
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Contrastive Analysis of English and Igbo Segmental Features: Implications in ESL Learning.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of a Contrastive study is to examine the differences that exist between languages, as well as to ascertain the challenges they pose to second language learners. This paper focuses on a contrastive analysis of the segmental features of the Igbo and the English languages with emphasis on the implication of the differences in the learning of English as a second language by people whose first language is Igbo. The study reveals that while the Igbo language has more consonants than the English language, the English language has more vowels than the Igbo language. Here lies the problem of the Igbo learner of the English language. The study ends with some suggestions on how to eradicate or, at least, grossly minimize the resultant interference.

KEYWORDS

Contrastive analysis, ESL, Igbo, Segmental features.

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1. Introduction

Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of two languages with the aim of identifying their structural differences and similarities, with their implication on language learning and teaching. In linguistics, contrastive analysis refers to a theoretically grounded, systematic and synchronic comparison of usually two languages. Linguistics and pedagogic theories have come up with two different approaches to language errors, namely: contrastive analysis and error analysis. Theoretically, contrastive analysis is based on structural linguistics and behavioural psychology (Allan, 1977).

The aim of this study is contrastive analysis, whose goal is to examine the differences that exist between English language and Igbo language phonemes and the difficulties they pose to second language learning by people whose first language is Igbo. Igbo is a major language in Nigeria spoken by the Igbo people, an ethno-linguistic group nation in West Africa. The Igbos came into contact with European culture during the colonial period. The States comprising the Igbos are Anambra, Imo, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi and some parts of River State, Kogi State and Delta State. There are many segmental features of many African languages discovered by a good number of researchers to be missing in the English language, as well as many segmental features of the English language that are not found in many African languages. Due to this fact, African learners of the English language face a lot of challenges in achieving proficiency in the language because the practical implication that follows the obvious differences between the African and the English languages is the emergence of errors.

The Igbo language is devoid of certain consonant and vowel sounds, which the English language has. This paves the way for difficulty for an Igbo learner of the English language to achieve proficiency in the language. On this note, this study focuses on exploring the phonological differences between the Igbo language and the English language, especially at the segmental level, thereby making attempts to highlight the consequent difficulties encountered by the Igbo learners of the English language. The study also proposes solutions on the way out of the problems.

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1.1 Research Problem

Nigeria is a multiethnic and multilingual nation. The issue of the number of languages in Nigeria has been subjected to guessing over the years. The enlisted living languages spoken in Nigeria are estimated to be between 522 to 527 (Lewis et al., 2013, 2020, 2021). This claim, by stating that over 522 living languages have been attested as spoken across Nigeria, was supported (Akindele et al., 2022). They went further to state in their study that out of these languages, seven have been observed to have gone into extinction. Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that the Nigerian speech community is multilingual. This study, therefore, sets out to find out the influence of the Igbo language on the segmental phonology of English and its implication for learning English as a second language.

2. Review of Related Literature

A few researchers have done some works on contrastive analysis of English and Igbo languages or related works. Nkamigbo, L. C. (2010) in African Journal of Teacher Education (AJOTE) addresses the issues of phonological facilitation and interference in both teacher training and general education in sub-Saharan Africa. These phonological phenomena are critically examined as they feature in Igbo, one of the major African languages spoken predominantly in South-Eastern Nigeria. The sound system of Igbo influences that of the English of the native Igbo speakers.

In the Journal of Igbo Language & Linguistics (JILL) No. 3, December 2011, Umuodinka, A. U. carried out a study on corpus-based contrastive analysis of Igbo and English adjectives. This emphasis is not on segmental features but on adjectives. The researcher used a descriptive approach to look into the patterns of authentic language use through the analysis of the actual usage of the adjectives. Emphasis was on the differences in their usage as they relate to interference problems encountered by the Igbo learners of English as L2. The results of the analysis showed that corpus-based contrastive study is an indispensable innovation in language teaching, especially as it plays a prominent role in foreseeing problem areas and making predictions to forestall their occurrence in language pedagogy.

Still, in the same journal mentioned above, Uzoigwe, B. C. (2011) attempted an in-depth contrastive analysis of Igbo and English Determiner phrases. The researcher compared the determiner phrase structures in Igbo and English languages. Determiners in both languages include: numbers, adjectives (qualifiers and quantifiers), demonstratives and genitives. The findings revealed that the Igbo language has an initial head structure where the determiners are positioned after the head 'X...' the ellipses represent the determiners. Some exceptions have been shown to occur where such forms as *otu*, *xfqdx*, *nd*, *naan* and *qtxtx* occur in the Igbo language. English maintains the structure of its head, assuming the final position in a phrase. This means that all the determiners come before the head '...X.'

Nwabuike et al. (2015) attempted a study on contrastive analysis of English and Tiv segmental phonemes: implication in ESL learning. The researchers examined the differences that exist between the English language and the Tiv language and the challenges both languages pose to second language learners of Tiv descent. The findings revealed that while the Tiv language has more consonants than the English language, both Tiv and English languages have the same number of vowels. But English vowels /æ/ and /ð/ are not present in Tiv, just as Tiv vowels /a/ and /o/ are not present in the English language. This poses some challenges for Tiv people learning English as a Second Language.

The closest work to the present study is that of Nwabuike, C. E., Kaan, A. T. and Anaso, G. N. (2015), yet their work was not on English and Igbo phonemes but rather on English and Tiv phonemes. All these works cited above do not really have their focus on the segmental features of English and Igbo languages. This study does that and stresses the pedagogical implications of ESL learning.

3. Methodology

This present study dwells on the contrastive analysis hypothesis of Lado (1957), which states that "... in the comparison between native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning". He outlines methods for comparing two systems of sound, grammar, vocabulary, writing and culture. He and Charles C. Fries, in their contrastive hypothesis, posit that difficulties in learning a language can be predicted on the bases of a systematic comparison of the system of the learner's first language (its grammar, phonology and lexicon) with the system of a second language. Contrastive analysis, therefore, is the systematic study of two languages and their comparison with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. It has been used to establish language genealogies and was used in the field of Second language Acquisition (SLA) in the 1960s and early 1970s as a method of explaining why some features of a target language were more difficult to acquire than others. The researcher will use this theory to compare and contrast the segmental phonemes of English and Igbo languages with the aim of identifying their similarities and differences and drawing conclusions on their implication on the learning of the English language by Igbo people.

3.1 Segmental Phonemes

Sounds and phonemes in a language are referred to as Segmental. Phonemes refer to a family of sounds in a given language which is related in character and is used in such a way that no member ever occurs in a word in the same phonetic context as any other member (Jones, 1967). Phonemes are distinct segments that make up the total inventory of sounds. A phoneme is the smallest linguistic unit of a language. Vowels and consonants make up the phonetic inventory of all human languages. These are also attested to in the Igbo language.

The English language has twenty-four consonantal sounds and twenty vowel/vocalic sounds (Nkamigbo, 2010). The vocalic sounds are further divided into twelve monothongs and eight diphthongs.

The English phonemic inventory /p b t d k g ʃ dʒ m n ŋ f v ə ð s z ʃ ʒ h l r j w i: i e æ a: ɒ ɔ: u u: ʌ ə ɜ: eɪ aɪ aʊ ɔɪ iə əu eə uə/

The Standard Igbo phonemic inventory has thirty-six phonemes. These comprise twenty-eight consonants and eight vowels.

The standard Igbo phonemic inventory /p b t d k g ʃ dʒ m n ñ w ŋw ny f v s z sh h l r kp gb gh kw gw ɣ i ɪ e a ɔ o u u/

Table 1. English and Igbo Vowels

English Language Vowels	Words found	Igbo Language Vowels	Words	Meaning
i	kit	i	nri	food
e	peg	e	egbe	hawk
æ	cat	a	ala	land
-	-	o	obele	small
ɒ	pot	-	-	-
u	cook	u	ilu	proverb
ʌ	hut	-	-	-
ə	again	-	-	-
i:	key	ɪ	ahja	market
a:	car	-	-	-
ɔ:	door	ɔ	ɔdum	lion
u:	room	u	ulɔ	house
ɜ:	breath	-	-	-
iə	here	-	-	-
eə	there	-	-	-
uə	poor	-	-	-
ei	rain	-	-	-
ai	high	-	-	-
ɔi	boy	-	-	-
əu	bone	-	-	-
au	cow	-	-	-

Table 2. English and Igbo Consonants

English Language Consonants	Words found	Igbo Language Consonants	Words	Meaning
p	pot	p	puta	come out
b	balance	b	bia	come
t	tent	t	tuta	pick
d	discover	d	dozie	repair

k	kitchen	k	keta	get a share
g	general	g	gafeta	come over
-	-	kp	kpasa	scatter
-	-	gb	gbabata	run in
-	-	kw	kwapu	clear out everything
-	-	gw	ogwugwa	telling
f	fan	f	ofufe	worship
v	van	v	ivu	fat; weight
θ	think	-	-	-
ð	this	-	-	-
s	see	s	soro	follow
z	zink	z	zanye	sweep into
ʃ	ship	sh	ishi	head
ʒ	pleasure	-	-	-
h	house	h	hapuya	leave it
m	man	m	mmadu	human being
l	life	l	golụ	to buy
n	now	n	ncha	Soap
r	root	r	eriri	Rope
ŋ	bring	ń	ańu	to drink
-	-	ŋw	nwanyị	woman
-	-	ny	anya	eyes
j	you	ɣ	yochapu	sift out
w	white	w	wepu	take away
tʃ	church	tʃ	ocha	clean
dʒ	judge	dʒ	Jide	hold; grasp
-	-	gh	nghagbu	cheating

4. Results/Findings

The findings of this study, based on the analysis done above, show that we have more vowels in the English language than in the Igbo language, thereby showing us that there are some vowels present in English that are not present in Igbo. These pure vowels in English /ɒ/, /ʌ/, /ə/, /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/ are not present in the Igbo language. Likewise, all of the eight diphthongs in English cannot be found in the Igbo language.

It is necessary to note here that Tone plays a key role in the use of Igbo vowels. One Igbo vowel sound can give different meanings to different words, which can only be differentiated in writing through the use of tone marking. Igbo is a tone language because it manipulates tone contrastively. Two level tones are observed in Igbo, namely high, which is unmarked and low. The down-step tone is a high tone which is reduced in pitch. Tone performs semantic and grammatical functions in Igbo. The application of different tones to certain lexical items yields different meanings.

For instance:

isi

isi 'head'
isì 'smell'
isì 'blindness'
isí 'to cook'

akwa

akwa 'cry'
akwà 'cloth'
àkwà 'bed or bridge'
àkwa 'egg'

oke

oke 'male'
okè 'boundary'
òkè 'share.'
òke 'rat'

This is a situation that cannot be found in the English language. Conversely, what we find in the English language is regular sequences of different pitches characterize stretches of speech between pauses and are known as intonation.

For consonants, the Igbo language has more consonants than the English language. While there are twenty-eight consonant sounds in Igbo, English has twenty-four. From the analysis, it is very clear that the two alveolar plosives /d/ and /t/ in the Igbo language substitute the two dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/, respectively, which are absent in the Igbo language. Also, the fricative

/z/ is absent in Igbo, while the semi-vowel /j/ for 'young' in English appears as /y/ for 'yochapụ' in the Igbo language, meaning 'sift out'.

While there are differences between the lateral /l/ and liquid /r/ in English consonants, the Igbo language does not recognize these differences as /l/ and /r/ are used interchangeably without altering the meaning. For instance, 'load' and 'road' are two different words in English, whereas 'lieya' and 'rieya' have the same meaning as (eat it) in Igbo language depending on the part of Igbo-speaking area they are used.

The following consonants in Igbo do not exist in English /kp/ - kpa (scatter), /gb/ - gbatata (run in), /gw/ - ọgwụgwa (telling), /kw/ - kwapụ (clear out everything), /ɲw/ - nwanyị (woman), /ny/ - anya (eyes), /gh/ - nghagbu (cheating).

4.1. Implications for ESL Learning

In the Nigerian multilingual setting, when learning English as a second language, the influence of the mother tongue or L1 cannot be ruled out or taken for granted. This is why it is pertinent to tackle the issue of interference from the mother tongue in the learning of the English language. Hence, it is of paramount importance for the learner of the target language to obtain a great level of mastery and proficiency in the target language. This is the reason it is necessary for the learner of English as a second language to start learning the language from point zero, and through the steady accumulation of the mastered entities of the target language, the learner eventually attains a particular level of proficiency.

Phonological errors may occur due to the fact that some of the English sounds are not found in the Igbo language. For instance, /ə/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/, /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/ are not present in the Igbo language, and many Igbo learners of English find it difficult to pronounce /ʌ/. The Igbo learners of the English language realize the English sound /ʌ/ as /ɔ/ as can be seen in "cut" /kʌt/ pronounced as /kɔt/. Also, /ə/ in 'again - /əgein/ is pronounced /agein/, thereby realizing /ə/ as /a/.

The absence of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ in the phonemic inventory of the Igbo language has far-reaching implications for learning English sounds. Where words like 'think' and 'path' occur in a sentence, many Igbo learners of English tend to pronounce them as 'tink' and 'pat', respectively. While the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ is substituted for the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/, the voiced dental fricative /ð/ is substituted for the voiced alveolar plosive /d/ by Igbo, learners of English. The lack of differentiation between lateral /l/ and the liquid /r/ consonants in the Igbo language tends to result in the inability of some Igbo speakers of English to differentiate the sounds in English. For instance, "ruler", "road", and "radio" are pronounced as /lula/, /lod/ and /ledio/, respectively.

On the whole, the implications of L1 on learning a second language need to be highlighted here, especially in respect of segmental phonemes. It should not be taken for granted that teachers of English are aware of their responsibilities in the teaching and learning of English as it relates to instructional goals.

4.2. Recommendations

From all the findings in this study, the researcher can categorically state that learners' cultural background can either enhance or impede the learning of a second language. Learning a second language is easier if the L1 and L2 cultures share similar features. However, in a situation where both cultures differ in so many aspects, as the researcher discovered in this study, learning becomes difficult. On this note, it is, therefore, the researcher's suggestion that teachers of Phonology of English be in the know of the linguistic backgrounds of second language learners.

Teachers must spot and highlight those shared features that may contribute to second language learning. Again, pronunciation correction practice is essential, and teachers must be cautious in error corrections because errors in pronunciation may be the result of negative language transfer or incorrect assumptions held about the second language. Such teaching strategies as isolating the problematic sound segments for remedy, the use of minimal pairs to contrast confusing sounds and the use of sounds in sentences can be adopted by the teacher for the correction of pronunciation errors.

Teachers of ESL should also make use of language laboratories in teaching phonology. This will go a long way in correcting errors in pronunciation.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the analysis and findings in this study, it is factual to say that, phonologically, the Igbo language differs to a large extent from the English language. As a result of the differences that exist in the vowels and consonants of the two languages, there are certain predictions of errors that an Igbo learner of the English language is bound to make. As for consonants, there are more consonants in the Igbo language than we have in English, but there are more vowels in the English language than are in the

Igbo language. In this regard, it is, therefore, very important and necessary that both Igbo learners of the English language and the teachers of the English language take advantage of the exposition made in this present study to actualize the desired goal of teaching/learning English as a second language. The findings of this study have generated some areas for further research. The present study covered only the segmental features. Further studies can be done to cover both the segmental and supra-segmental features.

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