

**IMPLICATIONS OF SOUND-LETTER AMBIGUITY OF VOWEL SOUNDS TO
SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS**

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Abstract

Inconsistencies in English at the level of orthography and phonology are numerous. This is because ordinary English spelling is very far from being an adequate system for transcription. This paper, therefore, investigates the effect of sound letter ambiguity of English vowel sounds on the learning process of Igbo second language learners. The paper hinges on the theory of error analysis as its theoretical framework. The study explores the sound letter ambiguity using post primary school students in Nnewi North Local Government Area of Anambra State. To accomplish this, a survey method was used to ascertain some of the challenges they face in the teaching and learning of English vowels. Data were gathered through dictation test and transcription exercise. The study observed that unintelligibility and defective pronunciation were among the problems which sound letter ambiguity imposes on second language learners. Some recommendations were proffered to improve the mastery of English vowel sounds to post primary school students.

Keywords: Inconsistency, orthography, phonology, vowel sounds and unintelligibility

Introduction

The influence of speaking is very strong in students who are speakers of English as a second language. Language is the only means of communication and if the aim of communication is jeopardized by one factor or the other, there will be a breakdown in communication. The phonology of English is very complex, much more complex than that of any other European language Simo Bobda (1992:75).Speech and pronunciations of words in English are seldom 'flat' David Okoroafor (2012:3). Different spellings may have the same sound and be represented by one symbols. There is no definite relationship between the spellings of words and their pronunciation in English. Okoroafor continues that we tend to deduce the pronunciation of many English words from other words we 'know better'; such words

could be English or our mother tongues. One spelling can have different sounds and symbols in different words. For instance, /e/ sounds /e/ in the word end but /p/ as in entourage. Speech is one area that carries the identity of the speaker in a way that writing does not. In view of this, there has been the question of what model of pronunciations to adopt. Although, the Received Pronunciation (RP) is often regarded as the universal standard for General Minimum Intelligibility, there are arguments as to whether RP is intrinsically better than the other standards.

The raging argument requires great significance especially when we agree with Warren (1995) that the analysis of the literature regarding RP Pronunciation shows that it is improperly and ambiguously defined qtd.in Onuigbo and Eyisi (2008: 192 -3). They further stress that the so called universal standard if it is actually universal, is only an arbitrary standard imposed on a vast majority by a tiny minority without giving serious consideration to its relationship with other dialects. Consequently, many learners find it hard to relate phonetic symbols to sounds in English.

Research Question

In what way(s) does the impact of ambiguity at the level of orthography and phonology manifest in the students poor mastery of English vowels sounds?

Definition of Concepts

It is worthy to define some concepts for better understanding of the work.

Phonetics – The general study of the characteristics of speech sounds Yule (1998: 41).

Sound - Minimal segment of a spoken language (The New Penguin English Dictionary (2001: 1372).

Letter - A character representing one or more of the sounds used in speech. Concise Oxford Dictionary (1999: 815).

Ambiguity - Acting both ways, actual or potential uncertainty of meaning. Mcarthur & FeriMcarthur(1992: 32).

Vowel - Speech sounds made by shaping the oral cavity while allowing free passage of air from the lungs. Clarence Sloat etal (1978) in Uzoezie(1992 : 30).

The English Sound System

While the English sound system has forty-four standard speech sounds (vowels and consonants), the alphabet has only twenty-six letters. Since there are more phonemes than there are letters of the English alphabet, letters are insufficient in number for the representation of allphonemes. Okoroafor (2012: 14) asserts that although some phonemes can be represented by symbols similar in writing to some letters of the English alphabet, they do not mean the same thing in phonetics. On this, Sethi, Sadanand and Jindal unanimously confirm:

While English has 44 sounds the alphabet has only 26 letters. So, the alphabet is overburdened. And worst still, even in the face of a scarcity of letters, many of them are sometimes squandered in representing the same sound. (11).

The implication of the above is little or no mastery of the vowel sounds as it imposes more confusion on the learners.

The Vowel Sounds

The English vowels are grouped into two major classes, namely: the pure vowels; also called monophthongs and the impure vowels; also known as diphthongs. The pure vowels are further subdivided into long vowels and short vowels. The long vowels are five and indicated by two dots (:) while the short ones are seven. The triphthongs are seven in number.

The Twelve Pure Vowels (Monophthongs)

1. /i:/
2. / I /
3. / e /
4. / æ /
5. / ɑ: /
6. / ɒ /
7. / ɔ: /
8. / u /
9. / u: /
10. / ʌ /
11. / ɜ: /
12. / ə /

They are each clearly negotiable as one sound.

The Eight Impure Vowels (Diphthong)

1. / eɪ /
2. / əʊ /
3. / aɪ /
4. / αʊ /
5. / ɔɪ /
6. / ɪə /
7. / eə /
8. / uə /

They sound like two different vowels fused together in pronunciation. That is, they have the characteristics of ending with a glide towards a closer vowel. Eyisi(2007: 293).

The Triphthongs

Peter Roach starkly avers that the most complex English sounds of the vowel type are the triphthongs. They can be rather difficult to pronounce, and very difficult to recognize (2004:24). He further gives the definition of a triphthong as a glide from one vowel to another and then to a third, all produced rapidly and without interruption.

The Five Diphthongs include:

1. /eɪə/
2. /aɪə/
3. /ɔɪə/
4. /əʊə/

5. /auə/

The Origin of Ambiguity

English vowels' ambiguity evolved from different sources. Some of them include: historical reasons, silent letters, the introduction of printing, the French scribes spelling of Old English, Roman Missionaries writing of OE, borrowing. Others are vowel alternation, vowel shift, learned writers fashion; we shall briefly look at some of them.

The French Scribes' Spelling of Old English

After the Norman Conquest, the French Scribes brought their own ideas about spelling. Several Old English (OE) spellings were replaced. David Crystal (1998:75) gathers that the French introduced 'q' where OE had used 'CW' as in 'queen'. French Scribes brought in 'gh' instead of 'h' in such words as 'night' 'enough' and 'ch' in place of 'c' in such words as 'church'. They began to use 'ou' for 'u' in words like 'house'. They used 'c' before 'e' or 'i' in such words like 'circle, cell. Because the 'u' was written in a similar way to 'm, n and v', words containing a sequence of these letters became difficult to read. Thus, they often replaced the 'u' with 'o' in such words as 'love, come, son, one'. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, English spelling was a mixture of two systems: French and Old English.

The Introduction of Printing

The early fifteenth century witnessed several ways of spelling words, reflecting regional variations in pronunciation. The introduction of Printing Press in 1476 by William Caxton helped to develop a standard form of English spelling and pronunciation. This provided more opportunities for people to write and gave their works much wider circulation. By the sixteenth century, English language was developing both in the text and in a growing number of observations dealing with the grammar, vocabulary and writing system. However, Caxton as well as other publishers faced the problem of uniformity of the writing system and had to distinguish between what was standard and non-standard. They chose the system of which reflected the speech of the London area as standard to follow in printing houses.

Silent Letters

The changes undergone by English for many years caused some letters to be silent at certain positions in words. For instance; the letter 'k' in words such as 'knee', 'knight' and others was pronounced in OE but it is not the case today. Similarly, the final 'e' of 'state' 'rice', 'fire', etc. was still pronounced in the Middle English period but later on become silent. The 'r' of 'fire', 'beer'. 'air' was pronounced in all accents of English till the eighteenth century. While all these changes took place in speech, spelling, however, remained stable.

Borrowing

English language borrows extensively from other languages. This fact has been acknowledged by many writers including Yule. He avers: "... the English language has adopted a vast number of loan words from other languages ...", (1996:65). These brought about un-English looking spelling words which ended in strange combinations of vowels and consonants. Some of these borrowing include:

Arabic – alcohol, algebra, coffee
Dutch – boss, trek, wagon
French – meñu, café, reśume
Italian – piano, music, opera
German – pretzel, ubermensch, gratticiel
Turkish – yogurt, superman
Japanese – tycoon
Spanish – cargo, picareseque, cigar
Danish – leg, fellow, skip

Greek Affixes Include:

demos – democracy
phone – telephone
grapho – orthography

Latin Affixes Include:

aqua – aquatic
annus - annual
corpus – corporal

English Vowel Shift

Vowel shift according to Trask (1996:20) refers to a series of related phonological developments which affected the tense or long vowels of English. In the fifteenth Century, the sounds of London speech witnessed the greatest change in its history. During this period, the tense vowels gradually rose one height or more, and the highest vowels, / i / and / u /, diphthongized into / ai / and / au / respectively (Bobda 1992: 72). The letter ‘i’ in words like ‘mine’, ‘site’ was pronounced / i: / before fifteenth century, /ei:/ from the fifteenth century and /ai / from the twentieth century. Again, the letter ‘a’ in the words ‘name’, ‘late’. was pronounced / a: / before fifteenth century, /a:/, /ɜ:/ and / e:/ from the fifteenth century and / eɪ / from the twentieth century. In the same vein, the letters ‘ou’ in the words ‘house’, ‘bout’ were pronounced /u:/ before the fifteenth century, /ou/ from the fifteenth century and /au/ from the twentieth century, and many others. This marks the last major barrier between early English and the standard language of the present day whose spelling in many ways reflects the way words were pronounced in Chaucer’s time (Trask 1996:20).

Sound – letter Ambiguity in Second Language (L2) Learning

It is a truism that English spelling does not always indicate how an English word should be pronounced. This implies that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the letters of Roman alphabet and the sounds of English. As earlier mentioned, the English language has twenty-six letters called the alphabet. Incidentally, the English alphabet is not enough to represent the English sounds daily used in utterances. Usually the letter symbol stands for numerous sounds in English, (Ephraim Chukwu 2014:3). In a similar way, J.D. O. Connor (1980:7) vehemently asserts that in ordinary English spelling it is not always easy to know what sounds the letters stand for. For instance, in the words, city, busy, women, pretty, village, the letters ‘i,u,o,e,a’ all stand for the same vowel sound; the middle letter of

the word ‘sit’. In addition, the letter ‘a’ represents five different vowels in ‘banana, man, bather, many’.

From the above examples, it clearly proves that many words are not spelled as they are spoken. This becomes a problem in a second language situation, where the learners study the target language against the background of their mother tongues in which a reasonable degree of competence has been attained. In virtually all Nigerian languages, words are spelt as they are pronounced. On the contrary, the English spelling system is a terrible one, very problematic indeed. It does not adopt a definite pattern. K. Beare vehemently concurs: ‘The difference between pronunciation and spelling causes a lot of confusion’. He continues that knowing the pronunciation of a word does not enable one to predict its spelling. He further provides some examples using silent letters: ‘u’ in guess and guitar.

Methodology

The population of the study includes all the senior secondary school three (SSS3) students of 2018/2019 academic session of Nnewi North Local Government Area (LGA) of Anambra State, Nigeria. Proximity played a great role in choice of a state. This is necessarily because the researchers not only had worked with one of the schools for more than ten years but also live in Nnewi. Hence, it is easy to visit the schools for a period of one year for the study. A total number of forty SSS3 students were purposively selected from two urban schools in Nnewi North L.G.A: Nnewi High School, Nnewi and Immaculata Model Girls’ Secondary School, Nnewi. The schools selected include public and private school, mission school, all girls school and all boys school. The study employed a survey research design. The design is suitable because it studied a group and not the entire SSS3 students of the selected schools. Data were collected using dictation test and transcription test. The scores gathered were used in the interpretation of data.

Theoretical Framework

Error Analysis

The paper hinges on the theory of Error Analysis (EA). The assumption that second language learners (L2) errors are caused by negative interlingual interference from their mother tongue (MT) has been long disputed. The criticism has been that interlingual interference from first language (L1) is not the only source of error in L2. Thus, Error Analysis, as propounded by Stephen Corder in 1970 becomes a better approach to describe L2 learners’ errors. The definition of EA as given by C. James (1981:1) says that EA is the process of determining the incident, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessfully language. Hence, EA upholds that negative interference from MT is not the only source of errors in L2; there are other sources of errors. In view of this, two sources of errors are listed under EA. They are interlingual (that is those caused by the effect of the learner’s MT or the learning of the target language) and intralingual (errors caused from the effect of the learning of the target language).

The importance of EA cannot be overstressed. It is useful in evaluating the undesirable status of errors so as to serve a guide to inner workings of the language teaching and learning process.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this paper include those from oral English performance of senior secondary school three students through dictation exercise and transcription of English words. A total number of ten words with target vowel sounds written on foolscap were given to each student to be transcribed. In addition, a list of another ten words was dictated to students which they were expected to spell correctly. The words were mainly selected from several text books recommended in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) and Spoken English scheme of work.

Again, percentage from the collected data were analysed descriptively. Samples of the dictation as well as transcriptions of English words were calculated to ascertain the total number of the correct and incorrect answers by the entire subjects selected. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in the study and the errors were calculated using descriptive analysis in simple percentage; number of students with correct transcription and spelling over the number of incorrect transcription or pronunciation times one hundred over one.

$$\text{Example } \frac{20}{20} \times 100 = 100\%$$

The researchers aimed at identifying and describing the challenges faced and errors committed by secondary school students in connection with inconsistencies at the level of autography and phonology of English vowel sounds.

Let us examine the following tables from the selected schools.

Section A – Spelling/ Dictation of English Words

Table I Immaculata Model Girls’ Secondary School, Nnewi

	Words	RP	Target vowel Sound	No of students	No of correct spelling	%	No of incorrect spelling	%
1	Village	vɪlɪdʒ	/ɪ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
2	Woman	wʊmən	/ʊ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
3	Entourage	ɒntʊrɑ:ʒ	/ɑ/i/ɜ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
4	Truck	trʌk	/ʌ/	20	3	15%	7	35%
5	Tomb	tʊ:m	/u:/	20	2	10%	8	40%
6	Plumber	plʌmə	/ʌ/,/ə/	20	3	15%	7	35%
7	Ego	ɪ:gə	/ɪ:/	20	0	0%	0	0%
8	Wallet	wɒlət	/eɪ/	20	0	0%	0	0%
9	Country	kʌntri	/ʌ/	20	5	30%	4	20%
10	Poor	pʊə	/ʊə/	20	0	0%	0	0%

Looking at the table above, it is observed that 30% is the highest percentage of correct word and that is on ‘country’. This is followed by 15% each on ‘truck’ and ‘plumber’, ‘tomb’, has 10% while the rest : village, woman, entourage, ego, and wallet has 0% each. This proves without doubt that the inconsistency in the spelling and sound of English vowels as majority of the students spelled the words such as ‘tomb’ which is pronounced /tʊ:m/ as /tum:b/ With the /b/ sound which is meant to be silent.

Section B – Spelling/ Dictation of English Words

Table II Nnewi High School, Nnewi

	Words	RP	Target vowel Sound	No of students	No of correct spelling	%	No of incorrect transcription	%
1.	Village	vɪlɪdʒ	/ɪ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
2.	Woman	wʊmɪn	/ɪ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
3.	Entourage	ɒntʊrɑːʒ	/ɒ/ɪ/ʒ/	20	0	0%	10	0%
4.	Truck	tɹʌk	/ʌ/	20	1	5%	9	45%
5.	Tomb	tʊ:m	/u:/	20	0	0%	10	0%
6.	Plumber	plʌmə	/ʌ/,/ə/	20	0	0%	10	0%
7.	Ego	ɪ:gə	/ɪ:/	20	0	0%	10	0%
8.	Wallet	wɒləɪ	/ei/	20	0	0%	0	0%
9.	Country	kʌntri	/ʌ/	20	2	10%	8	40%
10.	Poor	pʊə	/ɪə/	20	0	0%	10	0%

From the table above, It is observed that the highest percentage of correct spelling is 10 and it is the word ‘country’. This is followed by ‘truck’ which has 5%. Surprisingly, no student could correctly spell the following words, as other percentages read zero: village, woman, entourage, tomb, plumber, ego and poor. The analysis indicates that majority of the students in Nnewi High School, Nnewi do not have the mastery of the English vowel sound as this is evident in their spelling because one spells what one pronounces. When one does not spell correctly, it obvious that one’s pronunciation becomes incorrect and as a result it would be difficult for others to understand what one intends to say.

Section C – Transcription of English Words

Table III Immaculata Model Girls’ Secondary School, Nnewi

	Words	RP	Approximates	No of correct transcription	%	No of incorrect transcription	%
1.	Birth	bɜːθ	bɑːt	3	15%	7	35%
2.	Ticket	tɪkɪt	tiket	3	15%	7	35%
3.	Entrepreneur	ɒntɹəprəʊnɜː	entəprenua	0	0%	0	0%
4.	Umbrella	ʌmbrelə	ɒmbrela	1	5%	9	45%
5.	Bouquet	bʊkɪt	bænkwet	0	0%	0	0%
6.	Police	pəˈliːs	poliːs	2	10%	8	40%
7.	Mayor	meɪə	meyɔː	0	0%	0	0%
8.	Comb	kəʊm	kɒmb	1	5%	9	45%
9.	Sachet	sætʃet	sætʃet	0	0%	0	0%
10.	Curse	kɜːs	kɔːs	2	10%	8	40%

From the above, it is noticed that only three students each could correctly transcribe the words ‘birth’ and ‘ticket’ and this gives a percentage of 35 each. For the words ‘police’ and ‘curse’ only two students each could transcribe them thereby giving a percentage of 40 each. It is also observed that one student each got the correct transcription of the words ‘comb’ and ‘umbrella’ which gives a total of 5% each.

However, all the students could not correctly transcribe the words ‘entrepreneur’, ‘bouquet’, ‘major’ and ‘sachet’ thereby leaving them at zero percent (%) each.

Section D – Transcription of English Words

Table IV - Nnewi High School, Nnewi

	Words	RP	Approximates	No of correct transcription	%	No of incorrect transcription	%
1.	Birth	bɜ:θ	bɑ:t	1	5%	9	45%
2.	Ticket	tɪkt	tiket	2	10%	8	45%
3.	Entrepreneur	ˌɒnrəprəʊnɜ:	entæprenu a	0	0%	10	50%
4.	Umbrella	ˌʌmbrelə	ɒmbrela	0	0%	10	50%
5.	Bouquet	bʊkeɪ	bənewet	0	0%	10	50%
6.	Police	pəʊlɪs	pɒli:s	1	5%	9	45%
7.	Mayor	meɪə	mæyo:	0	0%	10	50%
8.	Comb	kəʊm	kɒmb	0	0%	10	50%
9.	Sachet	sæʃet	sætʃet	0	0%	10	50%
10	Curse	kɜ:s	kɔ.s	0	0%	10	50%

Looking at the above table, it is observed that only two students out of twenty could correctly transcribe the word ‘ticket’; so also the words ‘birth’ and ‘police’ could only be correctly transcribed by one student. The rest of the words: entrepreneur, umbrella, major comb, sachet and curse were all incorrectly transcribed as no student got it right.

In all, it is rightly observed that out of the two schools chosen by the researchers, one performed better than the other. That is to say, that Immaculata Model Girls’ Secondary School Nnewi performed much better than Nnewi High School, Nnewi. The challenge is therefore, more noticed in High School. Part of the reason could be that Nnewi High School is a boys public School where most of the students do not take their studies especially on Spoken English seriously. Another reason of the much error challenge could also be that some teachers are less monitored and less concerned about the oral performance of the students.

On the other hand, if the challenge of ambiguity of English letters and sounds is compared between the two schools selected, it is glaringly noticed that the challenge is less on the Immaculata Model Girls’ Secondary School, Nnewi. The reason again could be that being a private school, the teachers are being closely monitored in carrying out their duties both within and outside the classroom. The students, in their own part, are more keen in their studies. Above all, excellent performance of the students especially in English language opens the door for more students to enroll in the school.

Challenges to Effective Learning of English Vowels to Second Language Learners

Since English is a second language in Nigeria, the learners are confronted with many difficulties in learning the language especially the sounds (vowels). Thus, one of the difficulties facing both the teacher and the learner in Nigeria is the dilemma of knowing what is to be regarded as the target model of English pronunciation. Although the Received Pronunciation (RP) is often regarded as the universal standard for General Minimum Intelligibility (G.M.I), there are arguments as to whether the RP is intrinsically better than the other standards. The raging argument acquires great significance especially as Warren (1995) asserts that:

The analysis of the literature regarding R.P. pronunciation shows that it is improperly and ambiguously defined. The so called universal standard if it is actually universal, is only on arbitrary standard

imposed on a vast majority by a tiny minority without giving serious consideration to its relationship with other dialects. Since spoken English is apparently a mix of numerous dialects, the R.P. which is a public school. Pronunciation cannot adequately serve as a universal standard especially as only a minority of English people speaks it qtd in Onuigbo and Eyisi(2007:192 – 3).

Nevertheless, in most Nigerian languages, words are pronounced exactly as they are. This implies that there is one- to-one correspondence between the pronunciation of the word and its orthography. For instance, ‘aka’ /aka/ ‘ego’/égó, //’oche’/óché. But reverse is the case with English orthography.

CelMurcia, et al (1996:270) confirm this: “English orthography is too abstract to be phonetically or phonemically optimal, for it lacks the principle of one-to-one correspondence”.

Based on these, we present two obvious implications of sound-letter ambiguity to second language learners of English vowel sounds.

Defective pronunciations

Spelling pronunciation exerts a great influence on second language learners of English. Many students rely on the orthography of a word to deduce its pronunciation. For instance, the words ‘gate’, ‘ego’, wallet, are pronounced respectively /get/, /ego/, ‘wa:let’, instead of /geɪt/, /i:gəʊ/, /wɔ:let/.

Again, problem always exists when it comes to long and short vowels. For instance, the words ‘seat’, ‘sheep’, ‘pool’ are pronounced /sɪt/, /ʃi:p/, /pul/instead of /si:t, /ʃi:p/ and /pu:l/ respectively. The implication of this is breakdown in communication as a result of the language used. Thus, citing Confucius Eyisi (2010 p ix) vehemently asserts that “if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done is not done”.

Unintelligibility

Inability to identify accurately the words uttered by a particular speaker plays a major role in communication breakdown. There exist some sounds in English which do not exist in some Nigerian languages such as Igbo. Such sounds; the central vowels, include /ɜ:/, /ə/, the back vowel /ʌ/, and so on. As such, the Igbo second language learner will have problems pronouncing them. The problem worsen when they resort to their Igbo equivalents or pronunciation based on their orthography, a total breakdown in communication is bound to occur, since orthography is not always a guide to the pronunciation.

For instance:

PRApproximates

bird/bɜ:d//bed/	
son/sʌn/	/sɒn/
mother/mʌðə/	/mɒdə:/
plate /pleɪt /	/pleti/

Recommendations

In order to improve the mastery of English vowel letters and sounds in Nigerian secondary schools, some recommendations have been made:

To students

Students should learn to practise pronouncing on their own sounds and words learned in class. They should participate in language clubs in their schools, listen to BBC news on radio and imitate the speakers. They should watch good English films and programmes on television. They should interact with people who speak good English. They should always have a good English dictionary for correct pronunciations. All these will enhance their pronunciation skill.

To Parents

Parents should endeavour to help their children who have difficulties in English by providing adequate materials for use.

To Teachers

Teachers should make concerted effort to pronounce words correctly. They should have a mastery of English phonology to enable them teach vowel sounds and letters effectively. They should also listen to BBC news and good programmes on radio and television so as to improve their pronunciation.

To the Ministry of Education (Post Primary School)

The Ministry of Education should ensure that professional English teachers are employed. Also, teachers should be well paid so as to work well. Adequate incentives should be provided to them.

Conclusion

The paper investigated the challenges faced by second language learners of English while learning English vowel sounds. It was revealed that sound-letter ambiguity hinders students' mastery of pronunciation of English vowel sounds. This has a lot of implications on student's learning process which included defective pronunciation and unintelligibility which lead to communication breakdown. Some recommendations were made to various groups such as teachers, parents and students. If these recommendations are put into consideration, no doubt, remarkable improvement will be noted

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