

# **THE APPLICATIONS OF PHONEMIC CONTRASTS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING IN NIGERIA**

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This paper focuses on the applications of phonemic contrasts in the utterances of forty final-year Yoruba-English bilingual University undergraduates and the implications of their applications on pedagogic practices in, especially, the English as a second language (ESL) environment. This subject is rarely studied in Nigeria, yet, it might be significant for shaping the effective teaching of oral English in especially the ESL environments. The respondents, twenty of whom were students of English and the other twenty, students of Yoruba, were tested based on the framework of traditional phonemic theory. The results indicated that only 40% of students of Yoruba were able to apply phonemic contrasts in the rendition of English words whereas 60% of the students of English did. The study establishes application or otherwise of phonological rules as a vital dimension of investigating phonological variation and proficiencies in ESL and suggests the need to pay more attention to the area in ESL teaching and learning operations, especially for students in other disciplines.

*Keywords:* Phonemic contrast, English as a second Language, Oral English teaching, Nigeria

## **INTRODUCTION**

A wide variety of “Englishes” are spoken in Nigeria, and diversity in terms of phonology and vocabulary usage. Using the variety that has been termed

“Standard Nigerian English” (Bamgbose 1982) which is also the variety spoken by most university-educated Nigerians. Standard Nigerian English has been described to differ systematically from British English in the areas of stress, rhythm, and intonation (Bamgbose 1982; Jibril 1986; Ufomata 1996; Jowitt 2000). It has been suggested that vowel reduction is less pronounced in Nigerian English than in British English, which leads to a perceptual impression of equal weight and length of each syllable

Over the past two decades, but particularly in the last 10 years, there has been a burgeoning consensus about the critical importance of the applications of “phonemic contrasts” especially to speakers of English as a second Language (ESL) (Akinjobi 2004). The Prague phonologists define a phonemic contrast as one susceptible of serving to differentiate meanings in a given language. Phonemic contrast has also been described as one which can distinguish meanings. One of the areas suggested by Sifakis and Saugari (2003) as requiring certain methodological considerations and exploration in English language studies in this 21st century is:

the sensitization of learners with respect to the different intonational and pronunciation-based patterns of speech segments, words, phrases or whole utterances, as they are used by different native and non-native speakers around the globe. (Sifakis & Saugari 2003:66-67)

It is within this methodological consideration that the present paper takes its bearing. In recent years, Oral English has become an integral part of the senior secondary school syllabus and examination in English Language. The official attitude of the regional examining body (West African Examinations Council) which conducts these examinations, is that tests of continuous writing, comprehension and objective test of texts and structure should be assessed based on the mastery of standard English as currently used by educated African writers and speakers of English in the Commonwealth. As far as Oral English is concerned, no explicit policy statements have been issued. The mode of testing is still evolving as it changes from year to year thus constituting additional burdens on schools which in the first place are ill-prepared for teaching the subject. In general, students are required to perceive and produce vowel/consonant contrasts and to recognise contrastive grammatical uses of stress. They are also expected to recognise attitudinal functions of intonation. But no adequate attention is given to the teaching of phonological rules to the students. Even, there are no clearly stated policy statements on the accent which is being tested. Ufomata (1990), attesting to the inadequate method of testing and teaching Oral English states that:

the entire Oral English examination has been known to be conducted in objective tests, with no perception or performance tests given. What seems to be the case is that while the educational authorities realise the importance of

teaching Oral English in schools, they find themselves unable and/or unwilling to provide the necessary funds to support effective teaching and testing of subject.

Besides, most teachers have no training in the teaching of pronunciation and they cannot be said to represent suitable models for the contrasts being tested in the examinations. Ufomata (1990) identifies various problems the Nigerian L2 speaker encounters in their attempt to differentiate vowels in English. She states that the long and short vowels are often undifferentiated and this she attributed to the fewer number of vowels in their indigenous languages. Although it is true that the durational distinction between long and short vowels is frequently not maintained in especially the speeches of L2 speakers not much has been achieved to update the pedagogic practices to cater for this variation. In view of the foregoing, it is important to explore other interactive methods which de-emphasize the role of the teacher and make personal training feasible for the student/learner, hence this study. According to Oladele (2001), oral English has continuously been a problem area for Nigerian students, even those studying English, as a course and the bane has been realizing or applying phonemic contrast in line with Standard British English (SBE).

## METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

This study employs the traditional phonemic theory employed by Szpyra-Kołowska et al (2005:1). According to Underhill (1987:101) analytic evaluation of this kind requires an identification of phonemes in bits. This involves judgment on the correctness of the learner's production of particular vowels, consonants, syllables and stress. This method of pronunciation, he claims, is more objective for the assessment of, especially, speakers of English as a second language.

There were 40 final year University undergraduates as respondents for the analysis. Twenty of them were from the Department of English and the remaining twenty from the department of African languages (Yoruba). They were required to undertake a task; henceforth appendix A, the task was an excerpt, with copies distributed to them to read aloud and afterward transcribe. Their renditions were tape recorded. They were required to write their department on their scripts and they were all tested on excerpt A one after another, behind closed doors. All the students from the department of English were required to mark their scripts E<sup>1-20</sup> according to their sitting arrangement, while those in the department of Yoruba marked their scripts Y<sup>1-20</sup>, also according to their sitting arrangement. Appendix A was meant to discover the

sensitivity of the students to phonemic contrasts in the given English words. Each respondent read aloud and transcribed the excerpt after reading. They took turns in doing this, to prevent the reading or pronunciation of one influencing another's. The assessors, two near-native English teachers listened for applications of phonemic contrasts in the reading of the respondents. The underlying expectation of the researcher is that subjects would recognize that these eleven pairs of English words (that is twenty-two), differ only by a single phoneme, in terms of pronunciation.

## ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

s/n	Tested Words		BBC Pronunciations		English Students	
					% passed	% failed
					E1	Talk
E2	Work	Walk	Work /ɔɛ ɪk/	Walk /ɔ ɪk/	60%	40%
E3	Hurt	Hut	Hurt /ηɛ ɪt/	Hut /η ʊt/	50%	50%
E4	Fill	Feel	Fill /fɪl/	Feel /fi ɪl/	70%	30%
E5	Course	curse	Course /k ɔ/	Curse /kɛ ɔ/	50%	50%
E6	Leave	Live	Leave /li ɪv/	Live /li v/	55%	45%
E7	choose	shoes	Choose /tʃu ɪz/	Shoes /ʃu ɪz/	55%	45%
E8	Won	Worn	Won /ɔ ʊv/	Worn /ɔ ɪv/	55%	45%
E9	Three	Tree	Three /θri ɪ/	Tree /tri ɪ/	52.5%	47.5%
E10	Fool	Full	Fool /fu ɪl/	Full /fu l/	37.5%	62.5%
E11	wind	wind	Wind /ɔAɪvδ/	Wind /ɔɪvδ/	55%	45%

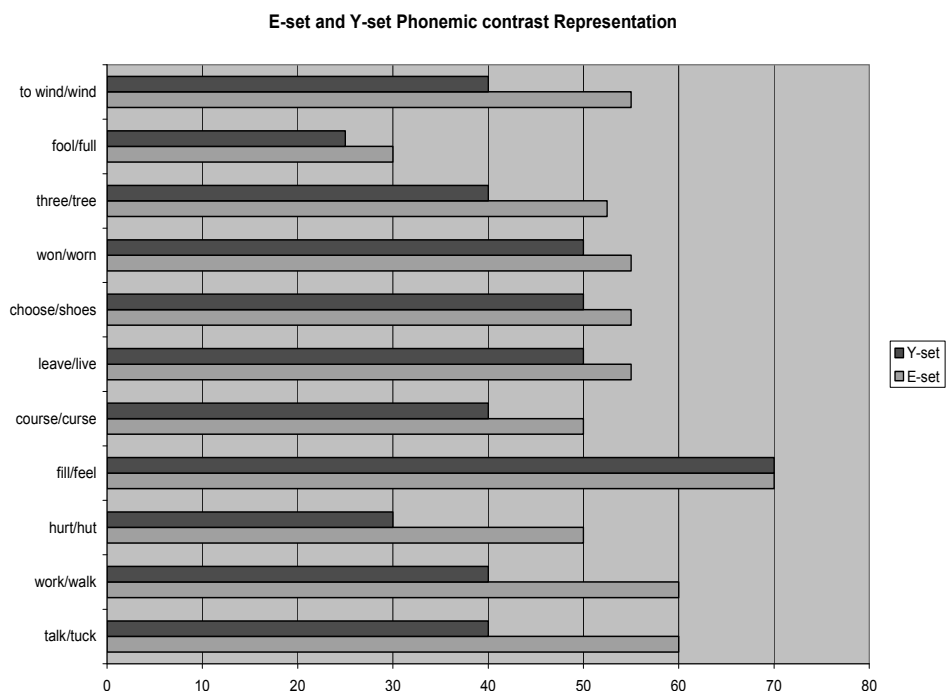
Table 1: Phoneme contrast test for students of English

Phoneme contrast Aggregate	English students	Yoruba students	Total
1) if pronunciation is variant or non-near native	6 35.00	11 60.00	17
2) if pronunciation is near-native or standard	14 65.00	9 40.00	23
Total	20 50.00 100.00	20 50.00 100.00	40 100.00 100.00

Table 2: Overall Percentage aggregate on phoneme contrast skill

s/n	Tested Words		BBC Pronunciations		Yoruba students	
					FQ passed	FQ failed
					Y1	Talk
Y2	Work	Walk	Work /wɜɪ k/	Walk /w ɪk/	40%	60%
Y3	Hurt	Hut	Hurt /hɜɪ t/	Hut /h ʝt/	30%	70%
Y4	Fill	Feel	Fill /fɪl/	Feel /fɪ ɪl/	70%	30%
Y5	Course	curse	Course /kɜɪ s/	Curse /kɜɪ s/	40%	60%
Y6	Leave	Live	Leave /li v/	Live /li v/	50%	50%
Y7	choose	shoes	Choose /tʃu z/	Shoes /ʃu z/	50%	50%
Y8	Won	Worn	Won /w ɒn/	Worn /w ɒn/	50%	50%
Y9	Three	Tree	Three /θri /	Tree /θri /	40%	60%
Y10	Fool	Full	Fool /fu l/	Full /fu l/	50%	50%
Y11	wind	wind	Wind /wɪnd/	Wind /wɪnd/	40%	60%

Table 3: Phoneme contrast test for students of Yoruba



## DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

Not only is decoding a challenge, but language minority students who are learning Yoruba may have difficulties with the auditory discrimination of sounds that exist in English and that do not exist in the readers' first language. For example, only 40% of students of Yoruba made a distinction between the short / $\phi$ / in tuck and /  $\text{t}$  / in talk, as well as the short / $\text{I}$ / in fill and the long / $\text{t}$ / in feel. It is hypothesized, that the differences in the spellings will help the learners to guess that there exist differences in the pronunciations, but this was wrong as these spelling differences were not considered for pronunciations.

According to Constantino (1999), poor reading in the second language (in this case English) may be due to poor reading ability in the L1, lack of proficiency in the L2, incorrect reading strategies in the L2 or not employing the L1 reading strategies in L2 reading, due to lack of proficiency in the L2. He documents that the preponderance of the evidence in most studies points toward

a lack of proficiency in an L2 as being the primary reason for L2 reading difficulties, at least at relatively low levels of L2 competence (Alderson 1984; Kamhi-Stein 1998; Lee & Schallert 1997). In the case of advanced L1 readers, poor reading in an L2 is due to a lack of L2 proficiency which causes them to transfer and use only basic reading strategies when reading in the L2 (Carrell 1991).

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE APPLICATIONS OF PHONEMIC CONTRASTS FOR ORAL ENGLISH TEACHING IN NIGERIA

This section discusses the implications of the applications of phonemic contrasts for the teaching of English language in Nigeria.

Teachers in bilingual/ESL programs are not simply second-language teachers, nor are they exclusively literacy teachers. They are required to develop the full range of language skills, plus reading, writing and content-area knowledge with language-minority students. To accomplish this, the bilingual/ESL practitioner must apply theories and principles from psycholinguistics related to second-language acquisition along with effective literacy practices. Studies of bilingual literacy development and cross-linguistic transfer of skills indicate that there is a high level of transfer of skills and strategies from the first to the second language in reading. Researchers conclude that the greater the similarity in the writing systems of the two languages, the greater the degree of transfer, thus reducing the time and difficulties involved in learning to read the second language (Odlin, 1989). In contrast to the high level of sound-spelling correspondence, English has 44 phonemes with many spelling pattern variations for representing these sounds. Although the consonants in English usually have a one-to-one correspondence with the sound they represent, there is rarely a one-to-one correspondence between a letter representing a vowel and the sound of the vowel. This is an area where Nigerians learning to read English as a second language may encounter some stumbling blocks.

Wells states that

Many of the irregularities and inconsistencies of English orthography offer the same degree of difficulty to all speakers of English, no matter what accent they speak it with. (Wells 2001:1)

In the case of the spelling *wind*, which corresponds both to / $\omega$ Iv $\delta$ / and to / $\omega$ AIv $\delta$ /, we all, natives and non natives, have to rely on the context and our lexical and syntactic knowledge (noun, verb) to identify them correctly.

Hypercorrections such as choose /tʃuʒ/ for shoes /ʃuʒ/ or vice versa results in Nigerian learners facing an added burden in learning the spelling of such words and effectively comprehending a read-aloud passage. Unlike the native or non-native who does not have this problem, they cannot consult their own pronunciation to decide whether or not to write the di-graph sh or ch in such words. This extra difficulty appears to carry over into the written English of Nigerian children who treat some of these graphemes as homophones and do not observe phonemic contrasts. When these students read, listeners might have to think which fits the context better, rather than relate the spelling immediately to a familiar difference in sound. For these sets of students the initial thing to do is to allow them undertake reading skills to ascertain whether they are dyslexic or not. Where this is not the case ample opportunity should still be given to learners to read aloud sentences such as the ones employed in this study to improve the learners ability to identify and apply phonemic contrasts. As linguists know, phonemic analysis is not without its contradictions and absurdities, which have led many phonologists to abandon the concept of phoneme. The basic point remains, that some phonetic differences are distinctive while others are not. Those of us who do distinguish them have no difficulty making the spelling distinction between choose and shoes because we pronounce the words differently. Those who pronounce them identically will inevitably find them tricky.

## CONCLUSION

Teaching pronunciation within the context of EFL or ESL is a rather different matter from being taught as L1 and in EFL or ESL environments, it may well be necessary to teach sounds and sound contrasts as well as how to read and write them.

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## APPENDIX A

### INSTRUCTION

Please read-aloud each of the ten sentences below to the hearing of your listeners

1. Don't **talk** unless you **tuck** in properly
2. If you **work** diligently, you will **walk** confidently
3. He got **hurt** in the **hut** yesterday
4. If you **fill** the gap, you will **feel** good
5. If they **cause** a fight they will receive a **curse**
6. Its time to **leave** the house you **live** in
7. **Choose** the pair of **shoes** you like
8. You **won** in the because you did not get **worn** out
9. There are **three trees** left in the garden
10. only a **fool** would not know the cup was **full**
11. **Wind** up the glass to prevent the **wind**