

Spelling-Sound Incongruences in English Language: A Case Study of Nupe Speakers as Second Language Learners.

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ABSTRACT: This study explores the challenges of English spelling and pronunciation faced by Nupe-speaking second language learners. English, known for its irregular spelling and pronunciation rules, poses significant difficulties for non-native speakers, particularly those whose first language has a distinct phonological system. Through qualitative analysis involving interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments, this research identifies common errors and patterns among Nupe speakers. The findings reveal that Nupe learners struggle with specific spelling-sound incongruences, influenced by the phonetic structure of their native language. This study provides insights into the particular difficulties faced by Nupe speakers, contributing to the broader understanding of second language acquisition and offering practical recommendations for educators.

Keywords: English spelling, pronunciation challenges, Nupe speakers, second language learners, phonological system, second language acquisition, spelling-sound incongruences.

I. INTRODUCTION

English, as a global lingua franca, is widely learned and spoken by millions of people around the world. Despite its prevalence, the English language presents a unique set of challenges to non-native speakers, particularly in its spelling and pronunciation. Unlike many languages that follow a more predictable phonetic system, English is notorious for its irregular spelling patterns and complex pronunciation rules. These incongruences often pose significant hurdles for second language learners, leading to a range of difficulties in mastering the language.

This study focuses on Nupe-speaking second language learners and their specific challenges with English spelling and pronunciation. Nupe, a language spoken by the Nupe people in Nigeria, has its own distinct phonological system

that differs markedly from English. The phonetic structure of Nupe, characterised by a more consistent relationship between spelling and sound, contrasts with the often unpredictable nature of English orthography. This disparity can create a significant learning curve for Nupe speakers when acquiring English as a second language.

The motivation for this study arises from the observation that Nupe speakers, like many other language groups, face particular difficulties when learning English. These challenges are not merely academic but have practical implications for communication, education, and integration into broader English-speaking environments. Understanding the specific nature of these difficulties can inform better teaching strategies, curriculum development, and support mechanisms for Nupe learners.

This research aims to explore the specific spelling-sound incongruences encountered by Nupe-speaking learners of English. By conducting a detailed analysis of common errors and identifying patterns in these challenges, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic obstacles faced by this group. Through a combination of qualitative methods, including interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments, the study will gather data on the experiences of Nupe speakers as they navigate the complexities of English spelling and pronunciation.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to document and analyse the specific spelling and pronunciation errors made by Nupe learners; second, to explore the underlying causes of these errors in relation to the phonological differences between Nupe and English; and third, to offer practical recommendations for educators and language practitioners to support Nupe-speaking learners more effectively. By addressing these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the broader field of second language acquisition and

provide valuable insights for improving language education for Nupe speakers.

In conclusion, this study seeks to illuminate the challenges faced by Nupe-speaking learners of English, focusing on the incongruences between English spelling and pronunciation. By understanding these challenges in depth, we can develop more effective teaching strategies and support mechanisms, ultimately aiding Nupe speakers in their journey to mastering English. The following sections will delve into the literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of spelling and pronunciation challenges in second language acquisition has been a prominent area of research within applied linguistics. English, in particular, has been extensively studied due to its global significance and the complexities inherent in its orthographic system. This literature review aims to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding the specific challenges faced by Nupe-speaking second language learners.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the foundational theories in second language acquisition is the Interlanguage Theory, proposed by Larry Selinker. This theory posits that second language learners develop an intermediate linguistic system that incorporates elements from both their native language and the target language. This interlanguage is influenced by the learner's native phonological and grammatical structures, often leading to specific types of errors. For Nupe speakers, their interlanguage likely reflects the phonetic regularities of Nupe, which may clash with the irregularities of English spelling and pronunciation.

Another relevant theoretical perspective is the Phonological Transfer Hypothesis, which suggests that learners transfer phonological rules and patterns from their first language to the second language. This transfer can be both positive and negative. Positive transfer occurs when the phonological rules of the two languages are similar, facilitating learning. Negative transfer, or interference, happens when the rules are different, leading to errors. Given the distinct phonological systems of Nupe and English, negative transfer is a significant factor in the spelling and pronunciation challenges faced by Nupe speakers.

Spelling-Sound Incongruences in English

English is known for its inconsistent relationship between spelling and pronunciation, a topic extensively covered in the literature. Studies by Venezky (1999) and Carney (1994) have documented the historical and linguistic reasons for these irregularities. The complex history of English, with influences from Latin, French, and other languages, has resulted in a spelling system that does not always match its phonology. This incongruence poses a significant hurdle for all learners, but especially for those from language backgrounds with more phonetic consistency, like Nupe.

Research by Gough, Juel, and Griffith (1992) emphasizes the impact of these spelling-sound incongruences on reading and spelling proficiency. Learners often face difficulties in predicting pronunciation from spelling and vice versa. This unpredictability can lead to frequent errors, frustration, and a slower acquisition process. For Nupe speakers, whose native language has a more straightforward phonetic structure, these challenges are particularly pronounced.

Previous Studies on Nupe Speakers

While there is limited research specifically focused on Nupe-speaking learners of English, studies on other African language speakers provide valuable insights. Ojo (2008) explored the challenges faced by Yoruba speakers, another Nigerian ethnic group, and found similar issues with English spelling and pronunciation. These studies highlight the broader context of African language speakers and their unique difficulties in learning English.

In the context of Nupe, Adegoke (2012) conducted a preliminary study that identified common pronunciation errors among Nupe learners of English. The study found that certain English phonemes, which do not exist in Nupe, were particularly challenging. These findings suggest that the phonetic structure of Nupe significantly influences the pronunciation difficulties encountered by its speakers when learning English.

Gap Analysis

Despite the valuable insights from these studies, there is a notable gap in the literature specifically addressing the spelling challenges of Nupe speakers. While pronunciation has been somewhat explored, the intricacies of English spelling and its impact on Nupe learners remain under-researched. This gap underscores the need for a focused investigation into the spelling-sound

incongruences and how they affect Nupe speakers' acquisition of English.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by Nupe-speaking second language learners in mastering English spelling and pronunciation. The methodology is structured to gather in-depth insights into the specific issues encountered by these learners and to analyze the underlying causes of these challenges.

Research Design

The research design is qualitative, focusing on detailed and nuanced data collection methods that provide rich, descriptive information about the experiences of Nupe-speaking learners. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the specific spelling and pronunciation difficulties faced by these learners and the factors contributing to these challenges.

Participants

The study involves a purposive sample of Nupe-speaking second language learners of English. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Native Nupe speakers who have been learning English as a second language for at least six years.
2. Learners from diverse educational backgrounds to ensure a broad representation of experiences.
3. Both male and female participants to account for potential gender differences in language acquisition.

A total of 30 participants were selected to provide a sufficient sample size for qualitative analysis while ensuring manageable data collection and analysis.

IV. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection was conducted using three primary methods: interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments.

1. **Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant to gather detailed information about their experiences with English spelling and pronunciation. The interviews focused on specific challenges, learning strategies, and perceptions of the difficulties they encounter. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility in exploring topics that emerged during the conversations.

2. **Surveys:** A comprehensive survey was administered to all participants to collect quantitative data on their language learning background, exposure to English, and self-reported difficulties with spelling and pronunciation. The survey included both closed-ended and open-ended questions to capture a wide range of information.
3. **Phonetic Assessments:** Phonetic assessments were conducted to identify specific pronunciation errors and patterns among the participants. These assessments involved reading passages and lists of words that include common English phonemes and spelling patterns known to be challenging for second language learners. The assessments were recorded and analyzed to identify recurring errors and patterns.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments were analysed using thematic analysis and phonetic analysis techniques.

1. **Thematic Analysis:** The interview and open-ended survey responses were transcribed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to spelling and pronunciation challenges. This analysis focused on understanding the nature of the difficulties, the learners' perceptions, and the strategies they use to cope with these challenges.
2. **Phonetic Analysis:** The recorded phonetic assessments were analysed to identify specific pronunciation errors and patterns. This analysis involved comparing the participants' pronunciations with standard English pronunciations and identifying deviations. The errors were categorised based on phonological features, such as vowel and consonant substitutions, deletions, and insertions.
3. **Quantitative Analysis:** The closed-ended survey responses were analysed using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the participants' language learning backgrounds, exposure to English, and self-reported difficulties. This quantitative data complemented the qualitative findings by providing additional context and validation.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and well-being of the participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. All data

were anonymized to protect participants' identities, and the research was conducted with sensitivity to cultural and linguistic considerations.

VI. RESULTS

The results of this study are organised into three main sections: spelling challenges, pronunciation challenges, and identified patterns. Each section presents the key findings derived from interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments conducted with Nupe-speaking second language learners of English.

Spelling Challenges

The analysis of the data revealed several recurring spelling challenges faced by Nupe-speaking learners:

1. **Irregular Spelling Patterns:** Many participants struggled with the inconsistent spelling patterns in English. Words such as "through," "though," and "thorough" were frequently misspelled due to their irregularities and the lack of direct phonetic correspondence.
2. **Silent Letters:** The presence of silent letters in English words posed significant difficulties. Words like "knight," "comb," and "island" were often misspelled as learners omitted or incorrectly included silent letters.
3. **Homophones:** Nupe speakers frequently confused homophones—words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings. Common errors included mixing up "there," "their," and "they're," as well as "to," "too," and "two."
4. **Complex Vowel Combinations:** Words with complex vowel combinations, such as "receive," "believe," and "neighbour," were problematic. Participants often misspelled these words by applying incorrect vowel combinations or substituting vowels based on their Nupe phonetic system.
5. **Consonant Clusters:** English words with consonant clusters, such as "strength," "scratch," and "thrift," were frequently misspelled as learners struggled to accurately represent these clusters in writing.

Pronunciation Challenges

Phonetic assessments and interviews highlighted several key pronunciation challenges:

1. **Vowel Substitutions:** Nupe speakers often substituted English vowels with those from their native language. For instance, the English vowel sounds in "ship" and "sheep" were commonly pronounced incorrectly, with

participants using a single Nupe vowel sound for both.

2. **Consonant Deletions and Insertions:** Participants frequently deleted or inserted consonants when pronouncing English words. Common deletions included omitting the final "t" or "d" in words like "last" and "hand." Insertions often involved adding a vowel sound between consonants in clusters, as in "black" being pronounced as "bilack."
3. **Stress Patterns:** English word stress patterns were challenging for Nupe speakers, who often applied Nupe stress rules to English words. This led to mispronunciations where the primary stress was placed on the wrong syllable, such as pronouncing "record" (noun) as "reCORD" (verb).
4. **Th Sounds:** The English "th" sounds (both voiced as in "this" and voiceless as in "think") were particularly problematic. Many participants replaced these sounds with "t" or "d," resulting in pronunciations like "dis" for "this" and "tink" for "think."
5. **Intonation Patterns:** The intonation patterns of English sentences were often misaligned with those of Nupe. Participants struggled with the rising and falling intonations typical of English, leading to sentences that sounded flat or incorrectly emphasized.

Identified Patterns

Several patterns emerged from the analysis of the spelling and pronunciation challenges:

1. **Phonological Transfer:** The majority of errors could be traced back to the phonological transfer from Nupe to English. The consistent and phonetic nature of Nupe spelling and pronunciation influenced the learners' approach to English, leading to predictable errors based on their native language structure.
2. **Interference from Native Language:** The interference from Nupe was evident in both spelling and pronunciation. This was particularly noticeable in the substitution of phonemes, application of Nupe vowel and consonant rules, and the misalignment of stress and intonation patterns.
3. **Common Error Types:** Errors in both spelling and pronunciation fell into a few common categories, such as vowel and consonant substitutions, silent letter omissions, and incorrect application of English phonetic rules. These commonalities suggest that targeted teaching interventions could address these specific areas effectively.

4. **Impact of Exposure and Practice:** Participants who had greater exposure to English through media, education, and social interactions showed fewer errors and better overall proficiency. This indicates that increased exposure and practice can mitigate some of the challenges associated with spelling and pronunciation incongruences. However, this group tends to acquire the American spelling forms as a result of the influence of technology. The social media and chatting spelling forms are also a great influence on the performance of this group.

VII. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by Nupe-speaking second language learners in mastering English spelling and pronunciation. By examining the data collected from interviews, surveys, and phonetic assessments, we can draw several key conclusions and consider their implications for language teaching and learning.

Interpretation of Findings

The spelling challenges identified in this study, such as irregular spelling patterns, silent letters, homophones, complex vowel combinations, and consonant clusters, highlight the significant difficulties Nupe-speaking learners face when navigating the inconsistencies of English orthography. These challenges are consistent with previous research on second language learners, reinforcing the notion that English spelling's irregularity poses a universal problem.

The pronunciation challenges, including vowel substitutions, consonant deletions and insertions, stress patterns, "th" sounds, and intonation patterns, underscore the phonological transfer from Nupe to English. This transfer is a well-documented phenomenon in second language acquisition, where learners apply the phonetic rules of their native language to the target language, leading to predictable errors.

Comparison with Existing Literature

The findings of this study align with previous research on the difficulties faced by African language speakers learning English. Studies on Yoruba and other Nigerian languages have similarly identified issues with English phonemes and spelling rules. For instance, Ojo (2008) and Adegoke (2012) documented pronunciation challenges among Yoruba speakers, highlighting the influence of native language

phonology on English acquisition. The consistency of these findings across different African languages suggests that the issues identified among Nupe speakers are part of a broader pattern of second language acquisition challenges in this context.

Implications for Teaching

The results of this study have several practical implications for educators and language practitioners working with Nupe-speaking learners:

1. **Phonological Awareness:** Teachers should focus on raising learners' awareness of the phonological differences between Nupe and English. This can be achieved through explicit instruction on English phonemes, stress patterns, and intonation.
2. **Targeted Spelling Instruction:** Given the specific spelling challenges identified, educators should provide targeted instruction on irregular spelling patterns, silent letters, homophones, and complex vowel combinations. Using phonics-based approaches and visual aids can help learners internalise these patterns.
3. **Pronunciation Practice:** Regular pronunciation practice, including drills and phonetic exercises, can help learners overcome common pronunciation errors. Emphasis should be placed on challenging sounds like "th" and on the correct application of English stress and intonation patterns.
4. **Increased Exposure:** Encouraging greater exposure to English through media, reading, and social interactions can mitigate some of the spelling and pronunciation difficulties. Immersive experiences and consistent practice are key to improving language proficiency.
5. **Use of Technology:** Language learning apps and software that provide immediate feedback on spelling and pronunciation can be beneficial. These tools can offer interactive and engaging ways for learners to practice and refine their skills.

VIII. LIMITATIONS

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. The sample size of 30 participants, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, may not capture the full diversity of Nupe-speaking learners' experiences. Additionally, the study's focus on qualitative methods means that the findings are descriptive and may not generalize to all Nupe speakers. Further research with larger

sample sizes and quantitative approaches could provide more comprehensive insights.

IX. FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of this study suggest several avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies tracking Nupe-speaking learners over time could provide deeper insights into the progression of spelling and pronunciation skills. Comparative studies involving learners of other African languages could further elucidate common patterns and unique challenges in second language acquisition. Additionally, research on the effectiveness of specific teaching interventions for addressing the identified challenges would be valuable.

X. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed examination of the spelling and pronunciation challenges faced by Nupe-speaking second language learners of English. The research highlights several key issues that these learners encounter, including irregular spelling patterns, silent letters, homophones, complex vowel combinations, and consonant clusters. Pronunciation challenges were similarly pronounced, with common errors related to vowel substitutions, consonant deletions and insertions, stress patterns, "th" sounds, and intonation.

The findings indicate that these difficulties stem largely from the phonological transfer from Nupe to English. The predictable nature of Nupe's phonetic system contrasts sharply with the irregular and complex orthography of English, leading to specific types of errors. This phonological interference underscores the importance of understanding the native language's influence when teaching English as a second language.

The implications of these findings are significant for language educators and practitioners. Effective teaching strategies should include raising phonological awareness, providing targeted spelling instruction, incorporating regular pronunciation practice, and encouraging increased exposure to English through various media and social interactions. The use of technology and interactive tools can also play a crucial role in supporting learners.

While this study offers valuable insights, it also acknowledges its limitations, including a relatively small sample size and a focus on

qualitative data. Future research could expand on these findings with larger, more diverse samples and incorporate longitudinal and comparative studies to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by Nupe-speaking learners and other African language speakers.

In conclusion, this research highlights the critical need for tailored educational interventions to address the specific spelling and pronunciation challenges faced by Nupe-speaking learners of English. By adopting informed and targeted teaching approaches, educators can significantly enhance the language acquisition process for these learners, ultimately contributing to their overall proficiency and academic success. The insights gained from this study not only benefit Nupe speakers but also add to the broader field of second language acquisition, providing valuable guidance for teaching English to speakers of other languages with similar phonological structures.

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