

Realisation of English Pure Vowels by Selected Senior Secondary School Students in Kaduna State, Nigeria

Andrew Onoja

Department of English

University of Jos

onojaandrew@gmail.com

0703 634 8850

Gladys Zangang Auta

Government Secondary School Akupal

Zangon Kataf Local Government Area

Kaduna State

and

Obins Nuhu Isaac

Department of General Studies

School of Agricultural Technology

Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria

Samara-Kataf Campus

Kaduna State

Abstract

This study investigated the realisation of some pure vowels of English by selected Senior Secondary School students in the Kaduna South Local Government Area of Kaduna State, Nigeria. Three objectives guided the investigation, namely, to identify and classify the types of errors made by the selected students in the realisation of English pure vowels, to determine the frequency and distribution of such errors, and to propose effective strategies and interventions for improving the production of English pure vowels among senior secondary school students. A cross-sectional survey research design was adopted to obtain data from a sample of 80 students selected through a random sampling technique from four secondary schools: Government Day Secondary School Maraban Rido, Government Secondary School Sabon Tasha, Government Secondary School Television, and Government Secondary School Kakuri. Two instruments were developed and used for data collection: the Single Pronunciation Test and the Oral Test on Connected Speech. The instruments were validated by experts in Test and Measurement from the University of Jos, and reliability was ensured through a pilot study involving a different set of students. Transcription of data followed IPA conventions, while data were analyzed using simple percentages to determine the frequency and distribution of errors. Findings revealed that students struggled significantly with the pronunciation of less familiar English pure vowels such as /ə/, /ɜ:/, /ʌ/ and /ɔ:/, often committing substitution and distortion errors. These errors negatively affect oral communication by reducing intelligibility and causing misunderstanding in both academic and social interactions. The study recommends, among other things,

early and explicit instruction in the pronunciation of English vowel sounds, particularly those absent in local Nigerian languages.

Key Words: *English pure vowels, Senior Secondary School students*

Introduction

The English language holds a crucial position as Nigeria's official language and also serves as a teaching subject across the various levels of education in Nigeria. As a subject, English Language education typically covers multiple aspects, including grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, speaking and listening skills. An important aspect of the English Language curriculum is the development of oral communication skills, aiming to enhance students' ability to express themselves fluently, engage in discussions and deliver presentations confidently. To achieve such communication proficiency in spoken English requires a deliberate acquisition of the sounds of the language, of which vowels are vital components.

The English language is known for its complex vowel sound system, consisting of a variety of distinct sounds that play a crucial role in pronunciation and comprehension. English has approximately 20 vowel sounds, which can be classified into short vowels, long vowels, and diphthongs. There is also a marginal group of vowels known as triphthongs. Mastering the English vowel sounds is essential for both native and non-native speakers, as it significantly impacts pronunciation accuracy, word recognition and fluency in spoken English. However, learning to use the different categories of English vowels by non-native speakers such as Nigerians poses significant challenges of articulation and intelligible communication. This is because many Nigerian languages do not have such a large vowel inventory. For instance, Hausa has a total of 12 vowels (Ellis & Tomlinson 101), while Igbo has eight (Igboanusi 47-48). Yoruba, like Hausa, also has 12 vowels consisting of seven oral and five nasal vowels (Agoke n.p). If such inventories of maximally 12 vowels are compared to English with about 25, then we are looking at an extra 13 vowels of English to acquire by a Nigerian speaker from any of these linguistic backgrounds. But the situation is more complicated than this as some of the vowels of English are absent in Nigerian languages.

The concept of pure vowel sounds refers to the idealised, distinct and unchanging sounds produced when pronouncing individual vowels in isolation. In linguistic terms, pure vowels are also known as monophthongs. These sounds are characterized by a single, steady-state articulation without any significant movement or glide. In English, pure vowel sounds are represented by specific

symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to provide a standardised way of representing and transcribing speech sounds. However, it is important to note that in natural speech, pure vowels are influenced by various factors such as adjacent consonant sounds, stress patterns and regional accents. As a result, the actual pronunciation of vowel sounds can vary significantly, leading to slight modifications or deviations from the pure vowel ideal. The English monophthongs are /i:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, /ɜ:/, /ɪ/, /e/, /æ/, /ɒ/, /ʊ/, /ʌ/ and /ə/.

Errors in the realisation of pure vowel sounds among senior secondary school students can stem from various factors and have a significant impact on their pronunciation and language proficiency. One common source of errors is the influence of regional accents and local languages, as students may carry over phonetic patterns and pronunciation habits from their mother tongues. This can lead to deviations from the Standard English vowel sounds and affect intelligibility (Gbenga 91). Additionally, limited exposure to spoken English outside the classroom, lack of explicit instruction on vowel sounds, and insufficient practice opportunities can contribute to errors. Students may struggle with accurately producing and distinguishing between different vowel sounds, resulting in mispronunciations and difficulties in conveying meaning effectively. This study aims to investigate errors in the realisation of English pure vowel sounds among senior secondary school students in Kaduna South Local Government Area of Kaduna State. Its objectives are:

- i. to identify and classify the types of errors made by the students when producing pure vowels of English.
- ii. to determine the frequency and distribution of such errors.
- iii. to propose effective strategies and interventions for improving the production of English pure vowels among senior secondary school students, particularly in Kaduna South LGA and other parts of Nigeria.

The study is limited to selected senior secondary school students in Kaduna South LGA of Kaduna State. The study focuses specifically on errors made by these students in the realisation of the pure vowels of English; that is, all twelve pure vowels of English. In addition, the study does not cover errors associated with consonant sounds or other aspects of pronunciation beyond pure vowels. Also, students from other regions in Nigeria or educational levels are outside the scope of the study.

The significance of the study essentially lies in its identification of the specific articulation challenges faced by students in Kaduna South Local Government Area in the production of English simple vowels and the common errors associated with such production. This has pedagogical implications in terms of remediation programmes that can be put in place by education stakeholders. For instance, the findings can guide language teachers in designing targeted instructional strategies to improve learners' pronunciation and overall communication skills. It can also serve curriculum developers, policymakers, and school administrators in refining English language curricula, teacher training programmes, and resource allocation for effective language teaching.

Literature Review

Different definitions of the concept of error have been developed from different perspectives. Basically, these definitions contain the same meaning, while the differences lie only in the ways they are formulated. Two definitions of errors are given here. First, an error is a systematic deviation; when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong (Ibrahim 207). Secondly, an error is a systematic deviation from the norms of the language being learned. Errors in various forms are important sources of information about foreign language acquisition, because they demonstrate conclusively that learners do not simply memorise the target language rules and then reproduce them in their utterances. They indicate that learners construct their own rules based on input data and that, in some instances at least, these rules differ from those of the target language learners (Jaja 79). Corder (53) uses the term 'erroneous' to mean those utterances which are either superficially deviant or inappropriate in terms of grammar. He distinguishes between mistakes, lapses and errors. They correspond to what he calls pre-systematic, post-systematic, and systematic errors. Pre-systematic errors are those committed by learners while they are trying to come to grip with a new point. Post-systematic errors occur when learners temporarily forget a point that has been previously understood. Systematic errors are those which occur when learners have formed inaccurate hypotheses about the target language.

Corder (76) states that an objective of the error analysis is to explain errors both linguistically and psychologically in order to help the learners study. Systematic errors should be looked for, so that the rules can be observed. This is a difficult task because learners may be highly inconsistent in their errors. The same errors can be viewed from various perspectives. For example, a learner's native language has only one way of referring to the future time, while the target language has

three ways of referring to the same. Learners gets into problem in trying to arrange the sentence and consequently commit some errors.

Corder (55) classifies errors in terms of the difference between the learners' utterance and the reconstructed version. In this way, errors fall into four categories: omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element; selection of an incorrect element; and disordering of the elements. He includes the linguistic level of the errors under the sub- areas of morphology, syntax and lexicon. Errors according to Corder (62) are breaches of the code of a language. He explains that errors are "deviant structure "or "unacceptable utterance" that signify imperfect knowledge of the linguistic code. This implies that errors are committed by those who are not well grounded in the structure of the language. He differentiates errors from mistakes. According to him, all learners and users of a language are prone to mistakes, which are slips and minor lapses due to fatigue, haste, nervousness or uncertainty, or when attention is divided or when we are absorbed in some linguistic activity. Mistakes are typically random and are readily corrected by the learner when their attention is drawn to them. Errors, on the other hand, are systematic and consistence deviances that reflect a defect in knowledge.

There are many studies on error analysis bordering on sound production in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, such as Nigeria. For example, Asonibare (2025) studied vowel articulation errors in Nigerian secondary students' spoken English. Her research subjects included selected S.S.1 students of Army Day Secondary School, Sobi, Kwara State, Nigeria, with a focus on the articulation of English pure vowels. Data were collected through voice recordings of twenty respondents during informal interviews and analysed using an error analysis approach. The study identified errors in the articulation of five vowels [ə, ʌ, æ, ɜ:, ɔ:] and found that vowel errors were most frequent in [ə] and [ʌ], with substitution and omission as the dominant error types. The findings suggest that the respondents struggle with some vowels of English. While Asonibare's work is similar to this, the linguistic contexts as well as the choice and number of respondents vary. The current study looks at English users in Kaduna state and analyses the 12 pure vowels of English instead of the five. This will broaden Asonibare's findings in terms of generalisations regarding errors associated with English vowels across geographical regions in Nigeria.

Similarly, Adeniyi (2023) assessed English pronunciation errors among senior secondary school students in Kwara State using a descriptive survey design. 12 schools were sampled from the Senior Secondary Schools in the state, while 120 students served as respondents. The major

findings of the study revealed that most of the students 78 (65.0%) committed segmental errors, and a significant difference existed between students' pronunciation errors based on the teacher's gender. While students' gender, school type, parents' educational qualification and school location have no significant difference. While Adeniyi's work focused on general pronunciation errors in Kwara State, the present study is concerned with specific errors of vowel articulation in Kaduna State.

Other studies such as those of Iyere (2015), Okhuosi (2021), and Hassan and Hasan (2022), also examined pronunciation errors but differ from the present investigation in terms of scope, location, methodological approach, choice of respondents, and underlying causes of errors. This study hopes to bridge this gap by investigating the specific challenges faced by students in Kaduna South and identifying the unique factors influencing their errors in the use of English pure vowel sounds.

The study used insights from the Error Analysis (EA) framework, which was developed by Pit Corder. It was later elaborated by Corder and Richards. EA posits that learners' errors are systematic, meaningful windows into the developing interlanguage rather than random "mistakes." Core principles include: (1) errors arise from identifiable sources—interlingual transfer (L1 influence), intralingual/developmental factors (overgeneralization, simplification, faulty rule formation), teaching/orthographic interference, and performance constraints; (2) errors should be studied through a rigorous sequence: data collection → error identification → description (linguistic level) → classification (by type/source) → explanation (causes) → evaluation (gravity/pedagogic priority); (3) errors have diagnostic value (how learners learn) and prognostic value (what to teach next). Within phonology, EA treats recurrent segmental and suprasegmental deviations as rule-governed patterns in the learner's system, not isolated slips, and links them to articulatory, perceptual, and inventory differences between target and source languages.

Applied to the present study, EA guides the entire research design. First, a corpus of students' productions using word lists, minimal pairs, carrier sentences, and short reading passages targeting English monophthongs was compiled. Secondly, tokens were recorded and transcribed with IPA. Next, the errors were identified and classified into types: vowel substitutions, centralisation, tense-lax and length, reduction in unstressed syllables, and hypercorrections or spelling-driven realisations. Then the sources of errors were explained by testing hypotheses about L1/L2 inventory mismatches, grapheme-phoneme interference, teaching input, and prosodic load.

Pedagogically, EA motivates targeted interventions: articulatory instruction with vowel charts, minimal-pair perception–production drills, feedback focused on high-impact contrasts, and re-assessment to confirm change. Thus, EA provides both the theoretical lens (errors as systematic interlanguage evidence) and a practical methodology for diagnosing and improving learners’ realization of English pure vowels in this context.

Research Procedure

The study used a cross-sectional survey method in order to collect data from the sample selected to analyse the errors in the use of English pure vowels. The population of the study comprise all the SSS 2 students of Kaduna South Local Government Area of Kaduna State, from which the sample population was selected. The total population is 3310. The sample of the study consists of 80 SSS 2 students selected randomly from four selected secondary schools, namely Government Day Secondary School Maraban Rido (A), Government Secondary School Sabon Tasha (B), Government Secondary School Television (C), and Government Secondary School Kakuri (D). The simple random sampling technique was employed since it gave every student in the population the chance of being selected. This helped to minimise bias and ensure representativeness of the sample.

The SSS 2 students were selected because they had completed basic English in SSS 1 and were not yet busy with final exams in SSS 3, making them suitable for testing oral English skills. It was assumed that their English Language teachers had taught them oral English over the years. Also, the four schools were selected in view of the ethnic and linguistic heterogeneity of Kaduna South. This mix makes it easier to assess students from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Consent of the various school administrators was sought in collaboration with the English teacher, who is part of this research team, before the tests were administered to the selected students.

A pronunciation test was used as research instrument in collecting data for this investigation. The test instrument is a word list of twelve words in which the 12 pure vowels of English are embedded. Eight of the words are monosyllabic, two are disyllabic, and two trisyllabic. The test was designed to assess the students’ accuracy in producing and recognising each of the pure vowels. The words and the target vowels for each are presented in Table 2. The test was administered to all four selected schools in the local government area within two weeks. Twenty students were selected from each of the four secondary schools.

Each student was given the word list to read aloud while the researchers recorded their production using a phone recorder. It takes an average of 15 seconds at a normal speech rate to read the entire word list. The environment for the data collection was conducive and secluded to minimise distractions and noise. The student's productions were then transcribed after careful auditory perception using A. C. Gimson's IPA model of phonetic transcription. Scoring was done based on the correct or incorrect realisation of each pure vowel by the students. Thus, for the vowel /i:/ produced by 80 students, scoring could be 20/60 for correct and incorrect, respectively. The percentages for correct or incorrect production were calculated based on the scores. So, for 20 correct realisations of the sound /i:/, the percentage is $20/80 \times 100 = 25\%$. These are reflected in Table 2. The three researchers combined their individual skills and experience as English language teacher and researchers to do the rating, while data were analyzed descriptively using simple percentages and tables.

Results

Table 1: Respondents' Degree of Performance

Schools	Degree of Performance by Students		Total
	Able	Not Able	
A	14 (70%)	6 (30%)	20
B	13 (65%)	7 (35%)	20
C	8 (40%)	12 (60%)	20
D	12 (60%)	8 (40%)	20
Total	47 (59%)	33 (41%)	80

Key:

School A: Government Day Secondary School Maraban Rido

School B: Government Secondary School Sabon Tasha

School C: Government Secondary School Television

School D: Government Secondary School Kakuri

Table 1 presents the degree of students' performance across the four schools (A, B, C, and D). Each school had 20 students assessed, contributing equally to the total sample size of 80 students.

The table indicates that School A had the highest percentage of students classified as “able” (70%), followed by School B (65%), School D (60%), and School C with the lowest (40%). Overall, 47 students (59%) across all schools were deemed “able” in their overall value performance, while 33 students (41%) were “not able”. This suggests that while a majority demonstrated acceptable value performance, there remains a significant proportion who did not.

Table 2: Production Test Result

S/No	Words	SBE Pronunciation	Vowel Sounds	Number of Correct Productions	Percentage	Number of Incorrect Productions	Percentage
1	amo <u>e</u> ba	/ə'mi:bə/	/i:/	20	25	60	75
2	C <u>a</u> n	/kæn/	/æ/	32	40	48	60
3	Vill <u>a</u> ge	/ˈvɪlɪdʒ/	/ɪ/	56	70	24	30
4	Wat <u>e</u> r	/ˈwɔ:tə/	/ə/	16	20	64	80
5	cl <u>e</u> rks	/kla:ks/	/a:/	72	90	8	10
6	etiqu <u>e</u> tte	/etiket/	/e/	56	70	24	30
7	cu <u>r</u> se	/kɜ:s/	/ɜ:/	24	30	56	70
8	to <u>m</u> b	/tu:m/	/u:/	36	45	44	55
9	fo <u>r</u> k	/fɔ:k/	/ɔ:/	16	20	64	80
10	Y <u>a</u> cht	/jɒt/	/ɒ/	20	25	60	75
11	co <u>u</u> ld	/kʊd/	/ʊ/	80	100	-	-
12	St <u>u</u> dy	/stʌdi/	/ʌ/	32	40	48	60

From the table above, item 1 on the table indicates that 20 participants representing 25% realised the sound /i:/ correctly in the word “amoeba” /əmi:bə/, while 60 participants representing 75% realised it incorrectly. This shows that most of the participants failed to realise this vowel correctly. In item 2, the table shows that 32 participants representing 40% realised the vowel /æ/ “can” /kæn/ correctly, while 48 participants representing 60% mispronounced it. This shows that most of the participants also failed to realise this vowel correctly. Item 3 indicates that 56 participants representing 70% correctly articulated the short vowel /ɪ/ in “village” /ˈvɪlɪdʒ/, while 24 participants representing 30% incorrectly produced it. This implies that most of the participants

realised the vowel correctly. Item 4 on the table indicates that 16 participants representing 20% correctly realised the schwa sound in the word “water” /wɔ:tə/, while 64 participants representing 80% incorrectly realised it. This shows that most of the participants failed to correctly realise /ə/. Item 5 on the table indicates that 72 participants representing 90% produced the sound /a:/ correctly in the word “clerks” /kla:ks/, while 8 participants representing 10% incorrectly produced it. This implies that this vowel was well articulated by the participants. Item 6 on the table shows that 56 participants representing 70% correctly realised the sound /e/ in the third syllable of the word “etiquette” /etiket/, while 24 participants representing 30% incorrectly realised it. This shows that most of the participants passed the pronunciation test for this sound. Item 7 on the table indicates that 24 participants, representing 30%, produced the vowel /ɜ:/ in the word “curse” /kɜ:s/ correctly, while 56 participants, representing 70%, did not produce it correctly. This implies that most of the participants failed to articulate this vowel correctly. For item 8 on the table, 36 participants representing 45% correctly articulated the long vowel /u:/ in the word “tomb” /tu:m/, while 44 participants representing 55% articulated it incorrectly. This indicates that most of the participants failed to correctly realise this sound.

For item 9, 16 participants representing 20% realised the sound /ɔ:/ correctly in the word “fork” /fɔ:k/, while 64 of them representing 80% realised it incorrectly. This also indicates that most of the participants failed to correctly realise this vowel. Item 10 on the table indicates that 20 participants representing 25% produced the short vowel /ɒ/ in “yacht” /jɒt/ correctly, while 60 of them representing 75% incorrectly produced it. This shows that most of the participants failed to produce this sound correctly. Item 11 on the table indicates that all the 80 participants representing 100% correctly realised the vowel /ʊ/ in “could” /kʊd/, indicating that all the participants passed in the realisation of this sound. For last item in the table, 32 participants representing 40% correctly realised the vowel /ʌ/ in the word “study” /stʌdi/, while 48 of them representing 60% incorrectly realised the sound. This shows that most of the participants failed in the correct realisation of this vowel.

Findings and Discussion

From Table 2, the following findings were made from the assessment of the performance test. It was found that the students had more challenge with eight of the pure vowels of English, namely /i:, æ, ə, ɜ:, ɔ:, u:, ɒ, and ʌ/. The less challenging and problematic pure vowel sounds were /ɪ, a:, e, and ʊ/. 75% of the participants could not pronounce “amoeba” with the long pure vowel sound /i:/

but realised it as /e/. This results in a more open realisation of the sound from its natural close position in native English speech. It was observed that a greater number of the students were not familiar with the letter combinations for this vowel in English. For the tense vowels, the following were problematic as revealed in the test: /i:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/ and /ɜ:/. Most students pronounced the word “fork” as /fɜ:k/ instead of /fɔ:k/. This may be caused by wrong pronunciation inherited from their primary school when they were taught phonics by their teachers. The lax vowels which constituted a problem to them include /æ, ɒ, ʌ and ə/. Considering individual words in which the phonemes are found, most students could not have a correct response to the pronunciation of words like yacht, can, study, and water.

From the findings and based on the objectives of the study, it is seen that the students’ errors in the realisation of English pure vowels derived essentially from intralingual errors. These errors, also referred to as “developmental errors” or “fossilized errors”, arise from incomplete or inaccurate knowledge of the target language. These errors occur within the target language system itself. This situation is responsible for the three error types identified from the analysis, namely vowel substitution, centralisation, and length neutralisation. Vowel substitution errors were attested in following cases: /e/→/i:/ in “amoeba”; /ɔ:/→/ɜ:/ in “curse”; /ɒ/→/u:/ in “tomb”; /ɜ:/→/ɔ:/ in “fork”; /a:/→/ɒ/ in “yacht”; /ɒ/→/ʌ/ in “study”. Errors involving centralisation of vowels include /i:/→/e/ in “amoeba”; /ɔ:/→/ɜ:/ in “curse”; /ɒ/→/ʌ/ in “study”, while errors of length neutralisation include /i:/→/e/ in “amoeba”; /ɒ/→/u:/ in “tomb”. These findings align with the observations of Asonibare (2025) who reported early-stage fossilization as the cause of the recurring, unmonitored patterns observed from the data of her study. She also indicated that vowel pronunciation difficulties among learners are primarily linked to grapho-phonological interference, first-language influence, and inadequate phonetic instruction.

In terms of the frequency and distribution of errors based on the second objective, the results show that substitution errors accounted for the most frequent error types. Also, certain pure vowel sounds, such as /i:/, /u:/, /ʌ/, and /ɒ/, were particularly prone to mispronunciation, while others like /ʊ/ in “could” were generally well-articulated, with 100% accuracy among students. This suggests that familiarity with certain vowel sounds, perhaps due to their higher frequency in everyday English usage, may contribute to better performance, with a corresponding tendency of poor performance in less frequent or absent vowels. This is consistent with Usoro’s (2023) findings,

who suggested that a reason for his respondents' poor performance in realising some pure English vowels is the absence of such vowels in their L₁.

Furthermore, the results show that errors regarding pure vowel pronunciation significantly impacted students' communication proficiency, which could lead to misunderstanding and reduced clarity in speech. For instance, mispronouncing “curse” /kɜ:s/ as /kɔ:s/, “tomb” /tu:m/ as /tɔm/, or “fork” /fɔ:k/ as /fɜ:k/ could change the meaning of words entirely or cause listeners to misinterpret the speaker's intent. This finding aligns with that of Usoro (2023), who suggested that the result of mispronunciation is distortion of information, with adverse implications for international communication. Based on the error analysis provision, the data from this study underscore the need for targeted pronunciation instruction that addresses these vowel sound challenges to enhance the overall communicative competence of not just the senior secondary school students in Kaduna South LGA but also other learners of English across different educational levels in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that senior secondary school 2 students in Kaduna South LGA face significant challenges in producing English pure vowels like /i:, æ, ə, ɜ:, ɔ:, u:, ɒ, and ʌ/ due largely to insufficient oral English training. It was observed through the investigation process that the difficulties stem from delayed or absent foundational pronunciation instruction at the primary school level, leading to persistent articulation errors and generally poor communication in the use of some English pure vowels.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Students should be taught correct pronunciation of English vowels as a second language at an appropriate time before late adolescence. This is because it is difficult to learn pronunciation effectively at a later stage in life.
- ii. More attention should be paid to those vowels which are not present in most Nigerian languages, like /ɜ:, ʌ, and ə/. For instance, the schwa vowel /ə / which is rarely used in Nigerian spoken English should be critically taught. The difference in length should be emphasised.

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