

Original Paper

Prospects and Constraints of Teaching and Learning Oral English in Senior Secondary Schools in Nigeria: A Case Study of Selected Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This paper investigates the prospects and constraints in the teaching and learning of Oral English at the Senior Secondary School level in Nigeria, using selected secondary schools as case study. Oral English is a discrete aspect of the curriculum of English studies at the secondary school level of education in Nigeria. In Oral English, students are taught segmental and suprasegmental sounds of English RP (Received Pronunciation). Being non-native speakers of English, Senior Secondary School students/SSCE candidates are expected to be conscious of English sounds that are different from those in their native languages. One of the goals of teaching Oral English at the SSCE level of secondary school education in Nigeria is to address the problem of negative transfer of the phonological features of mother tongue (MT) into the phonological corpora of second language (L2), which is English (in the case of Nigeria). The theoretical frameworks of this study are Interference and Intraference theories. The study concludes that although proficiency in English guarantees learners the success they desire in SSCE and prepares them for career needs, the Oral English component of SSCE is not effectively taught owing to some factors which include teacher-incompetence and lack of language laboratories. Consequently, failure persists in the Oral English component of the SSCE, and because it is part of the English Language paper, overall performance in the subject declines.

Keywords

SSCE, secondary school, English studies, phonology, Oral English, teaching, learning

1. Introduction

The Senior Secondary School level of education in Nigeria comprises SS 1-SS 3. As a discrete aspect of the SSCE English Language curriculum, Oral English is very significant to an ESL learner of English.

The skills to be learned have immediate and remote relevance to learners. Failure rate in English Language is not unconnected with poor performance in Test of Orals which is usually Paper 3. This study is significant because at a time when failure rate in English Language raises concern, the study brings to the fore, critical perspectives on the prospects and constraints of teaching and learning Oral English in multilingual Nigeria, where English is an Official Language. In this study, the term “Spoken English” is used interchangeably with the term “Oral English”. For several decades, Oral English is being taught as a crucial aspect of English studies in Nigerian secondary schools. Recurring failure rates in Test of Orals or English Language implies that there is need to re-examine the teaching methods. Scholars who contend for better teaching of English Language in formal education in Nigeria hinge on the fact that the subject functions immensely in the preset and future endeavours of learners. Indeed, investments in the teaching and learning of the subject cannot be too much in an ESL context like Nigeria. Given the fact that communication is useful at individual and collective levels, research works on the teaching and learning of Oral English at the Senior Secondary School level is timely and germane.

2. Phonology

As a field of linguistics, phonology is concerned with the study of the functions of sounds, and the rules that govern how such sounds (phonemes) are patterned in isolated words and in linguistic stretches (connected speech). Ikekeonwu (1996) defines phonology as “the branch of linguistics which concerns itself with the study of speech sounds already identified and studied, to establish their function and relations on a given language.” According to Akmajian, Demers, Farmer and Harnish (2001:109), phonology is “the subfield of linguistics that studies the structure and systematic patterning of sounds in human language.” See Czaykowska-Hogins and Dobrovolsky (2004, pp. 49-97) who provide useful tips on the meaning and scope of phonology. The discrete sounds of human languages are harmonized and organized as a regular linguistic system through grammar-related rules. The processes capture what is known as phonology. The phoneme is a core concept in phonology. It is either segmental (vowels and consonants) or suprasegmental (stress, tone, intonation pitch, rhythm, etc.).

2.1 Segmental Phonology

2.1.1 Vowel

Characteristically, a vowel is articulated with no instance of air obstruction in the mouth (oral cavity). This will suffice as a definition of all vowels. In terms of classification, a vowel can be: monophthong, diphthong or triphthong. While monophthongs do not necessitate gliding of the articulators, the production of diphthongs and triphthongs necessitates gliding. The literature of English phonetics and phonology acknowledge that there are twelve pure vowels in English RP. In this regard, Roach (2000) is instructive as it captures the vowel and consonant charts of English RP.¹

2.1.2 Consonant

In the articulation of the consonant sounds of English RP, friction (either partial or complete) at some points in the mouth results in the obstruction of airstream. Consonants can be lenis (voiced consonants)

or fortis (voiceless consonants). Consonants are described in terms of place of articulation (location of the mouth where complete or partial friction occurs during the production of consonants: upper lips, teeth, palate, uvula, etc.); and manner of interference (sound qualities produced discretely through the modification of airstream: nasal, stop, fricative, affricate, approximant, flap or trill).²

2.2 Suprasegmental Phonology

The properties of sounds beyond the segment, is known as “suprasegmental phonology” Bussman (1996, p. 115) reports that “‘suprasegmental’ is a term coined by American Structuralists for distinctive features that unlike a phoneme, cannot be segmented individually from linguistic utterances, such as differences in juncture, stress, pitch, accent, prosody, intonation, syllable breaks.” In addition, Jones (2006, p. 388) defines supraegmental phonology as “the study of stress, rhythm and intonation.”

2.2.1 Stress in English RP

Stress is the degree of prominence which a syllable receives. It is generally used to denote the total perceived pitch, loudness and length of an utterance. In English, stressed vowels produce higher pitches, and this implies that they are usually longer and louder than vowels that are not stressed. Davenport and Hannahs (2000, p. 244) define stress as “a measure of prominence associated with the syllable.” According to Jones (1972), stress is “the degree of force with which a speaker pronounces a word or a syllable.”

Types of stress are as follows:

- a.) Primary stress: It is signified with a superscript stroke as in “^lrocky”;
- b.) Secondary stress: It is marked with a subscript stroke as in “_lcruci^lfixion”; and
- c.) Weak stress: It is unmarked in most pronunciation dictionaries.

Some rules for placing stress on English words are listed below:

- a.) Every English word has its fixed stress pattern;
- b.) The stress patterns of grammatical words are such that primary stress is absent in connected speech. However, this is not applicable to cases where stress is placed on them for the purpose of contrast;
- c.) Prominent syllables do not appear in immediate succession as in the words “_loppo^lr^ltunity” and “con_lside^lration”;
- d.) In some di-syllabic words, two syllables receive primary stress as in “^lblue^lprint”, “^lout^lgrow”, “^lJu^lly” and “^lcri^lsis”. But one can be replaced by a secondary stress;
- e.) Based on the notion of “fixed stress pattern”, a di-syllabic English word may have primary stress either on the first syllable or on the second.
- f.) For the purpose of changing the word class (part of speech) of a word, there can be stress shifting. For example, while “^lexport” is a noun, “ex^lport” is a verb.

2.2.2 Tone and Intonation in English RP

A tone is not an absolute speech; it is relative. In connected speech, a tone is either “high” or “low” in relation to nearby pitches.

Intonation refers to the rising and falling of voice pitches during speech production. Types of intonation include: Tune I (falling tune) represented by the symbol \; and Tune II (rising tune) represented by the symbol /. The falling tune may be high-falling or low-falling while the rising tune may be full-rising or half-rising. The differences are represented with reduced length of the symbols. Pitch contours are numerous noticeable, although the two basic tunes (Tune I and Tune II) are satisfactory in the analysis of most spoken communication.

Below are some rules for using intonation on linguistic stretches:

- a.) The falling tune (Tune I) appears at the end of exclamations, although it may be used with some degree of length;
- b.) The falling tune (Tune I) ends commands and requests;
- c.) The rising tune (Tune II) is used to indicate pauses in sentences as in the positions of the commas in written texts;
- d.) A statement ends with a falling tune (Tune I);
- e.) A question ends with a rising tune (Tune II);
- f.) The rising tune (Tune II) is used in question tags; and
- g.) The rising tune (Tune II) is used for listing items in linguistic stretches.

Akere (1987, pp. 22-23) presents the following tips as functions of intonation:

- i.) Intonation helps in delimitating the units of information within an utterance;
- ii.) It serves to structure the information content of a sentence;
- iii.) It serves to locate the center of intonation within an information unit;
- iv.) It serves to determine the communicative functions of different grammatical types of a sentence e.g. request, command, or a statement;
- v.) It is used to convey attitudinal meanings e.g. surprise, annoyance, etc.
- v.) It helps to characterize a particular style or a variety of speech, e.g. baby talk, sermon, etc.

2.2.3 Rhythm in English RP

The time-based distribution of speech production is referred to as rhythm. According to Osisanwo (1986), speech rhythm is “a regular succession of one type of sound feature or the other used in achieving melody and sometimes, meaning in a human language.” Rhythm is the result of different stress placement in words and linguistic stretches – secondary and primary stress. Pike (1945) posits that “the rhythm of a language is determined by how chest-pulses and stress-pulses recur and their mode of succession and coordination.” To explain how chest-pulses produce rhythm, Pike (ibid.) submits that there are two main kinds of speech rhythm: stress-timed and syllable-timed. In syllable-timed rhythm, “the periodic recurrence of movement is supplied by the syllable producing the chest-pulses.”

3. Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Frameworks

Interference and Intraference theories are the two theoretical frameworks of this study. They are relevant to the study in the sense that the points of divergence or convergence in the phonological features of L1 (mother tongue) and L2 (English) can facilitate the teaching and learning of discrete aspects of language, including the phonological aspect.

3.1.1 Interference Theory

Omowumi Bode Steve Ekundayo (2018, pp. 66-68) presents Interference Theory:

Interference is associated with the concepts of Contrastive Analysis and Language Transfer which are based on the assumptions that second language learners have the tendency of transferring the features of their native and/or first language to their second language utterances ... Another term for interference is negative transfer, which manifests at all the levels of linguistic organization. The most common in ESL are the phonological types in which the normative speakers impose the fossilized phonological system of their native languages on their second language, at the segmental and suprasegmental levels, which makes non-native Nigerian English accent sounds different from native English accents, such as the Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American English (GAmE)...

3.1.2 Intraference Theory

Omowumi Bode Steve Ekundayo (Ibid, pp. 66-68) comments on intraference:

The application of the word intraference may be traced to several independent outstanding works separated by time and long distances: (Barry Hale www.barryhale.intraferencemirrors; William Croft 2000; 2003; and Ekundayo's 2006, 2014). Croft (2000) says that "different elements of the same language can interfere with each other if they share enough linguistic substance", and the intraference occurs when language items are affected by different dialects, sociolinguistic variants or other structures of the same language ... According to Ekundayo (2000), intraference is "the habit of transferring the rules and dynamics of a language from a section where they have been established and where they acceptably operate to another section within the language where they hitherto used not to operate. Since such a transfer is within the language, it is better tagged intraference, which is the reverse of interference...

3.2 Methodology

To ascertain the phenomena that this study investigates, 50 copies of questionnaires are administered to SSCE students and their teachers from private and government-owned secondary schools in Nigeria. The responses to questionnaire are integrated into the Results and Discussion section, drawing insights from the literature of phonology and language pedagogy. The questionnaires contain seven statements. Each statement is provided with a five-point scale: Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA), Disagree (D), Strongly

Disagree (SD) and No Response (NR). Figures and percentages are used in the presentation and analysis of responses to questionnaire items.

4. Results and Discussion

The table below reveals responses to items 1-7:

Table 1. Table of Responses to Questionnaire

S/No.	Question	Scale, Figure and Percentage	Scale, Figure and Percentage	Scale, Figure and Percentage	Scale, Figure and Percentage	Scale, Figure and Percentage
		A	SA	D	SD	NR
1.	You are more competent in spoken English than in written English.	28=56%	2=4%	18=36%	2=4%	0=0%
2.	Your mother tongue (MT) negatively affects your performance in spoken English.	40=80%	7=14%	1=2%	1=2%	1=2%
3.	Your school does not prohibit the speaking of vernacular.	2=4%	1=2%	35=70%	10=20%	2=4%
4.	Your performance in the suprasegmental features of English is better than your performance in the segmental	1=2%	1=2%	42=84%	2=4%	4=8%

	features of English.					
5.	You are encouraged to speak English in your home	4=8%%	5=10%	36=72%	5=10%	0=0%
6.	Your school does not use laboratory for teaching and learning Oral English.	38=46%	5=10%	4=8%	2=4%	1=2%
7.	Your Oral English teacher is competent in teaching the Oral English component of English Studies.	20=40%	3=6%	12=24%	1=2%	14=28%

Respondents in the affirmative position in Item 1 are 30 (A=28, SA=2). It should be noted that some of the respondents to this item hold the wrong view that spoken English is simply the good command of English vocabulary rather than the correct knowledge and use of speech sounds (segmental and suprasegmental phonemes), which are the focus of the SSCE curriculum in Oral English. Unless such students learn speech sounds through classroom intervention, they may not pass the Oral English component of the SSCE. If those who do not claim that they are more competent in spoken English than in written English are generated from scale D (Disagree (36%)) and scale SD (Strongly Disagree (4%)), then there is still a significant number of respondents claiming that they do not have sufficient knowledge or competence in spoken English. Thus, the effective teaching and learning of Oral English is crucial for candidates' success in Oral English at the SSCE level. Noting that some of the respondents to this item

are teachers, this study posits that the competence level of teachers of Oral English may not be satisfactory to guarantee good performance and continued success of candidates in the examination.

Item 2 shows that majority of the respondents agree that their mother tongues negatively affect their performance in Oral English. Points of divergence between L2 and L1 in phonological features cause this situation. Areas of convergence between the former and the latter in terms of phonological features facilitate the teaching of Oral English at the SSCE level; in the process of speech production, sound segments can be transferred from MT into L2. This can be the case when speech sounds are produced in isolation and in connected speech. While 40% of the respondents agree that their mother tongues negatively affect their performance in Oral English, 14% strongly agree with the statement. This gives a significant figure (47 (94%)). Thus, there is the need to ensure that the SSCE curriculum for Oral English is able to adequately address the goals of teaching in terms of ESL learner-needs. Points of divergence between MT and English should be explored for pedagogical purpose. This is the thrust of contrastive studies in linguistics. The insignificant figures shown in scales D, SD and NR (as responses) imply that students' poor performance in Oral English examination is indeed, not incidental.

In Item 3, only 2 (4%) of respondents agree that their schools do not prohibit the speaking of vernaculars. The implication of this is that many school authorities hold the view that English is useful in the career needs of students in Nigeria, irrespective of their levels. In this regard, responses to Item 3 indicate that many respondents (D=70%; SD=20%) believe that speaking English is necessary in an ESL context. The significance of English in Nigeria's educational system is amplified by the fact that even though Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are taught at the SSCE level, the speaking of vernaculars is still prohibited in schools, particularly in private schools. By encouraging students to communicate in English, they can gradually overcome some of the points of divergence in the phonological features of MT and English, thus making the pedagogical process more productive.

Only 4% of respondents are in the affirmative position concerning Item 4 (A=2%; SA=2%). Therefore, most of the respondents hold the view that they are better in the articulation of the segmental features of English than in the articulation of the suprasegmental features of the language. Scholars acknowledge that in an ESL context, the prosodic features of English (suprasegmental phonology) constitute greater problem because non-native speakers of English had already internalized non-English sound patterns above the segment. As long as 4 (8%) of the respondents did not respond to Item 4 (NR), it is possible that they also have the notion that the suprasegmental features of English constitute major difficulty to them. Good classroom intervention can address ESL-induced learner-difficulties in suprasegmental phonology. As speakers of Nigerian English (NE), students of secondary schools in Nigeria have the speaking habit of stressing virtually all syllables in words. The teacher has the crucial task of helping such students overcome the error in preparation for the SSCE in English Language. Linguists contend that the error is caused by the fact that many Nigerian languages have only the tonic syllable. Scholars note that in terms of the suprasegmental features of English, Nigerian English is neither stable nor rule-moderated, resulting in lack of understanding in cases of words produced in isolation. Eka (2000) asserts

that “‘innovative placement’ and ‘near-native stress placement’ inform how Nigerians stress words.” The fact that the prosody of Nigerian English and mother tongues diverge significantly from RP implies that teachers have herculean task to perform in the teaching and learning of Oral English at the SSCE level. Kujore (1985) cited in Akinjobi (2002, p. 32) comments on stress assignment rules of Nigerian English:

- a. Primary stress falls on the first syllable of verbs with -ess, -ate, -bit, -fly, -ize, -yse, -ish, -ment;
- b. Stress is assigned on penultimate syllables on nouns ending with -er, -or, -sphere, etc.;
- c. Certain words that end with -ive, -tory and -ture (i.e. nouns and adjectives are assigned penultimate stress;
- d. Stress pattern reversal is in words like “acute”, “cabal”, “cassette”, where stress is placed on the second syllable rather than on the first syllable in Standard English.

In Item 5, respondents in the non-affirmative position are 41 (D=36 (72%); SD=5 (10%)). Since 41 out of 50 respondents indicate that they are not encouraged to speak English at home, poor performance in Oral English as well as high failure rate in English Language in general, is not unthinkable. Parents’ strong protection of mother tongues is a reason for discouraging their children from speaking English at home, even though such parents know the importance of the language in their children’s careers. The literature of sociolinguistics acknowledges that ethnocentric attitude is one of the language attitudes that do not promote the spread of English in an ESL (English as Second Language) context. It is a truism that so long as parents are the sponsors of their children’s education, they remain strong determining factors in the teaching and learning of Oral English at the SSCE level.

Responses to Item 6 are instructive: A=46%, SA=10%, D=8%, SD=4% and NR=2%. These results put those in the affirmative position at 56%, and those in the non-affirmative position at 12%. This implies that most secondary schools in the country do not use language laboratory for teaching SSCE Oral English (Test of Orals). Although the English language is the focus of this study, the absence of language laboratory in such schools means that the teaching and learning of the phonological features of other SSCE subjects such as Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo and French is not satisfactory in such schools. It is worthy of note that schools that have language laboratories are mostly the private schools. Indeed, language laboratory is necessary for effective teaching and learning of Oral English at the SSCE level. In the language laboratory, a wide range of activities can be used by an experienced teacher to facilitate the teaching and learning of segmental and suprasegmental phonemes. Hangyu Zhang (2020, p. 1) submits that “considerable attention has been paid to a variety of classroom activities in an English speaking class ... However, there has been evidence showing that different situations in classroom activities exert various effects on learners’ English speaking proficiency ... This fact indicates that both positive and negative effects can be made according to types and effects of classroom exercises ... communicative activities such as discussion, problem-solving and role play can develop students’ English speaking proficiency ... some oral activities in EFL classes such as some drill activities possibly cause the low

English speaking proficiency for students...” A good lesson in spoken English is carefully and properly planned. In such lessons, classroom activities are skills-revealing. Hangyu Zhang (ibid) reports that “... a system of exercises for teaching a foreign language should be understood as a set of types and kinds of exercises that are related to each other by purpose, material, and method of their implementation...” The absence of language laboratory or functioning language laboratory contributes to failure. School authorities should do everything possible to provide language laboratories for the teaching and learning of Oral English. The fact that only few respondents are on the non-affirmative position concerning Item 6 (12% as in D and SD) makes it difficult to ascertain that failure rates in SSCE Oral will decline in the nearest future.

Item 7 shows responses that raise concern because 14 (28%) of the respondents do not declare their ratings concerning teacher-competence in Oral English. In ESL context, teacher-competence is crucial for teaching standard variety of English at the phonological level, given the fact that non-native speakers of English are not used to the sound patterns of L2 (English). The respondents who disagree that their Oral English teacher is not competent in teaching it are not too few to raise concern (12 respondents); in this regard, 26% of respondents are not satisfied with Oral English teachers’ handling of the curriculum that prepares them for SSCE in Oral English. This implies that there should be appropriate intervention by different stakeholders. Teacher-capacity-building via trainings, provision of facilities and incentives can be helpful. If more than half of those who did not respond to Item 7 are merged with responses to scales D and SD (12 and 1 respectively), then a significant percentage of those who disagree that their teachers are competent in teaching the Oral English component of the SSCE English Language will rise significantly.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Through legislation, English became Nigeria’s Official Language and medium of instruction in schools. Thereafter, language policies remain fundamental in the teaching and learning of English Language and its discrete components in multilingual Nigeria. See Dada (2000) for insights on language policy and planning in Nigeria. Commenting on the case of Literature-in-English, Emmanuel Maurice Ekah and Idorenyin T. Ukot (2011, p. 55) notes that “the actual reason why students fail in public examinations like NECO and WASCE in English and literature is the fact that the teaching of literature in English has been neglected and ignored by teachers and students unwillingness to buy prescribed texts for themselves ... As a result, literature which should complement English language teaching is not taught effectively ... the recent approaches to language teaching have ignored literature teaching. Moreover, literature approaches are now subsumed under approaches to language learning, so these have negative effects on literature and language teaching and learning. Merging these two important subjects together therefore confuses the teachers of both subjects ...” The study concludes that despite the prospects of competence in English, different factors are responsible for the lingering poor teaching, learning and failure of SSCE candidates in Oral English. By way of recommendations, the study opines as follows:

- i. The periods for teaching and learning Oral English in SSCE should be increased on the timetables.
- ii. Participatory teaching should be encouraged. In this regard, students should be actively involved in classroom tasks and activities.
- iii. The curriculum of Spoken English should be revised periodically to adequately capture the skills to be learned.
- iv. Facilities (human and material resources) should be provided to teach SSCE Test of Orals effectively. These include the provision of competent teachers, textbooks, language laboratory equipments and standard classrooms.

Notes

Note 1. However, below is the chart of the English IPA Vowels (2005):

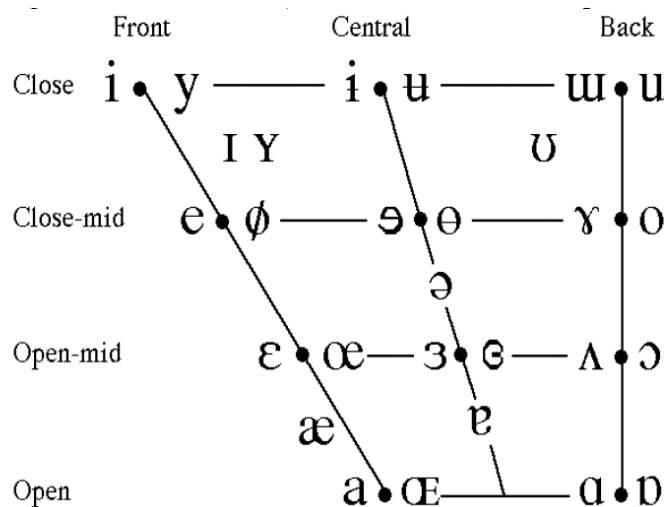


Figure 1. Vowel Chart of English

Note 2. The (2015 version) of the IPA consonant chart (cf. Odugbo 2017, p. 39) is presented below:

CONSONANTS (PULMONIC)												
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolar	Retroflex	Palatal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngeal	Glottal	
Plosive	p b			t d		ʈ ɖ	c ɟ	k ɡ	q ɢ		ʔ	
Nasal	m	ɱ		n		ɳ	ɲ	ŋ	ɴ			
Trill	ʙ			r					ʀ			
Tap or Flap				ɾ		ɽ						
Fricative	ɸ β	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ	ʂ ʐ	ç ʝ	x ɣ	χ ʁ	ħ ʕ	h ɦ	
Lateral fricative				ɬ ɮ								
Approximant		ʋ		ɹ		ɻ	j	ɰ				
Lateral approximant				l		ɭ	ʎ	ʟ				

Where symbols appear in pairs, the one to the right represents a voiced consonant. Shaded areas denote articulations judged impossible.

Figure 2. Consonant Chart of English RP

Note 3. The consonants are described as follows:

- /p/ – voiceless bilabial plosive
- /b/ – voiced bilabial plosive
- /t/ – voiceless alveolar plosive
- /d/ – voiced alveolar plosive
- /k/ – voiceless velar plosive
- /g/ – voiced velar plosive
- /f/ – voiceless labiodental fricative
- /v/ – voiced labiodental fricative
- /θ/ – voiceless dental fricative
- /ð/ – voiced dental fricative
- /s/ – voiceless alveolar fricative
- /z/ – voiced alveolar fricative
- /ʃ/ – voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
- /ʒ/ – voiced palato-alveolar fricative
- /h/ – voiceless glottal fricative
- /m/ – voiced bilabial nasal
- /n/ – voiced alveolar nasal
- /ŋ/ – voiced velar nasal
- /tʃ/ – voiceless palato-alveolar affricate
- /dʒ/ – voiced palato-alveolar affricate
- /w/ – voiced bilabial semi-vowel
- /j/ – voiced palatal semi-vowel

/r/ – voiced alveolar roll

/l/ – voiced alveolar lateral

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Appendixes

Appendix 1

Dear Respondent,

I am conducting a research to investigate the prospects and constraints in the teaching and learning of Oral English at the SSCE level of secondary school education in Nigeria, using selected Nigerian private and government-owned secondary schools.

Your correct responses to the questions in this questionnaire will not only be treated confidentially, but will also be very useful in conducting the research.

Abdullahi Sani, PhD

Researcher

Appendix 2

SECTION A

Preliminary Information

Please tick (/) in the boxes as appropriate

(i.) Sex: Male (); Female ()

(ii.) Age: 14-18 years (); 18-22 years (); above 22 years ()

(iii.) Category of Institution (Private or Government-owned):

iv.) Name of Institution:

SECTION B

Statements of Questionnaire

Each statement is provided with a five-point scale: Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA), Disagree (D), Strongly Disagree (SD) and No Response (NR).