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**AN ASSESSMENT OF SOUND SYSTEM IN IBIBIO LANGUAGE: THE CLARITY AND  
PHONOLOGICAL CHALLENGES**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The paper carefully assessed the sound system in Ibibio language: the clarity and phonological challenges. Ibibio is spoken in the South-South Nigeria, specifically in Akwa Ibom State and some parts of Cross River State and has been described as having two contrastive level pitches, High and Low. Sound system of a language is not simply an abstract set of phonemes and rules of their realization in different contexts but it is also a collection of phonotactical restrictions on the permissible combinations of phonemes. Every language has its own sound patterns. The phonology of a language is the sound system of that language. Unlike phonetics, which is concerned with the study of speech sounds in general, phonology is concerned primarily with the sound patterns of individual languages. The paper reviewed the concept of sound system and Ibibio language. The Ibibio sound system and phonological challenges of sound system in Ibibio language. It was on this basis that the study concluded that; every language of the world has its own phonemic representations of sounds, that is, the underlying representation of various sounds that make up the language system. The Ibibio language, as spoken at present, has certain identifiable characteristic that distinguishes it from other languages that are genetically distinct. The study identified that the problem of intonation is very pronounced among Ibibio speakers of English. The phonological challenges of Ibibio language is the difficulties in 'speech production', how to pronounce, which speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way. One of the recommendations made was the school teachers, management and the parent should look an adequate and correct way of assuaging difficulties in 'speech production' among the younger ones and also see how encourage the children on how to pronounce with speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way.*

**Keyword: Sound System, Ibibio Language, and Phonological Challenges**

**INTRODUCTION**

According to Codemint (2022), every language has its own sound patterns. Ibibio is a tonal language spoken primarily in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States in the South-South

region. Ibibio belongs to the Lower-Cross languages, a sub-family of the (New) Benue Congo Phylum, and it is spoken by about four million people. The phonetic system of that language. Unlike phonetics, which is concerned with individual sounds in general, phonology is concerned primarily with the sound patterns of individual languages. English is used in Nigeria as the language of education and commerce, among others, and it is necessary for the Ibibio speakers of English to speak a variety that is both nationally and internationally intelligible. Tones manifest in different ways in various languages. There are high (H), low (L), and down-stepped tones in Ibibio. Other tonal realizations include a high-low (falling) and a low-high (rising) (Yul-Ifode, 2012). The tone-bearing units are vowels and syllabic nasals. Words may have different lexical meanings depending on their tone. (tèm) "cook," (tém) "clear a bush," (wák) "many," (wàk) "tear into pieces," and so on.

The low tone is marked by a grave accent [ ` ], while the high tone is marked by an acute accent [ ^ ]. Each of these tones can occur in all the possible environments: initial, medial, and final positions. The down-stepped tone is marked with an exclamation mark [ ! ]. Unlike the low and high tones, the downstepped tone is restricted in its occurrence. The down-stepped tone occurs after a preceding high tone, that is, when the pitch on the succeeding syllable of the word is slightly lower than the pitch on the preceding syllable. It does not appear at the beginning of any word that stands alone (Israa, 2019). Some Ibibio speakers hardly distinguish between long and short sounds. In many instances, long sounds are considerably reduced in length. Ibibio speakers also have problems relating to the non-segmental features of English. The problem of intonation is very pronounced among Ibibio speakers of English. The phonological challenges of the Ibibio language are the difficulties in "speech production," including how to pronounce, which speech sound to use, and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The problem of this study is that some Ibibio and English speakers are likely to encounter problems like semantic, syntactic, phonological, or morphological errors when speaking English. Many English words are difficult to pronounce because Ibibio lacks certain English sounds. The problem with an Ibibio speaker of English is that he tends to apply the rules of Ibibio to his use of English, particularly at the early stages of his attempt to learn English. This problem features in many areas of sound production. For example, the English consonants "y" and "i," "sg" and "k,"

Phonology refers to the sound system of a language. It refers to the selection of individual sounds and syllables to form spoken words. Phonology deals with sound structure in individual languages: the way distinctions in sound are used to differentiate linguistic items and the ways in which the sound structure of the "same" element varies as a function of the other sounds in its context (Neurobiology, 2016). Phonology and phonetics both involve sound but differ in that phonetics deals with sounds from a language-independent point of view, while phonology studies the ways in which they are distributed and deployed within particular languages. Phonological processing is necessary for both the comprehension and production of speech and language. It is also critically involved in processing written word forms for reading and spelling.

According to Maciej (2020), the sound system of a language is not simply an abstract set of phonemes and the rules of their realization in different contexts. It is also a collection of phonotactical restrictions on the permissible combinations of phonemes. Many languages are fond of planting vowels in between consonants. Some, however, have complex consonant clusters (i.e., Polish *pstrykn* (*pstrknw*)). Phonemes that are meaningfully contrastive in a language. For example, English speakers have one mental bin for the /r/ sound and another one for the /l/ sound. That's because in English, /r/ and /l/ are two separate phonemes. But speakers of languages with different phonologies (like Japanese or Korean) have just one bin that contains both of those sounds. That's because in Japanese and Korean, the /r/ and /l/ sounds are part of one shared underlying phoneme category.

Phonetics is the general study of the characteristics of speech sounds. It is the description of the description of speech sounds in a language (Adam, 2019). It is concerned with the ways in which speech sounds form systems and patterns in human language. Phonology permits a speaker: to produce sounds that form meaningful utterances. to recognize a foreign accent and make up new words. Voiced and voiceless sounds are two types of sounds.

## VOICED AND VOICELESS SOUNDS

**Voiceless:** When the vocal cords are spread apart, the air from the lungs passes between them unimpeded.

**Voiced:** When the vocal cords are drawn together, the air from the lungs repeatedly pushes them apart as it passes through, creating a vibration effect. It is the location, inside the mouth, at which the constriction takes place. We use the symbols of the phonetic alphabet to denote specific sounds. These symbols are enclosed within square brackets.

The voiced/voiceless distinction is important in English because it helps us distinguish words like:

rope/robe, fine/vine, seal/zeal

[rop]/[rob] [fam]/[vam] [sil]/[zil]

But some voiceless sounds can be further distinguished as aspirated or unaspirated

pool [phul] spool [spul]

tale [thel] stale [stel]

kale [khel] scale [skel]

## The Sound System of Ibibio Language

The Ibibio language has twenty-four (24) segmental phonemes comprising ten (10) vowels and fourteen (14) consonants.

### *Vocalic Phonemes of Ibibio*

There are ten (10) phonemic vowels in Ibibio (Eme, 2016). The vowels, the orthographic form, phonetic Description and their distribution are seen below:

1. i /i/ a close front unrounded vowel. It occurs in ìtá, 'three' ; dí 'come'
2. ĩ /ĩ/ a centralized front unrounded vowel kĭ
3. ǐ /ǐ/ m 'sew'; dĭ
4. ɸ, 'hide' Aniekan NYARKS, Ph.D And  
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5. e /e/ a half-close front vowel. ènò 'gift'; mé 'endure'; dĕ
6. a /a/ a central open unrounded vowel àbà 'forty'; bàt 'count'
7. ʌ /ʌ/ half-open centralized vowel with very slight lip rounding. bàk gossip; tʌk
8. 'grind
9. ə /ə/ a half-close central vowel with, lips in the neutral position. kpák 'cut into
10. pieces'.
11. ɔ /ɔ/ a half- open back rounded vowel as in dòmárry ɔkɔk 'chewing stick'.
12. o /o/ a half-close back rounded vowel. ówó 'human being'; wòt 'kill'.
13. u /u/ a close back rounded vowel. dù 'live'; únék 'dance'
14. u /u/ a centralized back rounded vowel ùkù 'fox', èkpú 'rat'

### ***Ibibio Consonant Phonemes***

There are fourteen (14) Phonemic consonants in Ibibio (Emenanjo, 2015). Their orthographic form, phonetic description as well as distribution are shown below:

1. p /p/ a voiceless bilabial stop. As in dép 'buy', tĭ
2. p-pé 'make hole'
3. b /b/ voiced bilabial stop. bĕn 'take', èbé 'husband'
4. t /t/ voiceless alveolar stop. tóp 'throw', étôp 'massage'.
5. d /d/ voiced alveolar stop. dómárry; údóŋ 'urge'
6. k /k/ voiceless velar stop. kàá 'go'; éká 'mother'; dák 'enter'.
7. kp /kp/ a voiceless labial velar stop. kpán 'fold'; èkpán 'suicide'
8. m /m/ a bilabial nasal. mé 'endure'; ìmâm 'laughter'.
9. n /n/ an alveolar nasal. nò 'give'; ùnén 'right/entitlement'; òdó 'marriage'
10. ny /ɲ/ a palatal nasal. ònám 'sell'; jĭná 'garden egg'; jĭ-jón 'personal name'.
11. ñ /ɲ/ a velar nasal. ònám 'river'; jĭ-kám 'root'.
12. f /f/ a voiceless labiodentals fricative. féén 'forgive'; m-fin 'today'.
13. s /s/ Voiceless alveolar fricative. sĭn 'put'; ù-sàn 'plate'.
14. y /j/ a palatal approximant. ù-jài 'beauty'; jém 'look for'.
15. w /w/ a labio-velar approximant. wán 'wrap'; ú-wâ 'sacrifice'.

### ***Ibibio Tones***

Tones manifest in different ways in various languages. There are high (H), low (L) and down stepped tones in Ibibio. Other tonal realizations include a high-low (falling) and a low-high (rising) contour tones as observed by Essien (1990) and Urua (2000). The tone bearing units are vowels and syllabic nasals. Words may have different lexical meanings depending on its tone. For example;

1. tèm 'cook'



‘To buy’

Mfrě                      Rising (LH)

‘Brain’

Ídêm                      Falling (HL)

‘Masquerade’

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Ibibio language is predominantly a subject-verb-object as two options to realize the arguments: overt full pronouns or r-expressions and argument markers. This is the word order of ordinary sentences in which the DPs are present (Thompson, 2009). However, it also allows some of the DPs to be dropped, in which case the SOV word order surfaces, and the arguments are marked by means of argument markers, as illustrated below:

S                      V      O

ámi    m-mà    á-kòp ikwó

‘I heard a song.’

S                      O V

à-mé                m-má

‘You like/love me.’

## **PHONOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF IBIBIO LANGUAGE**

At this level of phonology, Ibibio lacks certain English sounds and this poses problems in the pronunciation of many English words. Also, phonological variation and morphological problems may result in semantic problems which may hinder effective communication in English (Roach, 2005).

The Ibibio language, as spoken at present, has certain identifiable characteristic that distinguishes it from other languages that are genetically distinct. The problem with an Ibibio speaker of English is that he tends to apply the rules of Ibibio language in his use of English particularly at the early stages of his attempt to learn English. This problem features in many areas of sound production. For example, the English consonants / y/ and / i/, / sg/ and / k/pose a problem to some Ibibio Speakers. These sounds are often reduced to /y/ and /j/ respectively because of their absence in Ibibio. Some Ibibio speakers hardly distinguish between /l/ and /r/ hence ‘grass’ /grQs/ sometimes becomes ‘klass’ [klas] and vice versa. There are also problems relating to the production of vowel sounds. Some sounds of Ibibio are basically different from those of English. Some Ibibio speakers hardly distinguish between long and short sounds. In many instances, long sounds are considerably reduced in length (Ukpe, 2018). Ibibio speakers

also have problems relating to the non-segmental features of English. The problem of intonation is very pronounced among Ibibio speakers of English.

The articulation of some English fricatives pose considerable difficulty to Ibibio speakers of English, because the sounds are non-existent in the Ibibio consonantal system, as in; [v, θ, ð, z, ʃ, ʒ,]. The English fricatives [f, s], however exist in Ibibio and do not therefore constitute any difficulty to English speakers of Ibibio. In realizing, the voiced labio-dental fricative [v] of English, Ibibio speakers of English use the Ibibio voiceless labio-dental fricative [f], for the English voiced labio-dental fricative [v], which does not exist in the Ibibio sound system. This consequently leads to phonemic confusion between the use of the English [v] and [f] in Ibibio English with the result that sometimes intelligibility is facilitated only by contextual clues as phonemic contrast between the two sounds is often completely lost. Some informants who have completed their secondary education, and who are in the Uni **Aniekan NYARKS, Ph.D And Glory Ikpe HANSON** English language realized the following words as recorded during the

Since there is dental sound in Ibibio, the articulation of the English dental sounds [θ] and [ð] are bound to constitute some difficult to Ibibio speakers of English, and the difficulty increases when the two sound occur in clusters with other English consonants (Essien, 2014). The Ibibio speakers of English use the voiceless alveolar plosive [t] as flat sound to represent the dental fricatives, examples;

Thank [ta:ŋk]	RP [θæŋk]
Faith [fet]	RP [feiθ]
Victory [fiktri]	RP [viktəri]
Visa [fisa]	RP [vi:zə]

According to Adetugbo, (2014), the English vowel system is so complex that Ibibio speakers find it difficult to pronounce it the exact way as the English speakers. However, the extent to which a particular English vowel proves difficult to an Ibibio speaker depends among other things, or otherwise a close substitutes in the learners Mother tongue system. Thus, the English vowels [i, e, a, o, u, ɔi, ei, ai] are easy to be realized by Efik speakers of English because some acceptable phonetic equivalents of them exist in Ibibio vowel inventory, though with minor qualitative differences.

The English vowels proving difficult to Ibibio speakers of English are the monophthongs [æ, ɒ, ɜ:, ə, ʌ] and the diphthongs [iə, eə, uə, əu, au], none of which has an exact equivalent in Ibibio. Some of the vowels that appear in Ibibio vowel chart are not exact equivalent to that of English central vowels; their true existence is highly in doubt as they cannot be realized with its true quality by Ibibio speakers.

## CONCLUSION

The study concluded that every language of the world has its own phonemic representations of sounds, that is, the underlying representation of various sounds that make up the language system. The Ibibio language, as spoken at present, has certain identifiable characteristic that distinguishes it from other languages that are genetically distinct. The study

identified that the problem of intonation is very pronounced among Ibibio speakers of English. The phonological challenges of Ibibio language is the difficulties in 'speech production', how to pronounce, which speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way.

## RECOMMENDATION

1. The school teachers, management and the parent should look an adequate and correct way of assuaging difficulties in 'speech production' among the younger ones and also see how encourage the children on how to pronounce with speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way.
2. Parent should teach their children Ibibio language right from childhood.
3. Ibibio language should be made compulsory in schools from the primary level to the secondary level.

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