

**TEACHING ENGLISH PHONEMES TO IKWERRE-IGBO L<sub>1</sub> SPEAKERS****Cecilia Amaoge Eme and Chinelo Vivian Okakpu****Department of Linguistics****Faculty of Arts****Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria****ca.eme@unizik.edu.ng /chinelviv@yahoo.com****+2348035611899 /+2348033817539****Abstract**

*Ikwerre-Igbo L<sub>1</sub> students experience difficulties in the pronunciation of English phonemes, which have negatively affected their mastery of English. There is the need to examine these problems, determine the extent of the erroneous pronunciation exhibited by students and provide intervention for them; hence this investigation on Teaching English phonemes to Ikwerre-Igbo L<sub>1</sub> speakers. Data were collected from 300 students, 100 each from rural (Elele), suburban (Igwuruta), and urban (Port Harcourt) schools in Rivers State who are Ikwerre-Igbo L<sub>1</sub> speakers. Their pronunciation of English phonemes was extracted. Using contrastive analysis (CA), phonemes of Ikwerre dialect of Igbo and English were analyzed and the implications for Ikwerre-Igbo students learning English elaborated, based on the premise of CA that the greater the differences in the phonemes of the languages, the more the difficulties the students would experience. The study discovered that interference of the mother tongue, Ikwerre-Igbo, is the major factor in the pronunciation difficulties of the students. They substitute the unfamiliar English phonemes with some phonemes in their L<sub>1</sub>. This leads to their erroneous pronunciation of the substituted English phonemes. Another interesting finding is that students in rural area exhibit the most erroneous pronunciation, followed by those in suburban area, and those in urban area, in that order. The study recommends that teachers pay more attention in teaching those sounds of English which are not in Ikwerre-Igbo, such as dental fricatives /θ ð/, palato-alveolar fricatives /ʃ ʒ/, central vowels /ɜ ʌ ə/ and diphthongs /əʊ ʊə eɪ aɪ ɔɪ ɛə/. Better teaching of the 'difficult' phonemes would eliminate the students' pronunciation errors.*

**Keywords:** *mother tongue, interference, contrastive analysis, Ikwerre-Igbo, learning English*

**Introduction**

Language is an essential feature of man that distinguishes him from animals. Having the appropriate language skills is an asset that promotes a lifetime of effective communication. Fatai, Adedeji, Gabriel and Musibau (2020) note that language is a socially and culturally constructed system of communication. According to Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010:1), "Language is a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc., through complex vocal or written symbols". Children born into a community acquire the language they are sufficiently exposed to as either their mother tongue or their first language, usually referred to as L<sub>1</sub>. In many parts of the world, including Nigeria, people find it expedient to learn another language (second language or L<sub>2</sub>) or other languages outside of the mother tongue they had acquired. In Nigeria, for instance, students cannot do without learning the English language. It is the official language of Nigeria and the language of instruction in Nigerian schools.

Learning to use a second language could be a rigorous exercise and often cannot be without challenges because the learner is faced with mastering the sound systems and prosodic features of



the second language which form the basic knowledge of every language, as against the firmly consolidated mother tongue already acquired. Thus, many learners of the second language do not adjust to the habits of the target language without the interference of their mother tongue. The challenges experienced in the teaching and learning of the language usually manifest at different levels of linguistic analysis- phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels; the difficulties at the phonological level involving the phonemes being basic.

Secondary school students in Nigeria experience difficulties in their quest to learn the English language. There are many indigenous languages of the people and children acquire one or the other as their mother tongue, depending on the part of the country where they reside. As a result of this, English language learning difficulties could differ depending on the mother tongue of the students; as second language learners often transfer the habits and rudiments of their L<sub>1</sub> to the English language. This study, therefore, investigates the difficulties in the pronunciation of English phonemes experienced by students who speak the Ikwerre dialect of Igbo as their L<sub>1</sub>. The study provides the needed intervention to tackle these problems that have negatively affected their mastery of English.

The Ikwerre dialect of Igbo is predominantly spoken in four out of the twenty-three Local Government Areas of Rivers State, namely, Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor, Emohua, and Ikwerre LGAs. It is one of the major dialects spoken in Rivers State.

### **Explication of Terms**

#### **Mother Tongue**

There are many views about what mother tongue means. Bamgbose (2022) defines mother tongue as an indigenous language of a people. Fatai, Adedeji, Gabriel and Musibau (2020) note that language is a socially and culturally constructed system of communication. A (2020) refer to mother tongue as the local language which an individual possesses consciously or unconsciously. Subandowo (2017) sees mother tongue as not only the language one learns from one's mother but also the speaker's dominant and home language. Mbah (2012) describes the mother tongue as the first language acquired by a child. He further explains that it must not necessarily be the mother's language; any language a child acquires first, either that of the mother or the father, automatically becomes the child's mother tongue. Seweje (2006) refers to mother tongue as the first language that a child acquires and with which they first make contact with themselves, others, and the environment. It is the language an individual learns to speak as a child. This is so because the mother is the first teacher available to the baby after birth. Thus, the mother likely passes on any language she speaks to the child.

This paper takes the traditional stance of what mother tongue means, as captured by Nordiaquist (2017). For him, mother tongue is a traditional term for a person's native language, that is, a language learned from birth. He goes further by saying that mother tongue is also called a first language, dominant language, home language, and native tongue. He states that mother tongue denotes not only the first language according to the time of acquisition but the first concerning importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. It is pertinent to add that in modern times, someone's L<sub>1</sub> may or may not be his native language because of migration where children could acquire a language that is not their native language as their first language. This paper, however, takes the students in the study as those who have Ikwerre-Igbo as their mother tongue or native language and acquired it as their first language (L<sub>1</sub>).

#### **Interference**

Language interference is a term used to describe the effects of transferring the acquired habits of one's mother tongue to the language being learned. The learner of the second language transfers the rules that govern the first language to the use of a second language. Onwe and Oguji (2022)

describe interference as a bilingual syndrome. They opine that in interference, the structure and vocabulary of a language that has been previously acquired by a language learner interfere with the efforts of the learner to learn a target language. Ellis (1997: 51) refers to interference as "transfer", which is "the influence that the learner's  $L_1$  exerts over the acquisition of an  $L_2$ ". He argues that transfer is governed by learners' perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in  $L_2$  learning. Onwe and Oguji (2022) note that transfer of features from one language to another could be negative or positive. Negative transfer occurs when a learner makes a distinct linguistic feature of one language to function in a different language thereby resulting in errors. Positive transfer occurs when the features of one language act positively in the learning of another language. In other words, it aids the understanding of a target language because of the inherent similar features.

Akindele and Adegbite (1999) define interference as the influence of the mother tongue on the learning of the second language. According to them, interference occurs when, in a bid to acquire a second language, learners mix up the rules governing their mother tongue with those of the second language. Zulfadli, Bukhari and Syafira (2019) define language interference as the effect of language learners' first language on their production of the language they learn. It is the learners' first language influences on their second or foreign language they are learning. The effect can be in any aspect of language, such as grammar, vocabulary, accent, or spelling. Similarly, Subandowo (2017) refers to the concept of language interference as a situation where speakers or writers apply knowledge from their native language to a second language.

Onike (2009) postulates that interference is a psycholinguistic concept that is a reality in language learning. Errors in second language learning are partly attributable to interference. Theorists of interference believe that acquisition of the first language usually affects performance in subsequent languages acquired. Patrick (2013) supports the point further by saying that interference as a linguistic problem is common in communities where second languages (usually the lingua franca) must be learned.

Interference is manifested at the different levels of linguistic analysis. At the phonological level, for instance, the learners replace or substitute any unfamiliar sound they come in contact with in the target language with a familiar sound available in their mother tongue. At the syntactic level, the knowledge of the first language influences the second in terms of word order, use of pronouns, determiners, tense, mood, etc. At the lexical level, the learners take words from their mother tongue and convert them to fit into the second language.

### **Contrastive Analysis**

Contrastive analysis (CA) is a diagnostic tool concerned with the comparison of two or more languages to determine the differences or similarities between them, either for theoretical, pedagogical or other purposes. Lennon (2008) explains that the main idea of contrastive analysis propounded by Lado is that it is possible to identify the areas of difficulty a particular language would present for the native speakers of another language by systematically comparing the two languages and cultures. CA is of the view that where the two languages and cultures are similar, many learning difficulties may not be expected; where they are different, many learning difficulties are to be expected.

Contrastive analysis is, therefore, conceived to account for second language acquisition by systematically comparing the first language and culture with the second language to determine the ways they differ or resemble. This tool of analysis is highly significant to this study as it presents an opportunity for the Ikwerre-Igbo and English sound systems to be compared systematically to

determine the differences and similarities between them. It is from the information derived from this comparison that the pedagogic implications would hinge.

### **Literature Review**

Many studies on the challenges and attitudes of students toward learning a second language or dialect have been conducted by various researchers. Most of the works point to some degree of interference of the first language or dialect on the second. Eme and Odinye (2008) note that one of the language learning problems identified among the L<sub>1</sub> Igbo students learning Chinese is mother tongue interference bordering on pronunciation. The pronunciation problem is as a result of the differences between the phonology of Chinese and Igbo. Their investigation reveals some phonemes in Igbo that are lacking in Chinese and vice versa. These Chinese phonemes would constitute pronunciation problems for Igbo learners of Chinese, as the students would negatively transfer the habit they formed for Igbo into Chinese.

Onuigbo (1990) notes that a second language learner that has acquired Igbo as his first language can produce 'pit' with ease but might experience some difficulties in producing 'split and spit'. This is because English permits consonant clusters but Igbo does not. As a result, the learners insert vowel sounds in between the consonants to break the cluster and ensure ease of pronunciation. Anasiudu (2005) corroborates Onuigbo (1990) when he notes that English and Igbo differ in syllable structure. English syllable structure admits consonant clusters which are strange to Igbo. He concludes that the Igbo learner of English encounters problems in pronouncing words that have consonant clusters. The learners often attempt to break the clusters by vowel insertion, which results in the production of erroneous forms of the language like 'dignity' for 'dignity', 'adivert' for 'advert', 'penality' for 'penalty'.

Another factor that poses a great challenge in learning English is the absence of some sounds in English from the inventory of the mother tongue of the students. Ugorji (2007) identifies some English consonants that are not present in standard Igbo e.g. /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/. Because of this, Igbo learners of English substitute /t/ for /θ/, /d/ for /ð/, /dʒ/ for /ʒ/. Teaching learners to pronounce these sounds correctly is a herculean task for teachers.

Emenanjo (1978) identifies only one preposition /na/ in Igbo while there are so many prepositions in English. This is a source of teaching and learning difficulty to an Igbo learner of English who battles with learning and appropriately using the many prepositions. Consequently, the students often use the prepositions indiscriminately. Owhoeli (2011) identifies some of the causes of ungrammatical sentences used by Ikwerre learners of English. Her work focuses on wrong use of tenses, wrong application of rules of concord, and wrong use of prepositions. The result of her study shows that the major problem is the wrong use of tenses. This could be attributed to the fact that the "Ikwerre verb is not inflected in any way; be it for tense, aspect, mood or whatever. However, in English, verbs change forms by the use of inflections such as -ed, as in 'form/formed'; -d, as in 'use/used'; -s, as in 'run/runs'; -es as in 'go/goes'".

In another development, Suleyman and Behnaz (2023) is a study aimed at determining and alleviating the influence of mother tongue interference and negative transfer from students who have Turkish or Persian as their first language and are learning English. They note that the features of interference are on the syntactic structure of a written task undertaken by second language learners. The learners have, at one point, utilized some L<sub>1</sub> structures to produce appropriate responses in L<sub>2</sub>, producing semantically acceptable compositions; but at another point, they have wrongly used L<sub>1</sub> structures interchangeably with L<sub>2</sub> structures thereby producing inappropriate L<sub>2</sub> responses.

Similarly, Ebunobi (2014) notes in her study of English and Igbo tense formation that the differences in structures of the languages under study are a source of error in the target language. She further identifies some differences in the tense formation of English and Igbo and concludes that wherever the structures of the target language differ from those of the mother tongue, we can expect difficulties in teaching and learning as well as errors in performance.

However, not all the challenges of second language learning result from mother tongue interference. Ukwueze (2008) asserts that internal inconsistencies in English hinder learning and usage by second language learners and users. An example drawn from his work is a situation where different spellings may occur in words, but in production they are pronounced alike. For instance, the long /i/ vowel sound can be realized from different spellings like: 'e' (be), 'ee' (tree), 'ea' (heat), 'ey' (key), 'i' (police), 'eo' (people). Teaching students to identify words with the vowel sound /i/ becomes problematic because the learner would have difficulty identifying the words that have the sound; as words with different spellings might have the same sound. He gives another instance with words that have the same spelling with 'oo' but different pronunciations, such as /ɔ/ in poor, /u/ in food, /ʊ/ in cook and good, /ʌ/ in flood and blood. A learner familiar with one of these words would likely generalize the pronunciation to all the words that have 'oo', thus producing an erroneous form of the target language.

This study makes its contribution and complements the effort of Owheoli (2011) to enhance the learning of English. Her work, though on Ikwerre, centres on the grammatical problems of the students and makes no reference to whether they are in rural, suburban or urban areas. The present study's focus is on phoneme production problems and how to tackle them, and to determine the level of erroneous pronunciations exhibited by the students in the rural, suburban and urban areas in Port Harcourt schools.

### **Methodology**

For this study, three secondary schools in Rivers State were selected through stratified random sampling based on the location of the schools. One each was selected from rural, suburban and urban areas: Community Secondary School, Elele, Emohua Local Government Area; Community Secondary School, Igwuruta, Ikwerre Local Government Area; and Model Girls' Secondary School, Rumueme, Port Harcourt, Obio/Akpor Local Government Area, respectively. Data were collected from 100 students from each of the schools, making a total of 300 students. The population is restricted to JSS 3 students to ensure that all the consultants are at the same level of academic attainment. Only English/Ikwerre-Igbo bilingual students were engaged for the study. The reason for the choice of schools is to capture the teaching of English phonemes in rural, suburban, and urban areas of Rivers State and determine the level of interference of their Ikwerre dialect. The schools chosen are located in areas of Rivers State where Ikwerre dialect is predominantly spoken. An interaction was established with the students where a list of English words was provided for them to pronounce. The list was prepared by the researchers in a way that all the 44 English phonemes were captured. The individual responses of the students were recorded, later transcribed orthographically and phonemically. A comparative description of the phonemes of English and Ikwerre dialect of Igbo was presented. Using the Contrastive Analysis (CA) framework, the transcribed data was analyzed to identify the pronunciation problems of the students with respect to English phonemes and the level of performance of the students based on the location of their schools. It was through the identified problems that the pedagogical implications were derived.

### **Contrastive Analysis of English and Ikwerre-Igbo Consonants** **English Consonants**

The Received Pronunciation (RP) English, which is the variety supposedly taught in Nigerian Schools, has 24 consonants: /p b t d k g ʃ dʒ m n ŋ f v s z θ ð ʃ ʒ h r l



j w /. They comprise 6 plosives /p b t d k g/; 2 affricates /tʃ dʒ/; 3 nasals /m n ŋ/; 9 fricatives /f v θ ð s z ʃ ʒ h/; a post-alveolar roll /r/; an alveolar lateral /l/; and 2 approximants /j w/. Examples of words where they occur are:

p	/p/	pet, apple, lip
b	/b/	book, able, pub
t	/t/	ten, attire, cat
d	/d/	dig, rider, road
k	/k/	can, market, luck
g	/g/	goat, forgot, dog
ch	/tʃ/	chalk, nature, church
j	/dʒ/	judge, bridge
m	/m/	man, amend, comb
n	/n/	net, annual, pen
ŋ	/ŋ/	young, singer, brink
f	/f/	fan, effort, cough
v	/v/	van, arrival, move
th	/θ/	three, enthrone, both
th	/ð/	there, brother, breathe
s	/s/	say, esteem, less
z	/z/	zebra, busy, buzz
sh	/ʃ/	shoe, mansion, cash
ʒ	/ʒ/	genre, leisure, vision
h	/h/	house, heat, ahead
r	/r/	roll, arrive, carry
l	/l/	let, alive, fall
j	/j/	you, mayor, yes
w	/w/	woman, way, aware

### **Ikwerre-Igbo Consonants**

Ikwerre-Igbo has 28 consonants: /p b t d k g k<sup>w</sup> g<sup>w</sup> tʃ dʒ m n ɲ ŋ ɲ<sup>w</sup> β β<sup>w</sup> f v s z ɣ h<sup>w</sup> h r l j w/ (Adapted, with modification, from Donwa-Ifode and Ekwulo, 1987). The consonants consist of 8 plosives /p b t d k g k<sup>w</sup> g<sup>w</sup>/; 2 affricates /tʃ dʒ/; 5 nasals /m n ɲ ŋ ɲ<sup>w</sup>/; 2 implosives /β β<sup>w</sup>/; 7 fricatives /f v s z ɣ h h<sup>w</sup>/; a tap /r /, an alveolar lateral /l/, and 2 approximants /j w/. Just as in standard Igbo, Ikwerre dialect does not permit consonant clusters, and consonants can occur only at the word-initial and word medial positions. Some of the instances of Ikwerre words where the consonants occur, which we present below, are got from the researchers' interaction with Ikwerre-Igbo native speakers while some were adapted from Alerechi (2007). They are:

/p/ /pjá/ sharpen, /pií/ there

/b/ /bja/ come, /ùbĕ/ pear

/t/ /tó/ grow, /ŋkítá/ dog

/d/ /divja/ doctor, /édè/ cocoyam

/k/ /àkítí/ beans, /ŋkó/ sharpness

/g/ /ŋgàdā/ chair, /gú/ sing

/k<sup>w</sup>/ /ák<sup>w</sup>á/ cry, /k<sup>w</sup>ùó/ talk



/g<sup>w</sup>/ /ng<sup>w</sup>ò/ palm wine tree, /g<sup>w</sup>ù/ give name

/ɣ/ /ɔvɔɣĩ/ day, /òɣĩɣĩrí/ darkness, /ɣĩ/ God

/ɖʒ/ /ɖʒé/ go, /ɲɖʒî/ darkness

/m/ /m̩vɔ/ comb, /mmá/ beauty

/n/ /ndí/ husband, /míní/ water

/ɲ/ /ɲkó/ sharpness, /ɲgàdã/ chair

/ɲ/ /ɔɲi/ fat, /ɲɣĩ/ grass cutter

/ɲ<sup>w</sup>/ /ɔ ɲ<sup>w</sup>ú/ death, /ɲ<sup>w</sup>ɲ<sup>w</sup>ērē/ wife

/β/ /ɔβára/ first son, /m̩βúru/ fruit

/b/ /àbà/ jaw, /àbòrò/ calabash

/f/ /áfó/ stomach

/v/ /èvùlù/ ram, /vò/ comb, /vùmé/ remove, /vùjá/ carry

/s/ /ɔsù/ fish, /sãmbì/ key

/z/ /ɔzuzà/ broom, /zàà/ sweep

/ɣ/ /íɣai/ money, /ɣjà/ come

/h/ /há/ peel, /ɲhē/ thing

/h<sup>w</sup>/ /áh<sup>w</sup>ú/ body, /h<sup>w</sup>ù/ blow

/r/ /ùri/ indigo, /érùru/ soldier ant, /ré/ sell

/l/ /ɔlò/ antelope, /lé/ look

/j/ /úhjé/ red, /áhjá/ market, /pjã/ flog

/w/ /rwè/ swallow, /èsúswé/ boil

### Analysis of the Consonant Systems and the Pedagogic Implications

The major difference in the consonant systems of English and Ikwerre-Igbo lies in their quantity. While English has 24 consonants, Ikwerre-Igbo has 28. In other words, they have certain phonemes in common, and some are obtainable in Ikwerre-Igbo but not in English and vice versa. For ease of comparison, the sounds are reproduced as follows:

#### English

/p b t d k g ɸ ɖʒ m n ɲ f v s z θ ð ʃ ʒ h r l j w/

#### Ikwerre-Igbo

/p b t d k g k<sup>w</sup> g<sup>w</sup> ɸ ɖʒ m n ɲ ɲ<sup>w</sup> β ɓ f v s z ɣ h h<sup>w</sup> r l j w/



Ikwerre-Igbo has bilabial implosives /ɓ ɗ/, palatal nasal /ɲ/, voiced velar fricative /ɣ/, and labialized sounds like labialized velar plosives /kʷ gʷ/, velar nasal /ŋʷ/ and voiceless labialized glottal fricative /hʷ/, but they are not in English. The Ikwerre-Igbo learners of English could commit pronunciation errors by bringing in these familiar sounds into their pronunciation of English. Conversely, English has the voiceless and voiced dental fricatives /θ ð/ and voiceless and voiced palato-alveolar fricatives /ʃ ʒ/. These English sounds are unfamiliar to the Ikwerre-Igbo speakers and pose some pronunciation problems for them in their efforts to pronounce English words containing any of the sounds because they substitute them with familiar sounds. Examples of the substitutions are /θ ð/ with /t d/ respectively, such that the students pronounce 'tink' instead of 'think'; 'fada' in place of 'father', and /ʃ ʒ/ substituted with /tʃ dʒ/ respectively as in 'shoe' and 'measure'. These are instances of interference involving negative transfer of L<sub>1</sub> knowledge into the target language and constitute problems for the teacher and learners. The researchers observed that the students from the rural area are mostly affected by the negative transfer, especially with respect to /θ ð ʃ ʒ/; as only 5 students (5%) pronounced the sounds correctly. Almost half of the students (48 students i.e. 48%) in the suburban area pronounced them correctly while only a little more than a quarter of the population in the urban school failed their pronunciation. In other words, 73 students, comprising 73% in the urban schools pronounced them well while 27 students (i.e. 27%) failed it.

Bilabial plosives /p b/, alveolar plosives /t d/, velar plosives /k g/, labiodental fricatives /f v/, alveolar fricatives /s z/, glottal fricative /h/, and approximants /j w/ are some of the consonants English and Ikwerre-Igbo have in common. These phonemes do not constitute pronunciation difficulty because Ikwerre-Igbo native speakers would transfer the features internalized from the mother tongue to the second language. This is a case of positive transfer.

From the foregoing, it becomes pertinent that in the teaching and learning of the pronunciation of English consonants, both the teacher and Ikwerre-Igbo learners must note these sounds that constitute difficulty and make conscious efforts about them. While the teacher reminds the students of the possibility of the errors and lays emphasis on the correct pronunciation, the students should make extra efforts to get the correct pronunciation.

### **Contrastive Analysis of English and Ikwerre-Igbo Vowels**

#### **English Vowels**

English has 20 vowels, comprising 12 monophthongs and 8 diphthongs, listed in that order thus: /ɪ e æ ʌ ʊ ɒ ə i ɑ ɔ ɜ u eɪ əʊ aʊ iə eə ɔɪ aɪ ʊə/. The 12 monophthongs consist of 7 short vowels and 5 long vowels. The short vowels are /ɪ e æ ʌ ʊ ɒ ə/ while the long vowels are /i ɑ ɔ ɜ u/. Examples of English words that have the listed vowels are as follows:

/ɪ/ pit, fin, market  
 /e/ pet, bury, debt  
 /æ/ pat, man, dam  
 /ʌ/ cut, blood, jump  
 /ʊ/ put, could, foot  
 /ɒ/ dog, watch, doll  
 /ə/ about, ago, teacher  
 /i/ week, key, bee  
 /ɑ/ hard, heart, farm  
 /ɔ/ fork, court, born  
 /ɜ/ heard, err, earn, bird  
 /u/ boot, food, coup

- /eɪ/ place, aim, spray
- /əʊ/ home, grow, coat
- /aʊ/ mouse, sound, loud
- /ɪə/ clear, ear, here
- /ɛə/ care, heir, peer
- /ɔɪ/ boy, voice, coil
- /aɪ/ find, ply, either
- /ʊə/ tour, poor

## Ikwerre-Igbo Vowels

Ikwerre-Igbo has 17 vowels /i ɪ e ε a o ɔ u ʊ ã ẽ ã õ õ ã õ ã/. They are made up of 9 oral vowels and 8 nasalized vowels. The oral vowels are /i ɪ e ε a o ɔ u ʊ/, while the nasalized vowels are /ã ẽ ã õ õ ã õ ã/. Some instances of the appearance of the vowels in Ikwerre-Igbo words are provided by our respondents while some are culled, with modifications, from Alerechi (2007, 2020):

/i/ /ɣi/ God, /ije/ walking  
 /ɪ/ /ànírì/ female tortoise, /ìwáí/ money  
 /e/ /jné/ person, /òbékʷù/ greet  
 /ɛ/ /ije/ walking, /éze/ king, /édè/ cocoyam  
 /a/ /àzõ/ back, /mádõ/ human being  
 /o/ /ùwó/ cloth, /òbékʷù/ greet  
 /ɔ/ /ɔvɔɣi/ day, /mívó/ comb, /órɔ/ house  
 /u/ /ùbè/ pear, /úhjé/ red  
 /ʊ/ /ḿpúró/ fruit, /àmòmà/ lightening  
 /ĩ/ /mini/ water, /éhiḡwè/ axe  
 /ĩ/ /m̀bīnībīnī/ cane, /òbíbjā/ coming  
 /ẽ/ /nhẽ/ thing, /izwẽ/ gossip  
 /ǎ/ /pjǎ/ flog, /áswǎ/ saliva  
 /õ/ /òkwúkwù/ talking, /òrùrwê/ swallowing  
 /ɔ̃/ /ɔ̃ŋʷó/ death, /ɔ̃ŋʷá/ moon  
 /ũ/ /úsè/ pepper, /vurú/ carry  
 /õ/ /àsõ/washing, /àzõ/ back

## Analysis of the Vowel Systems and the Pedagogic Implications

For ease in reference the vowels systems of English and Ikwerre-Igbo are reproduced hereunder:

English: /ɪ e æ ʌ ʊ ɒ ə ɪ ɑ ɔ ɜ u eɪ əʊ aʊ iə eə ɔɪ aɪ uə/

Ikwerre-Igbo: /i ɪ e ɛ a o ɔ u ʊ ãĩ ãĩẽ ãĩ ãĩũ ãĩũ/

The number of vowels and their quality constitute the major differences between the vowel systems of English and Ikwerre-Igbo. While English has 20 vowels, Ikwerre dialect of Igbo has 17 vowels. This shows that English has more vowels than Ikwerre-Igbo. Therefore, there are certain vowels they have in common, and there are some that are in Ikwerre-Igbo but are not in English and vice versa.

Some of the vowels that are found in English but not in Ikwerre-Igbo are the central vowels /ɜ ʌ ə/. The teacher finds it difficult getting the students to perceive the differences between these sounds and what they substitute them with. For instance, /gɜl/, /kʌt/ and /fæðə/ are erroneously pronounced as /gel/, /kɔt/ and /fada/ respectively. Again, Ikwerre-Igbo vowels are not grouped in terms of length. None of their vowels could, therefore, be referred to as long or short. The comparable English long and short vowels like /i ɪ/, /ɔ ʊ/ differ not only in length but also in quality. Thus, the learners' erroneous pronunciation of seat /sit and cut/caught/cot as /sit/ and /kɔt/ respectively, without any differentiation of the vowels, becomes a problem for the teacher. Moreover, nasalized vowels are



only phonetic in English but phonemic in Ikwerre-Igbo. The teachers are faced with the problem of teaching the students not to nasalize the English oral vowels, except in the environment of a following nasal. It is difficult for the teacher to let them understand why /e/ is pronounced as oral vowel in /pet/ but as nasalized vowel in /pen/ [pɛ̃n].

Similarly, the Ikwerre-Igbo vowel system does not possess central vowels and diphthongs. As a result, Ikwerre-Igbo learners of English encounter difficulties in the pronunciation of English words containing, especially, the central vowels. This error cuts across all the students used for this study, irrespective of the location of their school. For other vowels, they approximate the length and quality, and for diphthongs /əʊ ʊə eɪ aɪ ɔɪ ɛə/ they approximate too by combining their L<sub>1</sub> substitute vowels to get the target sound or reduce the diphthong to a monophthong.

In their approximation or reduction of the vowels, the study discovered that the students in urban school come closer to the desired pronunciation than those in the suburban area. The pronunciation of the students in the rural school is farther off than the target. This gives their speech an air of erroneous pronunciation, as all of them realized 'go' /gəʊ/ and 'cake' /keɪk/ as /go/ and /kek/; and could not differentiate the vowels in seat/sit and cut/caught/cot. Also, they erroneously pronounced these words the same way- pat/part/path, father/farther, den/then, cut/caught/cot. Although other errors such as morphological, lexical, grammatical, and semantic are prominent in the utterances of the students in the rural school, those errors are beyond the scope of this research. The researchers opine that the students in the urban school performed very much better than their counterparts in the rural school because they have more qualified and experienced English teachers as well as better facilities for the teaching and learning of English, particularly, English pronunciation.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

This study examined the pronunciation problems of Ikwerre-Igbo L<sub>1</sub> students in their learning of English phonemes as well as their implications for English pronunciation teaching and learning. From the investigation, the erroneous production of English phonemes by the students results basically from mother tongue interference, which is notably most prominent in the utterances of students in rural school. Pronunciation errors could mar or hinder effective communication; hence the need to eradicate or, at least, minimize their occurrence.

To achieve the appropriate pronunciation of the English phonemes by Ikwerre-Igbo L<sub>1</sub> speakers, due attention should be given to the oral skills. For the effective learning of English phonemes by Ikwerre-Igbo students, teachers should pay specific attention to speech sounds that are available in English phonemic inventory but are not obtainable in Ikwerre-Igbo, the students' mother tongue. They should ensure that the sounds are taught with more emphasis and caution as well as promptly carry out the correction of any pronunciation error that might occur. The students, on their part, should put more effort in their learning. This is to say that the problems in the teaching and learning of English could be minimized through commitment on the part of both the teachers and the learners to the task of teaching and learning. Learners should be encouraged to constantly use the dictionary when in doubt about the pronunciation of any word. English teachers should also constantly improve their pedagogical skills and be more acquainted with the modern trends in language teaching. This will not only enable Ikwerre-Igbo learners of English sounds to achieve the mastery of English pronunciation but also reduce the problems of the teacher in the task of teaching the pronunciation of English phonemes.

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