

DIFFICULTY IN PRONUNCIATION OF DIPHTHONGS AMONG PUBLIC SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The study examined the difficulties students encountered in pronouncing diphthongs. Specifically, the study highlighted some areas that posed problems for students in articulating diphthong sounds. The study was anchored in language acquisition theory, which posited that learners have acquired a first language and that their L1 might hamper the articulation of sounds, and in error analysis theory, which stated that a learner's errors reflect their learning process. Here, the errors an L2 learner makes are traceable to either intra-lingual or developmental in nature or inter-lingual (transfer). A descriptive research design was adopted to describe the areas students find difficult when pronouncing diphthongs. Data were collected through structured questionnaires. Data were equally analyzed using mean scores. The study's findings revealed that ignoring glides in pronunciation and overemphasizing the first vowel were among the problematic areas that students couldn't articulate properly. The study concluded that students should be exposed to continuous drilling to improve their pronunciation skills. This is because a second language learner has not gained veritable knowledge of how these diphthongs are pronounced. It was recommended, amongst others, that teachers attend workshops on the training prevalent in these diphthongs and possibly teach the students more effectively.

1. Introduction

The importance of English in Nigeria has reached such a high level that students are expected to have a high level of pronunciation mastery. However, this remains a difficult challenge for many students. The difficulty students face in pronouncing diphthongs is concerning and must be addressed to develop effective pronunciation skills. English is included in the Nigerian educational curriculum to enable students to communicate effectively and clearly in the language. Unfortunately, many secondary school students lack proper oral English skills, leading to mispronunciation of certain diphthongs. Both teachers and students should prioritize oral proficiency to overcome these pronunciation difficulties, especially with diphthongs such as in "boat" /boʊt/ and "bit" /bīt/, which differ only in the pronunciation of the diphthongs /oʊ/ and /i/ respectively.

Although oral English is a vital part of language learning, it has often been overlooked by many English teachers, leading to frequent pronunciation mistakes among students. This neglect has resulted in students' weak oral skills and poor mastery of spoken English. However, recent advances in English language teaching emphasize the importance of oral English because it improves learners' overall comprehension and effective language use. Oral English helps enhance clarity, fluency, and communicative ability. Despite this significance, many students still find it difficult to complete meaningful pronunciation exercises, especially when articulating diphthongs. This issue often leads to mispronunciations that can cause misunderstandings and changes in meaning during communication. As Morah et al. (2022) note, effective knowledge transmission is critical for functional competence, while Ngozi and Eke (2023) highlight the importance of supportive teaching practices to improve learning outcomes. Similarly, Eke (2023) stresses the need for a curriculum focused on practical language use. Therefore, strengthening oral English instruction is essential to enhance students' spoken communication skills.

Language errors can happen because of incorrect pronunciation of diphthongs, which can change the meaning. Therefore, accurate pronunciation is important so that the listener can correctly understand the purpose of the conversation. In Nigeria, for example, regional languages can influence how people intone and pronounce words. Diphthongs are present in many languages, including English. For students, pronouncing these diphthongs correctly can be challenging. As a result, Riyan (2017) argued that different pronunciations can lead to shifts in meaning, and ignoring pronunciation errors may cause misunderstandings. The researcher defined pronunciation as the way language is structured to produce specific sounds or words properly.

ed that if a student's first language does not contain diphthongs or has different diphthongs from English, the students may find it challenging to accurately pronounce diphthongs in English. The difficulties in pronouncing diphthongs can be due to various factors such as poor intonation, misrepresentation of phonics sounds, and inadequate articulation, among others. These factors will undoubtedly affect students' speaking skills because they have not yet internalized proper pronunciation. Speaking competency involves the ability to develop and achieve a high level of conversational skill. This means being fluent in English, understanding all the fundamental sounds, and correctly using them while speaking. Speaking is the primary way language is communicated orally. It is a human activity that involves physical, psychological, semantic, and linguistic components. Generally speaking, communication is the most important tool for human interaction because everyone who speaks aims to convey their thoughts and feelings effectively. A speaking situation requires the speaker to deliver the message with appropriate intonation and pronunciation to achieve the best result. In essence, a strong grasp of pronunciation makes speaking more enjoyable and effective. The researcher defined speaking competence as the ability to communicate effectively through proper pronunciation.

Understanding the difficulties students face with the proper pronunciation of diphthongs and their impact on speaking competence remains an unsolved puzzle. The relationship between pronunciation difficulties and speaking ability among secondary students is interconnected because both depend on each other for accurate results. Most studies have been conducted in Western countries (Riyan, 2017), and therefore, a full understanding of this relationship risks being culturally biased. Repeating such studies in Nigeria, especially in Anambra, could help remove this bias. The present study aims to investigate the pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs among senior secondary school students in Anambra State Nigeria.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

The way students pronounce diphthongs in English is becoming concerning. Pronunciation challenges with diphthongs among secondary school students in Anambra State are also present due to a lack of proper grounding in pronunciation skills. Students struggle to connect these sounds correctly, resulting in inaccurate word pronunciation, including diphthongs. The researcher has observed many students facing pronunciation difficulties, not only with diphthongs but with nearly all English words. These difficulties can be linked to poor intonation, misrepresentation of phonemes, incorrect articulation of sounds, and the fact that many first languages lack diphthongs, creating pronunciation challenges for students.

A number of studies have examined the pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs, with many focusing on their impact on students' speaking competence. Despite these efforts, many studies address only one variable, and those conducted in Nigeria do not seem to resolve the question of diphthong pronunciation difficulties among secondary school students in Anambra State. This serves as the motivation for this study, which aims to investigate pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs among secondary school students in Anambra State.

1.2. Purpose of the study

The main purpose of the study is to examine the pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs among secondary school students in Anambra State. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the areas that students find difficult in the pronunciation of diphthongs.
2. examine effective strategies for the improvement of pronunciation difficulty in diphthongs

1.3. Significance of the Study

The study has both theoretical and practical importance. It will contribute to existing knowledge about diphthong pronunciation challenges among secondary school students. The study will be based on Error Analysis Theory by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). This theory states that it involves procedures for identifying, describing, and explaining learner errors. It assumes that learners make errors, and by identifying these mistakes, strategies can be developed to correct them. The study is theoretically significant because the findings will expand the range of contexts in which the theory is commonly applied, such as pronunciation difficulties with diphthongs among secondary school students.

Practically, the study would be highly valuable to students, teachers, and policymakers. When the findings are published in journals and shared through workshops using language laboratory equipment, they will offer essential pronunciation tips and symbols to assist secondary school students with difficulties with diphthongs and speaking skills. This will help students develop strong mastery of pronunciation drills to reduce errors.

The study's findings, when shared through seminars, conferences, workshops, awareness campaigns, and published articles, will help secondary school teachers and policymakers become aware of diphthong pronunciation difficulties and how to help students overcome them. These efforts will contribute to developing more effective language policies and initiatives to address diphthong pronunciation challenges among secondary school students.

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study focused on the pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs among secondary school students in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. It identified the specific diphthongs that students find the most challenging in their spoken English. The study was limited to 16 public secondary schools within the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State, involving 405 secondary school students. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 200 participants as the sample. Furthermore, the study focused on diphthongs and their inherent pronunciation challenges and did not include other aspects of English pronunciation, such as intonation, stress, or rhythm, because including these elements would make the study too broad.

1.5. Research Questions

This study would be guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the areas that students find difficult in the pronunciation of diphthongs?
2. What are the effective strategies for improving the pronunciation difficulty of diphthongs among students?

1.6. Review Of Related Scholarship

This chapter will present a review of related scholarship for the present study. It will be organized under the following subheadings: conceptual review, empirical studies, theoretical framework, and summary of the study.

1.7. Conceptual Review

1.7.1. Pronunciation

The ability to produce and articulate clear sounds in English is essential for good pronunciation. Pronunciation refers to how language is spoken, including how words are pronounced and how a person enunciates words (Hornby, 2008). It involves the way we produce the sounds that convey meaning when speaking. This includes specific consonants and vowels (segments), as well as suprasegmental features such as stress, timing, phrasing, rhythm, intonation (suprasegmental aspects), and voice projection (voice quality) (Yates et al., 2014). Gilakjani (2012) considers pronunciation to be a set of habitual sound production. These habits are developed through repeated practice and correction when mispronunciations occur. Conversely, Dalton in Hassan (2014) defines

pronunciation as the production of meaningful sounds that are part of a language's code and are used to achieve meaning within a context of use.

Pronunciation is undoubtedly the way a person articulates a word or language. Novarita (2017) defined pronunciation as the manner in which language sounds, or words are spoken. Pronunciation is the most important aspect of language learning, including language skills, because pronunciation differences can also influence meaning. Therefore, pronunciation becomes an essential element to consider. Stefani et al. (2019) stated that pronunciation is the mastery that leads to different meanings. Leohart (2008) defined pronunciation as the typical way a word or language is uttered. English is considered a challenging language to pronounce because of the distinction between symbols and sounds. The process of producing sounds, hearing them, and applying pitch and intonation to word choices is known as pronunciation (Harmer, 2007). Pronunciation of words is closely related to oral communication (Grandyna 2018).

1.7.2. Speaking Competence

Speaking is unavoidable in life because every day involves speaking in some way. Therefore, it is important to master speaking and its skills to be competent. Speaking is a skill necessary for communication and participation in the broader world of work (Handayani et al, 2021). It is the only skill that requires us to convey an utterance interactively with another individual (Setiawan et al, 2021). In speaking practice, having a partner is essential to perform the skill correctly for communicative purposes (Mantra et al., 2018). Speaking is an interactive process of interpreting meaning that involves producing and processing information (Astawa et al., 2018). It also involves the movement of the speech organs to produce sounds perceived by the ear (Widdowson, 2008). Additionally, speaking is interactive and requires cooperation in managing speaking turns (Thombury, 2009). Harris (2010) explained that speaking is a coding process in which speakers share ideas, thoughts, and feelings they want to communicate, influence, or interact with others. In this context, the speaking situation involves the speaker encoding a message verbally (a word or sentence) with content and a structure that involves the listener.

1.8. Empirical Studies

A study was conducted by Yowani et al (2021) on Common pronunciation problems in learning English in Indonesia. It was an essay-type designed to identify frequently occurring pronunciation problems among English learners. The study found that differences in sound systems between English and the native language caused difficulties for students in phonetic learning. The reviewed study and the present study differed in their geographical locations: the former was conducted in Indonesia, while the latter will be conducted in Anambra State, Nigeria. Both studies is related because they handled pronunciation problems in English.

Luke et al (2022) conducted a study on the pronunciation of words in the English Language: the difficulties in learning and the determining factors in Akwa Ibom State. An opinion paper intended to find out the extent of difficulties in learning word pronunciation in the English Language and the determining factors. The study found that a well-publicized and interesting development could help revive in ESL students' minds what they need to know about pronunciation. Both studies are related, as they appear to support the main topic: pronunciation difficulties. The reviewed study differs from the present study because the former was conducted in Akwa Ibom State, whereas the present study will be conducted in Anambra State.

Jahara et al. (2021) conducted a study on pronunciation problems encountered by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. The study focused on pronunciation problems as perceived by Arab undergraduates. The methods of data collection were questionnaires and recorded speech samples. The data was analyzed using pronunciation tests. The findings revealed that undergraduates will improve their pronunciation through consistent motivation, oral drills, imitation, and a willingness to participate in the designed tests. Both studies are related because they appear to support the main issue of pronunciation difficulties. The reviewed study differs from the present study because it was conducted in Saudi Arabia, whereas the present study will be conducted in Anambra State, Nigeria.

Igbo et al. (2020) conducted research on grammatical errors in Nigerian English pronunciation among students in Enugu State: Psychological implications and management. Three research

questions and one null hypothesis guided the study. The population consisted of 999 undergraduate students. Simple random sampling was used to analyze the research questions, while the t-test was used to answer the hypothesis. The study found that consonants and vowel phonemes, syllabic consonants, and unstressed words are aspects of pronunciation that undergraduates consider problematic. Both studies are related because they appear to support the main idea of the study on pronunciation difficulties. The reviewed study differs from the present study because it was conducted in Enugu State, whereas the present study will be conducted in Anambra State.

Omotoyinbo (2023) conducted research on pronunciation challenges in the English Language among undergraduate students in Ondo State. A descriptive survey design was used for the study. The sample consisted of 100 respondents using simple random techniques. The study used a structured self-constructed questionnaire for data collection. Data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages. The study found that mother tongue plays a significant role in the phonological acquisition of a second language learner, along with pidgin and creole, which can lead to incorrect pronunciation of English words among undergraduates. Both studies are related because they support the main issue of pronunciation difficulties. The reviewed study differs from the present study in terms of geographical location: the former was conducted in Ondo State, while the latter will be conducted in Anambra State.

1.9. Theoretical Framework

1.9.1. Error Analysis Theory by Ellis (1997)

Error Analysis Theory was proposed by Ellis (1997). The theory posits that it is a technique for identifying, describing, and explaining errors made by learners of English as a second or foreign language. The theory states that it is a process of identifying deviations in a learner's language in order to correct them. Ellis proposed four main steps: identification, description, explanation, and evaluation for handling learners' errors. In the context of this study, there is a valuable insight into the types of errors, such as phonological errors, where there is mispronunciation of diphthongs, and factors influencing errors, like transfer from the learner's native language.

The theory is related to the present study because pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs is as a result of students' misconception about phonology, its pronunciation and how their native language interfere in their pronunciation of certain words with diphthongs such as "cow" - /kəʊ/, "boy" - /bɔɪ/, "beer" - /bɪə/, "bear" - /bɛə/ etc.

1.9.2. Language Acquisition Theory by Noam Chomsky (1965).

The theory was proposed by Chomsky, which stated that linguistic knowledge is innate, that is, a child is born with a language acquisition device (LAD)- a kind of linguistic template which enables a child to acquire the grammar of the language(s) in his immediate environment. The theory argues that human brain structures naturally allow for the capacity to learn and use languages. Humans acquire language by unconsciously storing information in the brain, which can later be used for a wide range of written and oral communication. Chomsky also emphasizes the importance of children acquiring and developing effective language skills during critical early developmental stages. This is because language helps them to learn and pronounce certain words.

The theory is relevant to the present study because, just as children are born with a language acquisition device, their early development is built on the LAD, which enables them to produce certain words in English. Though there may be lapses in the early stages of their lives, pronunciation difficulties may persist.

1.10. Summary of literature review

The literature review has been organized into three broad sections: conceptual review, empirical studies, and theoretical framework. The concepts of pronunciation and speaking were examined. Pronunciation is a set of habits for producing sounds. Speaking is a coding process in which speakers communicate ideas, thoughts, and feelings they want to share, interact with others, or influence. Various theories, such as Ellis's (1997) Error Analysis Theory and Noam Chomsky's (1965) Language Acquisition Theory, were reviewed. Error analysis theory is relevant to the study

because it identifies learners' language errors, which prompt pronunciation difficulties with diphthongs. The language acquisition theory is relevant to the study on the premise that, in the early critical stages of children's development, their pronunciation of words may be affected because they already possess innate linguistic knowledge; therefore, introducing a phonological sound different from those in their native language would lead to pronunciation difficulties.

Finally, a few studies related to the current study were reviewed under the empirical studies section. At the end of the review, however, at the course of the research work with respect to the various empirical studies among other variables discussed in this work, it appears that none of the above studies explored, empirically determined pronunciation difficulties of diphthongs and speaking competence among secondary school students in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. An attempt is made to fill the knowledge gap that led to this research by investigating pronunciation difficulties with diphthongs and speaking competence among secondary school students in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

2. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive research design to assess the level of difficulties students face in diphthong pronunciation. With this design, the researcher could collect information via a questionnaire from a group of people, analyze the data, and generalize the results to the entire population. The population consisted of 405 students from 16 secondary schools in Onitsha North L.G.A. A sample of 200 students was chosen using simple random sampling techniques to ensure that the entire population was represented. The research used a structured questionnaire titled "Difficulties in Pronunciation of Diphthongs Questionnaire" (DPDQ) to address the research questions. The questionnaires were administered by the researcher, with assistance from two trained research assistants. The collected data were compiled, analyzed, and reported based on a four-point scale. The mean was calculated by multiplying each response frequency by its corresponding scale value, then dividing the total by the number of respondents. A response mean of 2.5 served as the cutoff mark for accepting an item at the specified level, and a mean rating below 2.5 was considered a disagreement level.

3. Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the areas that students find difficult in the pronunciation of diphthongs?

Table 1. Mean scores on the areas of pronunciation difficulty of diphthongs

S/N	Items Statements	Mean	Decision
1	Overemphasis on the first vowel as in the word "beach" is often mispronounced as "beech" making a prolonged "ee".	2.69	Accepted
2	Ignoring the glides as in "oi" & "oy" as in "boil" & "toy" are normally mispronounced.	2.88	Accepted
3.	Confusing similar diphthongs as differentiating "ei" in vain & "ay" in rain	3.04.	Accepted
	Grand Mean	2.87	Accepted

Items in Table 1 showed that all students' responses were above 2.5 (an acceptable mean). This resulted in a grand mean of 2.87. This indicated that pupils agreed that these items represent the ways in which the pronunciation of diphthongs posed problems for students. Research Question 2. What are the effective strategies for improving the pronunciation difficulty of diphthongs?

Table 2. Mean scores on the effective strategies for improvement in diphthong pronunciation

S/N	Item Statements	Mean	Accepted
1.	Engaging students in regular phonetic/oral drills	2.75	Accepted
2.	Imitating native speakers is a powerful technique for refining one's pronunciation	2.97	Accepted
3.	Visualising the mechanics of pronunciation can enhance one's overall grasp of diphthong articulation	2.78	Accepted
	Grand Mean	2.83	Accepted

As shown in Table 2, all students' responses had means above 2.5, which is an acceptable range. The overall mean of 2.8 indicated that students agreed that these items constitute effective strategies

for addressing difficulty in diphthong pronunciation. The discussion would be done in line with the research questions that guided the study.

3.1. Areas that pose difficulties in the pronunciation of diphthongs

The analysis of the items in research question 1 showed that students accepted that these areas are problematic in the pronunciation of diphthongs. This issue is very common in a second-language context, such as Nigeria, where second-language learners are still working to master the L2. This aligns with Igbo et al. (2021), who found that consonants, vowel phonemes, and unstressed sounds pose difficulties in diphthong pronunciation. Therefore, if these sounds are not properly learned, they will continue to be problematic for students.

3.2. Effective strategies for the improvement of diphthong pronunciation

The analysis of research question 2 showed that students agreed that these strategies are effective in addressing difficulties in pronouncing diphthongs. It also demonstrated that mastering diphthong pronunciation is a crucial step toward achieving linguistic fluency. The findings align with those of Jahara et al. (2021), which indicated that students could improve their diphthong pronunciation through consistent motivation, oral drilling, imitation, and a willingness to participate in the designed activities and tests.

4. Conclusion

A second-language learner of English often faces challenges in pronouncing diphthongs because they have not yet mastered the techniques involved. However, difficulties in dipping vowel pronunciation mainly stem from the complex motor skills needed to move the tongue and jaw, as well as differences between dialects and native languages. Overall, substitution, insertion, and omission are equally common reasons why diphthongs are usually mispronounced.

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