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The Primacy of Intelligibility Over Native Accent Imitation in English Pronunciation Among Yoruba Speakers of English As A Second Language

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Abstract

Speech intelligibility denotes the degree to which a listener can understand what a speaker says, regardless of his or her accent. When teaching pronunciation, especially in nations where English is a second language or an international language, there has been a long-standing debate as to whether or not native-like pronunciation should be attained instead of ensuring clear and effective communication. This paper looked at the difference between being intelligible and having a native-level accent. It asserted that in teaching and in real life it is more important to focus on being understood. It drew on key theoretical and empirical studies such as Kachru's (1985) World Englishes model which deals with pluricentric standards, Levis's (2005, 2018) principle of intelligibility, and finally Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core to analyse the various factors affecting accent perception and comprehension, examining how these elements interact within second-language learning. Mixed methods research design was used for this study, i.e., quantitative and qualitative data were analysed together. Participants included 150 subjects. It examined how things work when someone is learning a second language. The

research discussed the issues experienced by the non-native speaker in multilingual and post-colonial societies such as Nigeria. These discussions arise from the context of the World Englishes and English as Lingua Franca, the research highlighted that it is of higher priority in acquiring a few specific fundamental phonological features to achieve mutual intelligibility rather than to strive for native-like realisation of speech, which is often not needed or possible.

Keywords: Speech intelligibility, native-like realisation, pluricentric standards, second language, World Englishes.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Language is a means of communication and understanding among people. It plays an essential role in the development of society, culture, and thought. It is a set of symbolic codes that have been established in society, which allows people to understand each other intellectually, emotionally, and in general (Crystal, 2021). From the point of view of linguistics, language is a system in which rules are formed that regulates the application of language codes. These rules govern such areas of language as pronunciation, word formation, syntax, and semantics of utterances understandable to members of a speech community. For example, from the linguistic point of view, the production of speech begins in the lungs, from which, through the vocal tract, air rushes out, interacting with the vocal tract and the speech organs, and speech sounds are produced, allowing people to communicate.

In today's world, English has become the universal language used worldwide for communication, governance, teaching, and business purposes. Besides the natives, there is an enormous number of non-native English speakers, who are not from the English-speaking countries, which implies that Britain cannot be the sole controller of this language. The most prominent model for investigating New Englishes is Kachru's model of 1985, which classifies the varieties of English on the basis of use and status. The Inner Circle consists of countries such as Britain and America, which are the mother countries of the language. The countries of the Outer Circle are Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore, and others, where English is used as a second language, thus, implying that the phonotactic rules must be followed. The last group is the Expanding Circle, in which nations learn English as a foreign language to communicate. It is significant that Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural country, where people unite by using English as a lingua franca. The English language used in Nigeria is referred to as Nigerian English which is largely based on the British Standard English with some local flavour for effective interaction.

Learning a Second language is quite challenging when it comes to pronunciation, indeed, when writing we have time to think about what and how to pronounce or write something, even writing tools can help us correct mistakes, grammar, spelling, etc. While, when speaking, it is much faster, and we have to think on the spot, this can also be challenging depending on how we pronounce words in our mother tongue, such words might be articulated differently in the second language making the speaker sound like he or she have an accent. This can be a big issue for teachers, who wonder if they should teach the students to speak like native English speakers or focus on making students communicate effectively. This study believes that students should be able to communicate effectively. This is probably true since when you speak English with someone, it will rarely be with an English native speaker, while most of

the time you will be interacting with a respondent who either speaks English too, maybe as their second language, or someone who does not speak English at all but wants to learn it for either a lingua franca purpose or for purpose.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This work has both theoretical and real-life value. It contributes to World Englishes research as well as the study of English as a foreign language by advancing arguments on behalf of Outer Circle varieties and by providing evidence on the relationship between intelligibility and multidimensionality in postcolonial territories with diverse linguistic heritages. The study's findings will be important to curriculum designers, teachers' educators, and policymakers in Nigeria, as well as the rest of the world. The results will help them provide more equitable and effective pedagogical solutions to teaching English as a foreign language. This article will advise teachers to focus on developing eye-catching skills rather than aiming to imitate native speech. In addition, it will help students become more fearless and self-assured in their communication with others. Finally, this study will provide empirical evidence to improve pronunciation instruction worldwide, making it more accessible and relevant for English L2 learners.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study aimed to establish the relationship between speaker clarity and speaker accent in English language teaching and learning by non-native speakers with Yoruba language background in Nigeria. The study objectives include:

1. To examine how listeners from first-language backgrounds perceive intelligibility and accent in spoken English.

2. To determine which phonetic characteristics of Yoruba-influenced English either support or hinder understanding.

3. To analyze how prioritizing intelligibility might influence English language teaching practices in Nigerian settings.

4. To develop a pronunciation teaching framework suited to the realities of Outer Circle contexts and aligned with English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) principles.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How significantly does emphasizing intelligibility over like pronunciation improve communication effectiveness for non-native English speakers?

2. How do listeners' assessments of intelligibility in Yoruba-influenced English compare with their judgments of its strength?

3. Which phonological aspects of Yoruba English have the impact on being understood?

4. What are the prevailing attitudes among teachers and learners, toward reduction compared to instruction focused on clarity?

2.1 Literature Review

In the recent time (since early 2000s) the question of teaching pronunciation has undergone significant reconsideration in regard to the relevance of the native vs. intelligibility principles. Levis (2005) states that the goal of instruction should be focused on achieving "comfortably intelligible outcomes" (the native standard being deemed unattainable by the majority of learners). In another piece, the author argues that intelligibility as a principle that guides teaching is "widely and justifiably held to be superior on grounds of workability, universal applicability to allophones (including NNSs), its awareness of non-functional "differences 9between varieties and the socio-function of varieties" (Levis, 2020: 1).This assumption may be regarded as a part of developing English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) since communication breakdown between non-native speakers is unacceptable (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010).

Jenkin's (2000) study on LFC (Lingua Franca Core) resulted in a description of inventory of elements essential in communication across varieties, which includes most consonants, correct placement of nuclear stress, vowel length distinctions, with some variations permissible for realizations of allophones and interchanges of /ð/ and /θ/. Since then, both practice and research have endorsed this approach: thus, Dauer (2005) evaluated the application of the LFC as innovative practice for pronunciation instruction while Walker (2010) actualized its implications for classroom instruction of such LFC constituents as consonants, consonant clusters, distinctions between short and long vowels, and nuclear stress. More recently, Barrera-Pardo (2022) examined the flap intelligibility as part of the LFC and concluded that adherence to its core features facilitates communication in spite of variations in other phonological areas. A number of studies conducted by Derwing, Munro et al. investigated the differences between accent and intelligibility with regard to the third factor – comprehensibility (the ability of a listener to identify speech sounds). Findings from these studies demonstrated that even though listeners may notice an accent, such speech can still be entirely comprehendible (Munro & Derwing, 1995; Derwing & Munro, 1997, 2015).

Moreover, suprasegmentals (intonation, stress) can play a more significant role than individual distinctive segments in facilitating intelligibility. Munro (2011) argues that intelligibility needs to be delineated from related concepts and discusses its pedagogical implications (most recently in her work on intelligibility of L2 accented speech). A series of studies conducted in the last decade also provide evidence for the described trends. Thus, Kang et al. (2018) found that across different varieties of English accent measures varied in their correlation with intelligibility while Kang et al. (2020) identified individual dimension of accent associated with higher likelihood of communication breakdown. The phenomenon of English as a lingua franca is especially relevant for post-colonial countries such as Nigeria where English serves as an unofficial lingua franca with remnants of local languages' phonology. As such, it unifies the country's multitude of ethnicities and tribes while incorporating elements of each

language's phonology; thus, the study informs the teaching practice in Nigeria since it promotes learners' confidence (as accent is less emphasised) while enabling effective communication within the multilingual society. The research described above also supports this tendency since the focus on making the language more audible to NNS has been proved to be more relevant than adherence to native-speaker norms. As a result, learners become more confident while communicating with more diverse audiences.

The study on World Englishes, Outer Circle English varieties (Kang et al., 2018, 2020) also actualises this tendency since exposure to different accents facilitates understanding as well as overall fluency of communication. Recent articles (Wang, 2023; Van Di, 2024) describe the observed shifts in the curricula and learners' beliefs about learning English. One of them (Wang, 2023) notes the occurrence of ideological change in national curricula which involves the rejection of the native-speaker ideology. Indeed, the research since 1999 provides the theoretical basis for the need to update the pedagogy of pronunciation instruction to meet the needs of communicating across varieties of English. Therefore, aside from mentioned above theoretical breakthroughs (Jenkins, 2000; Levis, 2005, 2018, 2020), there is a number of empirical articles such as those by Derwing and Munro (2015), Walker (2010) and Kang et al. (2018, 2020) providing evidence for the tendencies discussed.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

The paper was formulated using the theoretical foundations provided by three renowned scholars. First, Kachru's (1985) World Englishes theoretical discussion acknowledges the multiple pluricentric models of the language. Levis's (2005, 2018) intelligibility-based approach is more communication-focused and offers an outcome-oriented perspective. Finally, Jenkins's (2000) Lingua Franca Core provides the phonological goals. Overall, the three theories have been utilized to reject the deficit view of non-native accent and imply that meaning negotiation is achieved through the interaction of talkers and listeners.

3.1 Research Methodology

The study applied a convergent parallel mixed method research design. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to simultaneously generate results, which were integrated during data analysis. Specifically, a mixed method design was chosen to complement both methods' strengths and provide converging results while triangulating perceptions and production data. The quantitative study involved one hundred (100) participants, including fifty (50) sociology students at the University of Lagos and fifty (50) secondary school students at Precious Prinx Comprehensive College, Idimu. The participants were selected using a convenience and snowball sampling technique from the universities and professional organizations. On the other hand, a qualitative study was conducted among twenty (20) participants who met the inclusion criteria. The criterion included being a Yoruba native speaker with a good command of the English language. The participants were selected using the same sampling technique used in the quantitative study, and they represented different ages (22-45 years old), genders, and levels of proficiency in Nigerian Educational English (NEE).

Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated using the questionnaire, interview, and speech sample as instruments. In the quantitative study, the five-point Likert scale was integrated into the questionnaire to measure the participants' perceptions towards accent versus intelligibility. Additionally,

the researcher used read-aloud and monolog speech samples from the 20 Yoruba participants to assess accent, comprehensibility, and intelligibility using the Derwing's and Munro's (2015) scale. In the qualitative study, the researcher generated data using transcription and error analysis of participants' speech samples, together with semi-structured interviews with ten participants on their perceptions of accent instruction and evaluation. The quantitative data were analysed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software through descriptive analysis, pearson correlation and independent-sample t-test. On the other hand, qualitative data were analysed thematically and acoustically using Praat software. Finally, ethics were maintained throughout the research process by ensuring confidentiality, obtaining informed consents and ensuring secure storage of the data.

4.1 Findings and Discussion

The quantitative results of the study yield mixed evidence in support of the study's main hypothesis. First and foremost, it is noteworthy that most participants agreed that intelligibility is more important than having a native-like accent for effective communication (78%, M = 4.32, SD = 0.78). Secondly, the analysis revealed a negative correlation between the accentedness and intelligibility ratings ($r = -.45$, $p < .01$), thus confirming that these attributes are only partially overlapping (Munro & Derwing, 1995; Derwing & Munro, 2015). Indeed, the Yoruba English samples were positively evaluated in terms of intelligibility (mean M = 82%, min-max 68-95%). Moreover, the intelligibility scores were significantly higher among the participants who were familiar with other African English varieties (M = 3.8% Kang et al., 2018).

In addition, the qualitative analysis of the 20 speech samples also supported the main hypothesis of the study. Indeed, the findings suggest that the speaker made frequent use of interdental fricatives, syllabic timing, and merged vowels that are common to many African languages. However, the preservation of nuclear stress and consonant clusters was found to have the most positive effect on intelligibility (Jenkins, 2000; Walker, 2010). Three overarching themes were also identified in the analysis of interviewees' responses. They included negative perceptions of accent-based discrimination in public places, a pragmatic desire to achieve intelligibility in a professional setting, and positive attitudes toward the cultural identity of the Yoruba English accent.

Overall, the findings of the study confirm the results of the Derwing-Munro studies on the partial dissociation between accentedness and intelligibility. They also extend this research direction to an Outer Circle English variety and demonstrate that it can be largely intelligible due to a preserved set of strategic features. In fact, the results undermine the theoretical underpinnings of the Inner Circle-based practice in ESP, since it can be limiting for students in terms of both confidence and time management. Thus, the current findings have implications for the development of a new approach to ELT, which is aimed at developing intelligibility-based communication competence. Such an approach should focus on three key features of the LFC framework, which include nuclear stress patterns, consonant clusters, and vowel length, and incorporate the perspectives of the participants. However, due to methodological limitations, including a convenient sampling method and a limited regional dialect, this study should be extended to multiple sites in order to obtain more generalizable results.

5.1 Conclusion

Foreign accents are often conflated with clarity. In contrast with popular belief, according to research conducted for the paper, there is no evidence that accent impacts intelligibility. Rather, accent should be taught with a view to achieving clarity to meet international and post-colonial communication needs. The intelligibility-based approach to learning English in Nigeria, as a former British colony whose official language is English, will contribute to maintaining language authenticity and offer phonetic tools needed for effective communication in multilingualism settings. Thus, pedagogical approaches should be adjusted to prioritize acceptability over emulative strategies to raise awareness among language learners about their pronunciation and reduce the accent bias. Subsequently, this will allow them to communicate effectively internationally while acquiring confidence in their language skills. Finally, this research can be used to address the problem of accents in language learning by supporting the claim that clarity should be prioritised over using native pronunciation when learning English.

5.2 Recommendations

1. Curriculum designers and teachers are advised to incorporate intelligibility oriented strategies including the Lingua Franca Core into pronunciation syllabi

2. Teacher preparation programmes need to give greater attention to raising awareness amongst teacher-learners regarding the issues surrounding World Englishes and build their competencies in teaching intelligibility features and away from native-like pronunciations

3. Learners need to boost confidence in producing speech sounds, prosodies and overall message clarity in order to enhance intelligibility and effective communication in target language communities

4. Tests and examinations need to develop items that seek to elicit and measure levels of intelligibility and comprehension attained by the learners. For instance, transcription tasks may be used instead of discrimination tasks as a way of assessing pronunciation proficiency

5. More investigative studies need to be conducted on intelligibility benchmarks with specific reference to professional and institutional requirements in the Outer Circle such as Nigeria

6. Institutions need to provide learners with extensive exposure to World Englishes varieties so that they can develop greater degrees of tolerance and familiarity with these varieties

7. Publishers and course book designers need to go through the existing pronunciation-related materials and make the necessary modifications by doing away with the emphasis on native-like models and putting more focus on the Lingua Franca Core features

8. Policy makers in Nigeria and other plurilingual countries need to put this information into considerations when developing language policies by recognizing Nigerian English as one of the official varieties and doing away with unnecessary language ideologies that seek to impose excessive burdens on language learners by forcing them to disguise their accents

9. Teachers are encouraged to engage learners in communicative tasks where peer-peer interactions take centre stage instead of focussing on target language-sound production

10. Teachers need to receive training on how to give feedback especially on pronunciation. They should practise being selective on features to comment on including only those that do not detract from intelligibility

11. University language centres need to open clinics that deal with issues related to pronunciation by giving advice and guidance on how to attain intelligibility instead of trying to help learners modify their accents

12. Developers or designers of multimedia programmes and computer assisted language learning resources need to put more emphasis on creating programmes that highlight features of intelligibility such as nuclear stress and retention of consonant clusters rather than going after native-like productions.

13. Courses on cross-cultural communication need to be initiated and made mandatory for all language learners and teachers so that they highlight the pertinent issues surrounding pronunciation differences and help eliminate xenophobic perceptions

14. More longitudinal studies need to be conducted to establish which of the recommended intervention strategies has greater potential of promoting target language competence amongst the learners.

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