



Students' Attitudes Towards the Segmental Phonemes of English in Selected Colleges of Education in North-Central Nigeria

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This study investigated students' attitudes towards the segmental phonemes of English in selected Colleges of Education in North-Central Nigeria. The study was motivated by the persistent challenges second language learners face in mastering English pronunciation, particularly consonant and vowel phonemes. Two objectives guided the study: to examine students' perceptions of the difficulty involved in mastering English segmental phonemes and to determine the influence of cultural background on their attitudes towards these phonemes. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised students of English in Colleges of Education in North-Central Nigeria, while a sample of ninety (90) students was randomly selected from three Colleges of Education. Data were collected through a researcher-designed questionnaire based on a modified Likert scale and analysed using descriptive statistics of percentage. Findings revealed that a majority of students experienced considerable difficulty in pronouncing and distinguishing English sounds, especially unfamiliar vowel and consonant contrasts. The results also showed that first language interference and cultural background significantly influenced students' attitudes towards English pronunciation. Many respondents reported feelings of shyness and lack of confidence when pronouncing unfamiliar English sounds, although a good number remained motivated to improve their pronunciation skills. The study concluded that students' attitudes towards English segmental phonemes are shaped by linguistic, cultural, and affective factors, which in turn affect pronunciation learning outcomes. The study recommended explicit phonetic instruction, increased listening and pronunciation practice, supportive classroom environments, and teaching strategies that address first language interference and learner anxiety.

Keywords: Attitude, College, English, Segmental Phonemes.

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Introduction

The study of second language acquisition has long been an area of interest for researchers, educators, and linguists alike. Within this domain, the importance of accurate pronunciation and phonological competence cannot be overstated. A

fundamental component of pronunciation lies in the mastery of segmental phonemes, the discrete speech sounds that constitute the building blocks of language (Byun, & Tessier, 2016). In the context of learning English as a second language (L2), the acquisition of segmental phonemes presents a unique challenge due to the phonetic variations and



intricacies that distinguish English from other languages. Central to this challenge are the attitudes of language learners towards segmental phonemes, which play a crucial role in shaping their learning experiences and outcomes.

This study seeks to delve into the intricate relationship between students' attitudes and their mastery of segmental phonemes in English as a second language. The attitudes of language learners have been recognised as pivotal determinants of language learning success (Dörnyei, 2005; Gardner, 2006). Attitudes influence motivation, engagement, and the willingness to invest effort in acquiring new linguistic skills, including pronunciation. Therefore, understanding students' attitudes towards segmental phonemes is essential for designing effective pedagogical approaches that foster successful language acquisition.

The unique phonological structure of English, characterised by a complex system of consonant and vowel sounds, presents a distinct set of challenges for L2 learners. The presence of numerous phonemes and their allophonic variations in different phonetic contexts demands precise articulation and auditory discrimination (Stone, Gao & Birkholz, 2021). Consequently, learners' attitudes towards these phonemic intricacies can greatly influence their motivation to address pronunciation difficulties.

Moreover, Moyer (2007) stresses that learners' attitudes towards segmental phonemes are closely tied to their perceptions of language identity, authenticity and intelligibility. Accurate pronunciation is often associated with native-like fluency and cultural integration, making it a factor in learners' social and professional aspirations. As English continues to be a global lingua franca, the significance of proficient pronunciation extends beyond communicative competence, shaping interpersonal interactions, academic achievements and career prospects (Jenkins, 2015).

By investigating students' attitudes towards segmental phonemes in English as a second language, this study aims to shed light on the intricate interplay between learners' motivations, linguistic goals and phonological challenges. A deeper understanding of these attitudes holds the potential to

inform effective pedagogical strategies that encourage positive engagement, enhance pronunciation skills and promote successful second language acquisition. Through the exploration of learners' perceptions, experiences and beliefs regarding segmental phonemes, this research contributes to the broader discourse on language acquisition and offers insights into optimising pronunciation instruction for English language learners.

Objective(s) of the Study

This research is generally intended to find out the attitudes of students of English in the North-Central Colleges of Education towards the segmental phonemes of English. Specifically, the research attempts to:

1. investigate students' perceptions of the difficulty in mastering English Segmental phonemes.
2. examine the role of cultural background in shaping students' attitudes towards English Segmental phonemes

Research Questions

1. What are the students' perceptions of the difficulty involved in mastering English segmental phonemes?
2. How does cultural background influence students' attitudes towards segmental phonemes?

Literature Review

The Nature and Scope of Attitude

Attitude is a psychological concept that means what an individual thinks and feels about something. Rajecki (1990) posits that attitude is a predisposition to respond cognitively, emotionally and behaviourally towards a particular object in a particular way. Esere and Mustapha (2018) opines that attitude might be learnt just by following the example or view of parents, friends, teachers, community members and colleagues. She further

says that the quality of a person's attitude is judged by the observable evaluative responses that such an individual tends to make.

Attitude could be formed as a result of some kinds of learning experiences. Olaoye (2007), Sternberg and Gringorenko (2001), Eagly and Chiaken 1998; Petty and Cacioppo (1986) express that there are a variety of popular definitions of attitudes but for psychologists, an attitude is learned, stable and relative, enduring evaluation of a person, object or idea which can affect an individual's behaviour. These authorities assert that attitudes are a bit more substantial than impressions, both, however, are aspects of social cognition. Petty Cacioppo's definition makes several points. First, individuals are not born with the attitudes they have -individuals acquire attitudes through the experience they have, especially in interacting with others. Second, attitudes tend to be stable and relatively enduring-attitudes tend not to change easily. Third, attitudes typically are evaluative, they are means by which individuals judge things positively or negatively and in varying degrees. Some issues may not concern individuals much in one way or the other, whereas other issues may engender strong opinions and finally, attitudes can influence behaviour such as when they (attitudes) cause people to act on or protest to something.

Berschied (1999) opines that it was believed at one time that simply understanding people's attitudes towards things, ideas or issues would help psychologists predict people's behaviour with great accuracy, but this view turned out to be an oversimplification. Sometimes, attitudes predict behaviour, but other times they do not. The New Encyclopaedia Britannica (2005) defines attitudes as hypothetical constructs (that means, they are inferred but not objectively observable) they are therefore manifested in conscious experience, verbal reports, gross behaviour and physiological signs. The New Encyclopedia Britannica further explains the concept as:

Attitudes can be arranged in a hierarchy based on their degree of

specificity or exclusiveness.

"values" are said to represent very broad tendencies, "interests" being slightly less inclusive and sentiments narrow still; attitudes are viewed as still more narrow tendencies, with "beliefs and "opinions being progressively the most specific members of the hierarchy (p.687).

Social psychologists like Sternberg & Grigorenko (2001), Feldman (1999) and Rajeci (1990) generally consider attitude to follow the ABC model, which suggests that an attitude has three components: affect, behaviour and cognitive. The affect component encompasses the positive or negative emotions about something - how individuals feel about it. The behaviour component consists of a predisposition or an intention to act in a particular manner that is relevant to somebody's attitude. Finally, the cognitive component refers to the beliefs and thoughts individuals hold about the object of attitudes. For instance, someone's attitude towards the prosodic features of English may consist of a positive attitude (the affect component), an intention to teach these features (the behaviour component) and the belief that the prosodic features of English are relevant for effective communication (the cognitive component). Every attitude has these three interrelated components, although they vary in terms of which element predominates and in the nature of their relationship. In all attitudes, however, forms are maintained and changed according to general principles that social psychologists have discovered:

According to Feldman (1999) students' attitudes towards segmental phonemes of English can be influenced by a variety of factors. They include:

- Students' attitudes may be influenced by their native language and the extent of exposure to

English phonemes. If their native language has similar phonemes, they might find it easier to grasp English segmental phonemes (Boonsuk & Fang, 2022). On the other hand, if there is a significant contrast, they might face more challenges and potentially develop negative attitudes. Students with a strong aptitude for language learning may have a more positive attitude towards segmental phonemes (Saito, 2023). Those who quickly adapt to new sounds and patterns might find phoneme acquisition less daunting.

- The teaching methods and materials used by instructors can greatly impact students' attitudes. Engaging, interactive, and well-structured lessons that focus on both phonemic theory and practical application can foster positive attitudes (Dool, & Simpson, 2021).
- Teacher's Competence and Enthusiasm: Teachers who are knowledgeable, enthusiastic, and effective in teaching phonemes can influence students' perception of the topic. Al-efeshat and Baniabdelrahman (2020) state that a passionate instructor who can explain the relevance and utility of phonemes might encourage more positive attitudes.
- Cultural Factors: Cultural attitudes towards pronunciation and language learning can affect students' attitudes. In some cultures, there might be more emphasis on correct pronunciation, leading to greater motivation to learn segmental phonemes.
- Perceived Relevance: Students are more likely to be engaged if they perceive segmental phonemes as relevant to their language goals, academic success, or future career. Demonstrating how mastering phonemes improves communication can enhance their attitudes.
- Anxiety and Confidence: Students with language anxiety or lack of confidence might develop negative attitudes towards phonemes if they perceive them as challenging. Supportive environments that address

anxiety and build confidence can help improve attitudes.

- Peer Influence: Peers can impact students' attitudes through discussions, comparisons, and shared learning experiences. Positive peer interactions can lead to more favourable attitudes towards segmental phonemes.
- Technological Resources: Interactive phonetic apps, online resources, and audiovisual materials can make learning phonemes more engaging. Integration of technology can positively influence attitudes, especially among Nigerian students.
- Dialect and Accent: Students' exposure to different English dialects and accents can shape their attitudes. Students might be more motivated to learn phonemes that align with the dialect they encounter frequently.
- Motivation and Goals: Students who are motivated to achieve a high level of fluency or proficiency in English might have more positive attitudes towards mastering segmental phonemes, seeing them as stepping stones toward their language goals.
- Feedback and Assessment: Constructive feedback and appropriate assessment methods can guide students' progress and encourage positive attitudes by showcasing their improvement over time.
- Instructors should be mindful of these factors when teaching segmental phonemes and strive to create a supportive, engaging, and inclusive learning environment that caters for various students' attitudes and needs.

Segmental Phonemes

Phonemes are the smallest units of sound in a language that can change the meaning of a word. Segmental phonemes refer to individual speech sounds that can be segmented or isolated from each other. They are the building blocks of spoken language. A phoneme is a distinct unit of sound in a language that can differentiate words. For example, in English, the sounds /b/ and /p/ are distinct phonemes because changing one sound for the other can change the meaning of words, like "bat" and

"pat." While a phoneme is a theoretical concept, in reality, phonemes can have different actual sounds, known as allophones. Allophones are variations of a phoneme that occur in different phonetic contexts but do not change the meaning of words. For instance, the "t" sound in "top" is pronounced slightly differently from the "t" sound in "stop," yet they are both allophones of the same /t/ phoneme. Basically, segmental phonemes are of two types: Consonant and Vowel phonemes.

Consonant Phonemes

Consonant phonemes are the basic sound units in a language that involve some degree of obstruction of airflow in the vocal tract and can distinguish meaning between words. In phonology, a phoneme is the smallest unit of sound that can change meaning. Consonant phonemes are those sounds produced with a narrowing or closure somewhere in the vocal tract.

English has around 24 to 26 consonant phonemes, depending on the dialect. These are categorised based on various articulatory features such as place of articulation, manner of articulation and voicing.

- i. Voicing: English distinguishes between voiced and voiceless consonant pairs. Voiced consonants are produced with vibration of the vocal cords, while voiceless ones are produced without such vibration. This depends on activity of the vocal folds.

*Voiced consonants: vocal cords vibrate (/b/, /d/, /g/, /z/)

*Voiceless consonants: no vibration (/p/, /t/, /k/, /s/)

* Test: Put your hand on your throat:

Z → vibration (voiced)

S → no vibration (voiceless)

- ii. Place of Articulation: Consonants can be produced at different points in the vocal tract, such as bilabial (both lips), alveolar (tongue against alveolar ridge), and velar (back of the tongue against velum). This

refers to where in the mouth the airflow is restricted. Common places include:

*Bilabial (both lips): /p/, /b/, /m/

*Labiodental (lip + teeth): /f/, /v/

*Dental (tongue + teeth): /θ/ (thin), /ð/ (this)

*Alveolar (tongue + alveolar ridge): /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/, /n/

*Palatal (tongue + hard palate): /ʃ/ (sh)

*Velar (back of tongue + soft palate): /k/, /g/, /ŋ/

*Glottal (vocal cords): /h/

- iii. Manner of Articulation (How the sound is made) : Consonants can be produced with different airflow patterns, like stops (complete closure then releases of airflow), fricatives (narrowing of airflow causing friction), and approximants (partial closure of airflow). This describes how airflow is obstructed.

Types include:

*Plosives (stops): complete closure, then release (/p/, /t/, /k/)

*Fricatives: narrow passage causing friction (/f/, /s/, /ʃ/)

*Affricates: stop + fricative (/tʃ/ as in church)

*Nasals: air passes through the nose (/m/, /n/, /ŋ/)

*Approximants: slight narrowing, smooth airflow (/l/, /r/, /w/, /j/)

*Lateral: air flows around sides of tongue (/l/)

Vowel Phonemes

Vowel phonemes are the basic sound units of vowels in a language. They are sounds produced with a

relatively open vocal tract (no significant blockage of airflow) that can change meaning between words. In phonology, a phoneme is the smallest sound unit that distinguishes meaning. A vowel phoneme is therefore a vowel sound that can create differences in words.

English has twenty vowel phonemes (12 Monophthongs and 8 Diphthongs). Vowels are characterised by their tongue height, tongue advancement and lip rounding. Vowel phonemes can be categorised as

1. Monophthongs (pure vowels) These are simple, single-vowel sounds. These are single, steady sounds. They are twelve in number

Monophthongs in English language include;

- /ɪ/ (bit) /i:/ (see/) /e/ (bed) /æ/ (cat) /ʌ/ (cup)
- /ɜ:/ (bird) /ɑ:/ (father) /ɒ/ (lot)
- /ɔ:/ (thought) /ʊ/ (book) /u:/ (food/) /ə/ (about)

2. Diphthongs: These are gliding vowel sounds that involve a transition from one vowel to another within a single syllable. These involve a movement from one vowel position to another within the same syllable. The Diphthongs are eight in number.

- * /aɪ/ (time) */eɪ/ (face) */ɔɪ/ (boy) */aʊ/ (mouth)
- * /əʊ/ (go) (BrE)
- * /ɪə/, /eə/, /ʊə/ (centering diphthongs in some accents)

Attitude



Conceptual Framework on students' attitudes towards segmental phonemes

Source: Researchers-developed (2023)

The conceptual framework anchors on the fact that, the cultural background and students' perceptions on vowels and consonants determine the status of the students' attitudes (positive/negative) towards segmental phonemes.

Methods

Design: This research engagement adopted a descriptive research design of the survey type for data collection. This survey method enabled the researcher to obtain the opinion of the students on

their attitudes towards the segmental phonemes of English. The design made it easier for the studied phenomena to be described exactly as they exist.

Population: The population consisted of all the students in the Colleges of Education in North-Central, Nigeria. The target population for the study were all the students in the Departments of English in the Colleges of Education.

Sample and Sampling Technique: The sample scope were ninety (90) students from three selected Colleges. Random Sampling Technique was used to sample thirty (30) students from each of the Colleges, making a total of ninety (90) students.

Instrumentation: The instrument for this study was a Researcher-Designed Questionnaire. It was used to elicit responses from the students regarding their attitudes towards the segmental phonemes of English. The questionnaire demanded responses in the modified Likert type based on Strongly Agree (SA), Agree(A), Disagree(D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). This section also contained ten (10) items

which each student is expected to fill.

For ethical reasons, the researcher allowed the respondents to know the purpose of this study after they had gotten an approval from the College Board Team for the data distribution and collection; they were assured that their responses would be treated with extreme confidentiality. The respondents were also given opportunity for verbal response on the questionnaire. This gave the researcher the opportunity to personally guide and check the answers to questions that had been raised by the respondents in this study.

Data Analysis: The data collected was analysed using the descriptive statistic of percentage.

Results and Discussion

RQ 1: What are the students’ perceptions of the difficulty involved in mastering English segmental phonemes?

Table 1: Responses to Research Question 1

Questionnaire Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1. I find it difficult to pronounce certain English sounds correctly	61	67.8	23	25.6	4	4.4	2	2.2	90	100
2. I struggle to distinguish between similar English sounds	52	57.8	28	31.1	6	6.7	4	4.4	90	100
3. Some English vowel and consonant sounds are confusing to me	54	60.0	21	23.3	9	10.0	6	6.7	90	100
4. Learning English segmental phonemes requires a lot of effort	42	46.7	26	28.9	12	13.3	10	11.1	90	100

5. I feel confident in my ability to pronounce English sounds correctly	12	13.3	14	15.6	35	38.9	29	32.2	90	100
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The responses to the questionnaire provide a clear picture of students’ perceptions of their difficulties with English segmental phonemes (RQ1). Generally, the data indicate that a substantial proportion of the sampled students experience notable challenges with pronunciation and sound discrimination.

For Item 1, a very large majority of respondents (67.8% strongly agree and 25.6% agree) reported difficulty in pronouncing certain English sounds correctly. This suggests that pronunciation problems are widespread among the students, with only a very small minority (6.6%) indicating otherwise. This strong consensus points to a fundamental issue in articulatory control of English phonemes.

Similarly, Item 2 shows that most students (88.9% combining strongly agree and agree) struggle to distinguish between similar English sounds. This highlights a perceptual difficulty, indicating that the problem is not only in production but also in auditory discrimination. Such difficulty often affects intelligibility and listening comprehension.

Item 3 reinforces this trend, with 83.3% of respondents agreeing that some English vowel and consonant sounds are confusing. This suggests that both vowel and consonant contrasts—likely those not present in the learners’ first language—pose challenges, contributing to confusion and possible miscommunication.

In Item 4, although agreement is slightly lower compared to earlier items, a majority (75.6%) still believe that learning English segmental phonemes requires considerable effort. This indicates that students perceive phoneme acquisition as cognitively demanding, possibly due to differences between their native language sound system and English.

Item 5 presents a contrasting perspective: only 28.9% of respondents express confidence in their ability to pronounce English sounds correctly, while a significant majority (71.1%) disagree. This lack of confidence aligns with the earlier findings of difficulty and confusion, suggesting that students are aware of their limitations and may feel insecure about their pronunciation skills.

Taken together, the results clearly show that most students face both production and perception challenges with English segmental phonemes. The high levels of reported difficulty and low confidence suggest a need for more focused instructional strategies, such as explicit phonetic training, increased listening practice, and corrective feedback. These findings imply that improving students’ phonological awareness and pronunciation skills should be a priority in English language teaching for this group.

RQ2: How does cultural background influence students’ attitudes towards segmental phonemes?

Table 2: Responses to Research Question 2

Questionnaire Items	SA		A		D		SD		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
6. My first language influences how I pronounce	62	68.9	13	14.4	9	10.0	6	6.7	90	100

English sounds											
7. I feel comfortable pronouncing English sounds that are different from my native language	6	6.7	13	14.4	57	63.3	14	15.6	90	100	
8. My cultural background affects my attitude towards learning English pronunciation	61	67.8	14	15.6	8	8.9	7	7.8	90	100	
9. I feel shy or embarrassed when pronouncing unfamiliar English sounds	58	64.4	23	25.6	7	7.8	2	2.2	90	100	
10. I am motivated to improve my pronunciation of English sounds	32	35.6	21	23.3	27	30.0	10	11.1	90	100	

The results for RQ2, focus on the influence of first language and cultural factors, as well as learners’ attitudes toward English pronunciation. Overall, the responses suggest that both linguistic background and affective factors play a significant role in shaping students’ pronunciation experiences.

For Item 6, a strong majority of respondents (68.9% strongly agree and 14.4% agree) acknowledge that their first language influences how they pronounce English sounds. This indicates clear awareness among students of first-language interference, which likely contributes to the pronunciation and perception difficulties identified in RQ1. Only a small proportion (16.7%) disagreed, reinforcing the widespread nature of this influence.

Item 7 presents an important contrast: a large majority of students (78.9%) reported that they do not feel comfortable pronouncing English sounds that differ from their native language. Very few respondents (21.1%) expressed comfort. This lack of comfort suggests that unfamiliar phonemes create anxiety or uncertainty, which may hinder practice and improvement.

In Item 8, most students (83.4%) agreed that their cultural background affects their attitude toward learning English pronunciation. This highlights the role of sociocultural factors, such as beliefs about language learning, exposure to English, and possibly attitudes toward accent and identity. These factors may either motivate or discourage active engagement with pronunciation practice.

Item 9 reveals a strong affective barrier: 90% of respondents admitted feeling shy or embarrassed when pronouncing unfamiliar English sounds. This is one of the most striking findings, as it suggests that emotional factors—particularly anxiety and fear of negative evaluation—are highly prevalent and could significantly limit students’ willingness to participate in speaking activities.

Finally, Item 10 shows a more mixed response regarding motivation. While a majority (58.9%) indicated that they are motivated to improve their pronunciation, a substantial proportion (41.1%) expressed low motivation. This suggests that although many students recognize the importance of improving pronunciation, a considerable number

may feel discouraged, possibly due to the difficulties and anxieties highlighted in earlier items.

In summary, the findings for RQ2 demonstrate that first language interference, cultural background, and emotional factors such as shyness and lack of confidence strongly influence students' pronunciation learning. Although more than half of the students are motivated to improve, the high levels of discomfort and embarrassment may act as barriers to effective learning. These results imply that language instruction should not only address phonetic difficulties but also create a supportive and low-anxiety learning environment, while acknowledging the influence of learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion

The study reveals that students in the selected Colleges of Education in North-Central Nigeria encounter considerable challenges with English segmental phonemes, both in production and perception. The majority of respondents reported difficulty in pronouncing certain sounds correctly and in distinguishing between similar sounds, indicating persistent articulatory and auditory challenges. Confusion over vowel and consonant contrasts not present in their first language contributes to miscommunication, while low confidence in pronunciation reflects an acute awareness of these difficulties.

First language interference, cultural background, and affective factors, such as shyness and embarrassment when producing unfamiliar English sounds, were found to significantly influence students' pronunciation experiences. Although a majority demonstrated motivation to improve their pronunciation, the prevalence of discomfort and anxiety may impede active practice and progress.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that Colleges of Education adopt explicit phonetic instruction, incorporating exercises such as minimal pairs, tongue twisters, and auditory discrimination tasks. Listening practice should be enhanced through exposure to varied English accents and guided listening activities. Instructors should foster a

supportive, low-anxiety environment to build students' confidence and encourage risk-taking in pronunciation practice. Attention should also be given to first language interference through contrastive analysis, while acknowledging cultural attitudes and promoting positive perceptions of English pronunciation. Finally, ongoing motivation can be sustained through goal-setting, progress recognition, and structured feedback.

Implementing these strategies can significantly enhance students' phonological awareness, pronunciation skills, and general confidence in English communication, thereby supporting more effective language learning in these Colleges of Education.

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