

# INFELICITIES OF ENGLISH SPEECH SOUNDS AND ORTHOGRAPHY IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING IN NIGER STATE

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**Abstract:** The study of language has moved from the traditional method to a more scientific method. This is why linguistics is defined in contemporary time as the scientific study of language. Unlike the previous prescriptive study of language, the scientific approach entails the study of the properties and components of a language in the language laboratory where electronic gadgets show the vocal track, the places and manners of articulation in speech production as well as the wave of air production. Given the pivotal role of laboratory to the study of languages in modern time, this study, therefore, sets to investigate its availability and use in the College of Education and Universities in Niger State where languages are taught. Descriptive survey methodology is adopted for this study. This methodology is adopted because it accommodates the use of questionnaire and interview especially in the course of interrogation of students learning language courses in the selected higher institutions in Niger State, Nigeria. The population of the study comprises the students studying English in both the Federal and State-owned institutions of higher learning in Niger State. In the course of this study, it is discovered that many language laboratories are not functional as a result of irregular power supply. Often times, the period when light is available is not the period speech sound classes are scheduled. Related to this is that petroleum, which should be an alternative means of power supply to the language laboratory gadgets, is also costly. This is a perennial problem in Nigeria. Many people who study language(s) in the Nigerian educational system do not have the opportunity to be taught speech sounds in the language laboratories. The effect is that those who are not familiar with the operations of language laboratory equipment are employed to teach speech sounds. Therefore, students are only taught theoretical phonology without having practical knowledge of speech sound production.

**Keywords:** traditional method, scientific study, students learning language, language laboratory.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Language laboratory is one of the essential facilities required for the accreditation of language courses in the Nigerian Colleges of Education and the Universities where language courses are taught. Encarta Dictionary (2009) described language laboratory as a special room for learning languages – a room equipped with audio or multimedia equipment for use in learning languages. Because of the indispensable role of such a room or complex in the study of languages, the 2020 edition of the Nigeria Certificate in Education Minimum Standards for Languages states inter alia that, for effective teaching, learning and research to take place, “...a well-furnished language laboratory/studio and theatre capable of seating at least 50 students must be installed”. The language laboratory should, according to the guideline, have “ICT-based equipment, such as computers, audio recorders, tapes, CDs, Internet facilities, LCD projects, etc”. The students who

study English as a single major have to, among their compulsory courses, be taught four course requiring laboratory experiment. They are “Practical Listening Skills and Speech Work”, “introduction to Phonetics and Phonology”, “Basic Reading Skills and Comprehension” and “Applied English Linguistics”. These topics have their equivalents in Arabic, French, Hausa, Igbo, Nupe and Yoruba.

A lecturer teaching either of these topics should be well-grounded in the use of the language laboratory to teach the students. The irony of the problem is that a teacher who did not learn speech sound in the laboratory throughout his/her course of study would still be the one employed to teach eventually when he/she secured lecturing job. This is how the cycle of the neglect of language laboratory continues in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

### Statement of the Problem

In spite of Government’s efforts to build language laboratories in Colleges of Education and Universities where languages are taught as courses, available studies show that students are hardly taken to the laboratories to learn speech sounds, especially the places and manners of articulations in sound production. Indeed, provision of language laboratories is a prerequisite for the accreditation of a language programme in any institution of higher learning in Nigeria. Justifying the provision of language laboratory for the teaching and learning of English, for instance, Peter Roach (2010) states that “because of the notoriously confusing nature of English spellings, it is particularly important to learn to think of English pronunciation in terms of phonemes, rather letter of the alphabets”, which is only achievable through special room for learning languages – a room equipped with audio or multimedia equipment for use in learning languages. Such audio, visual and audiovisual equipment enable the learners of a particular language to tailor their pronunciation along the recorded voices of the native speakers’. But, where the equipment is not available or used (when available), correct pronunciation in a language becomes a problem.

### Objectives of the Study

This study sets to:

- 1 i. examine the teaching of language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing, in Nigeria.
- 2 ii. identify and contrast English phonemes with the phonemes of Nigerian Languages..
- 3 iii. explicate the viability of the use of modern technology to enhance the teaching and learning of speech sounds.
- 4 iv. pinpoint practical ways Nigerian L2 students can learn speech sounds through language laboratory

## 2. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive survey methodology will be adopted for this study. This methodology is adopted because it accommodates the use of questionnaire and interview especially when lecturers and students who are supposed to use the laboratory will be interrogated. Descriptive research, according to McCombes (2023), aims at accurately and systematically describing population, situation or phenomenon. It uses a wide variety of research methods to investigate one or more variables. Descriptive research is an appropriate choice when research aim is to identify characteristics, frequencies, trends and categories. Hence, in the main, analytical research methodology will be adopted for the aspect of literary analysis of this study. Analytical research methodology is a text-based hermeneutic study that is more suitable for literature.

Population denotes all the elements, people, things, materials and events of interest for a particular study. The population of this study, therefore, comprises the lecturers teaching language courses in colleges of education and the universities in Niger State, as well as the students learning English. No fewer than fifty lecturers (50) and two hundred (200) students will constitute the population of the study. Federal College of Education, Kontagora, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida University, Lapai, and Abdulkadir Kure University will be sampled for the study. Hence, these span Federal and State-owned institutions of higher learning where language courses are taught in Niger State. The Federal University of Technology Minna will be excluded from the study because language-based courses are not taught in the school.

The measuring instrument for this study is questionnaire. The structured questionnaire will be used to collect data from respondents in the college of Education and Universities. The segmented questionnaire will be tagged: Language Laboratory and the Teaching of Speech Sounds in Colleges of Education and Universities in Niger State and Interview will be employed where appropriate. The area of this study is Niger State, Nigeria. The study is delimited to the academic

area of functional Language Laboratory and the Teaching of Speech Sounds in Colleges of Education and Universities. It is an aspect of Art and Humanities studies bordering on effect of teaching of speech sounds.

It is a consensus ground among scholars that a good instrument cannot be devoid of reliability and validity. Hence, the reliability and validity of the instruments for this study will be ascertained by a pilot study of physical visit to the language laboratories in the research area. The results obtained from the pilot study will be used to determine the reliability of the instruments. The questionnaire will be administered personally by the researchers to the respondents. Answered copies of the questionnaire will be retrieved pronto from the respondents to avoid loss and/or mutilation in transit. The data collected for this study will be analyzed and interpreted into percentage which will generate tables and charts for descriptive study. Doing this will enhance comparison and generalization of findings at the completion of the research.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Among the languages spoken in Nigeria, English enjoys an enviable status. It is the language used to communicate with heterogeneous audience as against homogeneous audience across all levels in the country. It is the language of business transaction, of education, of the mass media, of the judiciary, of legislation, of military and paramilitary units and, indeed, government businesses. English language is also Nigeria's symbol of identity among comity of nations. As an Anglophone country, Nigeria is one of the English-speaking countries of the world. Considering these pivotal roles the language plays in the country not only in the aspect of unification in a multilingual setting but also as competence in its mastery enhances upward social mobility, it is expected to be well taught. Good mastery of English language and display of competence in it is the barometer for measuring the quality of academic attainment in Nigeria. Oyetade (2001) in Isaac Ohia and Felicia Chibuogwu (2016) avers that good performance in English is associated with academic success in Nigeria. Little wonder that a credit pass in English language is a prerequisite that cannot be waived for admission into Institutions of Higher learning in Nigeria.

Every field of study now drifts towards technology for effective teaching and mastery. The advancement of technology has impacted lives a great deal in developed countries. Manouchehr and Gui (2011) observe that technology has improved personal lives, the way lessons are taught, learnt, and how businesses are run. It has made it possible to form virtual team collaboration and communication regardless of location and culture of team members. Technology has removed the distance barriers and made higher education to be more effective. Hence, the purpose of this study is to assess the various ways technology can help enhance language education in a developing country like Nigeria. Aside from language laboratory, attention is accorded computer-assisted technology and the use of the internet to enhance language teaching.

Since the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal lecture notes on general linguistics, language study has taken a scientific-based model, a highly analytical approach, and a departure from the old prescriptive methodology to a descriptive-driven pedagogy. Following the scientific trend, language teaching requires, in contemporary time, a well built, modern and sufficiently equipped resource centre with electronic gadgets that will facilitate teaching and learning process. Such resource centre is otherwise known as language laboratory. In the present era of science and technology, all the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—can be taught effectively, in second language setting, using the language laboratory. Madhurima (2011) stressed the significance of language resource centre and submitted that certain expressive skills of the learners: speaking, reading and writing, can be learnt in the digital language laboratory by using network software. Good and efficient technology- based laboratory activities are required for the students' mastery of English language outside the conventional classroom teaching and learning.

Investigating the efficacy of Information Communication Technology (ICT) on English language learning, Ohia and Felicia Chibuogwu (2016) declare that globally, focus seems to have shifted from textbook to technology in the classroom. This submission does not hold to an extent. Technology should not take the place of textbook; they should rather play complementary roles. ICT facilities should be used to amplify classroom proceedings.

#### **The Concept of Phonology**

Phonology is the system of contrastive relationships among the speech sounds that constitute the fundamental components of a language (Kammelu, 2016). It is a branch of linguistics concerned with the systematic organisation of sounds in languages. It has traditionally focused largely on the study of systems of phonemes in particular languages (and therefore, used to be called phonemics or phonematics) but it may also cover any linguistic analysis either at a level beneath the

word (including syllable, onset and the rime, articulatory gesture, articulatory features, mora etc) or at all levels of language where sound is considered to be structured for conveying linguistic meaning (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/phonology). Abiodun (2007:51), in his own definition, says 'phonology is that branch of linguistics that studies the organisation of speech sounds in human languages... the component of grammar that accounts for the general pattern or structure of sounds and the way sounds relate to one another in normal speech.' Oyebade (2008:2) also defines phonology as the scientific study of the arbitrary vocal symbols used in human speech and the patterns into which these symbols enter to produce intelligent, meaningful utterances. 'We have to notice that from all the various definitions presented for phonology above, phonology attempts to study the form of the vocal symbols as well as the pattern they produce.

Identifying the phonemes that pose difficulties to Nigerian learners of English, Oyedokun and Iwabi (2015) note that a person of Yoruba descent learning English as second language may not have much problem with the English vowel sounds, except the schwa sound /ə/ but such individual may have problem of replacing nearly equivalent consonant sounds found in Yoruba as substitute for the following English consonant sounds: /dʒ/, /Z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʒ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /v/. Learners may not have any problems mastering the phonemes both languages have in common but they are likely to have problems mastering those they do not have in common.

In a similar vein, there are five English consonants absent in Hausa posing difficulty to Hausa learners of English. They are /f/, /v/, /ŋ/, /ð/, /p/ and /ʒ/. There is alternation between /p/ and /f/. This means that /f/ is a variety of /p/ and /p/ is a variety of /f/. Jowitt (1991) submits that a Hausa speaker of English can also realise /p/ as /ə/. This, according to him, is as a result of Mother Tongue interference. For the voiced Labio-dental fricative /v/, it is realised as /b/. And as it is well known, the English /ʒ/ and /ð/ are realised as /s/ and /z/ respectively. According to Dunstan (1969), the phoneme /p/ is not present in many dialects of Hausa and a common error is to use /f/ instead, resulting in confusion between such words as 'pat' and 'fat' and 'fill' and so on. Apart from these problems, the allophones of /p/ in English are also a source of difficulty and particularly the fact that the distribution of /p/ is wide in English especially in such words as 'photography', 'photocopy' and its cognates in 'laughter' and 'plough'. With a competent instructor and native-like recorded sound, learners can easily overcome these problems.

#### 4. FINDINGS

In the course of this study, it is discovered that many language laboratories are not functional as a result of irregular power supply. Often times, the period when light is available is not the period speech sound classes are scheduled. Related to this is that petroleum, which should be an alternative means of power supply to the language laboratory gadgets, is also costly. This is a perennial problem in Nigeria. Many people who study language(s) in the Nigerian educational system do not have the opportunity to be taught speech sounds in the language laboratories. The effect is that those who are not familiar with the operations of language laboratory equipment are employed to teach speech sounds. Therefore, students are only taught theoretical phonology without having practical knowledge of speech sound production.

It has also been discovered that a single letter of the alphabet often represents more than one sound; and conversely, a single speech sound is often represented by several different letters. As for problems of the first type, we can see that the letter *s* represented as /z/-sound in the word *dogs* and an *s*-sound in the word *cats*. Another irregularity of sound is the case of the letter *t* that can be represented as /t/-sound in the word *tin*; but it can also represent /ʃ/-like sound as in *nation*. Conversely, consider the *k*-sound in the word *kick*. This sound is orthographically represented in two different ways: the letter *k* at the beginning of the word and the letters *ck* at the end of the word. The word *cow* begins with a /k/-sound, but here it is represented by the letter *c*. Similar problems arise with the initial /dʒ/-sound in *jug*. This initial sound represented by the letter *j*, takes letter *g* in a word such as *giraffe*. Even the sequence of letters in words such as *ridge* and *edge* represent the /dʒ/-sound phonetically with different orthographical structure.

English orthography is inadequate as a representation of the current speech sounds in English. This lack of consistency in representing sounds is due in part to the fact that the English writing system became fixed several hundred years ago, although the pronunciation of the words has continuously changed since that period. The irregular nature of English language could be a source of error to students. Classroom activities should therefore be built around these complex aspects.

The other cause of error in English language is the inadequate mastery of English language from early childhood. The National Policy on Education in Nigeria does not help. It states that English language should be introduced at the third year of primary school. Since the problems of poor mastery of English starts from there, and all second language interferences are based on how students think, the child should start early to learn the English language but the government policy on language education says that he should start 'at a later stage. Early childhood is an important stage for the development of the children's oral skills in English through story- telling, drill on sentence patterns, accurate descriptions of object, conversation on incidents of everyday life such as buying things, etc. If the policy of 'straight for English at the primary school level' is adopted, children will acquire the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in English with ease. They will be familiar with the sounds of English and will easily form words, sentence patterns and later compositions.

It was observed that the Nigerian learners of English as a second language had problem with some English consonant and vowel sounds. They have the problem of replacing nearly equivalent consonant and vowel sounds found in Nigerian languages as substitutes for the following English consonant sounds: /dʒ/, /Z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /ʒ/, /ð/, /ŋ/, /θ/, /v/ and vowel sounds /ɔɪ/, /eə/, /əʊ/, /ɪə/ and /ʊə/. The Learners do not have problems mastering the phonemes which English and Nigerian languages have in common but they have problems mastering those they do not have in common.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In sum English orthography is inadequate as a representation of the current speech sounds in English. This lack of consistency in representing sounds is due, in part, to the fact that the English writing system became fixed several hundred years ago, although the pronunciation of the words has continuously changed since that period. The irregular nature of English language could be a source of error to students. Classroom and language laboratory activities should therefore be built around these complex aspects.

## 6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are made based on the findings of this study:

- (1) Those who should be assigned to teach speech sound should be thoroughly subjected to aptitude test in the language laboratory before they are employed;
- (2) Curriculum developers should make the government understand the imperative of uninterrupted power supply to laboratories;
- (3) Both the practical and the theoretical aspects of phonetics and phonology should be taught in the language laboratory.

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