant of the English words tested. Therefore, from all indications, the SBE variant posed difficulties to most of the respondents used.

Table 2 presents respondents' performances with words in connected speech. Of the twelve items tested, only one of them ('all right') had more than half of the respondents (precisely 34 respondents representing 52.3 %) pronouncing the SBE version of the word correctly. The lowest attempt was made with the expression 'cats and dogs' possibly because most of them failed to realize 'and' either as a syllabic or a complete syllable. All these generally indicate that most Nigerians do not speak SBE or the standardized RP after several years of the existence of the English language in Nigeria. This tends to answer our first research question namely: "Do the English pronunciations observed among Nigerian university undergraduates approximate to those of SBE?" From our analysis so far, the answer to this question is, laconically, 'no'. This is where the concept of eclecticism comes in. A realistic study of a second language should adopt an eclectic approach since there could be unimaginable and unquantifiable variant forms that may be noticed with nonnative speakers.

One observation we noticed with the respondents we used was that some tended to reflect the linguistic background in their pronunciations as a result of mother-tongue interference. A number of them had their educational training within such linguistic environment; some were influenced by family background; while others were influenced by social exposure. Many others tended to reflect the sociolinguistic background within which the discussion was taking place. This informs our resort to explaining that communication accommodation theory (CAT) can explain the kind of utterances we observed among our respondents.

1.9 Challenges in an ESL Classroom

From the analysis this research has carried out so far, it has become obvious that Nigerians speak a variety of English that can be rightly referred to as Nigerian Spoken English, and from this study, Educated spoken Nigerian English. This is best described as an endonormative model of English, that is, the type occasioned by the sociolinguistic factors like culture, interference of mother tongue (MT) with the second language, in this case, the English language; educational level of speakers/users, social status, linguistic background, among others.

In fact, it would be a misnomer if Nigerians were to speak the SBE of the native speakers because even the teachers themselves, in the majority of cases, do not speak British English. Rather, they speak British oriented English with Nigerian accent. Therefore, instead of examination bodies in Nigeria using a purely exoglossic or exotic model of English (that is, the Standard British English) as a model for examining mostly endoglossic speakers and learners, other teaching models like the ones proposed in Josiah (2011) should be explored if the teaching of English in Nigeria must be made as realistic as possible. These further answers another research question put forward at the beginning of this paper – that is whether there are available pedagogical models available and which are adequate for applied linguists to work with.

1.10 Prospects

Based on what we have observed so far in this study, there are a few steps that should be taken to aid English speaking in Nigeria. One, mini-laboratories with modern phonetic softwares could be set up, if the funding for larger laboratories is not available. Such language laboratories should have such softwares like Praat, Speech Filing System (SFS), PACX, Signalyze, Adobe Auditioning 1.5 for editing of spoken data (in an attempt to maintain appropriateness in pronunciation), the English Pronouncing Dictionary with soft copies, CD, Dictionaries on CDs including Encarta Dictionary, and other numerous softwares that can help students in a classroom setting observe some spectrographic details of what they produce in their spoken speech. These will go a long way to point to participants in such learning environments the kind of errors they should avoid in maintaining acceptable forms of pronunciation

1.11 Conclusion

This study was intended to find out if the pronunciation of English by Nigerian undergraduates approximates to that of SBE; to discover the patterns of pronunciation of English words and expressions among Nigerian undergraduates exemplified by final-year university students from different parts of Nigeria; to isolate observable characteristics of the spoken English of educated speakers and learners of English with final year-university students as exponents, and to draw attention of English teachers to those features so identified. We will sum up our remarks and observations in this study briefly here.

Effective communication plays some vital roles in any given society. If such communication is to be facilitated in the Nigerian society, there is the need to fashion out a model of English that will be more suitable or appropriate to Nigerians. This is because in this study, it has become very clear that most Nigerians, no matter how highly educated, do not approximate closely to the Standard British English, the RP. Even if they wished to do so, the exonormative model sounds quite affected and socially unacceptable to the majority of Nigerians. Besides, at present, there are three identifiable varieties of SBE, the RP (Jowitt, 2007). It is, therefore, apparently difficult to know which one Nigerians should choose from these three since all of them seem alien to Nigerian English users/learners, moreso, since it is difficult to anticipate the number of new varieties that would emerge at the end of the day. This is because language is as dynamic as the society where it exists. The explanations we have attempted to make so far suffice for the need to fashion out an endonormative model of English to suit Nigerian communicative needs. This may ultimately halt the “so-called” falling standard of English in Nigeria.

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APPENDIX

ORAL TESTS ON THE REALIZATION OF ENGLISH SOUNDS AMONG SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Dear Respondent,

Kindly read the following words and the short paragraph provided. The reading will be recorded into an audiotape. It is to be used for a research purpose. The respondents's identity will be treated with confidentiality.

Note: Please mention your name and language to help us in our analysis, and then, read the following into the audiotape provided for you.

- (i) watch you
- (ii) in case
- (iii) all right
- (iv) bad, bat
- (v) secretary, Ferbruary
- (vi) several
- (vii) suppose
- (viii) ask
- (ix) take, cat, people
- (x) cats and dogs
- (xi) tested, watched, warned
- (xii) cats, dogs and horses

- (xiii) fiscal
- (xiv) the idea of it
- (xv) learn
- (xvi) health, thorough

Test of Undergraduate Pronunciation Patterns in Connected Speech

In case Jean's secretary learns computer in February this year, I will watch you coach him. All right, suppose he learns like a bad bat, or like cats, dogs and horses, the idea of it would be defeated. Particularly, this fiscal year, several people have asked questions about computer training. However, a lot of scientists who have thoroughly watched and tested some equipment have warned computer learners of serious health problems.

Table 1 Respondents' Performances on Single-word Items Tested

Words	SBE Variant	NA	% Able	NNA	% NA	Total No. of Respondents
Secretary	'sekrətəri	4	6.2	61	93.9	65
February	'febrʊəri	12	18.5	53	81.5	65
Several	'sevrəl	13	20	52	80	65
Suppose	/sə'pəʊz	9	13.8	56	81.1	65
Take	t ^h eIk	10	15.4	55	84.6	65
Cat	k ^h æt	19	29.2	46	70.8	65
People	'p ^h i:pl	6	9.2	59	90.8	65
Tested	'testɪd	12	18.5	53	81.5	65
Watched	wɒtʃt	2	3.1	63	96.9	65
Warned	wɔ:nd	46	70.8	19	29.2	65
Fiscal	'fiskl	28	43.1	37	56.9	65
Health	helθ	13	20	52	80	65
Thorough	'θɔ:rb	12	18.5	53	81.5	65
This	ðɪs	9	13.8	56	81.1	65
Bad	bæd	7	10.8	58	89.2	65
Bat	bæt	23	35.4	42	64.6	65
Ask	a:sk	31	47.7	34	52.3	65

Table 2: Respondent's Performances on the Items Tested on Words in Connected Speech

Phrases	SBE Variant	NA	% Able	NNA	% NA	Total Resp.
<u>Watch you</u>	wɒtʃ ju:	8	12.3	57	87.7	65
<u>In case</u>	ɪn keɪs	14	21.5	51	78.5	65
<u>All right</u>	'ɔ:lraɪt	34	52.3	31	47.7	65
<u>Cats and dogs</u>	kæts ənd dɔgz	3	4.6	62	95.4	65
<u>The idea of it</u>	/ðɪ aɪ 'dɪə əv ɪt	8	12.3	57	87.7	65
<u>This year</u>	ðɪs jɜ:	7	10.8	58	89.2	65
<u>Coach him</u>	kəʊtʃ hɪm	6	9.2	59	90.8	65
<u>Would be defeated</u>	wʊd bi di'fi:təd	26	40	39	60	65
<u>A lot of</u>	ə lɒt əv	23	35.4	42	64.6	65
<u>I will watch you</u>	aɪ wɪl wɒtʃ	9	13.8	56	81.2	65
<u>Fiscal year</u>	'fiskl jɜ:	9	13.8	56	81.2	65
<u>A bad bat</u>	ə bæd bæt	19	29.2	46	70.8	65

Key: NA = Number Able; NNA = Number Not Able; SBE Variant = Standard Nigerian English Variant; % Able = i.e. Percentage able to produce SBE variant; % NA = i.e. Percentage of those not able to produce the SBE variant