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THE POLITICS OF PRONUNCIATION: AN EXAMINATION OF ACCENT AND IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH (NigE) TEACHING

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the intricate relationship between accent, identity, and pedagogy in Nigerian English Language Teaching (ELT). Despite the growing recognition of Nigerian English (NigE) within global frameworks, Received Pronunciation (RP) remains the dominant model in educational settings, often marginalizing local accents. The primary aim of this research is to explore the implications of accent bias on teaching practices and student perceptions. Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis across various secondary schools in Nigeria. The findings reveal significant tensions between the adherence to RP and the acceptance of NigE, with educators often feeling pressured to conform to foreign norms. Students exhibit linguistic insecurity tied to societal biases favoring RP while expressing pride in their local accents. The study concludes by advocating for curriculum reforms recognizing NigE as a legitimate variety, emphasizing intelligibility over accent conformity. Recommendations include revising teacher training programs to promote inclusive pedagogies that validate linguistic diversity. By embracing NigE, educators can empower students to communicate effectively while celebrating their cultural identities, bridging local and global linguistic contexts.

Keywords: accent bias, English language teaching, linguistic identity, Nigerian English, pronunciation

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INTRODUCTION

English in Nigeria transcends its colonial origins, serving as the country's official language and a critical tool for education, governance, and commerce (Montejo-Ráez et al., 2024; Muawanah et al., 2024). However, the Nigerian English variety (NigE), despite being widely recognized as legitimate within the World Englishes framework, remains undervalued in education systems (Isiaka, 2021). Pronunciation, a key feature of linguistic identity, has become a site of contestation, with Received Pronunciation (RP) continuing to dominate curricula and professional expectations (Unuabonah & Oladipupo, 2018). In Nigerian ELT, the politics of pronunciation often alienate learners and teachers who feel pressured to conform to a culturally distant accent (Okpe & Onjewu, 2016a). This alienation not only reinforces linguistic hierarchies but also stifles the authentic voices of Nigerian speakers. As Mahadevan (2024) observes, linguistic capital—what society deems "acceptable" speech—is tied to power and privilege, creating exclusionary barriers for those who deviate from the norm.

Pronunciation, often regarded as the auditory gateway to understanding language, is a cornerstone of English Language Teaching (ELT). It influences not only intelligibility but also perceptions of linguistic competence and identity. In multilingual contexts like Nigeria, where English operates as a lingua franca, pronunciation is deeply intertwined with issues of power, identity, and societal expectations. Teachers and learners must navigate a delicate balance between achieving

global intelligibility and preserving local linguistic authenticity (Adelaja et al., 2023; Aoyama et al., 2022; Onukaogu et al., 2022; Unuabonah & Oladipupo, 2018).

Global English varieties, particularly those in Kachru's (2022) Outer Circle, like Nigerian English (NigE), challenge the primacy of native-speaker norms, including Received Pronunciation (RP). However, the dominance of RP in ELT curricula reflects colonial legacies and reinforces linguistic hierarchies (Aletta et al., 2024; Mavroudi & Tsagari, 2018). These biases marginalize Nigerian English accents in Nigeria, fostering linguistic insecurity among learners and teachers (Aletta et al., 2024; Aoyama et al., 2022).

As the official language and a medium for education, governance, and commerce, English is pivotal in Nigeria, unifying a linguistically diverse nation with over 500 indigenous languages. Introduced during colonial rule, English has since evolved into Nigerian English (NigE), a distinct variety influenced by local languages like Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Recognized within the World Englishes framework, NigE features unique phonological, lexical, and syntactic characteristics, such as syllable-timed rhythm and code-switching with indigenous languages. Despite its widespread use, NigE faces stigmatization, with British Received Pronunciation (RP) often perceived as the benchmark of linguistic competence (Bauer & Sánchez, 2024).

The sociopolitical dynamics of pronunciation in Nigeria highlight issues of identity and power. Accents serve as markers of social status, with RP associated with education and professionalism, while NigE accents are often marginalized. This bias stems from colonial-era linguistic hierarchies prioritizing native-speaker norms, reinforcing inequalities, and limiting the recognition of NigE in formal settings. Scholars advocate for a shift toward intelligibility-focused teaching, emphasizing effective communication over conformity to foreign pronunciation standards, thus validating NigE as a legitimate English variety (Jalali & Ansaripour, 2014; Okpe & Onjewu, 2016b).

This study aims to explore the interplay between accent, identity, and pedagogical practices in Nigerian English Language Teaching (ELT). Specifically, it aims to identify how accent bias impacts teaching methodologies and student perceptions of linguistic identity. By examining the tensions between Received Pronunciation (RP) and Nigerian English (NigE), the study seeks to highlight the implications of these dynamics for educational practices. Ultimately, the research aims to provide recommendations for curriculum reforms and teacher training programs that promote inclusive teaching, recognize the validity of NigE, and empower students to embrace their linguistic identities. This will contribute to a more equitable and practical approach to English language education in Nigeria.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the interplay of pronunciation, accent, and identity in Nigerian English Language Teaching (ELT). Using a case study approach, it examines how ELT teachers, students, and policymakers perceive pronunciation and accent bias. Data is collected through interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, allowing an in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences and institutional frameworks influencing pronunciation pedagogy. The study focuses on secondary schools across urban and rural areas of Nigeria, highlighting regional diversity in linguistic practices and challenges.

Participants include 10 English teachers selected for their varied training backgrounds, 15 students enrolled in English programs, and five educational stakeholders involved in ELT policymaking. Teachers provide insights into their pedagogical approaches and their views on the

tension between Received Pronunciation (RP) and Nigerian English (NigE). Students share their experiences with pronunciation instruction, its impact on self-esteem, and the pressures of adopting specific accents. Educational stakeholders discuss policies and teacher training's role in addressing accent bias.

The study employs semi-structured interviews, classroom observations in five schools, and curriculum analysis. Interviews reveal perceptions of pronunciation standards and the sociolinguistic implications of accents in ELT. Observations capture real-time teaching practices and classroom interactions, while curriculum analysis examines the alignment between policy and practice. Together, these methods provide a nuanced understanding of how pronunciation and identity intersect in Nigerian ELT, with implications for more inclusive and context-sensitive pedagogical frameworks.

For data analysis, thematic analysis is applied to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. The interviews are transcribed and coded, allowing for the extraction of key insights regarding teachers' and students' experiences with pronunciation. Classroom observations are analyzed to assess the practical application of pronunciation teaching and the interaction between teachers and students. Document analysis includes a review of curriculum guidelines and teaching materials, examining their alignment with the perspectives gathered from participants. This multi-faceted approach comprehensively explains the factors influencing pronunciation pedagogy in Nigerian ELT.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents the findings from the data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The results highlight the impact of accent bias on the teaching and learning English pronunciation in Nigeria, how pronunciation is integrated into ELT, and the perceptions of Nigerian English within the educational system. The findings are organized into key themes, each reflecting the core research questions of the study.

Teachers' Perspectives on Pronunciation and Accent

Tension Between RP and Nigerian English in Pronunciation Teaching

From the interviews with teachers, it became clear that a significant tension exists between the desire to teach Received Pronunciation (RP) and the recognition of Nigerian English as a valid form of English. Many teachers reported feeling pressure to prioritize RP, particularly in urban and semi-urban schools, with a stronger emphasis on adhering to global linguistic norms. However, teachers in rural schools and those with more experience in multilingual classrooms acknowledged the necessity of embracing Nigerian English accents to ensure adequate student communication.

Teachers often referred to RP as the "correct" or "professional" way of speaking English, a view reinforced by the curriculum, textbooks, and national education standards. Despite this, many teachers recognized the limitations of RP, especially in a country where most people speak English with heavy influences from their native languages. As one teacher in a Lagos-based secondary school noted:

> *"In our classroom, we teach RP because that is what is expected in the exam. However, we use Nigerian English when speaking with the students outside of class. It is easier and more natural for them."*

This contradiction illustrates how Nigerian teachers must navigate the demands of the national educational system while also considering their students' practical communication needs.

Accent Bias in Teacher Training

Teacher training programs were found to perpetuate a strong bias toward RP. Most teacher trainers emphasized the importance of RP pronunciation for professional success. This focus on RP in training programs contributes to linguistic insecurity among teachers, many of whom feel inadequate because their native Nigerian accents do not align with the expectations set by the curriculum. Teachers expressed frustration with the gap between their formal training and the realities of their classrooms, where Nigerian English is the predominant variety spoken by their students.

One teacher from a northern Nigerian school mentioned:

"During my training, they taught us that we must speak like native speakers to be good teachers. However, when I return home, my students do not understand when I speak that way. I have to adapt to their accent, which is Nigerian English."

Students' Perceptions of Accent and Identity

Linguistic Insecurity and Identity Struggles

Accent bias emerged as a significant source of linguistic insecurity for students. In interviews, students reported feeling that their local accents were viewed as inferior, especially in formal settings like exams and job interviews. Several students believed they had to "adjust" their accents to match RP to be taken seriously or appear educated. This perception was widespread among students in urban areas, where access to elite schools emphasizing RP is more widespread.

One student from a private secondary school in Anyigba shared:

"I feel like I have to *speak in a certain way to sound smart. When I speak in my accent, some teachers and other students look at me like I am not serious. So, I try to speak like the people on TV or in the movies, with a British accent."*

Other students echoed this sentiment, especially those attending schools that strongly focus on academic performance. Students' sense of self-worth was closely tied to their ability to adopt RP, indicating a strong societal belief in the superiority of British English over Nigerian English.

Local Accents and Self-Esteem

Interestingly, a few students, particularly those in more rural schools, were proud of their Nigerian accents and felt that local varieties of English were equally legitimate. These students argued that their ability to communicate effectively, regardless of their accent, was more important than conforming to foreign norms. One student from a public school in Ibadan stated:

"I speak English like I speak my language. I do not need to speak like the British or Americans to be successful. I have seen successful people who speak like me."

This group of students appeared less affected by the pressures of accent bias, indicating that pride in local identity could be a protective factor against the negative impacts of accent discrimination.

Teachers' Practices and Classroom Observations

Emphasis on RP in Classroom Instruction

Classroom observations revealed that most teachers predominantly used RP when teaching pronunciation. Teachers would model RP during lessons and insist on its use during formal speech exercises. However, when the lessons were less formal, such as in discussions or group activities, teachers often switched to Nigerian English, reflecting the pragmatic need for intelligibility and comfort in communicating with students.

One observation from a classroom in Lagos noted:

"The teacher starts the lesson by emphasizing RP and giving examples of correct pronunciation. However, when a student answers a question using a Nigerian accent, the teacher does not correct them, but instead adapts to the student's way of speaking."

This adaptability suggests that while RP is the formal standard in many Nigerian classrooms, there is an underlying flexibility in recognizing Nigerian English accents' practicality and local relevance. Teachers prioritize effective communication over strict adherence to RP when working with students in informal contexts.

Corrective Feedback and Accent

Regarding corrective feedback, teachers were found to emphasize pronunciation correction based on RP norms, particularly in formal assessments and examinations. However, teachers only made significant corrections when students used Nigerian English accents if the accent hindered understanding. Teachers were more likely to focus on correcting phonetic errors affecting intelligibility rather than accent.

One teacher in a rural secondary school mentioned:

"If a student says something hard to understand because of how they pronounce it, I will correct it. However, if they say it in a Nigerian way, and it is clear, I do not mind."

This flexible approach to correction underscores the reality that, while RP is prioritized in the curriculum, mutual intelligibility and effective communication remain the core goals in the classroom. In many cases, Nigerian English accents were understood and accepted, even when they diverged from RP norms.

Curriculum and Policy Analysis

Curriculum Emphasis on RP

An analysis of the national curriculum documents revealed that English language teaching in Nigeria emphasizes RP as the pronunciation model. Curriculum guidelines prioritize RP for teachers and students, with little to no mention of Nigerian English as an acceptable variety. Textbooks commonly use RP audio recordings and examples, reflecting an institutional bias toward British English.

However, educational stakeholders pointed out that Nigerian English is increasingly recognized in informal educational settings despite the curriculum's emphasis on RP. Many curriculum developers desired to incorporate Nigerian English into more formal pedagogical frameworks but pointed to institutional resistance as a significant obstacle.

One educational administrator explained:

"The curriculum has not changed much since independence. There is some push for incorporating Nigerian English in classroom materials, but it faces resistance from traditionalists who still prefer RP."

This tension highlights the challenge of reforming educational policies to reflect Nigerian students' linguistic realities while respecting international English proficiency standards.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of pronunciation in Nigerian English Language Teaching (ELT), emphasizing its impact on identity, communication, and educational outcomes. The entrenched preference for Received Pronunciation (RP) perpetuates linguistic insecurity, reinforcing colonial hierarchies. However, Nigerian English (NigE), with its distinct phonological and cultural features, offers an inclusive and practical alternative aligned with Nigeria's multilingual realities. By focusing on intelligibility over accent conformity, ELT can respect learners' linguistic identities and enhance communicative competence.

Key recommendations include reforming the national curriculum to formally recognize Nigerian English as a legitimate variety. Integrating NigE into textbooks and lesson plans would validate local accents and reduce the undue pressure to conform to RP. Revamping teacher training programs is also essential; educators should be trained to prioritize intelligibility and recognize the legitimacy of NigE, enabling them to teach confidently and inclusively.

Adopting the Intelligibility Principle ensures a focus on clear communication rather than accenting perfection in classrooms. Presenting RP as one of many pronunciation models alongside NigE helps students understand pronunciation as diverse and their accents as valid. A student-centered approach can further reduce linguistic insecurity by fostering pride in Nigerian accents as markers of cultural identity, enabling students to communicate confidently in local and global contexts.

This study underscores NigE's potential to bridge local and global linguistic contexts, ensuring learners are proficient communicators and confident in their cultural identities. Addressing accent bias in ELT is a pedagogical imperative and a step toward decolonizing English education and embracing linguistic diversity as a strength. Nigeria can promote effective communication through curriculum reforms, teacher training, and inclusive teaching practices while celebrating its rich linguistic heritage.

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