

## ***Teaching Spoken English in the ODL System in Nigeria; Challenges and Strategies for Improvement.***

**Theodore Osagie Iyere**  
Department of English,  
National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos  
theodoreiyere@yahoo.co.uk

### **Introduction**

The Spoken English course is a vital component of the B.A. English language programme in many Open and Distance Learning institutions in Nigeria. The course provides the base for growth in other courses related to grammar, reading and writing abilities. As learning and applying the skills of spoken English are so closely related, the ODL classroom should be a place where the use of spoken language is sensitively supported and where active listening is developed and valued. The act of speaking enables students to make connections between what they know and what they are learning, and listening helps them to acquire knowledge and explore ideas. Although many students have mastered basic listening and speaking skills, some students are much more effective in their spoken communication than others. And those who are more effective communicators experience more success in school and in other areas of their lives. Indeed, the skills that can make the difference between minimal and effective communication in spoken English can be taught, practiced, and improved.

### **What is speech?**

In <http://www.buzzin.net/english.htm> speech is defined as the universal means of oral communication that distinguishes humans from the rest of the animal kingdom, and is considered by linguists as the primary material for study, especially in oral communication situations. So, a spoken language is a human language in which the words are uttered through the mouth. The success of any spoken communication activity is based on the simple method of listen, understand, and speak (Iyere, 2007).

### **What is ODL (Open and Distance Learning)?**

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, opines that “**Distance education**, or **distance learning**, is a field of education that focuses on the pedagogy, technology, and instructional system designs that aim to deliver education to students who are not physically "on site" in a traditional classroom or campus”. It proposes that **Open learning** is “a teaching method that is, among others, founded on the work of Celestine Freinet and Maria Montessori. Open learning is supposed to allow students experience self-determined, independent and interest-guided learning”. The foregoing proposition is corroborated by Open & Distance Learning Quality Council which postulates that “Open and distance learning means there is some flexibility and control in the hands of the learner as to when, where and how (s)he will learn, guided by structure and support from a provider. Often abbreviated to ODL, the term is loosely applied to most forms of learning, except for those at the two extremes: classroom-based learning, as at school, where there is little or no flexibility, and self-study and informal learning, which lack any external support”. Open and Distance Learning is therefore, the combination of on-line learning (e-learning) and other distance education delivery methods. It is the introduction, utilisation and application of ICT to enhance open and distance education thus implementing open and distance learning policies in order to

make learning activities more flexible and enable these learning activities to be distributed among many learning venues.

### **Basic Operating System of ODL Institutions**

The types of available technologies used in distance education are divided into two groups: **synchronous** and **asynchronous**. Synchronous technology is a mode of online delivery where all participants are "present" at the same time requiring a timetable to be organized. Web Conferencing is an example of synchronous technology. Asynchronous technology is a mode of online delivery where participants access course materials on their own schedule. Students are not required to be together at the same time. Message board forums, e-mail and recorded video are examples of asynchronous technology.

**Synchronous technologies** include Web-based VIOP, Telephone, Video conferencing, Web conferencing, Direct-broadcast satellite, Internet radio, Live streaming, while **Asynchronous technologies** include Audio cassette, E-mail, Message board forums, Print materials, Voice Mail/fax , Video cassette/DVD, On-Demand streaming.

There is also **Learning Management System** or **Learning Content Management Systems** which can be used for both Synchronous and Asynchronous learning. (LMS is not so much a learning tool as a framework for a facilitator to better administer the classroom). It is important to state that in a distance learning system, it is not just enough to deliver courses, but to also organize a learning environment in which facilitators have to be involved. In the Nigerian Open and Distance learning environment, facilitators are considered as essential as the other media listed above. A course is then designed, taking into account the respective role of each of those media: tutors and human resources as well as classical and electronic technologies.

At this juncture, the following questions become relevant;

- Does the Open and Distance Learning environment in Nigeria provide a modality of instruction that is better suited for learners of Spoken English?
- Does the Nigerian ODL system facilitate greater learner-facilitator interaction in the spoken English class?
- How will the ODL system in Nigeria provide the Spoken English learners the opportunity of increased interaction with their classmates – either inside or outside the classroom?
- Can the Nigerian ODL system provide the much needed opportunity to develop Spoken English related technology competencies for facilitators and learners of the subject?
- Do the learners of Spoken English in the Nigerian ODL system have access to global resources and experts via internet communication and internet resources in the various institutions?
- It is generally presumed that students come to the university for various reasons; they could be interested in changing careers, or they might want to expand their knowledge base for work or personal reasons. They might even want to expand their cultural background or learn a new language. One of their main reasons for choosing distance education as a delivery method could be that they want to learn at their own pace or at a time and location that is convenient for them. The question that would be asked; 'is this possible with a technical course like Spoken English where so much needs to be done through oral drills?

### **Useful Facts for Facilitators Teaching Spoken English in the Nigerian ODL System.**

From my experience in working with students, I have found out that students learning spoken English in the ODL environment in Nigeria often approach the learning of English pronunciation from a wide variety of native language backgrounds and may speak languages with sound systems that vary a great deal from that of (RP) English. It is therefore, very important for ODL institutions in Nigeria to provide an ideal learning environment that will treat language learning as a social process where comprehensible input is a must when expecting comprehensible output. Most importantly, facilitators should endeavour to provide students with adequate teaching methodology and 'make-shift' resources, as well as suitable vocabulary and learning activities that will encourage the development of effective speaking skills. There is no single best way to teach English language or Spoken English specifically. That is why English language teachers must find methods that are the most appropriate during the different stages of the teaching and learning process and then design the spoken English curriculum to meet their final goals.

### **Suggestions on Techniques of Teaching Spoken English in Nigerian ODL Institutions.**

The teaching of spoken English should be fundamentally different from the teaching of written English. It is therefore, proposed that teachers of English as a second language, no matter where they teach, should follow some easy teaching methods to avoid possible language problems and to exclude the possibility of the language barrier. This also applies, considerably to the teaching of spoken English. However, let us take a cursory look at some methods of language teaching that have been suggested by some linguists.

#### **The oral approach / situational language teaching**

The oral approach was developed from the 1930s to the 1960s by British applied linguists such as Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornsby. They were familiar with the Direct method as well as the work of 19th century applied linguists such as Otto Jespersen and Daniel Jones but attempted to formally develop a scientifically-founded approach to teaching English than was evidenced by the Direct Method. The basic difference between the oral approach and the direct method was that methods devised under this approach would have theoretical principles guiding the selection of content, gradation of difficulty of exercises and the presentation of such material and exercises. The main proposed benefit was that such theoretically-based organization of content would result in a less-confusing sequence of learning events with better contextualization of the vocabulary and grammatical patterns presented. Last but not least, all language points were to be presented in "situations". Emphasis on this point led to the approach's second name. Such learning in situation would lead to students' acquiring good habits to be repeated in their corresponding situations. Teaching methods stress PPP (presentation (introduction of new material in context), practice (a controlled practice phase) and production (activities designed for less-controlled practice)).

#### **The audio-lingual method**

The audio-lingual method was developed around World War 11 when governments realized that they needed more people who could conduct conversations fluently in a variety of languages, to work as interpreters, code-room assistants, and translators. This "informant method" had great success with its small class sizes and motivated learners. The main difference was the developing audio-lingual methods allegiance to structural linguistics, focusing on grammar and contrastive analysis to find differences between the student's native language and the target language in order to prepare specific materials to address potential problems. These materials strongly emphasized drill as a way to avoid or eliminate these problems. Under this method,

students listen to or view recordings of language models acting in situations. Students practice with a variety of drills, and the instructor emphasizes the use of the target language at all times. The idea is that by reinforcing 'correct' behaviors, students will make them into habits.

## **Communicative language teaching**

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), also known as *the Communicative Approach*, emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. Despite a number of criticisms it continues to be popular, particularly in Europe, where constructivists' views on language learning and education in general dominate academic discourse.

## **Proprioceptive language learning method**

The proprioceptive language learning method (commonly called the *feedback training method*) emphasizes simultaneous development of cognitive, motor, neurological, and hearing as all being part of a comprehensive language learning process. Lesson development is as concerned with the training of the motor and neurological functions of speech as it is with cognitive (memory) functions. It further emphasizes that training of each part of the speech process must be simultaneous. The proprioceptive method, therefore, emphasizes spoken language training, and is primarily used by those wanting to perfect their speaking ability in a target language. The proprioceptive method virtually stands alone as a second language acquisition (SLA) method in that it bases its methodology on a speech pathology model. It stresses that mere knowledge (in the form of vocabulary and grammar memory) is not the sole requirement for spoken language fluency, but that the mind receives real-time feedback from both hearing and neurological receptors of the mouth and related organs in order to constantly regulate the store of vocabulary and grammar memory in the mind during speech. For optimum effectiveness, it maintains that each of the components of second language acquisition must be encountered simultaneously. It therefore advocates that all memory functions, all motor functions and their neurological receptors, and all feedback from both the mouth and ears must occur at exactly the same moment in time of the instruction. Thus, according to the proprioceptive method, *all student participation must be done at full speaking volume*. Furthermore, in order to train memory, after initial acquaintance with the sentences being repeated, *all verbal language drills must be done as a response to the narrated sentences which the student must repeat (or answer) entirely apart from reading a text*.

## **Michael Thomas Method**

This method is an audio-based teaching system developed by Michael Thomas, a language teacher in the USA. It was originally done in person, although since his death it is done via recorded lessons. The instruction is done entirely in the student's own language, although the student's responses are always expected to be in the target language. The method focuses on constructing long sentences with correct grammar and building student confidence. There is no listening practice, and there is no reading or writing. The syllabus is ordered around the easiest and most useful features of the language, and as such is different for each language.

## **The use of Contrastive Analysis**

Linguists have tried to identify potential pronunciation difficulties of non-native speakers of a language by using contrastive analysis, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis posits that by contrasting the features of two languages, the difficulties that a language learner might encounter can be anticipated (Crystal, 2003; Fries,

1952). Features of many languages were catalogued by linguists, but it was not possible to systematically predict which areas of English would be difficult for speakers of particular native languages. A less predictive version of the hypothesis was eventually put forth that focused on cross-linguistic influence. Cross-linguistic influence claims that prior language experiences have an impact on the way a language is learned, but these experiences do not consistently have predictive value (Brown, 2000; Wardhaugh, 1970). From this work, linguists have been able to develop lists of sounds that native speakers of particular languages may find problematic in learning English. For example, many students in Nigeria have difficulty producing English sounds like “tʃ”, “z:”, “r”, “θ”, or may have difficulty distinguishing between and producing “ʃ” and “z” sounds, or between the short vowels and their long counterparts.

### **Stress, Intonation, and Rhythm**

Munro and Derwing (1999) observed that even heavily accented speech is sometimes intelligible, and prosodic errors (errors in stress, intonation, and rhythm) appear to affect intelligibility more than do phonetic errors (single sounds). Since this finding, research on and teaching of pronunciation have moved from an exclusive focus on the sounds of language (vowels and consonants) to include suprasegmentals (stress, sentence and word intonation, and speech rhythm), or vocal effects that extend over more than one sound (Crystal, 2003; Florez, 1998; Low, 2006; Munro & Derwing, 1999).

Regarding stress, languages have traditionally been classified as either stress timed or syllable timed. In stress-timed languages (e.g., British and American English, German, Dutch, and Thai) “stressed syllables fall at regular intervals throughout an utterance” (Crystal, 2003, p. 245), and rhythm is organized according to regularity in the timing of the stressed syllables. That is, the time between stressed syllables is equal, as unstressed syllables are spoken more quickly and vowel reduction occurs. For example, the sentence “**Michael writes fast**” is made up of three stressed syllables, as indicated by the bolded letters. The sentence “**Christopher can write fast**” is made up of six syllables, but only three of them are stressed. The unstressed syllables “to,” “pher,” and “can” are spoken quickly and vowel reduction occurs, so the time between the stressed syllables tends to be equal, and both sentences take approximately the same amount of time to say. In syllable-timed languages (e.g., many Nigerian languages like Igbo, Yoruba, etc) syllables are said to be equal in timing although there are features of tonal distinctions which equally make linguists call them “tonal languages”. That is, even when all syllables appear to be equally stressed, the use of tones help distinguish the meanings of words, and all syllables appear to take the same amount of time to utter. In examining the role of stress, or “the degree of force used in producing a syllable,” (Crystal, 2003, p. 435) in intelligibility, Field (2005) asked trained listeners to transcribe recorded material when the variables of word stress and vowel quality were manipulated. He determined that when word stress is erroneously shifted to an unstressed syllable, without a change in vowel quality, utterances are significantly less intelligible than when vowel quality is manipulated. Both native and non-native English-speaking listeners responded similarly when judging the intelligibility of words with misplaced word stress.

Implications of these researches for the ODL classroom instruction are that tutors and facilitators need to spend time teaching learners the rules for word stress, intonation, and rhythm in English as well as focusing on individual sounds that may be difficult for the learners in their classes.

In many ODL institutions in Nigeria, text books or course materials are often produced to support face to face tutorial facilitation. In many cases, these course materials are usually completed by some useful information provided by the facilitator within the period of facilitation. This has been interpreted to be one of the major constraints of distance learning where the learner is expected to be working alone. First of all the learning material has to be composed as a modular structure.

In the second place, it has to simulate a communication situation. Finally, it has to be complete. This means that it has to include all the information needed by the learner: contents, explanations, applications, autocorrected exercises, learning aids, explanatory notes, glossary, and so on. It may interest one to know that majority of these ODL course materials do not really look completely like this ideal model.

## Intelligibility and Varieties of English

English has become an international language, but then, facilitators need to keep in mind that the goal of improving pronunciation for many ODL learners of spoken English is mutual intelligibility, not perfection. Based on the foregoing discussion, a number of instructional strategies for teaching pronunciation that can help ODL students to meet their personal and professional needs. Facilitators can guide their students to do the following:

- Cultivate positive attitudes toward accuracy
- Notice the effects of pronunciation on interactions during tutorial sessions
- Notice prosodic features of language (stress, intonation, rhythm)
- Develop communicative competence

Indeed, facilitators can learn a great deal by observing spoken English learners as they communicate with each other, noting the places where communication breaks down, and attempting to determine which pronunciation features caused miscommunication to occur. As they observe, facilitators can develop a list of pronunciation features to focus on in class and jot notes on note cards to give the students feedback as they listen to group and pair work and learner presentations. Facilitators might use a checklist similar to the one in Table below. For example, when students are giving presentations or working together in pairs or groups, the teacher can use the checklist to make note of when a student is not understood or when several students make the same pronunciation mistake. This information can become material for subsequent pronunciation lessons. Through use of a checklist, learners can be made aware of particular features of speech that potentially cause problems for intelligibility and can work on these features. A checklist can also be helpful to learners as they develop their own pronunciation goals. See the pronunciation checklist below:

### Pronunciation Checklist

Pronunciation	Always	Sometimes	Never
Mark "x" where applicable, according to frequency of error			
<b>Consonants</b>			
th (e.g., <i>thin</i> —not[t])			
th (e.g., <i>then</i> —not[d])			
s & z (e.g., <i>sue</i> vs. <i>zoo</i> )			

r (e.g., <i>rice</i> vs. <i>lice</i> )			
l (e.g., <i>parrot</i> vs. <i>palate</i> )			
<b>Final consonants</b>			
Voiceless, voiced (e.g., <i>nip</i> . <i>nib</i> ; <i>seat</i> vs. <i>seed</i> ; <i>lock</i> vs. <i>log</i> ; <i>larch</i> vs. <i>large</i> )			
final l (e.g., <i>final</i> , <i>little</i> , <i>sell</i> )			
final s (e.g., <i>pupils</i> , <i>writes</i> , <i>schools</i> )			
-ed suffix to mark past tense			
<b>Vowel variation</b>			
<i>hill</i> vs. <i>heel</i>			
<i>cut</i> vs. <i>cart</i>			
<i>cot</i> vs. <i>caught</i>			
<i>pull</i> vs. <i>pool</i>			
<i>pen</i> vs. <i>pan</i>			
<b>Intonation</b>			
Use of rising intonation: yes/no questions (e.g., <i>Are you coming?</i> )			
Use of falling intonation: statements (e.g., <i>Yes, I am coming</i> ); <i>wh</i> questions (e.g., <i>What are you doing?</i> )			
<b>Voice</b>			
Mark "x" where applicable, according to frequency of error			
<b>Audibility level</b>			
Too loud			
Too soft			
Fading out at end of statements			
<b>Pitch and range</b>			
Monotonous			
<b>Other comments</b>			

*Note:* This checklist was designed by Nora Samosir & Low Ee Ling (2000) as a means to assess teachers' oral English proficiency.

Now, for prosodic features of language—word stress, intonation, and rhythm—are extremely important to comprehensibility, in addition to correct pronunciation of discrete letter sounds. Teachers should include prosodic training in instruction (Bally & Holm, 2005; Gauthier, Shi, & Yi, 2009; O'Brien, 2004). Teachers can begin with listening activities (e.g., listening for rising intonation in yes/no questions) and then have learners compare question intonation in English

with that of their native languages and then imitate dialogues, perform plays (see O'Brien, 2004), and watch videos in which yes/no questions are used (e.g., Hardison, 2005).

There are also a number of activities facilitators can do to help learners use word stress correctly:

- *Lead perception exercises on duration of stress, loudness of stress, and pitch.* These exercises will help learners recognize the difference between stressed and unstressed syllables (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Field, 2005).
- *Do exercises on recognizing and producing weak, unstressed syllables* (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Field, 2005).
- *Present pronunciation rules for stress* (Dalton & Seidlhofer, 1994; Kenworthy, 1987). For example, teach learners that in reflexive pronouns, the stress is always on the word *self* (e.g., *myself, ourselves* [Grant, 2010, p. 57]).
- *Teach word stress when teaching vocabulary* (Field, 2005). For example, any time that new words are introduced, point out to learners where the major stress falls.

The goal of pronunciation teaching and learning is communicative competence, not the complete absence of an accent (Gatbonton, Trofimov, & Magid, 2005). By using audiotapes and videotapes, especially of speakers of different varieties of English, facilitators can give learners meaningful exposure to variation in pronunciation and increase their communicative competence (Florez, 1998).

## Conclusion

Spoken English is a vital component of the English language arts curriculum and provides the base for growth in reading, writing, and listening abilities. As learning and applying the skills of Spoken English are so closely related, the classroom should be a place where the use of spoken language is sensitively supported and where active listening is developed and valued. Talk enables students to make connections between what they know and what they are learning, and listening helps them to acquire knowledge and explore ideas. Subsequently, the abilities to listen critically and to express oneself clearly and effectively contribute to a student's success in school and later in life. Although there are challenges to teaching and learning spoken English in an ODL environment, it is an area vital to students learning English as a second language. The various techniques highlighted in this paper shed light on pronunciation features to be taught and on learners' goals and motivations for improving their pronunciation. We therefore, proposed that by incorporating current research and its implications into their teaching technique, facilitators can help students gain the skills they need for effective spoken communication in English.

## References and Bibliography

- Bailly, G., & Holm, B. (2005). SFC: A trainable prosodic model. *Speech Communication*, 46(3/4), 348-364.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.



- Dalton, C., & Seidlhofer, B. (1994). *Pronunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Derwing, T.M., & Munro, M.J. (2005). Second language accent and pronunciation teaching: A research-based approach. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 379-397.
- Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the listener: The role of lexical stress. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 399-423.
- Florez, M.C. (1998). *Improving adult ESL learners' pronunciation skills*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. Retrieved June 30, 2009, from [www.cal.org/caela/esl\\_resources/digests/Pronun.html](http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/digests/Pronun.html)
- Fries, C. (1952). *The structure of English*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World.
- Gatbonton, E., Trofimovich, P., & Magid, M. (2005). Learners' ethnic group affiliation and L2 pronunciation accuracy: A sociolinguistic investigation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 39(3), 489-511.
- Gauthier, B, Shi, R., & Yi, X. (2009). Learning *prosodic* focus from continuous speech input: A neural network exploration. *Language Learning and Development*, 5(2), 94-114.
- Grant, L. (2010). *Well said*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Hardison, D. (2005). Contextualized computer-based L2 prosody training: Evaluating the effects of discourse context and video input. *CALICO Journal*, 22(2), 175-190.
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distance\\_education](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distance_education)
- <http://www.buzzin.net/english.htm>
- Iyere, T.O.(2006) *Spoken English*, National Open University of Nigeria, Lagos.
- Kenworthy, J. (1987). *Teaching English pronunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Low, E.L. (2006). A review of recent research on speech rhythm: Some insights for language acquisition, language disorders and language teaching. In R. Hughes (Ed.), *Spoken English, TESOL and applied linguistics: Challenges for theory & practice*. London: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- O'Brien, M. G. (2004). Pronunciation matters. *Teaching German*, 37(1), 1-9.
- Wardhaugh, R. (1970). The contrastive analysis hypothesis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4(2), 123