APPLICATION OF STRESS, RHYTHM AND INTONATION IN THE SPEECH OF EREI-ENGLISH BILINGUALS

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ABSTRACT: *The study investigated the handling of the supra-segmental features among Erei speakers of English. A survey questionnaire was administered to 150 respondents in selected secondary schools under study. The subjects were grouped by age into three: 10-12 years, 13-15 years and 16 years and above. Two research questions were formulated to direct the course of the study. Data were analysed in five sections through the application of four gradable items: SA – strongly agree, A – agreed, D – disagreed and SD – strongly disagreed. Findings showed that the prosodic features such as stress, rhythm and intonation are the basis for intelligibility than the individual segments, but the teaching of the features received less attention in the class as well as the teachers in the study did not have a good command of the prosodic features in their spoken English. The provision of well-designed curriculum and syllabus, oral textbooks with targeted supra-segmental features, well-equipped libraries and language laboratories, the introduction of radio and television language programmes and on-the-job training and retraining of teachers in spoken English were suggested to help solve the problem of intelligibility among the Erei people as L2 users of English in Nigeria.*

KEYWORDS: Stress, Rhythm, Speech, Erei-English, Bilinguals, Intelligibility, Teaching

INTRODUCTION

Erei speakers learn English after they have already acquired their native language (L1). They therefore form a percentage of Nigerian speakers for whom English serves as a second language (L2). English also acts as a medium of instruction in schools from the primary up to the tertiary level. In some parts of the world, it serves as an L1, and in many others, as a foreign language (FL). Although Finegan (1987, in Okon, 2000) puts the number of those who use English as L1 at 300 million and those who use it as an L2 or FL at about 375 million, yet recent research shows that non-native speakers now outnumbering native speakers by three-quarter (Power, 2005, p. 41; Jowitt 2008). In fact, Buda (2006, p. 1) estimates that out of the 750 million speakers of English, only 300 million use it as their first or native language, and the remaining 450 million speak it as an L2 or FL. And in the words of Jowitt (2008), he estimates that native speakers or native-like speakers of English are now about 670 million, while the non-natives (that is, L2 and FL) are about 1,800 million. And those he calls "middle-of-the-road" are calculated to be between 1,200 million to 1,500 million. This observation shows therefore, that one-quarter of the world population use English around the globe, and has been confirmed by Brown (1991) who claims that even though Mandarin, a Chinese language, is spoken by a greater number of people, English currently spoken around the world, has a wider dispersion than any other language. Apart from Britain, USA, Australia, New Zealand and parts of Canada (among the White English speaking countries), English is not native to others who use it. Many functions have been assigned to English. It is therefore not

surprising that emphasis has often been on the ability to use the English language correctly (Omolewa, 1971; Okon, 2000; Ukam, 2015).

The notion of English adapting itself to the language situation in Nigeria is based on the fact that English is an L2 in the Nigerian environment and as such is bound to be influenced by the indigenous languages (Banjo, 1971). Since English is an L2 in the Nigerian environment, acquired after the L1, and as a language learnt outside its natural setting, it would not only be difficult to acquire, but would also create many linguistic problems to its users (Onose, 2010).

In the study of phonology, the supra-segmental feature (also known as the non-segmental or prosodic feature) is the area of study that receives less attention than segmental phonology (Nunan 1991; Banshaw, 1994; Zhang, 2006). The reason is that the teaching of phonology usually begins with the sound systems and later delves into stress, rhythm and intonation after segmental phonology has been studied. Sometimes, when the teaching of the prosodic features come up for discussion, the learners would have become bored and have lost interest, or they would have felt overwhelmed (Cunningham & Mary, 1998; Onose, 2010; Ukam, 2015). Busá (2012) laments that "prosody has traditionally been given little relevance in pronunciation classes, which, instead, have focused on the discrimination and articulation of sounds through drills, minimal pair exercises" (p. 101).

With the increasing popularity of the communicative approach to language teaching, attention has moved away from linguistic accuracy to conversational fluency (Zhang, 2006). The goal of acquiring the sound systems of an L2 has changed from the quest for achieving near-native proficiency to an ability to develop communicative effectiveness as well as intelligibility. Thus, according to Nunan (1991), the major theoretical shift which has occurred with the development of communicative approaches has been from segmental work to a focus on supra-segmental features. Researchers agree however, that while the acquisition of segmental features of English presents some problems and difficulties for L2 speakers, the acquisition of the non-segmental features, especially stress, rhythm and intonation, is consistently the major stumbling block, presenting greater problem to L2 learners because less attention is given to them (Coniam, 2002; Bott, 2005, p. 5). Although Byne and Walsh (1973) acknowledge that segmental features are more difficult to acquire, they argue that mastering of the supra-segmental features is much more important for intelligibility than producing native-like vowels and consonants. Zhang and Xu, (1981, in Zhang, 2006) also note that the single major cause of perceived foreign accent in L2 speakers speaking English is, in fact, probably the incorrect production of stress, rhythm and intonation.

In other words, there is reason to believe with Sabater (1991, p 145) that the practice of English stress and rhythm has been traditionally neglected despite the existence of a number of descriptions of stress, rhythm and intonation as well as many practical materials to support the teaching of the non-segmental features (Albrow, 1968; O'Connor, 1973; Couper-Kuhlen, 1986, among many others). This could be an explanation why L2 learners find it difficult to acquire the stress, rhythm and intonation of English (Banjo, 1979; Amayo, 1981). In his experiment, Sabater (1991) proves that "an appropriate stress and rhythmic pattern is more important for intelligibility and meaning bearing than the correct pronunciation of isolated segments (p. 145), and especially, stress and rhythm determine the pronunciation of segments in English more than the ability to articulate individual sounds (Banshaw, 1994).

Burgess and Spencer (2000), in their experiment gathered from L2 teachers through questionnaire, pointed out that "stress, rhythm, intonation and vowel reduction were all

mentioned as major areas of difficulty experienced by learners" (p. 197). They state that this is "all the more interesting as many pronunciation materials have tended to focus primarily on segmental features" (p. 197), thereby neglecting the non-segments (Lemmen, 2011, p. 14). If we reason that wrong production of rhythm is "being out of beat in music", then we can easily agree with Lemmens (2011) who demonstrates that "suprasegmental errors are just as important as segmental errors" (p. 14), suggesting that "the prosody of a language should be considered as part of its basic structure" (p. 14). Therefore, the major complexity and troublesome area to learners of L2 is basically when the L1 and L2 have divergences at the non-segmental level, just as they do at the segmental level; Erei and English are no exceptions.

The prosodic features determine the correct shape to the word, and if learners and users of English are to achieve appropriate intelligibility, it is important to give words their correct accentual pattern and rhythm (Ayodele, 1983; Sabater, 1991). Therefore, non-segmental features are significant aspect of communicative intelligibility, deserving a close study among the Erei as L2 speakers of English.

Statement of the research problem

Although English language is taught from the primary to the tertiary level of education, there is emphasis on the "correct use" of the language in both its spoken and its written form (Omolewa, 1975). Spoken English in Nigeria has not shown any remarkable affinity or resemblance to the spoken English of native speakers in terms of the non-segmental features (Banjo, 1971).

Learners of English as an L2 often find it difficult to place the stress on the right syllable and/or use the rising tune appropriately. Erei native speakers, who use English as their L2 like many other Nigerian speakers of English, are likely not to exhibit appropriate manifestation of the non-segmental features in their speech. It causes a great deal of difficulty in learning stress, rhythm, intonation and many other prosodic features among L2 users. Hence, non-segmental phonology of English is important in speech, which should deserve scholarly attention.

Objectives of the study

1. To investigate the non-segmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation, showing how they are manifested among Erei-English bilingual students in order to test their performance.

2. To describe the effects of non-application of these features.

Research questions

1. To what extent do Erei learners of English manifest stress, rhythm and intonation in their spoken English?

2. What is the relevance of English prosodic features in the speech of Erei-English bilingual speakers?

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in four secondary schools in Erei, Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State. The schools were Community Commercial School, Ibini; Community Secondary School, Abanwan; Community Secondary School, Ipene and Community Secondary School, Urugbam. One hundred and fifty (150) respondents were administered questionnaires which were used for data collection. The responded were grouped by age into three: 10-12 years, 13-15 years and 16 years above. While the first two groups were given 56.6 per cent of the questionnaires, the third group made up of students preparing for SSCE were given 43.4 per cent. The distribution among the respondents shows that 65 per cent of the total number of the questionnaires went to the senior school section and 35 per cent went to the junior section. Pre-test examination as well as the teaching of stress, rhythm and intonation was carried out for eight weeks among the respondents. They were asked to read aloud some selected words and sentences in order to test the deployment of stress, rhythm and intonation in their spoken English. The Data were analysed based on the respondents' self report in five sections through the application of four gradable items namely: SA – strongly agreed, A – agree, D – disagreed and SD – strongly disagreed. The results of the questionnaire were calculated and reported in frequencies and percentages in order to strengthen the findings.

Analyses and results

The results gathered from the data are presented and analysed in frequencies and percentages according to the research questions which guide the study.

Table 1: Distribution of respondents based on teaching method

S/N	Item	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
1	Oral English, especially the features of syllables, stress, rhythm and intonation, is taught in the secondary school you attend.	14	9.3	26	17.3	40	26.7	70	46.7	150	100

Table 1 shows extent to which the non-segmental features of English are taught in the secondary schools. Item 1, the only item in Table 1 reveals that those who strongly agreed that stress, rhythm and intonation are taught in the school they attend were 14(9.3%), and the respondents who agreed were 26(17.3%). Forty (26.7%) disagreed, while 70(46.7%) of the total number of respondents who strongly disagreed constituted the highest number.

Table 2: Responses based on teachers' effectiveness in the teaching of non-segmental features

S/N	Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
2	Your English language teachers teach you these features of syllable, stress, rhythm, and intonation in the class.	33	22	27	18	30	20	60	40	150	100
3	Your English language teachers focus more on the oral teaching of the individual sound segments than on the non-segmental features like syllable, stress, rhythm, and intonation.	80	53.3	36	24	19	12.7	15	10	150	100
4	Your teachers apply these features of stress, rhythm, and intonation in their speech when they are speaking with you.	3	2	8	5.3	66	44	73	48.7	150	100

Items 2, 3 and 4 of Table 2 focus on the extent to which the teachers played their role in teaching the non-segmental features.

In item 2, 33(22%) of the respondents strongly agreed that teachers explained these features to their understanding in the English teaching process. Twenty-seven respondents, representing 18 per cent of the total agreed while 30(20%) disagreed. The remaining 40 per cent, constituting 60 respondents strongly disagreed, a strong indication that teachers did not pay much attention to the teaching of these features. The percentage shows that majority of the respondents were yet to be exposed to the relevant features.

Item 3 in Table 2 indicates a greater focus on the individual segments than on the non-segments. The respondents who strongly agreed (80 or 53.3%) constituted the highest number. Despite the fact that oral English is not given sufficient attention in the teaching process, it was noted that even when attention is given, the area of segmental features receive more attention than the non-segments. On the other hand, those who agreed formed 26 or 24 per cent of the total respondents, and were also aware that the non-segments receive less teaching attention.

Nineteen respondents (12.7%) disagreed, and those that strongly disagreed were 15 respondents (10%).

Item 4, Table 2 shows the level of application of the non-segmental features in the speech of the teachers in the study. Although educational level is not a major parameter in this study, the statement about teachers' effectiveness is used in this report to show that a teacher of a language should have a good command of that language, especially in the spoken aspect, applying the rules when speaking with the students because, learners copy what they hear. Three respondents, representing two per cent of the total population strongly agreed, while 8(5.3%) of the respondents agreed. Whereas the remaining 66(44%) disagreed, and those who strongly disagreed that teachers did not apply stress, rhythm and intonation in their spoken English were 73(48.7%), indicating that the teachers in the study do not have a good command of spoken English. Teachers would therefore, have a retroactive effect of the poor deployment of the non-segmental features on the students they teach.

Table 3: Responses testing usefulness of application of non-segmental features in the speech of an individual

S/N	Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
5	You can apply these features of stress, rhythm, and intonation in your own speech.	10	6.7	15	10	75	50	50	33.3	150	100
6	It is useful to apply these features of stress, rhythm, and intonation when speaking.	90	60	40	26.7	20	13.3	0	0	150	100

Table 3, which consists of two research items numbered 5 and 6, outlines the usefulness of the non-segmental features in the spoken English of L2 in the study. The analysis of the respondents' view shows that 10(6.7%) respondents in item 5 strongly agreed that they could apply these features in their speech. Fifteen (10%) of the respondents agreed, 50 per cent who were 75 in number disagreed, while the remaining 50(33.3%) respondents strongly disagreed. The data shows that majority of the subjects were aware that they could not handle these features properly in their speech, emphasizing the poor handling of the non-segmental features by Erei speakers of English.

Item 6 of the same table demonstrates that 90(60%) of the respondents were aware that the features of stress, rhythm and intonation in their speech might be relevant for intelligibility. Those who agreed were grouped into 40(26.7%), and those who disagreed were 20(13.3%). However, no respondent had rated himself strongly disagreed, indicating zero per cent.

Table 4: Distribution of respondents based on relevant materials for teaching of non-segmental features of English

S/N	Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
7	You have seen materials or books that contain these features of syllable, stress, rhythm, and intonation.	75	50	41	27.3	12	8	22	14.7	150	100
8	Your textbooks discuss the individual segments more than non-segments, especially the syllable, stress, rhythm and intonation.	90	60	45	30	10	6.7	5	3.3	150	100

There are two items labelled 7 and 8 on Table 4. The table explains sample distribution of respondents on the relevant materials for the teaching of the non-segmental features of English.

Item 7 of the table shows that 50 per cent of the total respondents strongly agreed and 27.3 per cent affirmed that they had seen books that treat these features. On the other hand, while 12(8%) of the respondents disagreed, those who disagreed strongly were 22(14.7%).

In item 8, 90(60%) of the total respondents strongly disagreed that the segmental features of English are more elaborated in the text books than the non-segmental features. Forty-five or (30%), 10(6.7%) and 5(3.3%) agreed, disagreed and strongly disagreed, respectively. The percentage of respondents who had a positive view put together stands at 90 per cent, giving a poor impression of the evaluation of the supra-segmental features. Only 10 per cent of the respondents were of the opposite view.

Table 5: Responses testing students' understanding of non-segmental features

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD	Total					
		Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
9	The absence of these features of stress, rhythm and intonation in your spoken English could lead to a different interpretation by those hearing you.	50	34	64	42.7	10	6.7	25	16.6	150	100
10	Most students have up to 50% understanding of the features of syllable, stress, rhythm and intonation.	3	2	19	12.7	51	34	77	51.3	150	100

Table 5, which constituted items 9 and 10, investigates the understanding of the students on the non-segmental features.

In item 9, 34 per cent of the total respondents strongly agreed that the absence of the features of stress, rhythm and intonation in their speech could lead to a different interpretation by those who hear them. Accordingly, 42.7 per cent agreed, 6.7 per cent disagreed and 16.6 per cent strongly disagreed.

Item 10 in the same table suggests that 3(2%) of the total respondents strongly agreed that students have an average understanding of the non-segmental features of English. Although 12.7 per cent agreed, a substantial 34 per cent and 51.3 per cent disagreed or strongly disagreed respectively.

Discussion of findings

From the report of our findings, it was observed that stress, rhythm and intonation, which are very vital tools for communicative intelligibility in English, do not receive adequate attention as appropriate. In English for instance, wrong placement of stress or occurrence of two strong

syllables adjacent to each other is not permitted (Eka, 1985; Udofot, 1997; Udoh, 1998; Okon, 2000; Ukam, 2015). Stress or rhythm which means emphasis given to some syllables in a word or sentence in relation to others is very important in English. But in Erei which is a syllable-timed, such phenomenal is not necessary in communication. Rather, there is the application of tone in every syllable in a word or sentence, that is, every syllable is given equal prominent so that the tonal nature of Erei would come out clearly. In his report, Ukam (2015) discovers that Erei Language uses falling tune in all utterance, as against English which uses two tunes: falling and rising, or sometimes may combine both to give fall-rise or rise-fall as the case may be.

Erei learners of English would find it difficult to apply the correct stress, rhythm or intonation of English if adequate attention is not given in the class, resulting to unintelligibility in their spoken utterance. In Table 1, the data shows that the teaching of Oral English, especially the non-segmental features, receives lesser attention in the class, and that the situation would have a negative impact on the spoken English of the group of students in the study who learn English as L2. The result in Item 1 of the same table also indicates that 73.4 per cent of those who had considered that adequate attention was not given outnumber those who agreed with only 26.6 per cent.

There is usually a focus on the teaching of the segmental phonemes than the non-segments even when Oral English would be taught. In Item 3, Table 2, 77.3 per cent of the respondents as against 22.7 per cent were in the opinion that teachers usually focus their attention on the segments than the non-segments in spite of the great differences between English prosodic system and the L2 system without occasional drawing their attention to the features which could contribute more significantly in improving their communicative ability. The perfection that could be achieved by Erei speakers at the level of segmental phonology of English would be higher compared to such achieved in the area of supra-segmental phonology. Initial difficulty acquired in pronouncing the individual segments like the central vowels and inter-dental fricatives may have been overcome and neutralised by Erei-English bilinguals, but not at the area of stress, rhythm and intonation. Yet, the importance of non-segmentals in both L1 and L2 acquisition is acknowledged by many researchers (Eka 1985; Okon, 2000; Atoye, 2005; Onose, 2010; Ukam, 2015). Findings show that majority of Erei-English bilinguals do not realised that the prosodic features of English are very important in communication, since they exhibit different functions from the Erei features. In Item 5, Table 3, the subjects who disagreed that they could not display the prosodic features in their speech outnumber those who agreed by 83.3 percent put together. The percentage emphasizes the poor handling of the non-segmental features by Erei speakers of English.

The implication of the assertion is that although the respondents may have known that wrong deployment of stress, rhythm or intonation may result to miscommunication as shown in Table 5, but they hardly could effectively attain a command of them due to either the quality of the teaching and the influence of the teachers as reported in Table 2, or the unavailability of the targeted textbooks shown in Table 4. All these put together may contribute to the poor performance of the Erei-English bilinguals in spoken English.

The findings therefore, indicate that the supra-segmental features of English actually contribute to speech intelligibility, meaning bearing and foreign accentedness than non-segmental features do. But Erei users of English do not have up to 75 per cent understanding of the features neither do they know how to display them in the process of speaking English. The corresponding effect of this observation is the increase rate of the poor deployment of the non-segmental features of English in the speech of Erei as L2 users in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Prosody has received little attention in pronunciation teaching processes, irrespective of the fact that its incorrect production would impede effective communication, meaning bearing and intelligibility. The progress achieved by Erei-English speakers at the segmental level of English phonology could not be measured with the one achieved at the level of non-segmental phonology. Second language English teachers tend to focus mainly on the individual segments when it comes to pronunciation teaching, thereby disregarding prosodic phonology in spite of the great differences between the English system and the L1 system, although the importance of non-segmentals in both L1 and L2 acquisitions is acknowledged by many researchers. Supra-segmental features are difficult to learn and acquire which many Erei-English bilinguals can hardly attain because of their progress toward ambilingualism, even though the supra-segmental features of English actually contribute more to speech intelligibility, comprehensibility and foreign accentedness than segmental features. It should therefore be paid more attention in the pronunciation teaching class.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum and syllabus designers may need to focus more on the supra-segmental features of pronunciation rather than the individual segments. Second language learners might not be aware of the differences between the rhythms of their syllable-timed L1 and the stress-timed of English language, drawing their attention to the supra-segmental features should help significantly in improving their communicative ability.

2. Oral English textbooks containing the targeted features of non-segmental phonology should be supplied in sufficient varieties and quantities in the library to enable students have more access, which in turn would assist their effort in their spoken English.

3. Well-equipped libraries and language laboratories should be provided in schools and communities.

4. Radio and television language programmes should be established in communities to help in the setting up of effective standards in spoken English.

5. The government should make it compulsory for English language teachers to continuously improve their command of and confidence in educated spoken English by constant exposure to refresher courses, seminars, conferences and workshops, to help students have a good command of spoken English, contributing more to their personal success in communication.

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