A Contrastive Study of Aspects of the Segmental Phonology of Nigerian Pidgin English and Standard English

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Abstract

This study examines the segmental phonology of NPE and SE for the purpose of Contrastive Analysis. The idea is to find out how the language habits of NPE, LI has affected the study of SE, L2. It was found out that even though the language habits of L1 impede the production of L2, L2 needs to be properly studied as other errors are out of ignorance.

INTRODUCTION
Contrastive Analysis

Charles C. Fries in his foreword to Robert Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures (1957) says that there is a new approach to foreign language learning which shifts the focus of first attention from methods and techniques to finding the special problems arising out of efforts to develop a new set of language habits against a background of different native language habits. A child in learning his native language has learned not only to attend to the particular contrasts that function as signals in that language; he has learned to ignore all those features that do not so function. He has developed a special set of "blind spots" that prevent him from responding to features that do not constitute the contrastive signals of his native language. He goes further to say that the basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special "set" created by the first language habits.

In this way, Charles C. Fries sets the stage for Robert Lado's pioneering work in Contrastive Linguistics: Linguistics Across Cultures. Lado (1957:2) assumes that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements similar to his native language will be easy, while those that are not will be difficult. The teacher who has taken time to make a comparison is better placed to appreciate the problem of the learner and adapt his teaching accordingly. He says that if these assumptions are true, then the foreign language teacher should not wonder why should go through the painful business of comparing languages.

Although this opinion has been variously criticized, it forms the framework of contrastive analysis as we know it today.

James (1980:1) observes that linguists have approached the study of linguistics either comparatively or in isolation. The comparativist assumes that while every language has its peculiarity, languages do have enough in common for classification into types. This approach is called linguistic typology and enables us to classify language as synthetic, analytic, tone and so on. Those who study language in isolation, are interested in the 'immanent genius of the particular language which makes it unlike any other language and endows its speakers with a psychic and cognitive uniqueness".

While holding the view that Contrastive Analysis is interested in both the isolationist and comparative viewpoints, the concept is more interested in the differences between languages than the similarities. He, therefore, sees Contrastive Analysis as a hybrid linguistic enterprise aimed at producing inverted (i.e Contrastive, not comparative) two-valued typologies (a CA is always concerned with a pair of languages), and founded on the assumption that languages can be compared.

James (1980:8) concludes by trying to locate the humble beginnings of CA. While recognizing Di Pietro's view of an early example of CA in C.H. Grandgent's book on the German and English sound systems, published in 1892, he suggests that modern contrastive analysis started with Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures which had its inspiration from Weinreich's (1953) and Haugen's (1956) books on the linguistic integration of immigrants to the USA.

Nickel (1971:2) says that contrastive linguistics compares languages with the utilitarian aim of improving the methods and results of language teaching. Unlike Carl James, he traces the origin of modern Contrastive Linguistics to the Publication in 1957 of Robert Lado' s Linguistics Across Cultures.

Kohler (1971:83) says contrastive linguistics produces separate detailed phonological and syntactic analyses of different languages according to the principles of structural linguistics and to show up the differences and similarities by comparing results, the purpose is for their application in language teaching.

Igboanusi (2000:189) tells us that Contrastive Linguistics arose from the need to tackle the problem of mother-tongue interference. In doing a contrastive analysis, we take aspects of the languages involved (Syntax, lexis, phonology) and find out in what areas they are similar or different with a view to predicting difficulties which the learner of the second language is likely to encounter.

The issues in this study arise from the phonological problems encountered by the Nigerian Pidgin English speaker trying to learn the phonology of Standard English (RP). The special set of "blind spots" that prevent the proper learning of the phonology of English will be identified. As Charles C. Fries identifies in his foreword to Lado (1957), we shall determine whether the basic problems arise from essential difficulties in English phonology or by the special "set" created by the habits of Nigerian Pidgin English phonology.

The study is based on the pidgin spoken in the Warri/Sapele axis of the Niger Delta in Nigeria where the language is said to have creolized.

Nigerian Pidgin English

Pidgins all over the world arise from contact situations. They have evolved from situations where there is a dire and urgent need to communicate for a purpose like trade. In desperation, both groups make an imperfect attempt at communicating in one of the languages, leading to the development of a rudimentary contact speech — form (Elugbe and Omamor, 1991 2).

It is usually supported with heavy gesticulation. Pidgins have thus been variously described as 'contact', 'trade', 'auxiliary', 'debased', 'jargonized', 'rudimentary' 'minimum', 'makeshift' and so on. Elugbe and Omamor opine that this can only be true of the initial stages of the development of pidgin. This contrasts with Agheyisi (1971), who sees West African Pidgin as simplified English with a lot of lexical gaps filled by English. West African Pidgin is described as impoverished. With time, the linguistic form stabilizes and becomes a language of its own. When it goes further than this to become the first language of a group, it is said to have creolized.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991:3) Citing Ryder (1969:24) tell us that the Portuguese were the earliest trading partners with Nigeria starting from 1469. Some form of Portuguese Pidgin must have developed. This pidgin must have been short lived with the ousting of the Portuguese by other European interest groups: the French, the Dutch and English.

Among these groups, British trade contact which started from the beginning of the l7th century endured. The result was the development of an English based pidgin along the coast.

The language became a lingua franca because of multiethnicity in the Niger Delta. Urbanization and the need for multiethnic groups to interact in places like barracks led to transporting the language inland. The result is that we now have varieties of pidgin based roughly on ethnic group and geographical location while in its birthplace it has creolized in areas like Warn and Sapele.

Nigerian Pidgin thus comprises a base language - English which has been and continues to be modified by indigenous languages which may be termed sub-strates (Mafeni, 1971:97).

The Segmental Phonology of Nigerian Pidgin English

Nigerian Pidgin English (henceforth NPE) is an evolving language. The first scientific study of NPE phonology as recognized by scholars like Elugbe and Omamor (1991) is the pioneering work of Mafeni (1971). The segmental phonology used here is thus based on insights from Mafeni (1971) and Elugbe and Omamor (1991).

Consonants

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) using the 'Delta area' of Bendel State, now Delta State, identify 25 consonants used in a typical variety from this area.

	m	n			(ɲ)	ŋ			(ŋᵂ)
p	b	t	d	(tʃ)	dʒ	k	g		kp	gb
f	v	s	z		ʒ				
			ɪ						
			ɹ			j			w h

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) say that the consonants in parenthesis are of doubtful status. They establish a concurrence with Mafeni (1971) that /ʒ/occurs only in varieties where there is interference from standard English and where depidginization is already taking place. Nigerian pidgin words such as /mɛʃ∂/ 'measure' may be pronounced /mɛʒɔ/ by some speakers.

The sound /tʃ/ occurs, according to them, in contexts which they do not consider as involving interference from Standard English. A word like /ʃɔp/ 'eat' according to Elugbe and Omamor would be pronounced /tʃɔp/, by some speakers including themselves. They go further to say that it is an acceptable alternative to (ʃ). There is dialectal or idiolectal variation in the use of /tʃ/and/ʃ/, which is however, restricted to a few items. Most items have ʃ. For example, nobody will say /tʃu/ for /ʃu/ though /tʃɑtʃ/ and /ʃɔʃ/ will be heard for 'church'. This use of /tʃ/ by some speakers is not necessarily tied to the spelling of the English source for those items. Words such as /tʃukutʃúkú/ 'thorns' which have not originated from English still allow /ʃukuʃúkú/ as an alternative.

One would like to observe that the phoneme /ʒ/ occurs in pronunciations that require /dʒ/ as in 'judge'

and /'gentle', which are often pronounced /ʒɔʒ/ and '/ʒɛntul/ respectively. This is among typical speakers of Nigerian Pidgin English.

One would, also like to say that while it is correct to say that /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ are acceptable alternatives for 'chair' and 'church' it is difficult to deny the influence of negative transfer from English by a particular category of speakers. The use of /tʃ/ can be explained if one uses the educational parameter to classify speakers of Nigerian Pidgin. Those who would use /tʃ/ in those contexts are those with first degrees and above. Among undergraduates, we have a mix of users and non-users. In summary, While one agrees with Elugbe and Omamor that /ʃ / is independently Nigerian Pidgin, it should also be stated that the use of /tʃ/ is by an educated class influenced by Standard English. The authors have even categorized themselves here.

The Sound, /ɲ/ occurs in words like 'buttocks'/ɲaʃ / 'yam' / ɲam/, 'young' /ɲɔŋg/. This puritanical view point according to Elugbe and Omamor (1991) is a result of the rule by which an approximant is nasalized if a nasal occurs anywhere in the same word. If this rule is not applied, we have alternatives like /jaʃ/, /jam/ and /jɔŋg/ respectively.

One agrees with this view point but would like to add that /ʃ/ and /j/ are freely interchanged in the Delta State variety of Nigerian Pidgin English.

The sound ŋw which arises from /w/ becoming nasal in the environment of a nasal as in 'one'/ŋwa/, 'win'/ŋwi/ and 'want' /ŋw̃ɔnt/ where the more common alternatives according to Elugbe and Omamor (1991) could be /wan/ etc. They go further to say that some speakers simply nasalize /j/ and /w/ in these environments, giving /jãʃ/, /jam/ /w̃a/, /w̃ɔnt/ e.t.c.

Other nasalized sounds are given: /l/ becomes ĩ in the environment of nasal vowels and / h/ become /˜h/. For those who use an approximant /r/, nasalization occurs in environments such as cause nasalization of /j/ and /w/ /rɔn/ 'run would be pronounced /r̃vɔ/

From the foregoing, it would have been observed that the consonants regarded as doubtful are used in certain varieties and under certain circumstances of Nigerian Pidgin English.

Vowel Phonemes of NPE

Mafeni (1971) identifies seven vowel phonemes of NPE:/i,e,ɛ,a,ɔ,o,u/. He says that vowel length is not significant.

He illustrates with the following vowel system and orthographic symbols:

Vowel Phonemes	Phonemic	Orthographic	English Equivalent
i	/bít/	bít	beat
e	/pén/	pén	pain
ɛ	/bɛt /	bét	bet
a	/hát/	hát	heart
ɔ	/hɔt/	hót	hot
o	/tót/	tót	carry
u	/fút/	fút	foot

He does not treat diphthongs in detail, saying that phonetic diphthongs are possible, but that phonemically, they are more conveniently treated as sequences of vowel.

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) identify seven pure /ieɛaɔou/ vowels. They state that as in most languages with only seven oral vowels in Nigeria, the qualities of the non-open vowels are very similar to those of cardinal vowels (CV) 1-3 and 6-8.

NP	í	is similar to	CV 1
	e	is similar to	CV2
	ɛ	is similar to	CV 3
	ɔ	is similar to	CV 6
	o	is similar to	CV 7
	U	is similar to	CV8

They identify /a/ as an open central vowel somewhere between the positions for CV4 [a] and CV 5[a].

Diphthongs

Elugbe and Omamor (1991) referring to Oyebade (1983) identify five dipthongs /aí, au, íɛ, ìɔ1: and ɔì/. They are however of the opinion that to these can be added.

[nõa]	'Noah'
[hɛ:j or [hɛa]	'hair'

A combination of Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and

Oyebade (1983) gives us

/aì/

/ɔí/

/au/

/ìɛ/

/ìɔ/

/oa/

/ɛa/

Standard English Consonant (RP)

The pattern here will be graphic as the purpose is not to explicate English phonology (which is already standardized) but to use an inventory of RP (Received Pronunciation) as a tool for a contrastive study of NPE and SE (Standard English) segmental phonology.

Consonants

Plosives

1. Bilabial plosives /P,b/ pin, bin
2. Alveolar, plosives /t,d/ tin, din
3. Velar plosives /k,g/ kin, gum

Affricates

4. Polato-alveolar affricates/tʃ,dʒ/ Chain, Jane
5. Post-alveolar affricates /tr, dr/ train, drain

Fricatives

6. Labio-dental fricatives /f,v/ fine, vine
7. 'dental fricatives /θð/ think, this
8. Alveolar fricatives /s,z/ seal, zeal
9. Palate-alveolar fricatives /ʃʒ/ sheep, measure
10. Glottal fricative /h/ how

Nasals

11. Bilabial nasals /m/ sum
12. Alveolar nasal /n/ noon
13. Velar nasal / ב / sing

Laterals

14. Alveolar lateral /l/ leaf
15. Post-alveolar frictionless continuant /r/

Approximants

16. Bilobial semi-vowel /w/ wet
17. Palatal semi-vowel /j/ yet

Adapted with insights from Jones (2006) and Gimson (1980)

Table of English Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	glottal
Plosive	p b			t d			k g	
Affricate					tf dʒ			
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ		(x)	
Nasal	m			n			ŋ	
Lateral approximant				I				
Approximant	w				r	j		

Jones (2006)

Consonant Phonemes of NPE

Mafeni (1971) identifies 24 consonants of NPE

NPE Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Post-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-dental	Glottal
Nasal	e m		n		ɲ			
Plosive	p b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Affricate				tf dʒ				
Roll tap			r					
Lateral			l					
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ ʒ				h
Approximant					j		w	

Mafeni (1971)

Vowel Phonemes of SE

The English language has five long vowels and seven short vowels. Some are front, while others are central and back. The diphthongs are classified according to whether they are closing or centring diphthongs as shown in the vowel charts.

Long Vowels
1. /i/   bean, seen
2. /u:/ food, boom
3. /a:/ part, hard
4. /ɜ:/ bird, burn
5. /ɔ:/ saw, born

Short Vowels
1. /I/   bid, sit
2. / ʊ/   put, look
3. /^/   such, much
4. / æ/   cat, had
5. /e/   pet, bet
6. /∂/   another, again
7. /D / pot, God

Diphthongs
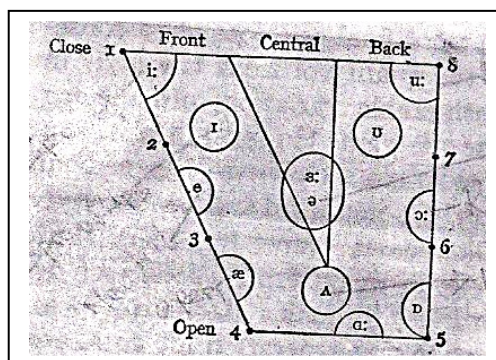Closing Diphthongs
1. /eɪ/   Say, bay
2. /aɪ/   buy, like
3. /ɔ /   toy, boy
4. /∂ʊ/ no, low
5. /aʊ/ now, loud

Centring Diphthongs
6. /I∂/   per, fear
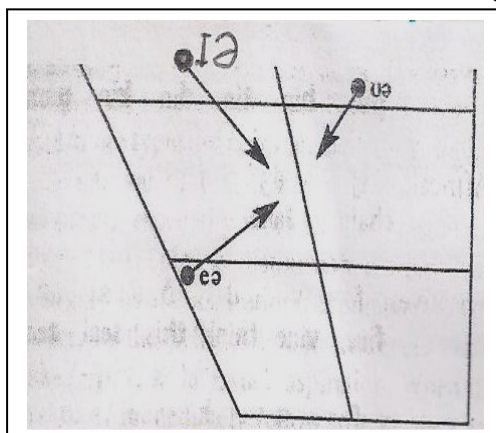7. /e∂/   pair, fair
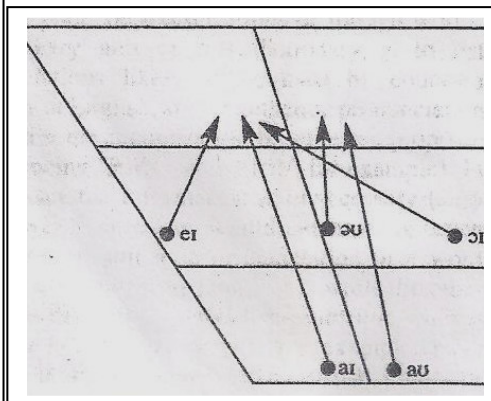8. /ʊ∂/ poor, poor

Vowel Charts

Pure Vowels

Jones (1967)

Jones (1967)

English Closing Diphthongs	English Centring Diphthongs
Jones (2006)	Jones (2006)

A Contrastive Analysis of the Segmental Phonology of NPE and SE

For the purpose of this study, NPE is a first language (L1) since the language has already creolized in areas like Sapele and Warri in Delta State of Nigeria. Standard English (SE) is thus a second language (L2).

This position is buttressed by Mafeni (1971:95):

Nigerian Pidgin is a lingua franca for many, and thus a true pidgin in Hall's sense; it is also a mother tongue for a number of families in certain areas and communities, and as such might in these cases be defined as a Creole language.

Differences and Similarities between NPE Vowels and SE Vowels

The English Language has five long vowels. NPE vowels are not marked for length. English has seven short vowels in addition to the five long vowels. NPE has seven vowels which are roughly equated with some of the English vowels.

NPE   i   is similar to CV1
          e   is similar to CV2
          ɛ   is similar to CV3
          ɔ   is similar to CV6
          o   is similar to CV7
          u   is similar to CV8

The /a/ vowel is seen as an open central vowel somewhere between the positions of CV4 and CV5. This produces the following vowel chart for NPE.

NPE Vowel Chart
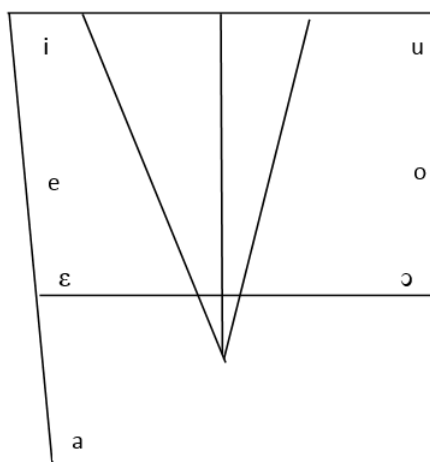
With insights from (Egbokhare, F.O. 2003:68, Jones, D. 1967:XV, Jones, D. 2006:Viii and Kelly, J. 1969:156.

While English has 12 pure vowels in all, NPE has seven. This means there is a shortfall of five.

Problem Areas/Implications for the L2 Learner

In spite of the similarities that we have drawn between NPE vowels and English vowels, not all of these similar vowels are well pronounced by the NPE speaker. The pronunciation of NPE /i/, /ɛ/, /ɔ/, /u/ and /a/ reinforce the pronunciation of RP /i:/, /e/, /ɔ:/, /u:/ and /a:/ except for the non-application of length where applicable. The similarity of NPE /e/ to RP CV2 and NPE /o/ to RP CV7 does not assist correct pronunciation of the RP vowels. The researcher's experience as a teacher of phonology shows that wrong pronunciation here is more a result of ignorance than the transfer of language habits from L1 to L2. RP's CV2 is usually pronounced by NPE speakers as /i/ without being marked for length, while CV7 is pronounced as /u/ without length.

Long Vowels

Of the five English long vowels, the most difficult for NPE speakers trying to acquire English as L2 is the central vowel /ɜ:/. It is hardly realized with the right quality and quantity. The result is that words like 'learn', 'sir' and 'nurse' are pronounced as if the vowels are different.

	RP	NPE
Learn	/ɜ:n/	/len/
Sir	/sɜ:s/	/sa/
Nurse	/nɜ:s/	/nɔs/

The remaining four long vowels, apart from length, are generally well pronounced because of their similarity with those of NPE

Short Vowels

As earlier mentioned, in spite of the similarity between English /I/, /ʊ/, /e/ and corresponding NPE vowels, English /I/ and /ʊ/ are not well pronounced. English has seven short vowels of which only the three mentioned here are close to what obtains, in NPE. This means that RP /ʌ/, /æ/, /∂/ and /D/ are absent in NPE.

Problems Areas/Implications for the L2 Learner

Of the seven English short vowels only /e/ is well realized inspite of the identified similarities of other NPE vowels with SE vowels. It becomes difficult to appreciate vowel contrasts as the following table shows:

S/N	RP	NPE	PROBLEM
	Vowel	Realization	Area
1.	I	/i/	'seat' and 'sit' are both pronounced, as/sit/
2.	/ʊ/	/u/	'pool' and 'pull' are both pronounced as /pul/
3.	/ʌ/	/ɔ/	'cot' and 'cut' are both pronounced as /kɔt/
4.	/æ/	/a/	The vowel sounds in 'cat', 'man' and had are all realized as /a/
5.	/∂/	/a/ /ɔ/	'teacher', actor /a/ /ɔ/
6.	/D/	/ɔ/	'God' /god/ becomes /gɔd/

Diphthongs

Standard English has eight diphthongs, comprising five centring and three closing. Unlike most Nigerian languages that do not have diphthongs at all, three diphthongs are generally agreed upon in NPE. The diphthongs are /ae/, /ao/ and /ɔe/, generally corresponding with English /aI/ /aʊ/ and /ɔI/. We are left with five English diphthongs without equivalents or near equivalents in NPE. These five are /eI/, /∂ʊ/, /I∂/, /e∂/ and /ʊ∂/.

Problem Areas/Implications for the L2 Learner

The three NPE diphthongs that are close to SE ones are relatively easy to pronounce. The availability of these sounds in NPE assists the realization in SE. The problem area is in the five diphthongs that are not available in NPE.

S/N	RP	NPE	PROBLEM AREAS
	Diphthong	Realization	
1.	/eI/	/e/	/eI/ becomes /e/ as in pidgin /pe/ equivalent of 'pay' in English.
2.	/∂ʊ/	/o/	/∂ʊ/ becomes /o/ as in pidgin /no/, pronounced /n∂ʊ/.
3.	/I∂/	/IƐ/	Even though identified by Oyebode (1983), it is different from the English diphthong. /I∂/ therefore becomes /IƐ/ as in /hiƐ/equivalent of English /hI∂/ written 'here' in English and /hię/ in NPE
4.	/e∂/	/Ɛ/	/e∂/ becomes /Ɛ/, as in pidgin /dƐ/ spelt, 'dę'. Equivalent of English 'there'.
5.	/ʊ∂/	/wɔ/ /ɔ/	/ʊ∂/ becomes /wɔ/ or /ɔ/ depending on context. English 'poor' is transcribed /pwɔ/ in pidgin, while English 'sure' is transcribed /ʃɔ/.

It would have been observed that apart from no. 3, the diphthongs are generally reduced to monothongs. Besides, the schwa sound is completely absent in NPE. The NPE learner of English finds this sound very challenging.

Triphthongs

There are very few triphthongs in English. The usually identified ones are /aI∂/ and /aʊ∂/:

/aI∂/ as in tire, fire

/aʊ∂/ as in flower, power

Research so far has not identified triphthongs in NPE. Triphthongs are also reduced to monothongs:

tire becomes /taja/

power becomes /pawa/

Difference and Similarities between NPE Consonants and SE Consonants

For the purpose of this analysis, Mafeni (1971) shall be used since it has stood the test of time and the chart is well laid out as in the English Consonant chart. Jones (2006) will be used for English consonants. Reference will be made to Elugbe and Omamor (1991) where necessary.

Both NPE and RP have 24 consonants each. The consonant sounds of both languages have a lot of affinity. There are only two absent sounds each way: /kp/ and gb/ are absent in RP, while /θ/ and /ð/ are absent in NPE.

Problems Areas/Implications for the L2 Learner

The dental fricatives that are absent from NPE constitute a great problem to the NPE learner.

S/N	RP	NPE	PROBLEM AREAS
	Consonant	Realization	
1	θ	/t/	θ becomes /t/. RP 'think' is pronounced /tink/ by NPE speakers.

Ironically, the presence of certain RP sounds in NPE does not automatically translate into correct pronunciation. The following sounds illustrate this:

S/N	RP	NPE	PROBLEM AREAS
	Consonant	Realization	
1.	tʃ /	/ʃ/	/tʃ/ is pronounced /ʃ/. Hence RP /tʃɜ:tʃ/ becomes /ʃɔʃ.
2.	/dʒ/	/ʒ/	/dʒ/ is pronounced /ʒ/. Hence RP gentle /dʒentl/ becomes /ʒentle/. This is found more in the speech of NPE speakers with little education.
3.	/h/	-	This sound is omitted in some expressions: the aspirate is thus omitted in 'horn' to sound like 'orn'. It intervenes in a word like 'egg' to sound like 'hegg'. This also obtains more in the speech of those with little or no Western education.
4.	/ŋ/	/n/ /g/	This sound is pronounced /n/ in 'think' and /g/ in sing

The other phonemes present in NPE are generally well pronounced.

Conclusion

In the course of the study, the following observations were made.

1.   There are apparent differences between NPE phonology and SE.
2.   NPE has no long vowels. This makes it difficult to indicate length while speaking.
3.   NPE collapses the five long vowels and seven short vowels into her own seven.
4.   Of the long vowels /ɜ: poses the greatest problem to NPE speakers, while /∂/

poses the greatest problem among the short vowels.

5. English plosives are not problematic because they are available in the variety of NPE that was studied.

6. The velar nasal is often mispronounced in words like 'think' and 'sing' inspite of its presence in NPE.

It was also observed that some of these mispronunciations are not a result of phoneme availability or otherwise, but a result of ignorance. Even though some of the language habits of NPE L1 have been transferred to SEL2, the fact remains that the sounds of English have to be properly taught and learned.

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