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A Study of Phonological Correlates between the Lingua Franca Core (LFC), Received Pronunciation and the Nigerian English Accent (NEA)

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Abstract

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has shifted global linguistic priorities by emphasizing mutual intelligibility over adherence to native-speaker norms. This study examines the extent to which the Nigerian English Accent (NEA) aligns with Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (LFC) - a set of pronunciation features identified as essential for effective ELF communication. Using comparative phonological analysis, the study draws on segmental descriptions of Nigerian English by Awonusi (2004) and Adetugbo (2004), alongside Jenkins' (2000, 2007) LFC framework. The findings reveal that NEA shares significant phonological features with the LFC, particularly in the preservation of voicing contrasts and initial consonant clusters, suggesting strong potential for intelligibility in ELF contexts. However, divergences such as vowel neutralization, interdental fricative substitutions, and inconsistent nuclear stress may hinder clarity in more complex communicative settings. These features, while common in many World Englishes varieties, highlight areas for targeted pedagogical attention. The study concludes that Nigerian English, as a localized variety, aligns more closely with intelligibility-focused ELF norms than with traditional native-speaker models like Received Pronunciation. Consequently, pronunciation teaching in Nigeria should prioritize features affecting intelligibility rather than enforcing native-like accuracy, supporting learners to communicate effectively while maintaining linguistic identity.

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Introduction

In recent decades, English has solidified its status as the global lingua franca, serving as the dominant medium of communication in diplomacy, international trade, academia, science, and digital platforms (Crystal, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2011). Within multilingual and postcolonial contexts such as Nigeria, English assumes a more complex and entrenched role, functioning not only as an official language but also as a medium for social mobility, academic advancement, and identity construction (Bamgbose, 1995; Adegbija, 2004). Nigerian English, particularly the Nigerian English Accent (NEA), has thus emerged as a distinct and widespread variety, reflective of the nation's linguistic diversity and socio-cultural realities.

With the rise of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)—a means of communication among speakers from different first language backgrounds—the relevance of native-speaker models has increasingly come under scrutiny. Scholars such as Jenkins (2000, 2007) and Seidlhofer (2011) argue that mutual intelligibility, rather than native-like accuracy, should be the guiding principle for pronunciation in international communication. In this paradigm, World Englishes are not mere approximations of native norms but legitimate, context-sensitive forms of English shaped by localized usage and cultural factors (Kachru, 1992; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008).

Despite a substantial body of research on the segmental features of Nigerian English (e.g., Awonusi, 2004; Adetugbo, 2004), limited empirical attention has been given to how NEA aligns with the intelligibility-focused framework of the Lingua Franca Core (LFC). The LFC, proposed by Jenkins (2000), outlines a set of pronunciation features considered critical for comprehensibility in ELF interactions—such as preservation of voicing contrasts, consonant cluster articulation, and correct nuclear stress placement—while de-emphasizing features like vowel quality and connected speech which contribute less to intelligibility.

The purpose of this study is to bridge this gap by evaluating the phonological compatibility of the Nigerian English Accent with the Lingua Franca Core. Based on feature-by-feature analysis, the research investigates both convergences and divergences between NEA and the LFC, thereby offering insights into the global intelligibility potential of NEA. Key questions addressed include: To what extent does NEA adhere to or deviate from the LFC features? What implications do these patterns have for intelligibility in

ELF communication?

By undertaking this analysis, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive understanding of pronunciation standards in English language teaching and assessment. It argues that LFC-informed models can help Nigerian English speakers maintain their linguistic identity while achieving effective communication in global contexts. In doing so, the research affirms the legitimacy of localized English varieties and encourages a shift away from deficit-oriented evaluations toward functional, intelligibility-based frameworks in applied linguistics and ELT policy.

Literature Review

Historical and Socio-Political Development of English in Nigeria

The entrenchment of English in Nigeria traces back to the British colonial expansion in the 19th century. Introduced primarily through missionary activities, trade, and the colonial administration, English rapidly became the language of governance, education, and religion (Adegbija, 2004; Bamgbose, 1995). Missionary schools played a pivotal role in institutionalizing English through formal instruction and literacy development, fostering a bilingual or multilingual elite class (Bamgbose, 1998). After Nigeria gained independence in 1960, English was retained as the official language, endorsed for legislation, education, inter-ethnic communication, and as a unifying medium for a country with enormous ethnic and linguistic diversity.

Nigeria is home to over 500 indigenous languages (Ethnologue, 2023), which vary widely in structure and usage. This linguistic multiplicity necessitated the establishment of a neutral lingua franca to bridge communication gaps. English, with its institutional backing and prestige, filled this role, becoming the default language for national integration, economic advancement, and international engagement (Jowitt, 1991). This has resulted in a sociolinguistic hierarchy where English dominates in formal, educational, governmental, and media domains, even as indigenous languages thrive in informal and community contexts.

Phonological Features of the Nigerian English Accent (NEA)

The Nigerian English Accent (NEA) is a reflection of the heterogeneity of its speakers regarding the multiplicity of language and culture. Shaped by

substrate influence from indigenous languages, the type and quality of English instruction, and regional variation across the country, (Awonusi, 2004; Adetugbo, 2004), these influences combine to produce a phonological system that is both distinct from British or American English and internally heterogeneous.

NEA Segmental Features

Vowel pronunciation in NEA often diverges significantly from Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American English (GAE) norms. For example, the high lax vowel /ɪ/ is frequently realized as a close front vowel [i], leading to minimal pairs such as ‘ship’ and ‘sheep’ being pronounced identically (Awonusi, 2004). The RP vowel /ʌ/ is often replaced with more open or back vowels such as [ɔ] or [a], and this affects the comprehension of ‘cut’ and ‘cot.’ Monophthongisation of diphthongs is also common, leading to /eɪ/ and /aʊ/ becoming [e] and [a], respectively (Awonusi, 2004). These characteristic pronunciations espouse mother tongue segmental phonotactics as well as suprasegmental properties. Substitution of consonant sounds also occur with the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which are relatively uncommon in Nigerian indigenous languages, often substituted with dental or alveolar stops [t] and [d] (Adetugbo, 2004). This substitution results in pronunciations like “tink” for “think” and “dis” for “this.” Moreover, final voiced stops such as /g/ are sometimes devoiced, as in “bag” pronounced [bak]. Simplification or deletion of consonant clusters, especially in syllable codas, is also common, reflecting a tendency to avoid complex consonant clusters that are absent in many Nigerian languages (Gut, 2008).

NEA Suprasegmental Features

NEA is predominantly syllable-timed, meaning that each syllable tends to have roughly equal duration, unlike stress-timed varieties of English such as RP or GAE where unstressed syllables are shortened (Ojo, 1996). This syllable timing leads to a relatively even rhythmic pattern, which can affect listeners’ perceptions of fluency or naturalness when comparing NEA with native English accents. Intonation patterns in NEA often mirror the tonal contours of indigenous Nigerian languages, which may result in non-standard stress placement and distinctive pitch variations that are intelligible within Nigerian contexts but potentially challenging for international listeners (Awonusi, 2004). These segmental and suprasegmental features form a phonological system that serves the communicative needs of Nigerian English speakers

while marking the variety as having a distinctive identity within the global English .

Jennifer Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (LFC)

Jennifer Jenkins' pioneering work on the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) marks a paradigm shift in the teaching of English pronunciation by focusing on intelligibility rather than native-speaker norms (Jenkins, 2000, 2007). Jenkins argues that the traditional emphasis on RP or General American English as the ideal model is neither practical nor necessary in the context of English as a global lingua franca, where most communication occurs between non-native speakers.

Segmental Priorities

The LFC identifies a subset of pronunciation features crucial to mutual intelligibility among non-native English speakers. These include the maintenance of voicing contrasts such as /p/ vs. /b/ and /t/ vs. /d/, as well as the clear articulation of consonants like /t/, /d/, /l/, /r/, /p/, and /b/ (Jenkins, 2000). Jenkins identifies the avoidance of consonant deletion in CC, CCC and CCCC clusters as well as the maintenance of consonants in word-initial and final positions to prevent lack of intelligibility. Vowel variations are noted to be more permissible, as vowel substitutions do not significantly impede intelligibility (Jenkins, 2007). These compromises reflect the different vowel systems among international English speakers and thus encourage a more achievable pedagogic goal.

Suprasegmental Considerations

While rhythm and intonation are recognized as variable across Englishes, the LFC underscores the importance of consistent word stress in multisyllabic words and correct placement of nuclear stress to aid comprehension (Jenkins, 2007). However, it deprioritizes native-like intonation patterns, acknowledging that such prosodic features differ widely without severely affecting mutual intelligibility.

The LFC framework has had considerable influence on pronunciation pedagogy, prompting educators to reconsider assessment criteria and instructional focus, especially in contexts where English serves primarily as a means of international communication rather than as a native or second language.

Scholarly Debates on the Lingua Franca Core

Since its inception, the LFC has attracted both praise and criticism within applied linguistics and language pedagogy circles. Supporters such as Seidlhofer (2011) and Jenkins (2007) argue that the LFC democratizes English by validating diverse English varieties and shifting the focus away from native-speaker norms, which have historically marginalized non-native speakers and their accents. This inclusive perspective aligns well with the linguistic realities in countries like Nigeria, where English functions as a lingua franca among multiple ethnic groups and international interlocutors. Seidlhofer (2011) emphasizes that intelligibility is the most relevant goal in ELF communication and that rigid adherence to native norms unnecessarily penalizes learners whose accents differ but are still comprehensible. Jenkins (2007) further notes that the LFC framework allows for pedagogical flexibility, making English pronunciation teaching more accessible and relevant worldwide.

Conversely, critics such as Derwing and Munro (2005) caution against the wholesale rejection of native norms. They argue that some pronunciation features excluded from the LFC may still be important in native-dominated contexts, such as international exams like IELTS and TOEFL, where native-speaker-like pronunciation can affect scoring. There are also concerns that accepting too broad a range of variation may lead to fossilization of pronunciation errors, potentially limiting learners' communicative effectiveness in global professional or academic settings.

Despite these criticisms, the LFC remains a significant step towards pragmatic and equitable pronunciation teaching, especially in multilingual contexts. The shift from deficit-based models towards intelligibility-focused frameworks reflects a broader change in attitudes towards World Englishes and ELF varieties.

Situating the Nigerian English Accent in the ELF Framework

Although Nigerian English holds significant sociolinguistic status domestically and internationally, it has not received adequate attention within the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) research tradition, which tends to focus on European, Asian, or pan-global varieties (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Seidlhofer, 2011). This omission is notable given Nigeria's prominence in academia, media, business, and international diplomacy.

By examining Nigerian English Accent (NEA) through the lens of the LFC, this study fills a critical research gap by assessing whether NEA's phonological features align with or diverge from the intelligibility-focused priorities of the LFC. This evaluation is not merely about phonetic accuracy but concerns the legitimacy, effectiveness, and sociocultural implications of NEA as a communicative tool in intercultural contexts.

NEA's segmental deviations such as interdental fricative substitutions or vowel monophthongization may be viewed as obstacles to intelligibility from a native-speaker perspective, yet may not impede understanding within ELF contexts, where listeners are attuned to diverse accents (Kachru, 1992). Furthermore, the suprasegmental traits of NEA, including syllable timing and tonal intonation patterns, may add a layer of complexity for international comprehension but also enrich the global English tapestry with unique rhythmic and melodic characteristics. Therefore, situating NEA within the ELF framework expands the conceptual boundaries of intelligible English, challenging dominant native-speaker norms and affirming the communicative validity of Nigerian English.

Broader Implications and the Sociolinguistic Status of NEA

A sociolinguistic understanding of NEA highlights its role beyond mere pronunciation features; it embodies identity construction, cultural pride, and communicative empowerment for Nigerians. NEA functions as a marker of local identity, signaling belonging and solidarity among speakers (Adediji 2023). It also offers a linguistic resource for negotiating global citizenship while maintaining cultural roots. In recent years, Nigerian English has gained increased visibility on digital platforms such as social media, podcasts, and international education forums. This digital presence amplifies NEA's influence, challenging prevailing stereotypes that associate accented English with lower competence or status (Akinloye, 2020). As Nigerian English gains global recognition, it reshapes perceptions about what constitutes intelligible and acceptable English, fostering greater linguistic inclusivity.

Moreover, NEA plays a vital role in intra-African communication, where shared phonological features with other West African Englishes facilitate mutual intelligibility and reinforce pan-African solidarity (Akinlade, 2013). This intra-regional intelligibility underscores the practical utility of NEA as a lingua franca within Africa, complementing its role on the global

stage. From a pedagogical perspective, integrating NEA's features within ELF-oriented pronunciation teaching promotes inclusivity and reflects linguistic realities. It challenges the hegemony of native-speaker models and supports a more democratic approach to English language education in Nigeria and beyond.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design grounded in documented phonological analysis. The primary objective is to assess the degree of phonological convergence and divergence between the Nigerian English Accent (NEA) and Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (LFC). Given the theoretical and descriptive nature of both constructs, with NEA as a codified postcolonial English variety and LFC as a normative framework of phonological features facilitating international intelligibility, this design allows for an in-depth, non-numerical exploration rooted in theoretical linguistics. The approach is justified by the availability of robust phonological descriptions of NEA in Nigerian linguistic scholarship, and Jenkins' clearly delineated criteria for the LFC in her foundational works. Unlike empirical phonetic studies that rely on acoustic analysis or perceptual tests, this study is analytical rather than experimental, enabling critical interpretation of how NEA phonology aligns or departs from LFC prescriptions.

Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) paradigm, particularly Jenkins' conceptualisation of the Lingua Franca Core (2000, 2007). ELF scholarship shifts focus from native-speaker norms to intelligibility-based pronunciation targets for international communication. Jenkins' LFC theory prioritises specific phonological features that contribute to mutual intelligibility among non-native English speakers, including consonant voicing contrasts, initial consonant clusters, vowel length distinctions, and nuclear stress. Excluded from the LFC are features such as rhoticity, weak forms, and intonation patterns, which are considered less critical for intelligibility. By juxtaposing NEA with the LFC, the study draws on a theoretical model that foregrounds function over form in global English communication. This focus

aligns with the evolving pedagogy of World Englishes and pronunciation instruction, which now centres on listener comprehension rather than native-like articulation.

Data Sources

Data for this study are drawn from secondary sources, specifically documented phonological analyses of NEA and published works by Jenkins. The phonological features of NEA are extracted from scholarly descriptions provided by Awonusi (2004), Adetugbo (2004), Jowitt (1991), and Udofot (2007), all of whom offer empirically grounded accounts of Nigerian English segmental and suprasegmental features. These works are selected for their depth, scholarly credibility, and relevance to NEA as used by educated Nigerian speakers—a category often referred to in the literature as Standard Nigerian English.

On the other hand, the LFC framework is based on Jenkins' primary texts, especially *The Phonology of English as an International Language* (2000) and *English as a Lingua Franca: Attitude and Identity* (2007). These works outline Jenkins' phonological model designed to promote mutual intelligibility among L2 English users, and they serve as the benchmark for evaluating NEA's conformity to ELF standards.

This reliance on well-documented secondary data enables a rigorous comparative analysis without the logistical constraints of primary data collection. However, the study acknowledges the limitations of this approach and recommends future empirical validation.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a selective extraction strategy. First, the NEA segmental features—such as consonant substitution, vowel realisation, and voicing patterns—were collated from key Nigerian phonological studies. These segmental features include common NEA traits such as:

The substitution of /θ/ and /ð/ with /t/ and /d/,

The simplification of consonant clusters (e.g., dropping final /t/ or /d/),

Non-differentiation between /ɪ/ and /i:/,

Tendency toward monophthongisation of diphthongs.

Similarly, suprasegmental features such as syllable-timing, reduced use of pitch range, and non-native stress placement were compiled from existing

descriptions.

In parallel, Jenkins' LFC elements were itemised to form a comparative feature matrix. These included critical phonological categories identified by Jenkins as essential for cross-linguistic intelligibility:

Maintenance of voicing contrasts in word-initial and medial positions,
Preservation of consonant clusters, especially at the beginning of syllables,

Production of vowel length contrasts (e.g., /i:/ vs /ɪ/),

Use of appropriate nuclear stress in utterances.

The collected data were then aligned feature-by-feature, allowing the study to measure points of phonological intersection and divergence.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

1. Thematic categorisation of NEA features under segmental and suprasegmental domains;
2. Feature mapping, where NEA features were directly compared with LFC priorities;
3. Impact assessment, where each divergence was evaluated for its potential effect on mutual intelligibility in ELF contexts.

Segmental analysis focused on the NEA's treatment of English consonants and vowels that are central to the LFC. Particular attention was paid to:

Interdental fricatives (/θ/, /ð/): Often replaced by /t/ and /d/ in NEA. While common in many English varieties, such substitutions are discouraged in the LFC due to potential intelligibility breakdown.

Consonant cluster simplification: Deletion or epenthesis (e.g., 'film' as /filəm/), which may hinder comprehension.

Vowel mergers and length confusion: For instance, the conflation of /ɪ/ and /i:/, which may reduce contrastive clarity.

Suprasegmental analysis explored how features such as rhythm, stress, and intonation in NEA affect communication. Although Jenkins downplays the role of intonation in the LFC, she underscores the importance of nuclear stress. NEA's generally flat intonation and syllable-timed rhythm were analysed in light of these priorities.

The findings were interpreted through Jenkins' (2000) intelligibility hierarchy, which differentiates between core (essential), marginal (helpful but

not necessary), and non-core (non-essential) features. Features diverging from the LFC but falling into non-core areas were treated as acceptable variation, while divergences in core areas were flagged as potential intelligibility obstacles.

Reliability and Validation

To enhance analytical rigor, findings were cross-validated across multiple scholarly sources. NEA features were only included if they appeared consistently across at least two independent studies. This triangulation method reduced the risk of idiosyncratic or unrepresentative data. Additionally, Jenkins' LFC elements were verified through both her major publications and supporting ELF literature (e.g., Walker, 2010; Dziubalska-Kolaczyk, 2005). Although the study is interpretive in nature, efforts were made to minimise bias by anchoring claims in established theoretical principles and citing peer-reviewed research.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study is delimited to educated Nigerian English speakers; whose accent forms the basis of Standard Nigerian English. Other regional or sociolectal varieties of NEA—such as those found in rural or multilingual settings—fall outside the scope.

A major limitation of the study is its reliance on secondary data. While the texts used are authoritative, they may not fully capture the dynamic variability of NEA in spontaneous speech. Moreover, the study does not include perception-based empirical validation (e.g., intelligibility testing with international listeners). These limitations mean that while the study offers a robust theoretical comparison, its practical implications require further empirical exploration.

Findings

This section presents a detailed comparative analysis of the phonological features of the Nigerian English Accent (NEA) in relation to the priorities outlined in Jennifer Jenkins' (2000) Lingua Franca Core (LFC). The analysis is organized into two major phonological domains—segmental and suprasegmental features—highlighting areas of convergence and divergence and examining their implications for international intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts.

1. Segmental Features

1.1 Voicing Contrasts in Obstruents: Convergence

A central requirement of the LFC is the maintenance of voicing contrasts in plosives and other obstruents, particularly between pairs like /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/, and /k/ and /g/ (Jenkins, 2000). NEA generally aligns with this priority. Educated Nigerian speakers tend to preserve these voicing distinctions reliably, contributing positively to mutual intelligibility in ELF communication (Awonusi, 2004). The functional load of such contrasts remains high in distinguishing lexical items, and their retention in NEA enhances its compatibility with global intelligibility standards.

1.2 Consonant Cluster Simplification: Divergence

Jenkins (2000) emphasizes the accurate production of consonant clusters—especially in initial and medial positions—as vital for ELF intelligibility. NEA speakers frequently simplify clusters through processes such as elision or epenthesis, particularly in final positions. For instance, “texts” may be pronounced as /tɛkɪs/, and “cold” as /kɔl/ (Adetugbo, 2004). While initial clusters such as /str/ in “street” are generally preserved, simplification of medial and final clusters represents a deviation from the LFC and may pose challenges in international communication, especially in dense or unfamiliar lexical items.

1.3 Realization of Interdental Fricatives: Divergence

Another marked divergence lies in the substitution of interdental fricatives. NEA speakers often replace /θ/ with [t] or [s], and /ð/ with [d] or [z]—producing forms like “think” as /tɪŋk/ and “this” as /dɪs/ (Awonusi, 2004; Jowitt, 1991). While such substitutions are phonetically grounded and widespread in many non-native Englishes, Jenkins (2000) regards them as serious impediments to intelligibility, particularly in interactions between non-native speakers from different L1 backgrounds. The lack of acoustic distinctiveness between substituted sounds and their intended targets can reduce clarity in minimal pair contrasts.

1.4 Vowel Length and Quality: Partial Convergence

NEA exhibits a widespread neutralization of vowel length distinctions, particularly between tense-lax pairs such as /ɪ/ and /i:/, /ʊ/ and /u:/. Words like “ship” and “sheep,” or “pull” and “pool” are often realized homophonously (Adetugbo, 2004; Eka, 2000). However, Jenkins (2000)

downplays vowel length and quality as core features, suggesting that precise vowel distinctions are not critical for intelligibility among non-native speakers. Thus, while NEA's vowel system departs from native-speaker norms, its alignment with LFC principles suggests that such deviations have minimal impact on ELF interactions.

2. Suprasegmental Features

2.1 Rhythm and Timing: Convergence

The rhythmic pattern of NEA is predominantly syllable-timed, contrasting with the stress-timed rhythm of British and American English (Awonusi, 2004). Jenkins (2000) asserts that rhythm does not carry a heavy functional load in ELF contexts and therefore excludes it from the LFC. Consequently, NEA's syllable timing—while divergent from Inner Circle norms—is unlikely to impair mutual intelligibility among L2 speakers.

2.2 Intonation and Pitch Range: Convergence

NEA typically exhibits a narrow pitch range and favors rising terminal contours, even in declarative statements. Though these patterns may appear non-native or “flat” to inner-circle listeners, Jenkins (2000) does not include intonation patterns within the LFC. Therefore, while NEA intonation may affect perceptions of fluency or naturalness, it does not represent a significant threat to intelligibility in ELF settings.

2.3 Nuclear Stress Placement: Partial Divergence

Unlike general intonation, nuclear stress (the placement of the tonic syllable within an utterance) is included in the LFC due to its high communicative value. NEA speakers frequently misplace nuclear stress, often defaulting to initial syllables regardless of pragmatic context (Adetugbo, 2004). Such misplacement can obscure sentence focus and alter implied meaning, particularly in contrastive utterances (e.g., “I thought he was coming” vs. “I thought he was coming”). Therefore, NEA partially diverges from the LFC in this area, with clear implications for communicative accuracy in complex discourse.

Summary of Convergences and Divergences

Feature	NEA Realization	LFC	Conform
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		Priority	ity
Voicing in stops	Maintained	High	Yes
Consonant clusters	Frequently simplified (especially final position)	High	No
Interdental fricatives (/θ/, /ð/)	Substituted /t/, /d/, /s/, /z/	High	No
Vowel length distinctions	Often neutralized (e.g., /ɪ/ vs /i:/)	Low	Yes
Rhythm	Syllable-timed	Low	Yes
Intonation	Limited, narrow pitch range; rising final intonation common	Low	Yes
Nuclear stress	Sometimes misplaced, initial syllable stress tendency	High	Partial

Pedagogical Implications

The comparative analysis demonstrates that while NEA retains several phonological features aligned with Jenkins' LFC—particularly in voicing and rhythm—it also exhibits divergences in areas such as consonant clusters, interdental fricatives, and nuclear stress, which may hinder intelligibility in ELF contexts. Therefore, targeted instructional interventions are recommended:

Consonant Cluster Training: Employ auditory discrimination tasks and gradual production exercises, focusing on medial and final positions.

Interdental Fricative Awareness: Use visual aids (e.g., mouth diagrams) and articulatory practice to improve awareness and accuracy of /θ/ and /ð/ sounds.

Nuclear Stress Instruction: Incorporate intonation-focused listening and speaking activities, highlighting the pragmatic functions of stress placement in varied discourse contexts.

Importantly, a World Englishes-informed pedagogy should balance intelligibility priorities with respect for local identity and norms. Jenkins (2000)

cautions against a native-speaker-centric pronunciation model and instead advocates for a focus on intelligibility-critical features. Thus, not all NEA divergences warrant correction. Instead, attention should be focused on those aspects most likely to impede understanding in international, non-native speaker interactions.

Discussions

This study investigates the phonological features of the Nigerian English Accent (NEA) in relation to Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core (LFC), focusing on segmental and suprasegmental aspects that affect intelligibility in English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) contexts. The findings revealed that while NEA aligns with the LFC in some critical respects—such as the maintenance of voicing contrasts in obstruents and general preservation of initial consonant clusters—it also diverges notably in areas like consonant cluster simplification, interdental fricative substitutions, vowel length neutralization, and nuclear stress placement. Suprasegmental features such as rhythm and intonation show less impact on intelligibility, consistent with Jenkins' (2000) argument that these features hold lower functional load in ELF communication.

These outcomes highlight the dual nature of NEA as both a practical and locally legitimate variety of English and a system with phonological features that may challenge intelligibility in global contexts. This section critically evaluates these findings, situating them within existing literature on World Englishes, ELF intelligibility, and second language phonology. By doing so, it stakes a claim for a balanced, World Englishes-informed approach to pronunciation teaching that recognizes NEA's legitimacy while addressing phonological divergences critical for international communication.

Evaluation

Segmental Features: Preservation and Divergence

The maintenance of voicing contrasts in stops (/p/ vs. /b/, /t/ vs. /d/, /k/ vs. /g/) in NEA aligns well with Jenkins' LFC criteria and is crucial for intelligibility across ELF contexts (Jenkins, 2000). This finding confirms previous Nigerian English phonological studies (Awonusi, 2004; Banjo, 1996) that identify voicing as a relatively stable feature, particularly among educated speakers. The ability to differentiate voiced and voiceless obstruents supports clear lexical distinctions, reducing the cognitive load on listeners unfamiliar

with Nigerian phonological patterns. This convergence underscores NEA's potential as a viable medium for international communication, particularly in formal or academic domains where clarity is paramount.

However, consonant cluster simplification in NEA, particularly in medial and final positions, constitutes a significant divergence from LFC norms and poses intelligibility risks. The common epenthesis or elision in clusters (e.g., /tɛkɪs/ for “texts” or /kɔl/ for “cold”) reflects both phonotactic constraints of indigenous Nigerian languages and historical contact influences (Adetugbo, 2004). From a second language acquisition perspective, such simplifications are frequent cross-linguistically but can interfere with listeners' parsing of word boundaries and morphosyntactic cues, thus hindering comprehension (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2010). Furthermore, Jenkins (2000) emphasizes consonant cluster preservation as critical for intelligibility among non-native interlocutors, particularly in contexts with diverse English accents. Therefore, cluster simplification in NEA requires pedagogical attention, possibly through focused phonotactic training and explicit articulation practice, to mitigate misunderstandings in international settings.

The interdental fricative substitutions (/θ/ → [t]/[s]; /ð/ → [d]/[z]) represent another major intelligibility challenge identified in this study. Such substitutions are pervasive across Nigerian English varieties and have been documented extensively in prior research (Awonusi, 2004; Banjo, 1996; Bamgbose, 1995). Jenkins (2000) highlights these sounds as core difficulties for ELF intelligibility, since interdental fricatives carry lexical and grammatical meaning that, when substituted, may lead to confusion (e.g., “think” vs. “tink”). The substitutions also align with the phonological inventories of many Nigerian languages, which lack interdental fricatives, indicating transfer effects (Trudgill, 2003). However, intelligibility outcomes depend heavily on listener experience; familiar interlocutors can often infer meaning from context, while less experienced listeners may struggle. These findings suggest that pronunciation instruction should prioritize raising awareness of interdental fricatives and provide explicit articulatory training, possibly supported by visual aids and auditory discrimination tasks.

Vowel length and quality neutralization in NEA, especially between pairs like /ɪ/ and /i:/ (“ship” vs. “sheep”), presents a nuanced intelligibility issue. Jenkins (2000) categorizes vowel length as a less critical factor for ELF

intelligibility, arguing that communicative success depends more on consonantal clarity. Nevertheless, the consistent merging of multiple vowel contrasts found in this study may cause ambiguity in fast or complex discourse, especially where minimal pairs carry important semantic load. This finding corroborates Adetugbo's (2004) observation that vowel mergers in Nigerian English reflect substrate influence and limited phonemic distinctions. Phonological theory suggests that vowel neutralization can reduce lexical distinctiveness, thereby increasing reliance on contextual guessing (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2014). Consequently, targeted vowel discrimination and production drills could enhance NEA speakers' intelligibility in international contexts without imposing undue conformity to native norms.

Suprasegmental Features: Rhythm, Intonation, and Nuclear Stress

NEA's syllable-timed rhythm contrasts with the stress-timed rhythm of Inner Circle Englishes like British or American English. While rhythm is often a salient marker of accentedness, Jenkins (2000) argues it carries lower functional load in ELF communication. This study confirms that NEA's syllable timing does not pose a significant barrier to intelligibility, echoing findings from other World Englishes studies (Seidlhofer, 2011; Kachru, 1992). The persistence of syllable-timed rhythm likely stems from the rhythmic patterns of Nigeria's indigenous languages, supporting theories of language transfer in prosody (Frajzyngier & Fox, 1994). Pedagogically, rhythm training may be less urgent compared to segmental issues, though incorporating rhythm awareness may still benefit fluency and naturalness.

Intonation in NEA, marked by narrower pitch range and rising terminal contours even in declarative sentences, represents a non-standard but intelligible suprasegmental pattern. Jenkins (2000) excludes intonation contours from the LFC core due to their lesser impact on intelligibility among non-native speakers. Studies on Nigerian English intonation (Awonusi, 2004; Bamgbose, 1995) similarly describe these prosodic features as socially and pragmatically meaningful locally, though occasionally perceived as "unusual" by native speakers. Intonational patterns influence pragmatic meaning and conversational cues, thus their divergence could affect interlocutors' perception and interaction dynamics more than comprehension *per se*. Incorporating pragmatic function awareness into pronunciation pedagogy may therefore support effective ELF communication.

Nuclear stress placement emerges as a critical divergence with potentially significant implications for intelligibility. The tendency among NEA speakers to place nuclear stress consistently on the first syllable, irrespective of pragmatic focus, can obscure meaning and disrupt information structure, especially in contrastive contexts. Jenkins (2000) underscores nuclear stress as one of the few suprasegmental features essential for intelligibility in ELF. Misplaced nuclear stress may lead to misinterpretations or increased processing effort, as listeners struggle to identify intended emphasis or sentence modality. This finding aligns with other studies that highlight prosodic competence as a key factor in ELF effectiveness (Cogo, 2012; Jenkins, 2015). Pedagogically, teaching nuclear stress placement through contextualized and interactive speaking tasks can foster pragmatic competence alongside phonological accuracy.

Implications for Pedagogy and ELF Communication

This analysis supports a nuanced, World Englishes-informed approach to teaching NEA speakers English pronunciation. While it recognizes the legitimacy of NEA as a local norm variety, it also identifies targeted areas where modification would enhance international intelligibility. Jenkins' LFC provides a practical framework for prioritizing features for instruction, allowing educators to avoid the unattainable goal of native-like pronunciation. In particular, teaching interventions should focus on consonant cluster integrity, interdental fricative realization, vowel contrast maintenance, and nuclear stress placement, using communicative and contextualized methods. Further, this study contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of accent and intelligibility in ELF pedagogy. It reaffirms that intelligibility rather than nativeness should be the primary goal and that phonological teaching must respect local linguistic identity while preparing speakers for global interaction (Seidlhofer, 2011; Jenkins, 2007). The findings also call for greater inclusion of Nigerian English phonological data in global ELF research, thereby enriching theoretical models and pedagogical frameworks.

Conclusion

This study has examined the phonological features of the Nigerian English Accent (NEA) through the lens of Jenkins' Lingua Franca Core, highlighting areas of both convergence and divergence. The findings affirm that while

NEA retains critical segmental contrasts that support intelligibility in international English communication, certain divergences—particularly in consonant cluster simplification, interdental fricative substitution, and nuclear stress placement—pose challenges that merit targeted pedagogical attention. By situating NEA within the World Englishes framework, this research underscores the importance of a balanced approach to pronunciation teaching—one that respects local linguistic identity while addressing features that impact intelligibility in global contexts. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on English as a Lingua Franca, offering practical implications for educators aiming to prepare Nigerian speakers for effective international communication.

Future research could expand on this phonological analysis by incorporating perceptual studies involving diverse listener groups, as well as exploring suprasegmental features in greater depth. Additionally, longitudinal intervention studies may assess the efficacy of pedagogical strategies proposed herein.

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