

# Assessment of the Teaching of English Pronunciation in Nigerian Schools

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## **Abstract**

*This piece identifies and discuss various aspects of pronunciation teaching, factors affecting pronunciation, and methods used by teachers in the teaching of English pronunciation. It also identifies challenges teachers face teaching the English pronunciation and possible ways of tackling the challenges*

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## **Introduction**

The English language is the most studied and most sought after language in the world and especially in the Nigerian society starting from the nursery school to post-secondary school. It is a verbal behaviour governed by rules that has attained international scope. English language is important in Nigeria because, apart from the fact that it is the language used for instruction, it builds bridge across the barriers created by the existence of many ethnic groups and also serves as the official language with which communication is done in all facets of political, economic and social lives. According to (Jackobson 1956), effective communication processes among users of the language must be achieved by maintaining the morphology, syntax, semantics and phonological ideals of the language. Anything short of this will stall the effective use of the language and strongly affect the proficiency and performance of the user.

Oral rendition or the spoken word, where the sounds of language will be physically applied to bring out the correct lexical items and consequently form appropriate and grammatically acceptable syntactic structures is very important as it is the final part of the language use where communication between hearer and speaker takes place. “Misapplication of the rules governing the sound system of any language, particularly, the English language, will negate the very essence of communication and mutual intelligibility” Schane (1973).

For this reason therefore, there is the need to teach the language effectively in our educational institutions. This is so because, sometimes some English words are pronounced differently from its spelling and again, speech sounds of English are unlikely to be same with those of the mother tongue of the learners.

Pronunciation teaching is the most complicated but significant aspect of ESL/EFL teaching. In the process of communication, pronunciation has great importance because successful communication takes place only with correct pronunciation. Nunan (1991) has mentioned that teaching of pronunciation is dealt from different point of view because influence of first language seems prominent in case of pronunciation and only gifted learners can attain the mastery over pronunciation, though they start learning language after puberty.

The teaching of pronunciation often gets pushed to the bottom of the list. Many teachers say there’s just not enough time to teach pronunciation. Learners often think it is not that important but, if students need or want to speak English understandably, pronunciation is important. Teachers therefore owe it to their learners to give them the tools they would need to be able to communicate successfully in English.

Pronunciation includes supra-segmental features and they are: sounds of the language, stress and rhythm, intonation. Each language has a great number of possible sounds. For example: English has forty-four distinctive sounds, whereas in English there are twenty-six alphabets. Since alphabets are not able to show the difference between different sounds like ‘th’ in this, that and ‘th’ in thank, throw, teachers and learners require achieving essential knowledge on those sounds, especially the sounds related to English language.

Teachers often concentrate only on teaching difficult sounds’ articulation and allow the class to produce native-like sounds, though this endeavour does not work among the learners after the term. Accurate pronunciation helps learners to achieve goal in communication, i.e. their utterance can be understood by the audience clearly and easily and they will also be able to understand native speakers’ conversations. But achieving accuracy in pronunciation does not become so easy for the learners and teaching pronunciation seems to be difficult for the teachers.

Consequently, proper teaching methods have to be adopted if such assimilation and integrations must be corrected.

### The Different Aspects of English Pronunciation

There are several definitions of pronunciation. First, it is imperative to point out that phonology is different from pronunciation. According to Tharpe, (2017) phonology is a linguistic term which is the study of the sounds and relationship between sounds that exist in a language while Pronunciation is the way in which these sounds are spoken. This means Phonology is what the sounds are in a language while pronunciation is how the sounds are used. Burgess and Spencer (2000: 191-192) also says “the phonology of a target language (TL) consists of theory and knowledge about how the sound system of the target language works, including both segmental and supra-segmental features. Pronunciation in language learning, on the other hand, is the practice and meaningful use of the target language phonological features in speaking, supported by practice in interpreting those phonological features in a target language speech that one hears”.

The English sound systems are broken into two, segmental and supra segmental as represented in the diagram below.

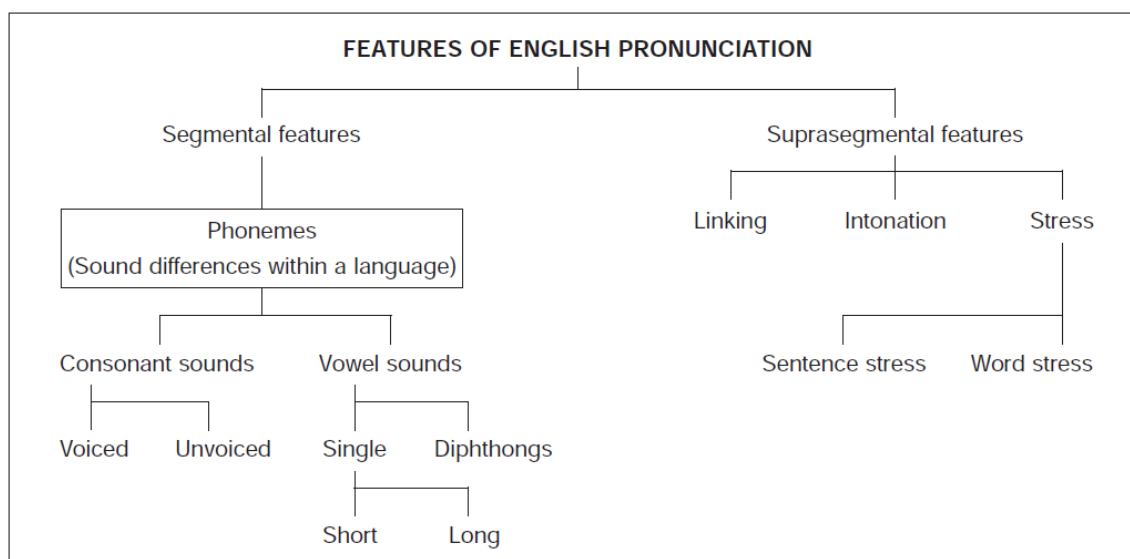


Figure 1: Features of English pronunciation. Source: Burns, 2003: 6

### The Segmental Feature

The features of pronunciation, as illustrated in the diagram above shows that segmental features of the speech system has vowel and consonant sounds. The consonant as shown divided into voiced and unvoiced or voiceless sounds and vowels into single (pure) and diphthongs. They are again either short or long sounds.

#### a. The vowel

Cruttenden (1994:34) says, “Vowel is a category of sounds normally with a voiced regressive air stream, without any closure or narrowing such that will result in noise component characteristics of any consonantal sounds; moreover the escape of the air is characteristically accomplished in an unimpeded way over the middle of the tongue”.

Vowels are usually articulated without a complete closure of the mouth. They can be low, mid or high and frontal, central and back depending on the position of the tongue during articulation. A large number of vowels are either relatively single (pure) or clearly gliding in nature and they have a distinctive function in English. The single (pure) vowels are twelve in number as represented in the following: seven short *monophthongs*: /ɪ, e, æ, ʌ, ɒ, ʊ, ə/; five *long monophthongs*: /i:, ɜ:, ɑ:, ɔ:, u:/

The gliding vowels otherwise called diphthongs are eight (8): /ei, ai, ɔi, əu, aʊ, iə, ea, uə/:

a) Three *centring diphthongs*, that ends in vowel /ə/: /ɪə/ *beard, near, here*, /eə/ *square, fair, aired*, /ʊə/ *tour, poor, moored*;

b) Five *closing diphthongs*, three of which end in vowel /ɪ/: /eɪ/ *face, paid, face*, /aɪ/ *nice, price, time*, /ɔɪ/ *choice, boy, voice* and two in vowel /ʊ/: /əʊ/ *home, no, goat*, /aʊ/ *house, mouth, now*.

Another kind, Schwa, is the third sound that most of the single vowel spelling can produce. The schwa is an indistinct sound of a vowel in an unstressed syllable, represented by the linguistic symbol /ə/. Schwa is a vowel pattern that is not always taught to elementary school pupils because it is difficult to understand. However, some make the argument that schwa should be included in primary reading programmes because of its importance in reading English words.

#### b. Consonant Sounds

There are twenty-four sound symbols, which make up the English consonants. Consonant according to Obafemi (1994:64) “are sounds produced with an obstruction to the flow of air. It may be total, partial or it may just be in form of light glide”. The division of consonants is in three classes: the place of articulation, the manner of articulation and the position of the glottis. The place explains how the sounds are produced, the manner tells the contact between the tongue and the rest of the buccal cavity while the position of the glottis shows whether the vocal cords vibrate or not.

The table below shows a summary of the English consonants, marking their manner of articulation and place of articulation

Here is a consonant chart as presented by Jones (1997)

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	palatal	Velar	Glottal
	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v	-v +v
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Affricate					tʃ dʒ			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			h
Nasal	m			N			ŋ	
Lateral				L				
Approximant	w				r	j		

### The Supra-segmental Feature (stress, intonation, rhythm)

Obafemi (1994) said with supra-segmental, English makes use of stress and intonation in the voice modulation to convey mood and attitude both of which, affect meaning. Explicit pronunciation learning can therefore be on the level of supra-segmentals, where the pupils learn and practice word stress, sentence stress, rhythm, weak forms and intonation.

#### a. Stress

Kenworthy (1988:28) asserts that “correct word stress patterns are essential for the learner’s production and perception of English”. If a non-native speaker produces a word with wrong stress pattern, an English listener may have great difficulty understanding the word, even if most of the individual sounds are well produced. In listening, if the learner of English expects a word to have a particular stress pattern, they may not recognize it when a native speaker says it. Meaning what they hear is not what they have in their mental dictionary.

Stress as defined by Jones (1994) is a degree of force with which a sound or syllable is uttered. Stress refers to the prominence given to certain syllables within words, and to certain syllables or words within utterances. It is signalled by volume, force, pitches change and syllable length, and is often the place where we notice hand movements and other gestures when we are watching someone talking.

To a learner whose background is his or her mother tongue where every word is given some amount of stress, the issue of stress and unstressed word is strange. Williams (2004:83,84) said “practicing stress as a feature of pronunciation in English includes words of two, three, four or more syllable where the different categories have their own system of determining whether the stress should fall of rise. Another is word that can be used as nouns and verbs where the nouns are stressed on the first syllable and the verb on the second syllable”.

#### b. Rhythm

English speech resembles music in that it has a beat. There are groups of syllables, just like bars of music, and within each group there are strong and weak beats. There is a tendency in English for the strong beats to fall on nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (words that carry a lot of meaning) and for the weak beats to fall on prepositions, articles and pronouns (words with a grammatical function). If we apply this to our sentence, we get the following rhythm:

What do you think of it?  
Da da da Da da da

According to Kenworthy (1988:30) “rhythm is characterised by alternation of strong and weak syllables”. He said it is a word stress and the way in which important items are fore-

grounded through the occurrence on a strong beat and unimportant items are back-grounded by their occurrence on a weak beat.

### c. Intonation

Intonation, or change of pitch, is crucial in signaling speaker meaning, particularly interpersonal attitudes.

Roach (2002) defines intonation as the use of the pitch of the voice to convey meaning. Williams (2004) said intonation in English is the falling tone at the end of a sentence and rising tone at end of a sentence. For example,

Look at it now. (falling tone at the end)

Would you like some tea? (rising tone at the end)

### Factors Affecting the Learning of Pronunciation

Many factors could affect the learning of pronunciation especially for an ESL learner of English language. Wong (1987:17) said, “The teaching of pronunciation is not exclusively a linguistic matter”. Therefore, teachers should consider factors that could affect significantly the teaching of pronunciation. These factors include exposure of the pupil to the target language, aptitude, attitude, motivation, age and native Language (L1).

#### a. Exposure to Target Language

Krashen (1982) said learners acquire a second language primarily from the input they receive, which has to be in large amounts and, most importantly, comprehensible. In English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, since the pupils have inadequate or no English native input outside the classroom, “the burden will fall more on the teacher to provide an adequate model of the target language”, and “to ascertain that students have opportunities to experience samples of the authentic oral discourse of native speakers” (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996: 17).

#### b. Aptitude (phonetic Ability)

It is a common view that some people have a “better ear” for foreign languages than others. According Kenworthy (1988:6) “some people are able to discriminate between two sounds better than others, and/or are able to mimic sounds more accurately” Celce-Murcia et al. (1996:17) believes that there are four traits that constitute language aptitude:

- a) “Phonetic coding ability”;
- b) “Grammatical sensitivity”;
- c) “Inductive language learning ability”;
- d) “Memory”

#### c. Motivation and Attitude

Motivation again is an important factor that influences the success in pronunciation learning. According to Balboni (2012), it is a form of energy that is responsible for the memorisation of new information and fundamental to the acquisition of a second language. There is a strong relation between motivation and attitude.

#### d. Age

Age is again a strong determining factor influencing foreign language pronunciation. Through observation, we see how easily babies and very young children learn languages. They easily pick up the sounds and words they hear around them and, gradually learn to imitate them correctly. It is closely connected to the theory of Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967)

which states that children between 2 and 13 can achieve native-like proficiency in acquiring a foreign language, especially pronunciation (Loewen, Reiders, 2011).

**e. *The Native Language***

Avery and Ehrlich, (1987) claim that native language is an important factor that affects the learning of pronunciation. Cook (2008) lending his voice said, “A person who knows two languages transfers some aspect from one language to another”, and “what can be transferred depends, among other things, on the relationship between the two languages”. This occurrence does not concern only separate sounds but “combinations of sounds and features such as rhythm and intonation” (Kenworthy, 1990: 4).

**Method of Teaching English Pronunciation**

Teaching method comprises the principles and strategies used for instruction. Williams (2004) asserts that the teaching of English pronunciation is general in the sense that it pays direct attention to the grammar, vocabulary, functions and notion of the language as these are spoken rather than written.

Many techniques and activities can be used to teach English pronunciation to young learners. Here is a list of some of them:

**a. Listen and Repeat Activities**

According to Tench (1991: 21), “the basic strategy in pronunciation teaching is imitation”. Therefore, English language teachers should take advantage of the children’s ability to imitate quite precisely, what they hear.

**b. Use of a Phonetic Alphabet (Phonetic Training)**

This technique, involves doing phonetic transcription and reading phonetically transcribed text. According to Harmer (2001: 185), “the clearest way of promoting awareness” of sound and spelling correspondence “is by introducing the various symbols”.

Phonetic Placement Methodology (Phonetic Training)

This methodology involves the use of articulatory descriptions. The teacher demonstrates to the pupils how to correctly place their tongue, teeth and lips in order to produce the correct sound. In order to enhance the teacher’s description of how sounds are produced, Celce-Murcia et al. (1996) suggest that it is possible to use the support of visual aids, such as articulatory diagrams

**c. Minimal Pairs**

Minimal pairs according to Kelly (2000: 18) are “words or utterances which differ only in one phoneme”. Celce-Murcia et al. (1996:8) claim, minimal pair drills “help students distinguish between similar and problematic sounds in the target language through listening discrimination and spoken practice”. Minimal pair drills include both word-level drills (e.g. *sheep/ship*) and sentence-level drills (e.g. “*Don’t sit on the seat*” (pragmatic level),

**d. Songs and Rhymes**

Brewster et al. (2002: 162) claims, “Carefully selected, songs, rhymes and chants can offer a rich source of authentic input”. Slattery and Willis, (2001) Said rhymes and singing songs are great ways to practice pronunciation, stress, and intonation. Young learners enjoy repetition, and songs and rhymes are generally repetitive and easy to remember.

**e. Tongue Twisters**

Using tongue twisters can be a fun and useful way for children to improve the articulation of English sounds (e.g. *Red lorry, yellow lorry, red lorry*) (Celce-Murcia et al., 1996: 9).

**f. Games**

Games are excellent tools for teaching pronunciation to children. As Brewster et al. (2002: 172) claims, “They are not only motivating and fun but can also provide excellent practice for

improving pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and the four language skills". When children play games, they use repeatedly the same language structures that they eventually memorize.

#### **g. Look and Say Method**

With look and say method children learn to recognize whole word or sentence rather than individual sounds. The pupil will look at a word which you sound and in turn will repeat the sound (the word). Flashcards with individual words written on them are used for this method often accompanied with a related picture.

#### **h. Reading Aloud**

Reading aloud as a method of teaching pronunciation is a method used to target suprasegmental features by providing exposure and practice with stress placement, linking, and other phonological processes that naturally occur in speech and contribute to the overall rhythm of the language.

Williams (2004 p.256) said; "poetry is basically oral literature since it is meant to be read aloud". The rhyme and rhythm of verse can readily come to our aid in teaching of pronunciation.

### **The Challenges of Teaching English Pronunciation**

Sotiloye (2007:89) said the challenges encountered in teaching English pronunciation range from those posed by learners, lack of equipment, interference from the learners' first language, the structure of English language itself, the nonchalant stance adopted by the government towards educational system to the evaluation of proficiency in the skill.

Williams (2004:77) agreed with Sotiloye by saying that "pronunciation should be tackled by systematic teaching in second language context". He advanced three reasons, first, the age at which they began to speak the second language, Second, Interference from the mother tongue and thirdly, noise which, is produced when one sound system is superimposed on another, like the static which makes regular radio signals difficult to hear.

Other challenges according to Ortese, Yawe and Akume (2005) include the learner, the learning environment, the teacher, the strategies used and the learning materials as challenges of teaching English pronunciation.

Through observation, it is evident in Nigeria that attention is not given to learning environment. It does not matter how good the teacher is or how intelligent the pupils are, if the environment is not conducive, learning will not be at its best. Therefore, the effectiveness of English pronunciation learning is dependent on the environment, teacher's ingenuity and the method he adopts in the teaching.

### **Conclusion/ Suggestion**

This piece has examined the various aspects of pronunciation teaching, factors affecting pronunciation, and methods used by teachers in the teaching of English pronunciation. It also identifies challenges teachers face teaching the English pronunciation.

The view point holds that the teaching of English pronunciation has not been given the proper attention it deserves. If the essence of language teaching is the acquisition of communicative competence, both the oral and written forms of the TL should be emphasized.

The methods identified here are limited to the teaching of English pronunciation however; the methods as they were are grossly underutilized by teachers in teaching English pronunciation. Language teachers should give the priority to help the students develop their pronunciation skill. If the students' vocabulary and grammar are up to the mark, but his/her utterance cannot be understood, all the efforts of learning English will be useless.

. Learners should be taught to pronounce the sounds accurately and to speak with the correct accent to, at least, meet the intelligibility of English as an international language.

To make this possible, ESL teachers should be trained to be conversant not only with the pronunciation of the different sounds of the language but in the stress and intonation patterns. They should to adopt the techniques of teaching either by using one teaching method or combined them as most of them are learner- centred. However, there is need to discover the methods that appeal to individual learners and to concentrate on that particular method for the learners. Teachers should also improve themselves through conferences and workshops and in teaching; they should pay more attention to areas of difficulty of learners.

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