

ABSTRACT

TITLE: Pronunciation Intelligibility of Nigerian Speakers of English

Traditionally, English language pronunciation teaching was based on native-speaker norms usually Received Pronunciation for British English (RP) and General American (GA). In other words, people studied English intending to interact with native English speakers and attaining this native-like accent was the ultimate goal. However, in the light of the expansion of English as a global language such assumptions are in urgent need of consideration and reevaluation, especially as the situation nowadays is shifting to a scenario where English language is increasingly being used for communication worldwide between speakers of other languages (de SOUZA, 1999). A growing body of research shows there are now more linguistic exchanges between non-native speakers (NNS-NNS) of English than between non-native speakers and native speakers (NNS-NS) (Crystal, 2003). In fact, Beneke (1991) estimates that around 80% of most interactions in EFL context take place in the absence of native speakers (NSs) while Mc Arthur (2002) reports that English is used in over 90 countries as an official language or semi-official language. Hence, it has been suggested that native speakers (NSs) and their pronunciation models have become less important in international communication.

In view of the global status of English today and in view of the emergence of non-native varieties of English world-wide, the concept of mutual intelligibility has emerged as one of the goals or the most important criterion for pronunciation rather than native like pronunciation accuracy as instances of NNS-NNS interaction have increased (Graddol, 1997). In the specific context of Nigeria, statistics show that one out of every four Africans is a Nigerian. Nigeria's size, natural resource endowment, economy, and influence in global affairs have continued to attract considerable scholarly attention. No other country in the sub-region, and very few in Africa as a whole, can compare with Nigeria in terms of economic and military capabilities (Adetula, 2013:1).

Given this status, it is crucial to know the extent to which other speakers from different linguistic backgrounds can understand Nigerian speakers of English. Therefore, the question of what hinders or promotes intelligibility in such communicative situations is an important one.

This paper reports on an investigation into the international intelligibility of the English of educated Nigerian speakers whose L1 is Yoruba. Speech samples collected from audio podcast produced by six Nigerian speakers were played to four groups of listeners: 6 Spanish, 6 Norwegians, 5 Germans and 7 Indians. The listeners were asked to transcribe based on the excerpts from the podcast in order to determine the extent to which they found the Nigerian English speakers intelligible. Some of the misunderstandings that occurred were analysed to determine which pronunciation features caused intelligibility problems. The findings showed that the mid central vowel caused the highest intelligibility problem as far as pronunciation is concerned.

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