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Mother Tongue Interference and English Language Pronunciation among Secondary School Students in Oyo Metropolis, Oyo State

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Abstract

The research work was geared towards the study of the Impact of Mother Tongue Interference on English Language Pronunciation: A Case Study of Oyo State. The study was conducted using descriptive research design. The study comprised 100 respondents in four (4) public senior secondary schools in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State. The results from the respondents were carefully analyzed using tables and frequency count percentage, mean scores and standard deviation, and each result obtained was presented, discussed and interpreted. Results indicated that the mother tongue interference is at a medium level for the learners' articulation of English sounds. The most pronounced differences were seen in the pronunciation of vowels, intonation and rhythm, with the pronunciation of consonants being comparatively little affected, respondents unanimously agreeing that it was affected by the mother tongue. Additionally, the results indicated that some teaching methods were effective for reducing the impact of the mother tongue interference. The researchers made some recommendations according to the results. Learners should be actively involved in oral English activities like debates, speeches, drama presentation, discussions, public speaking etc. to improve their fluency and confidence. Second, the English language teachers should put more emphasis on pronunciation, use the mother language with the learners as a teaching aid in the classroom so that the learners can break through the interference of the mother language.

Keywords: Mother Tongue Interference, English Language Pronunciation, Segmental Features, Suprasegmental and Impact.

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Introduction

Language is a key means for communication, education and social interaction and learning language is significantly shaped by the language situation in which learners live. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, English plays a special role in being the official language, a language of communication and the language of instruction in educational institutions of all levels. Despite the fact that English is officially the language of Nigeria, however, it is a second language for most

Nigerians as they learn it along with their native languages (Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, etc.). Thus, there is the possibility of cross-linguistic influences in learner's pronunciation due to the interaction between the learners's mother tongue and English. Among these influences, one of the most conspicuous is mother tongue interference (MTI) which is the effect of the speaker's first language (L1) on the learning and use of the second language (L2) that he or she has acquired (Olateju & Adebayo, 2021). Pronunciation is an important part of language proficiency since it directly influences intelligibility, communicative effectiveness and academic achievement. It has been found that learners' transfer of sound patterns from their L1 to L2 could cause systematic pronunciation deviations which are different from the Standard English norms (Eze & Okoli, 2022). These deviations can be at segmental level (vowel and consonant level) and at suprasegmental level (stress, rhythm, intonation pattern). It has been noted that the phonological system of English is quite different from many Nigerian languages, which makes it easier for there to be interference in second language acquisition (SLA) (Adegbite, 2020; Yusuf & Bello, 2024).

Yoruba is a major indigenous language in South Western Nigeria, and holds a prominent place in the people's daily life, culture and social identity, especially in Oyo State. The Yoruba language has a relatively simpler syllabic structure than the English language, and it is a language that is tonal. In the case of English, it has complex consonant clusters (e.g. strengths, schools) while yoruba has a consonant-vowel pattern. Yoruba speakers tend to reduce English consonant clusters into a vowel by adding a vowel after a consonant cluster (epenthesis) and/or by leaving out some consonants. Furthermore, since Yoruba does not employ stress patterns to express meaning, a learner may find difficulty in mastering the stress pattern and intonation patterns in English, which is likely to cause prosodic interference (Akinwale & Ogunleye, 2023). Empirical studies that have been carried out in the past few years (2020- 2025) have further confirmed MTI's importance in Nigeria's pronunciation environment of English. Thus, Ojo and Akinlabi (2021) reported that the use of more familiar sounds such as /t/ and /d/ etc. was a common problem in the production of dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ for Yoruba-speaking secondary school students.

Interference that a learner's first language (L1) has on the acquisition and use of a second language (L2) is known as mother tongue interference (MTI), first language interference (L1I), negative language transfer (NLT). It is the transfer of linguistic features, structures, rules or habits from the L1 to the L2 which are unconsciously applied and cause deviations from the norms of the L2 (Ellis,

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2020). Mother tongue interference (MTI) is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon in the L2 learning process in the second language learning context, especially in multilingual societies, in which the learner uses the previous language to understand and produce the target language. This dependence can create problems if the forms of the two languages are very different (Odlin, 2021). Several factors influence the degree and persistence of mother tongue interference:

a) Structural Differences between L1 and L2: Greater differences increase the likelihood of interference (Lado, 1957; Ellis, 2020).
b) Level of Proficiency in the Second Language: Beginner learners experience more interference than advanced learners who have internalized L2 rules (Saville-Troike, 2020).
c) Age of Language Acquisition: Older learners tend to exhibit stronger mother tongue influence, especially in pronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2020).
d) Learning Environment: Environments dominated by the mother tongue encourage continuous interference, especially where the second language is rarely used outside the classroom (Odlin, 2021).

English language pronunciation is the systematic production and perception of languages' speech sounds in English, including the production of the individual sounds, the stress of the syllables and the use of intonation and rhythm to indicate meaning. Pronunciation is an important aspect of the ability to communicate with people and is a vital part of students' competence in spoken language (Roach, 2020). English pronunciation has two significant aspects: segmental and suprasegmental.

a) Consonants and vowels are known as segmental features of pronunciation. There are 24 consonant sounds and 20 vowel sounds (Roach, 2020), in English, depending on the accent. In English, the consonants are grouped according to voicing, place of articulation and manner of articulation. To make accurate pronunciation, learners must identify the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds, for example /b/ and /p/, as well as between sounds lacking in many first languages, for example /θ/ and /ð/ (Kelly, 2021). English vowels are especially difficult to pronounce because there are long and short vowels and high and low vowels in English. There are phonemic differences between long and short vowels such as ship and sheep which can change meaning. A learner's failure to become familiar with these differences can result in intelligibility problems (Roach, 2020).

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b) Suprasegmental Features of Pronunciation: Suprasegmental features are those in addition to the individual sound, such as stress, rhythm and intonation. They play an important role in the naturalness and clarity of spoken English (Celce-Murcia et al., 2021).

Second language learners' pronunciation may be affected by the sound system of the L1. Learners might transfer over familiar phonological features into English speech, which can lead to accented pronunciation or the consistent errors (Odlin, 2021). Pronunciation is known to be a hard second language learning skill to acquire, especially for adults. This challenge is said to be due to the fossilization of first language sound patterns and minimal contact with native/fluent speakers of English (Derwing & Munro, 2020).

Mother Tongue Interference is the influence of the first language (L1) on the use of the second language (L2), especially when the structures of L1 are unconsciously transferred to L2 communication. This interference has a significant impact on communication, as it impacts pronunciation, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and discourse specificity affecting the production, perception, and interpretation of messages in the target language (Odlin, 2021). Mother tongue interference can be more evident when the L2 is not used in everyday communicative situations or when the L2 community is multilingual with L1, L2 and more being the language of everyday communication (Ellis, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Although pronunciation has been recognised as a critical aspect of language learning, the English language teaching and learning in many schools in Nigeria focus on grammar, reading and writing, and have limited attention given to phonetics and oral skills. As a result, students can get locked into the incorrect pronunciation, which can be maintained in their academic and professional career. Teachers, however, rarely have access to empirical data specific to their own context, and regarding pronunciation errors that are being caused by mother tongue interference, hence they do not have at their disposal the information necessary for the development of targeted instructional strategies. In addition, while some studies have investigated mother tongue interference in Nigeria, many studies have concentrated on general language performance, and/or on other regions of Nigeria other than the south western region. Comparative context-specific studies that explore the effects of MTI on the pronunciation of English among learners in Oyo state where the linguistic, cultural and educational environment may be different from other states in the country have not

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been conducted. If there is no such evidence, teachers and curriculum writers can keep making generalizations that don't take into account the particular pronunciation problems presented by learners in this area. Hence, the present study inquiries into the impact of mother tongue interference on the pronunciation of English by learners in south western Nigeria especially in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State.

Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to examine the impact of mother tongue interference on English language pronunciation among learners in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State. Specifically, the study investigated;

1. the common English pronunciation errors made by learners in Senior Secondary Schools, Oyo metropolis, Oyo State as a result of mother tongue interference.
2. phonological features of indigenous languages spoken in Senior Secondary Schools, Oyo metropolis, Oyo State contribute to interference in English pronunciation.
3. the extent at which mother tongue interference affect learners' articulation of English sounds, including vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation.
4. the implications of mother tongue interference for English language teaching and learning.
5. the effective instructional strategies can be used to reduce the negative effects of mother tongue interference on English pronunciation among learners.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study;

1. What are the common English pronunciation errors made by learners in Senior Secondary Schools, Oyo metropolis, Oyo State as a result of mother tongue interference?
2. Which phonological features of indigenous languages spoken in Senior Secondary Schools, Oyo metropolis, Oyo State contribute to interference in English pronunciation?
3. To what extent does mother tongue interference affect learners' articulation of English sounds, including vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation?
4. What are the implications of mother tongue interference for English language teaching and learning?

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5. What effective instructional strategies can be used to reduce the negative effects of mother tongue interference on English pronunciation among learners?

Methodology

The research employed a descriptive survey methodology. The study targeted demographic comprised all senior high school pupils from chosen public secondary institutions in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State. A cohort of 100 students was randomly chosen from four senior secondary schools in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State, One school was selected from the four Local Government Areas in Oyo metropolis, Oyo State. Twenty-five students were randomly selected from each school to partake in the study. The instrument employed for data gathering was a meticulously designed questionnaire named: "Mother Tongue Interference and English Pronunciation Questionnaire (MTIEPQ)". The questionnaire was divided into two parts: Section A encompassed demographic details including: Gender, Age, Educational level, and Language utilised at home. Section B (This encompassed assertions pertinent to the research enquiries to gather information) The survey was constructed with a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The face and content validity of the research were done by experts in research. The investigators distributed the survey to the participants in the chosen educational institutions. Authorisation was secured from school officials prior to disseminating the surveys. The investigators elucidated the objectives of the investigation to the participants so as to ensure that the surveys are accurately filled out and retrieved promptly upon completion. The gathered data was examined with descriptive statistical techniques, specifically: Frequency counts and percentages for the demographic data, including mean scores and standard deviations for the research enquiries.

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Results

Table 1: Common English pronunciation errors made by learners as a result of mother tongue interference.

ITEM	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Decision
I often replace some English sounds with sounds from my mother tongue.	3.46	0.73	Agree
I find it difficult to pronounce some English consonant sounds correctly.	2.85	0.91	Agree
I find it difficult to pronounce some English vowel sounds correctly.	2.67	1.00	Agree
I sometimes add extra vowels when pronouncing English words.	2.78	1.05	Agree
I sometimes omit or simplify consonant sounds when pronouncing English words.	2.84	1.03	Agree

Table 2: Contribution of Phonological features of indigenous languages to the interference in English pronunciation.

ITEM	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
The sound system of my mother tongue influences my English pronunciation.	3.26	0.93	Agree
Some English sounds do not exist in my mother tongue.	2.87	0.86	Agree
I tend to pronounce English words based on the sound patterns of my native language.	3.05	0.93	Agree
The tonal nature of my mother tongue affects my English pronunciation.	2.86	1.10	Agree
Differences between English and Yoruba sound systems affect my pronunciation of English words.	2.79	0.97	Agree

Table 2 shows that Mother tongue sound system includes {x} = 3.26, SD = 0.93. L1 sound pattern includes {x} = 3.05, SD = 0.93, absence of some English sounds in L1 {x} = 2.87, SD = 0.86, tonal nature of L1 {x} = 2.86, SD = 1.10, and English-Yoruba sound system differences {x} = 2.79, SD = 0.97. Grand mean of 2.97 shows respondents agree that indigenous language phonology interferes with English pronunciation. The relatively low SDs indicate fair consensus across items.

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Table 3: The extent to which mother tongue interference affects learners' articulation of English sounds (vowels, consonants, stress and intonation.

ITEM	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
My mother tongue affects how I pronounce English vowel sounds.	2.85	0.98	Agree
My mother tongue affects how I pronounce English consonant sounds.	2.64	1.02	Agree
I find it difficult to pronounce English words with correct stress patterns.	2.74	0.96	Agree
My mother tongue influences the rhythm and intonation of my English speech.	2.88	0.96	Agree
I sometimes pronounce English words incorrectly because of the influence of my native language.	2.78	0.98	Agree

Table 3 shows that Rhythm and intonation include {x} = 2.88, SD = 0.96, and vowel sounds {x} = 2.85, SD = 0.98, recorded the highest means. This suggests suprasegmental features and vowel quality are most vulnerable to L1 interference. Incorrect pronunciation due to L1 influence {x} = 2.78, SD = 0.98, stress pattern difficulty {x} = 2.74, SD = 0.96, and consonant sounds {x} = 2.64, SD = 1.02, were also agreed upon. Consonants had the lowest mean and highest SD, showing slightly more disagreement among respondents. With a grand mean of 2.78, the findings confirm that mother tongue interference moderately affects learners' articulation of English vowels, consonants, stress, and intonation. The SDs around 1.00 indicate moderate spread in responses.

Table 4: The impact of mother tongue interference on English language teaching and learning

ITEM	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
Mother tongue interference makes it difficult for students to speak English fluently.	3.29	0.82	Agree
Pronunciation errors caused by mother tongue interference affect communication in English.	2.92	0.95	Agree
Mother tongue interference affects students' performance in English language examinations.	2.94	0.90	Agree
Some students feel shy speaking English because of pronunciation problems.	3.01	0.98	Agree
Mother tongue interference makes learning English pronunciation more difficult.	2.79	1.01	Agree

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Table 4 shows that difficulty in speaking English fluently include {x} = 3.29, SD = 0.82, had the highest mean and lowest SD. This shows strong consensus that L1 interference most affects oral fluency.

Table 5: The use of effective instructional strategies in reducing the negative effects of mother tongue interference

ITEM	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	SD	Decision
Teachers should give more pronunciation exercises during English lessons.	3.39	0.81	Accepted
Listening to correct English pronunciation can help students improve their speech.	3.23	0.72	Accepted
Language laboratories can help students practise correct pronunciation.	3.19	0.84	Accepted
Teachers should teach the differences between English and Yoruba sounds.	3.09	0.88	Accepted
Regular speaking practice can help reduce pronunciation errors.	2.87	1.03	Accepted

Table 5 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of respondents' opinions on effective instructional strategies for reducing the negative effects of mother tongue interference. The grand mean of 3.15 indicates that respondents generally agreed with all the suggested instructional strategies.

Discussion of findings

The results of the Research Question One demonstrated that learners' pronunciation errors in English are affected by mother tongue interference in general. The respondents agreed that the most common pronunciation problem encountered by learners is replacing the pronunciation of the English sounds with sounds from their mother tongue. This is consistent with Kelly (2021) who thought that speakers might replace the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ by alveolar stops /t/ and /d/ or by fricatives /s/ and /z/ respectively. These are called substitutions and lead to sounds such as tink for think or dis for this. Additionally, Roach (2020) confirmed that learners forget to distinguish between long and short vowels or tense and lax vowels, which results in fewer

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distinctions in meaning. This vowel neutralization can affect intelligibility particularly in minimal pairs like ship/Sheep.

The second research question, which found that the respondents generally agreed that the phonological features of indigenous languages affect the pronunciation of English, was also echoed by the results of the research. In particular, the respondents strongly agreed that the sound system of the mother tongue has a great effect on the pronunciation of English words, where the learners easily transferred familiar patterns of speech from the mother tongue to English. This is in line with Ellis' (2020) argument that the L2 environment in multilingual societies, where the L2 is primarily used in formal communication, can make mother tongue interference more salient, given that L2 speakers make use of the familiar mother tongue linguistic structure to a large degree. For research question 3, the respondents tended to agree that mother tongue interference has an impact on the pronunciation in English. The results showed that the aspect of spoken English most influenced by the first language interference is rhythm and intonation, indicating that learners tend to transfer the intonation, tone and rhythm of their L1 to their L2. They also agreed that the pronunciation of English vowel sounds is greatly affected by the mother tongue, since learners will usually use an unfamiliar English vowel sound and replace it with the same sound from the mother tongue. This is in line with Kelly (2021) opinion that lexical stress, however, is not a phonemic feature in Yoruba. In contrast, all syllables are equally stressed and meaning is indicated by tone not stress. Consequently, the Yoruba speakers tend to stress all the syllables of the English word, resulting in the natural rhythm and stress placement being altered.

The results of the fourth research question indicated that the majority of the respondents agreed that the development of mother tongue interference (MTC) has significant negative effect on the learners' performance in English language. Respondents were most supportive of the view that first language interference affects the ability of learners to speak English fluently, showing that the most impacted area of the learners' language use is oral fluency. They also agreed that students' pronunciation difficulties cause them to feel shy or unconfident to communicate orally in English. Moreover, respondents included the fact that L1 interference negatively impacts students' performance in English language exams and that the pronunciation errors make students less intelligible to listeners. This is similar to the Mother Tongue Interference (MTI) in L2 communication explained by Odlin (2021), which is the interference of a speaker's first language

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(L1) on the use of his second language (L2) especially when the L1 structures are transferred into L2 communication without the speaker's awareness. This interference has a significant impact on the communication process, as it relates to pronunciation, the process of grammar, vocabulary, and discourse patterns, and how messages are created, received and understood in the target language. This is in harmony with Ellis (2020) who posits that teachers should become aware of the L1-induced errors and correct them by employing the contrastive analysis approach and focused instruction. The teacher can identify the differences in the structure of the mother tongue and the target language and thus avoid negative transfer.

The result indicated that the respondents had a general agreement that some of the instructional strategies are effective in minimizing undesirable impact of mother tongue interference on English pronunciation. As for pronunciation training, those who agreed the most were that teachers should give learners more pronunciation training in English lessons, which shows that pronunciation training is the most effective way to enhance learners' oral English is to conduct regular and targeted pronunciation training. They also agreed that listening to correct models of English pronunciation would help learners have accurate speech patterns by helping them to imitate the standard pronunciation. The respondents also agreed that the language laboratory should be used because the language laboratory is a place that facilitates learners to listen to practice and also a place that facilitates learners to get feedback on their pronunciation in a conducive learning environment. Besides, it is found that speaking frequency is the best way to reduce L2 interference, indicating that learners can gradually replace their L2 interference with the correct pronunciation of English by means of continuous oral communication. The uniformity of respondents' views suggests that they agree that it is important that learners' spoken English is not affected by the mother tongue and that the teaching method should be consistent and practice must be continuous. This is consistent with that of Odlin (2021) who argued that teacher training should be adequate in the field of second language acquisition and applied linguistics, as this is where mother tongue interference has its significance.

Conclusion

The results of this study found that mother tongue interference is still a problem in mastering the correct pronunciation of English by learners. The phonological displacement of native languages to English is manifested in phonological substitutions, phonological insertions, omissions of

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consonants, inappropriate stress, incorrect rhythm and intonation. These pronunciation problems affect students' oral fluency, confidence, effectiveness of communicating in English and/or academic performance. The study also shows that the negative impact of mother tongue interference can be reduced by conscious use of instructional techniques like intensive pronunciation exercises, language laboratories and listening to standard spoken English, and frequent speaking exercises. Hence, good pronunciation teaching should take an inseparable part in the English language learning so as to boost the communicative competence of the learners and to help them make better performance in English language.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the results of the study:

1. The English language teachers should include frequent and intensive exercises to improve pronunciation in the teaching and learning process so that the learners do not have a negative impact from the mother tongue in pronunciation.
2. Language laboratories should be provided and properly equipped in schools and regularly used for listening, pronunciation drill and oral communication training.
3. Teachers should consistently expose learners to models of Standard English pronunciation using audio recordings, educational videos, language software and other authentic learning resources.
4. Learners should be actively involved in speaking in English through debate, speeches, drama presentation, discussion and public speaking activities to enhance fluency and confidence.
5. The teaching of Oral English and phonetics should be deepened in the curriculum planning and education administration, increase the teaching time and supply good teaching materials in schools.

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