

## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH/IGBO SYLLABIC STRUCTURES

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### Abstract

Igbo native speakers who learn English as a second language (L2) most of the time encounter perennial difficulties in mastering the syllabic structure, stress pattern and correctly articulating the English lexical words, and the syntactical structures. Research has shown that these difficulties are as a result of the differences between the phonological structures of the English language (L1) and the Igbo language (L2) which, in turn, affects the L2 learner's communicative competence in the English language. A comparative study of a language investigates two or more languages in order to compare their structures or other linguistic features, to show whether they are similar or different. This paper, therefore, examines the syllabic structures of the two languages, English and Igbo respectively. It also assesses stress/tonal patterning in lexical words and connected speech. Contrastive Analysis theory by Robert Lado (1957) and CV phonology by Kahn (1980) were adopted for the work.

**Keywords:** Comparative, English, Stress, Syllable, Structure

### Introduction

As most second language teachers of the English language will attest and classroom research indicates, the influence of the first language (L1) is either noticeably or subtly evident in the second language classroom. Nevertheless, for researchers, the difficulty has been to disambiguate the interlingual influence from that of the multitudinous other cognitive, developmental, and learner-specific variables in acquisitional play. Phonetics and Phonology have remained glaringly, the challenging aspects of the English language for both teachers and students in a second language environment. The sound system of a language can be studied from these two broad perspectives, phonetics and phonology. Phonetics deals with the study of speech sounds (segmentation and description), while phonemics or phonology is concerned with how the speech sounds are structured to form a system in a particular language. Sounds occur in groups or company and are no longer treated as atomistic entities because when they occur in company, they absorb some qualities of sounds. The major branches of phonetics are articulatory phonetics which deals with the study of how speech sounds are produced; acoustic phonetics which studies the physical properties of the speech sounds; and auditory phonetics which is concerned with the perception of the speech sounds. There is an important link between phonetics and phonology. While phonetics tells us how the sounds of language are produced and what their articulatory, acoustic and auditory properties are, phonology studies how these sounds are structured and how they function to convey meanings in a particular language. However, according to Pike (1945:57), "Phonetics gathers raw material, phonology cooks it".

A syllabic study is an aspect of phonology which has remained a mystery and presents some difficulties to the second language learner of the English language (ESL) because of the complex nature of the target language. It is an area in phonology known as prosodic phonology. Without adequate knowledge of the syllables of the English language, the ESL learner finds it difficult to pronounce words correctly and place stress on lexical words and connected speech or discourse.

In the English language and other languages, a syllable is defined as having a psychological reality such that even an uneducated person can intuitively break a word into a syllable. It is a good starting point for phonology. According to Baldeh (1997), "while Nigerian L1s (mother-tongues) have syllable isochronicity, that is, the syllables occur regularly, the English language has stress isochronicity, that is the stressed syllables are regular, and stressed syllables are woven in-between the unstressed syllables". With the above statement, one can say that while every syllable in Igbo language is stressed, in English, it is not. Below are some examples:

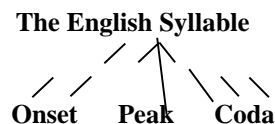
| Word       | English      | Igbo             |
|------------|--------------|------------------|
| Bread      | /ˈbred/      | /ˈbu're'di/      |
| Tomato     | /tə'ma:təʊ/  | /tu'ma'to/       |
| Typewriter | /ˈtaɪpraɪtə/ | /ˈtai'pu'rai'ta/ |
| School     | /ˈsku:l/     | /ˈsu'ku'lu/      |
| Christmas  | /ˈkrɪsməs/   | /ˈkris'ti'ma'si/ |
| Sprite     | /ˈspraɪt/    | /su'pu'rai'ti/   |

Since Igbo language is tonal, the second language learner transfers its features to the English language, and this poses a great problem in their bid to master the English syllabic structure. Hence, one would rightly assert that the L2 learner is powerfully conditioned by the features of the native language. Moreover, English consonant clusters present a problem for the L2 learner whose mother-tongue has a different syllabic structure. This makes the syllabic structure of English a more complex one.

### Syllable in English: A Conceptual Framework

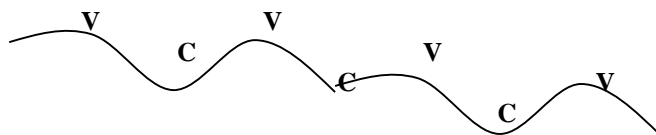
A syllable is a unit of sound composed of a central peak of sonority (usually a vowel), and consonants that cluster around this central peak. Stetson (1928) in *Chest Pulse or Expiratory Theory* states, take the air you are breathing as a balloon, when you are talking, take what you are saying as releasing air little by little. Each one of these, is voluminous enough to produce one syllable depending on the syllable structure.

In view of the above statement, a syllable is seen as a correspondence to a single expiration. Therefore, it can be defined as a segment which may consists of a single sound as in are /a:/, awe /ɔ:/ or a sequence of sounds as in table /teɪbl/, cupboard /kʌbəd/ in a given language produced with one chest pulse and possessing a peak of prominence which is usually a vowel or a syllabic consonant. The vowel is the syllabic centre or nucleus of a syllable irrespective of the language. A syllable has three prominent parts, the onset or release or beginning, the peak or nucleus, and the coda or closure or arrest or final consonant. Diagrammatically, it could be represented as,



The syllabic structure of the Igbo language is predominantly CV while that of the English language is  $C^{0-3} V C^{0-4}$  or (CCC) V (CCCC). The broken lines of the onset and coda show the optionality of the consonant sounds which occupy the initial and final positions while the unbroken line of the peak shows the obligatory nature of the vowel sound in the syllabic structure.

### A Graphic Representation of the Peak of Syllability



The most prominent part which is perceived as the ridge is the vowel while the trough is the consonant.

### The Syllabic Structure of English Words

English language is a stress-timed language and has a very complex syllabic structure  $(C^{0-3}) v (C^{0-4})$  or (CCC) v (CCCC). This simply means:

1.  $(C^{0-3})$ ... the onset or the initial consonant sound could be one or more but not more than three at the initial position.
2. V ... the peak or the nucleus which is the vowel sound is an obligatory element in the syllable.
3.  $(C^{0-4})$  ... the coda or the final consonant sound could be one or more consonants but not more than four at the final position.

**Sample Structure of the English Syllable using the Monosyllabic Words**

| SYLLABLE STRUCTURE | WORD     | SEGMENT   | RULE                           |
|--------------------|----------|-----------|--------------------------------|
| 1. V               | Are      | /a:/      | C <sup>0</sup> VC <sup>0</sup> |
| 2. CV              | At       | /æt/      | C <sup>0</sup> VC <sup>1</sup> |
| 3. CV              | Me       | /mi:/     | C <sup>1</sup> VC <sup>0</sup> |
| 4. CCV             | Try      | /traɪ/    | C <sup>2</sup> VC <sup>0</sup> |
| 5. VCC             | Arms     | /a:mz/    | C <sup>0</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |
| 6. CVC             | Good     | /gud/     | C <sup>1</sup> VC <sup>1</sup> |
| 7. CVCC            | Silk     | /sɪlk/    | C <sup>1</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |
| 8. CCVC            | Scores   | /skɔ:z/   | C <sup>2</sup> VC <sup>1</sup> |
| 9. CCVCC           | Plank    | /plæŋk/   | C <sup>2</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |
| 10. VCCC           | Ants     | /ænts/    | C <sup>0</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |
| 11. CVCCC          | Lumps    | /lʌmps/   | C <sup>1</sup> VC <sup>3</sup> |
| 12. CCVCCC         | Prompt   | /prɒmpt/  | C <sup>2</sup> VC <sup>3</sup> |
| 13. CCCVC          | Street   | /stri:t/  | C <sup>3</sup> VC <sup>1</sup> |
| 14. CCCVCC         | Strict   | /strikt/  | C <sup>3</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |
| 15. CCCVCCC        | Sprints  | /sprints/ | C <sup>3</sup> VC <sup>3</sup> |
| 16. CCVCCCC        | Glimpsed | /glimpst/ | C <sup>2</sup> VC <sup>4</sup> |
| 17. CCCVCCCC       | Strength | /streŋθ/  | C <sup>3</sup> VC <sup>2</sup> |

No Nigerian language has up to the clusters above including the Igbo language. This poses a problem and analysis becomes more difficult for the Igbo bilingual. Furthermore, as a result of too many clusters in English, the L2 learner introduces a vowel sound in-between the consonant sounds. Below are some examples of syllabification of English lexemes by the L2 learner:

| Word            | English      | Igbo           |
|-----------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1. Screw driver | /skrudraivə/ | /sukudraiva/   |
| 2. Park         | /pa:k/       | /pa:ki/        |
| 3. Goat         | /gəut/       | /gəutu/        |
| 4. Joseph       | /dʒəuzif/    | /Jəusefu/      |
| 5. Lawrence     | /lɒrəns/     | /lɒrənsi/      |
| 6. Vulcanizer   | /vʌlkənaizə/ | /fɒkunaiza/    |
| 7. Ball         | /bɒl/        | /boolu/        |
| 8. Table        | /teɪbl/      | /tebulu/       |
| 9. Christmas    | /krɪsməs/    | /kirisitimasi/ |
| 10. Market      | /ma:kit/     | /ma:keti/      |

**Syllabic Structure of Igbo Words**

The Igbo language is a syllable-timed language since every word is syllabified. Syllabification simply means the process of dividing words into syllables. The syllabic structure of the Igbo language is (C)<sup>T</sup><sub>S</sub> where C= Consonant, ( ) indicates optionality, T = Tone, S= Syllabic

From the formula above, one can see that 'the syllabic' is the only tone-bearing unit in the language. In the Igbo language, the syllabic is either a vowel or the syllabic nasal. Examples include:

| SYLLABIC STRUCTURE | WORD  | SEGMENT |
|--------------------|-------|---------|
| CV                 | Ga    | /ga/    |
| VCV                | Afe   | /afe/   |
| CV                 | Pu    | /pu/    |
| VCV                | Udu   | /udu/   |
| CCV                | Mbe   | /mbe/   |
| CCV                | Mma   | /mma/   |
| CCVCV              | Mwepu | /mwepu/ |
| CCV                | Myo   | /myo/   |
| CCV                | Mfe   | /mfe/   |
| CCCV               | Mkpa  | /mkpa/  |

### Strong and Weak Syllables in English and Igbo Phonological Studies

**In the English language**, we have weak and strong syllables. Only the strong syllable is stressed because of the vowel quality, intensity and length. Weak syllables tend to be shorter, of lower intensity and different in quality. For example, in the word, better /<sup>1</sup>betə/, the second syllable is weak, stress is, therefore, placed on the first syllable. This is because the syllable has a weak vowel sound called the schwa /ə/, which is shorter than the first, not loud enough and cannot occur in a strong syllable. Other examples include:

|            |                           |
|------------|---------------------------|
| doctor     | / <sup>1</sup> dʌktə/     |
| lover      | / <sup>1</sup> lʌvə/      |
| sister     | / <sup>1</sup> sistə/     |
| farmer     | / <sup>1</sup> fɑ:mə/     |
| manner     | / <sup>1</sup> mænə/      |
| daughter   | / <sup>1</sup> dɔ:tə/     |
| pilot      | / <sup>1</sup> pailət/    |
| obey       | /ə <sup>1</sup> bei/      |
| understand | /ʌndə <sup>1</sup> stænd/ |
| above      | /ə <sup>1</sup> bʌv/      |
| again      | /ə <sup>1</sup> geɪn/     |

**In the Igbo language**, every syllable is strong. There is no weak syllable. Therefore, the Igbo people find it very difficult to pronounce the weak syllables. One sound in Igbo could have different meanings by supra-segmental changes. Examples include:

Oke --- boundary  
Oke --- rat  
Oke / \ share  
Oke \ --- male

However, strong syllables are remarkably peaked by the weak syllables as in:

Bicycle /baisikl/      /baisikulu/  
Fan /fæn/      /fa:nu/

### Theoretical Framework

Contrastive Analysis theory, as postulated by Robert Lado in 1957, is an influential construct in the theories of second language acquisition which uses comparisons of languages to explain areas of difficulties for learners. CA was first developed by Charles Fries in 1945 as an integral component of the methodology of foreign language (FL) teaching. It states clearly that challenges in acquiring a new or second language are derived from the differences between the two languages. The theory, therefore, evaluates the languages to identify if they have anything in common, that is, both similarities and differences, and contributes to a better understanding of the acquisition process of second language structures. In addition, Johnson (1986) is of the opinion that if there is no familiar characteristic in the languages, it indicates that the learner might have difficulty in learning the target language (TL). In view of this, one would arrive at the conclusion that contrastive analysis stresses the influence of the mother tongue in learning a second language in phonological, morphological, lexical and syntactic levels. It holds that second language would be affected by the first language. CA, is therefore, founded on the assumption that the L2 learner will tend to transfer the formal features of their L1 utterances.

On the other hand, CV Phonology is a Generative Theory of Syllable which is a postulation of CV-tier by Kahn in 1980. It is a new approach to syllabic organization or syllable representation in the English language. However, CV-tier is a tier of C and V slots which are filled by segments.

In this research work, however, we examine the syllabic structures of two languages, English and Igbo respectively and the challenges faced by the Igbo bilinguals in their bid to acquire communicative competence in the English language.

### Methodology

The study combined the use of questionnaire and interview with an oral/written diagnostic test. The questionnaire which was tagged, 'Teacher/Student' Response to the Similarities and Differences in the Syllabic Structures of the English and Igbo languages' was administered by the researcher to 10 teachers and fifty students from 5 secondary schools respectively. In all, 60 questionnaires were administered and retrieved immediately.

Some teachers were interviewed to gather data on the challenges they encounter while teaching supra-segmental phonology of the English language from where the syllabic study was taken. The period of administering the questionnaire and waiting for the interview was used by the researcher to carry out an oral/written test for the students.

### Analysis and Discussion of Findings

From our analysis of data, the type of errors discovered were both in syllabification of the English words and inappropriate placement of stress in lexical words. Here are some of our extracts.

| English Word | Transcription             |
|--------------|---------------------------|
| Driver       | / <sup>1</sup> draiva/    |
| Mark         | / <sup>1</sup> ma:ki/     |
| Coke         | /kəu <sup>4</sup> ku/     |
| Francis      | / <sup>1</sup> frənsisi/  |
| Florence     | /flɔrən <sup>1</sup> si/  |
| Mall         | / <sup>1</sup> mɔlu/      |
| Rice         | / <sup>1</sup> raisi/     |
| Meat         | / <sup>1</sup> mi:ti/     |
| Teacher      | / <sup>1</sup> ti:tʃa/    |
| Top          | / <sup>1</sup> tɔpu/      |
| Man          | / <sup>1</sup> manu/      |
| Receipt      | /risi <sup>1</sup> putu/  |
| Electric     | / <sup>1</sup> eletiriki/ |
| Manage       | /mane <sup>1</sup> dzi/   |
| Lamb         | / <sup>1</sup> lambu/     |
| Christian    | / <sup>1</sup> kristienu/ |

These are few of the words extracted from the Igbo bilingual students and one observable point can be identified. In the examples, we have noted the instance of syllabification of almost all the words. These do not conform to the day-to-day use of the English language by the native speakers of the language. The teachers acknowledged that teaching suprasegmental phonology is done very, very badly. The sad truth is that very few teachers know how to handle it, even if they are aware of the problem. Some teachers teach it analytically even though it is a very practical topic and is best learned by constant practice. Some students, on the other hand, have a phobia for that aspect of the English language. They see it as too theoretical and analytical. In fact, it has remained a mystery which is yet to be demystified.

### Recommendations

The researcher suggests that syllabic structures and stress-timing cannot really be done analytically. They are just too complex. Syllables, rhythm, intonation, and stress placement are best learned by imitation done frequently for a short time. The teaching style should be brisk, humorous and ready to adapt instantly to handle individual difficulties. Teachers of the English language should be well-groomed in the syllabic structure, syllabic analysis, placement of stress in the English language in order to guide and impact positively on the students. Provision of a good language laboratory will be of great benefit to the teacher and student for constant practice.

### Conclusion

In a bicultural, multicultural environment like Nigeria, the use of English has become quite interesting. The English language has undergone and still, is undergoing changes in the hand of the users. Little wonder, an Hausa/English bilingual pronounces the word, 'power/pauə/' as '/fawe/,' 'people/pi:pl/ as '/fi:fl/'. The contact situation and the deliberate attempt by the L2 learners to make the target language their own has led to the hybridization of the language to suit their different linguistic purposes and particular environments. Moreover, teachers' incompetence and laxity in the teaching of suprasegmentals have continued to create unnecessary bane on students' competence in the use of the English syllables and stress, analytically and in practice. Consequently, the in- depth exploration of the topic made by the researcher would go a long way to ameliorate or totally eliminate the erroneous pronunciation of words, inappropriate graphic expressions and unnecessary phobia for syllabification and stress in the English language.

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