

ISSUES OF INTELLIGIBILITY OF NIGERIAN ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM¹

Gabriela BROZBĂ*

Abstract: Communicative competence in English has been a desired goal in international settings ever since the Empire existed. However, a match, or better yet an overlap, between the expected competence and the actual performance has not always been attained or a native-like one, even if native varieties have constantly been taken as the yardstick for comparison. In international classrooms the situation becomes even more interesting and hard to tackle at times due to factors related to the various linguistic backgrounds and what is perceived as being the standard by the participants involved. Therefore, 24 intelligibility judges have been invited to take part in an intelligibility experiment for some samples recorded at the Romanian-American University in Bucharest. Some of these judges have formal training in linguistics and they were included in order to double check and substantiate our results obtained from the linguistically naïve judges.

Keywords: intelligibility, suprasegmental differences, phonological processes, segmental causes.

1. Introduction

Despite the recognition and acceptance of non-native varieties of English as distinct varieties by a great deal of scholars, the use of local norms in the classroom remains a highly debatable issue. Native models, as well as didactic materials which reflect native norms, tend to be used in teaching practices of non-native speakers. Simo Bobda (2000b: 65) asks himself whether “the New Englishes have a place in the English language teaching (ELT) classroom other than that of the uninvited guest to be driven out at all costs”. The concept of intelligibility is quite complex and it has been frequently misunderstood. Smith (1992: 76) operates a three-way distinction between: intelligibility, comprehensibility and interpretability. In this paper we aim to distinguish between the three and see them at work in a situation involving users of English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL).

This standard-related debate has been fueled by the three-way division ENL ~ ESL ~ EFL. In approaching the degree of usage and the role English plays in the countries of the world today, scientists and researchers have developed a tripartite model which is very well illustrated in Strang’s (1970: 17-18) description, as follows:

At present time, English is spoken by perhaps 350 to 400m people who have it as their mother tongue. These people are scattered over the earth, in far-ranging communities of divergent status, history, cultural traditions and local affinities. I shall call them A-speakers, because they are the principal kind we think of in trying to choose a variety of English as a basis for description. The principal

¹ This work was supported by the strategic grant POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Project ID 140863 (2014), co-financed by the European Social Fund within the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development 2007 – 2013.

* University of Bucharest, brozba.anydora@gmail.com.

communities of A-speakers are those of the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. There are many millions more for whom English may not be quite the mother tongue, but who learnt it in early childhood, and who lived in communities in which English has a special status (whether or not as an official national language) as a, or the, language for advanced academic work and for participation in the affairs of men at the international, and possibly even the national level. These are the B-speakers, found extensively in Asia (especially India) and Africa (especially the former colonial territories). Then there are those throughout the world for whom English is a foreign language, as part of their country's educational curriculum, though the language has no official, or even traditional, standing in that country. These are the C-speakers.

In other words, these types of speakers correspond to the three-circle model proposed by Kachru (1992). In his model, the Inner Circle includes the norm-providing varieties, in the sense that it has given rise to the two leading normative models of Standard English – British and American English. The Outer Circle delimits the so called “norm-developing” (Kachru 1985) varieties of English, in the sense that English, which is only one of the two or more linguistic codes used, has developed an internal standard of usage which has a status and dynamics of its own in such multilingual societies. The Extending Circle shares some characteristics with the Outer Circle, i.e. the spread to these regions has taken place in non-Anglophonic cultural backgrounds and it is restricted to a rather limited number of domains (actually, more restricted as it appears mainly as a secondary subject in education or in domains which involve international communication needs such as tourism, politics, science etc.). However, by contrast, the Expanding Circle is “norm-dependent” (Kachru 1985), in the sense that speakers of EFL need to look elsewhere for criteria to judge their usage.

The variety under scrutiny in this study is the English spoken in Nigeria (hereinafter referred to as NigE), a complex multilingual society, which already subjects it to pressure from diverse linguistic influences, given that there are about 500 indigenous languages at play (according to an estimate by Grimes and Grimes 2009). The three main local languages, i.e. Hausa in the northern part, and Yoruba and Igbo in the southern part (with about 26 million speakers each, according to Ugorji 2010: 2), seem to be further subdividing it in a Northern subvariety and a Southern subvariety (e.g. Gut 2008) but this separation has neither been operationalized nor is the focus of this investigation. Why this variety? First and foremost, it is the largest same-citizenship ESL community in Africa², and, secondly, it was the primary ESL variety to which the investigator had access and for which formal interviews had been conducted.

In the present study our aim is twofold: on the one hand, we will try to assess the degree of intelligibility of the speech of two NigE users by looking at the potential sources of non-intelligibility, and, on the other hand, we will also tentatively try to

² Crystal (2003: 107) claims there are about 60 million users of ESL in Nigeria, but Gut (2008: 35) argues that it is realistic to assume that about 20% of the population members have at least some command of English (which still makes up for a very high number of speakers, given that the country fosters about 150 million inhabitants).

discuss the so-called possible remedies and the issues that may hinder “improved” performance.

2. Analysis

2.1 Methodology

The material under analysis consists of recordings of two NigE samples, for which a Sony ICDUX523BLK Digital Flash Voice Recorder was used. They were recorded in a quiet environment (at the Romanian-American University in January 2013), with “noise cut” function of the device activated.

From the overall recorded material two types of tasks were extracted³: the reading of a list of 20 words (which are the lexical sets proposed by Wells 1982), and the reading of two texts, namely *The North Wind and the Sun* (as adapted by the International Phonetic Association), and *The Boy Who Cried Wolf* (adapted from Aesop).

The experiment was conducted in May 2013 for both groups of student judges. In this session the voice was altered in Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2012) by using the “convert gender” function for the first group (i.e. made up of linguistically naïve judges). However, because this alteration was signaled as a major shortcoming by the participants, a second session of the same experiment was conducted in May 2014 with the group of judges for whom the conversion was originally intended.

During the experiment the students were invited to listen to the first task twice (word list) and to write down while the recording was played as many words as they could understand. For the second task (the read texts), the recordings were played just once and then the students were invited to self-rate the degree of understanding (expressed in percentages) for each text and each speaker. Subsequently, they were asked to retell the story of the texts in a few sentences, and to mention whether the texts were known. Finally, they were also requested to provide in bulleted format some reasons which, they thought, hindered the degree of intelligibility of the content, if there was any such case at all.

2.2 Participants

The recorded samples belong to two students majoring in International Business at the Romanian-American University in Bucharest. One of them is a NigE male whose native language is Yoruba. In terms of proficiency he is below intermediate⁴ and started learning English when he was 3-4 years old (in kindergarten). At the time of the recording he was 30. The other sample subject is a NigE female, who is a native speaker of Edo but who also has solid knowledge of Igbo. She is above intermediate and has also

³ These are part of a larger experimental design which was meant to decrease the formality of the style by task, as follows: a list of words, four texts and a sociolinguistic interview.

⁴ Or what in creole studies is referred to as “mesolectal”.

started learning English in kindergarten. At the moment of the recording she was 26. Both subjects are fluent speakers of Nigerian Pidgin.

The intelligibility judges are 24 students, separated as follows: 14 non-philology students (majoring in International Business at the Romanian-American University), and 10 philology students (minoring in English at the University of Bucharest⁵). The philology students include 2 males and 8 females, aged 20-23 (2 of whom are 40 and 43), whose English level is B2-C1 within the Common European Framework of Reference. The 14 non-philology student judges are identified as follows: 5 Romanian EFL students (3 females and 2 males, aged 19-25; whose English level is B2-C1); 5 international EFL students from Morocco, Turkey and France (all males, aged 21-24; English level – B2-C1); 3 ESL NigE students (males aged between 24-30, below intermediate), and 1 ESL Indian male, 19 of age, upper intermediate⁶.

2.3 Results and discussion

In the case of the first task – the list of words reflecting the lexical sets in Wells (1982) –, the tokens written down by students were matched against the original list and the results were drawn up (see Table 1). The researcher decided to compute the results for the word list task both as a ratio between the exact matches and all words in the original list, and between the exact matches and what was labeled as “caught tokens”, i.e. what they actually managed to write down out of the original 20 words. This operation was motivated by our intuition that the judges may have had different underlying reasons for why in some case only very few tokens were written down: some complained about the pace at which the sampling subjects were reading, but others must have lost focus altogether (if compared to the overall performance of their listening peers – see Table 1 for differences between philology and non-philology students, for example).

What one can notice at a first glance by looking at the figures in Table 1 below is that in the case of the male speaker (coded here as S1), the level of proficiency is reflected in the results across the English varieties of the judges (except for the NigE judges⁷). As far as intelligibility is concerned, the philology students did better than non-philology students, as expected, given that they have formal training in linguistics. However, what was unexpected, and hence contrary to what is generally assumed (that speakers of a language will tend to understand their co-nationals better than people of a different nationality do), is that their fellow NigE participants got the lowest counts.

⁵ Their major varied between Japanese, Dutch and Jewish Studies.

⁶ The two different proficiency-related terminologies reflect the situation of the students: in the case of the EFL students, the ranking was based on previously existing tests, while in the case of ESL students the assessment was based on the researcher’s judgment, as such standardized tests were not required by the University at the time of their admission since they had come from countries where English was an official language.

⁷ They actually lost their focus even faster than their peers and did not pay a lot of attention to the second speaker altogether.

<i>Philology students</i>													
Judge ID	M1	F1	F2	F3	M2	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	Total		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
S1 (/20)	45	30	45	40	40	35	35	55	40	40	40.5		
S1 (/caught)	45	45	47	44	44	39	41	55	50	40	45		
S2 (/20)	70	60	60	60	55	55	70	70	50	60	61		
S2 (/caught)	82	80	0	75	79	58	74	80	71	60	65.9		
Intelligibility score (/20)												50.75	
Intelligibility score (/caught)												55.45	
<i>Non-philology students</i>													
<i>Romanian EFL students</i>							<i>International EFL students</i>						
Judge ID	F9	F10	M3	F11	M4	Total	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	Total	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
S1 (/20)	40	20	30	55	35	36	15	10	10	20	10	13	
S1 (/caught)	47	27	60	65	35	46.8	25	17	25	36	18	24.2	
S2 (/20)	45	40	20	65	55	45	45	30	25	30	30	32	
S2 (/caught)	56	47	44	93	69	61.8	56	100	71	67	50	68.8	
Intelligibility score (/20)	40.5						22.5						31.5
Intelligibility score (/caught)	54.3						46.5						48.65
<i>NigE ESL students</i>						<i>IndE ESL student</i>							
Judge ID	M10	M11	M12	Total	M13								
	%	%	%	%	%								
S1 (/20)	15	25	35	25	40								
S1 (/caught)	27	43	50	40	44								
S2 (/20)	10	20	20	16.7	55								
S2 (/caught)	22	50	80	50.7	73								
Intelligibility score (/20)	20.9				47.5								
Intelligibility score (/caught)	45.4				58.5								

Table 1: results for task I (word list)

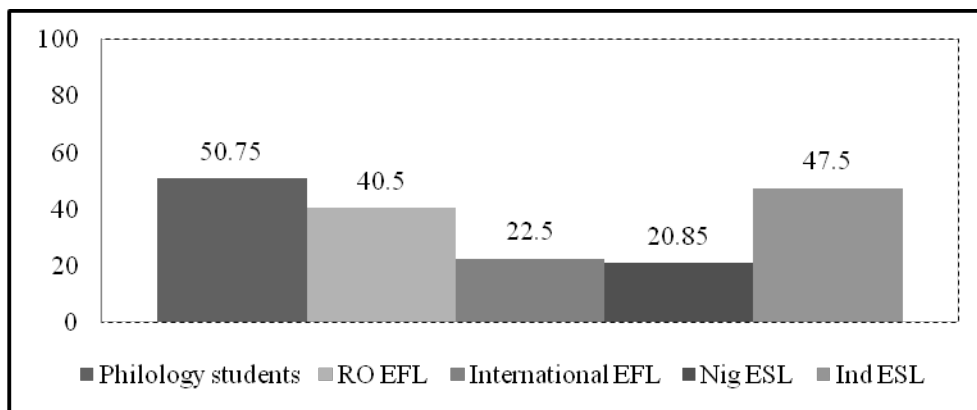


Figure 1: Intelligibility mean scores for task I

If we were to create a scale of intelligibility based on the results in Table 1, and visually enhanced by the graphical representation in Figure 1, this would probably look as follows:

- (1) RO philology EFL » IndE ESL » RO non-philology EFL » international EFL » NigE ESL

This should certainly not be treated as a generalization, or even as a general tendency, given that our number of both sampling subjects and evaluating judges is rather

limited, and also non-homogeneous for the latter (in terms of variety type, proficiency level, exposure to and knowledge of other languages⁸).

For the second task (the two reading texts), results are comparable. Similarly, the proficiency level of the recorded subjects is reflected in the results across the English varieties (except for NigE judges). In terms of intelligibility, the philology students did better than non-philology students again, while the NigE judges still got the lowest counts. Despite the resemblance, results are slightly different, and this may largely be due to the fact that they had to self-rate the degree of intelligibility. In light of Table 2 and Figure 2 below, the hierarchy in (1) looks as shown in (2):

- (2) RO philology EFL >> international EFL >> RO non-philology EFL >> IndE ESL
>> NigE ESL

However, when asked to retell the stories in a few sentence, not all of them were capable to successfully do it, which might be a strong indicator that the percentages for this second task might actually be even much lower.

Overall intelligibility for task I, if we consider the caught tokens for all the judges, amounts to 37.66%, whereas the overall intelligibility for task II (all judges) is of 34.77%, but one has to keep in mind that this may be much lower given that it involves self-rating. This notwithstanding, it seems that intelligibility decreases as the formality of the style decreases. This is somehow to be expected as when decreasing the formality of the task in speech the aim is to steer the participants away from putting on their best pronunciation, i.e. the interviewee will tend to focus less on form and more on content (Labov 1966), and, as a direct consequence, his or her speech will be more and more infused with non-native features, which, in our case, may function as potential inhibitors of intelligibility. This makes one wonder what will happen in the case of a conversational scenario (which could be treated as the least formal speech style in such an experimental design). One can argue that in reality things may be less dramatic than they seem: the scenario above is a study in which speakers do not really acted as they would in a natural conversation. Factors such as rapid speech, which usually add to the difficulty in decoding a message which may already carry unintelligibility triggers, are remediable (by paraphrases, gestures, reformulations etc.), since communication is a negotiation between two participants whose mutual goal is understanding and conveying a message.

⁸ The judges were asked to write down the languages they speak and the countries in which they have lived for a prolonged period of time, in the order of the time spent in each.

<i>Philology students</i>													
Judge ID	M1	F1	F2	F3	M2	F4	F5	F6	F7	F8	Total		
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%		
Text1 -S1	20	50	15	50	10	35	40	50	60	30	36		
Text1 -S2	35	65	70	70	40	60	60	80	50	40	57		
Text2 -S1	30	40	20	70	20	55	40	85	20	20	40		
Text2 -S2	70	70	60	95	60	70	60	90	30	60	66.5		
Overall intelligibility T1											46.5		
Overall intelligibility T2											63.25		
Overall intelligibility											49.88		
<i>Non-philology students</i>													
<i>Romanian EFL students</i>							<i>International EFL students</i>						
Judge ID	F9	F10	M3	F11	M4	Total	M5	M6	M7	M8	M9	Total	
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Text1 -S1	20	50	5	10	30	23	40	10	60	10	60	36	
Text1 -S2	70	60	30	12	30	40.4	70	50	70	20	70	56	
Text2 -S1	35	90	75	15	10	45	20	30	20	50	20	28	
Text2 -S2	80	100	30	35	5	50	30	50	60	70	20	46	
Overall intelligibility T1							31.7						46
Overall intelligibility T2							47.5						37
Overall intelligibility							39.6						41.5
<i>NigE ESL students</i>							<i>IndE ESL student</i>						
Judge ID	M10	M11	M12	Total		M13							
	%	%	%	%	%	%							
Text1 -S1	10	10	5	8.33		20							
Text1 -S2	15	20	10	15		60							
Text2 -S1	5	10	7	7.33		20							
Text2 -S2	10	20	12	14		50							
Overall intelligibility T1						11.66							
Overall intelligibility T2						10.66							
Overall intelligibility						11.16							
						37.5							

Table 2: results for task II (reading texts)

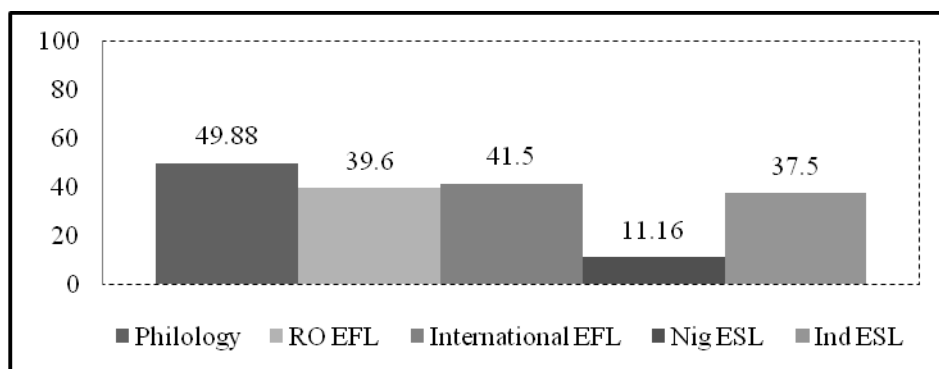


Figure 2: Intelligibility mean scores for task II

2.4 Sources of non-intelligibility

As stated in the introduction, part of our goal is to attempt to identify the potential sources of non-intelligibility. To this end, the researcher has annotated in a text grid in

Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2012) the words included in the first task, for which the judges had to provide a correspondent, to their understanding, in writing. The phonetic transcriptions, as rendered by the recorded speakers, will be provided in what follows, and paired with the corresponding words, as provided by judges in writing. The discussion will bring forth those relevant phonological phenomena that become transparent from the transcription (as they “deviate” from what would be perceived as the standard or “correct” pronunciation), and hence lead to the mismatch.

Not surprisingly, since this task only includes words in isolation, the causes for intelligibility failure will be almost exclusively segmental⁹. Consider the following renditions of some of the words in the list:

(3)	Word	S1	S2	RP
a.	<i>nurse</i>	[nɔs]	[nɔs]	[nɜ:s]
b.	<i>strut</i>	[trɔt]	[strɔʔ]	[strʌt]
c.	<i>goat</i>	[got]	[got]	[gəʊt]
d.	<i>face</i>	[fes]	[fɛns]	[feɪs]
e.	<i>fleece</i>	[flis]	[flɛns]	[fli:s]
f.	<i>thought</i>	[tɔʔ]	[tɔt]	[θɔ:t]
g.	<i>north</i>	[nɔt]	[nɔs]	[nɔ:θ]
h.	<i>mouth</i>	[maʊs]	[maʊθ]	[maʊθ]

The most striking phenomenon is perhaps the substitution of monophthongs which is also reflected in the words provided by the judges. For example, almost all (with the exception of 2 Nigerian judges) listed *nose* for *nurse*, and *stroke*, *struck* or *trout* for *strut*. In this latter case, *trout* must have been the closest thing that came to the judges’ mind for the pronunciation of the word by S1 who reduces the onset cluster by deleting the alveolar fricative, whereas in the case of *stroke* or *struck* the voiceless stop glottalization must have been the main trigger for their choice. Monophthongization of diphthongs is most probably the underlying explanation for treating *goat* as *got*, and *face* as *first* in the case of one of the Nigerian judges. It has been noted in the literature (e.g. Schmied 1991, Simo Bobda 2000a, Mutonya 2008) that the NURSE vowel is often rendered as and merges with the DRESS vowel in West Africa, which in our case, combined with a simplification of the word-final consonant cluster, might explain the word supplied. Stopping and substitution for interdentals, combined with monophthongs substitution, phonemic length leveling, and glottalization of final stops, might account for the following: *talk* or *top* (for *thought*); *not* (for *north*); *mouse* (for *mouth*). Finally, the epenthesis of the alveolar nasal in the case of S2 clearly suggests why we get *fence* (for *face*) and “*flence*” (for *fleece*). Considering all the aforementioned phonological phenomena at play, besides the pace of the reading and the loss of focus, one can claim that the judges were put off by their ability to associate the “distorted” pronunciations with any lexical item available in their mental lexicon and gave up providing a word in such instances altogether.

⁹ The pace at which the speakers read may be another one, but this would more likely influence the number of tokens that they manage to catch rather than the actual understanding of individual items.

In the case of the second task, where judges were asked to explain what hindered intelligibility, we could identify and categorize some reasons as issues related to suprasegmental differences: intonation – not the expected one; different rhythm / robotized (M9); stutter (F10). Some other reasons that are worth mentioning vary between: lack of fluency (they seem to be reading but they lack practice, M1); foreign, weird or particular accent / not standard English / not native speakers of English; incorrect pronunciation; peculiar /weird pronunciation; influenced by their local language (F1, F3); anxiety (M2); hard to follow (F5); what he said doesn't make sense (M10).

The first experimental group, made up of non-philology students complained either that the readers had a strange voice, about poor sound quality or that the voice was not clear, which was largely due to voice / gender manipulation in Praat. Therefore, we repeated the experiment without any manipulation one year later to check whether the file conversion had influenced dramatically our results but the intelligibility scores increased insignificantly. Therefore, we decided not to include them here at all.

2.5 Possible remedies and classroom solutions

We concluded the discussion in 2.3 by claiming that things may not be so dramatic after all in actual conversations due to the different communicative techniques that the speakers may use to enhance comprehension.

However, in classrooms things are slightly different, especially in the case of specialty disciplines where technical terms cannot be really reformulated or paraphrased, and any attempt to do so may be interpreted as a lack of knowledge, hedging or stalling and can, consequently, have a direct impact on the assessment process and be reflected in a poor grade. The teaching staff members involved in such (unfortunate) scenarios have often suggested that language teachers should try to include in their teaching curricula and weekly meetings with the students any of the following: spelling and pronunciation drilling, more exposure to native accents in the form of language trainings and exchange programs abroad/in ENL countries (in partnership with the International Office and the Student Exchange programs), audio and video sessions using authentic materials.

All these sound nice in theory and are feasible in practice but we fear that things may not differ dramatically despite our strenuous efforts to “improve” them. This is largely due to the fact that at the university level students are already at a late stage of their linguistic development¹⁰. Moreover, at the time when such subtle differences are acquired, they are usually enrolled in the education system of their country where the learning process is guided by teachers who already display such features.

The question then remains: what can be done? Maybe the way to go is to prepare teachers for the linguistic diversity of the incoming students and encourage them to be more open and lenient towards inter-variety differences, and, why not, to embrace to a certain extent and acknowledge the reality of the huge amount of variation existing under the umbrella-term “English”.

¹⁰ The acquisition process having been concluded for a very long time, at least at the phonological level.

3. Conclusions

The current investigation has been an attempt to show that ESL usage is clearly an issue, not only for EFL listeners but also for ESL users, and it is, to our knowledge, the first such attempt in the case of NigE.

Some things to consider for future experiments may be the following: controlling the pace of reading (especially for word lists by using timed, computer prompted images), balancing the numbers of participants in terms of varieties in the case of the listeners (and include native judges as well, if possible), and sampling a more representative number of subjects in the case of the readers.

References

- Boersma, P. and Weenink, D. 2012. Praat - Doing phonetics by computer (version 5.3.23) [Computer program]. <http://www.praat.org/> [Retrieved on August 10th, 2012].
- Crystal, D. 2003. *English as a Global Language*, second edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grimes, B. and Grimes, J. 2009. *Ethnologue. Languages of the World*. vol. 1. Dallas: SIL International.
- Gut, U. B. 2008. Nigerian English: Phonology. In R. Mesthrie (ed.), *Varieties of English*, vol. 4, *Africa, South and Southeast Asia*, 35-54. Berlin · New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Kachru, B. B. 1985. Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle. In R. Quirk and H. G. Widdowson (eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, 11-30. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kachru, B. B. (ed.) 1992. *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures*, second edition. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Labov, W. 1966. *The Social Stratification of English in New York*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Mutonya, M. 2008. African Englishes: Acoustic analysis of vowels. *World Englishes* 27 (3/4): 434-449.
- Schmied, J. J. 1991. *English in Africa: An Introduction*. London: Longman.
- Simo Bobda, A. 2000a. Comparing some phonological features across African accents of English. *English Studies* 83 (3): 53-70.
- Simo Bobda, A. 2000b. Research on New Englishes: A critical review of some findings so far with focus on Cameroon English. *AAA – Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 25 (1): 53-70.
- Smith, L. E. 1992. Spread of English and issues of intelligibility. In Kachru (ed.), 75-90.
- Strang, B. M. H. 1970. *A History of English*. London: Methuen.
- Ugorji, C. U. C. 2010. *Nigerian English Phonology*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Wells, J. C. 1982. *Accents of English*, vol. I, *An Introduction*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.