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**A Study of Phono-Syntactic Variations in Selected Adolescent L2 Learners'
Reading and Writing Tasks**

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Abstract

This study leveraged the fact that Nigerian Adolescents' English language usage at the phonological and syntactic levels is influenced by pronunciation irregularities, non-standard expressions, wrong spellings and grammatical errors in their reading/pronunciation task as well as essay writing. Therefore, the study set out to investigate phono-syntactic variations in selected adolescents' L2 learners' reading and essay writing tasks. The data for this study constituted 15 purposively selected recurring words that were extracted from the recordings of reading tasks assigned to 60 adolescent learners at two secondary schools at Ogbomosho metropolis, Nigeria. Data were drawn from sample essay writings of the studied secondary students. The instruments for data collection were WASSCE SSCE questions on English language test 2017 passage six and an essay writing question. Tape recorder was adopted for recording participants' utterances for phonological analysis. The study adopted a blend of the Complex Dynamic Systems theory and Interlanguage Theory for data interpretations. The study found that phonemes substitutions and characterise the phonological variations of the adolescents which reflect overriding influence of Yoruba phonology on the learners' English pronunciation. Also, at the level of syntactic analysis, the study recorded syntactic variations in forms of incorrect word formations, mis-spellings, and inappropriate compound formations, all of which impact on the intended meaning communicated in the essays. The study concluded that even though pho-syntactic variations are noticeable, the writers' intended messages remain largely recoverable by virtue of contextual interpretations.

Keywords: adolescent language usage, interlanguage phonology, L2 learning, syntactic variation

Introduction

Variations in language use have become the central focus in contemporary linguistic research, referring to the actual ways in which language users employ language in everyday conversations, including the frequency, contexts, and functions of linguistic forms. While linguistic competence evaluates how an individual's internalised knowledge of language, and linguistic performance examines the practical application of that knowledge in communication, usage-based language variation considers the influence of repeated linguistic experience on the development of linguistic knowledge. Usage-based linguists argue that linguistic structures emerge from recurrent patterns of language use rather than from a wholly separate innate grammatical system (Bybee, 2006; Ellis, 2015).

From this perspective, language learning is shaped through continuous participations in meaningful communicative activities, whereby repeated exposure to linguistic forms strengthens speakers' knowledge and understanding of language. Recent scholarship has further underscored the importance of language usage in language acquisition and maintenance. According to Ellis (2015), frequent encounters with particular linguistic forms facilitate their entrenchment in memory, thereby contributing to the development of linguistic competence. In a multilingual setting, speakers often draw upon diverse linguistic resources in response to varying social and communicative demands. Consequently, competence, performance, and usage are best understood as interrelated dimensions of language ability, each contributing to a more comprehensive explanation of how language is acquired, processed, and employed in real-life communicative contexts. In this study, usage-based variations at the phono-syntactic levels are evaluated in selected adolescent L2 learner's reading and writing tasks.

Literature Review

This section contains review of related literature to the study. The concepts of phonological and syntactic variations are central to this study, hence the discussion in this section centers on these two topics.

Phonological Variation

Phonological variation is a sociolinguistic phenomenon like other variations in lexico-grammatical aspect of language. It is a term used to describe the differences that occur in pronunciation of words and other grammatical structures within a language, which are affected by social factors ranging from ethnicity to regional factors (Gobir & Affinihi, 2022). Phonology-based variations could be explained based on differences in pronunciation across speakers, contexts, or dialects of the same language or other languages. Variations at the level of phonology are often related to differences in realisation of phonemes, stress patterns, and intonation. These changes sometimes occur at multiple levels—from individual speakers to entire speech communities (Behera, 2023).

Like other forms of language variation, phonological variation can be a natural pattern of linguistic diversity which reflects the dynamic nature of spoken language (Olugbodi, 2023). It is also structured and probabilistic, meaning that while certain realisations are favored in specific contexts, there is a degree of unpredictability. Studying phonological variation provides insights into social identity, language change, and the interaction between language and society (Coetzee, 2016). Phonological variation has been deeply intertwined with phonological theory. Phonological variation in all languages is massively structured and orderly; there is a random component, such that the surface realisation of a given utterance cannot be predicted categorically, but the patterns of realisations in particular contexts are

probabilistically structured with great regularity – particular realisations are strongly favored by particular phonological contexts (Guy, 2007).

Syntactic Variation

Like phonological variation, syntactic variation is a usage-based form of language use which could be accounted for at a grammatical level of structural descriptions and classifications. Syntactic variation provides essential insights into how learners of a second language (L2) are influenced by the structural patterns of their first language (L1). Gass and Selinker (2008) emphasised that syntactic interference occurs when structural patterns from a learner's first language influence the formation of sentences in a second language, often resulting in non-standard constructions.

In collaboration with other recent studies, Olajobi and Ofodu (2023) and Olugbodi (2025a) submitted that secondary school students in Nigeria frequently display syntactic interference in both written and digital communication, with common errors observed in article usages, preposition placements, tense marking, and sentence linking. They harped on the point that Yoruba, as a Niger-Congo language, differs significantly from English in its grammatical structures (Awobuluyi, 2017; Atoyebi, 2010). While both languages follow a subject-verb-object order, Yoruba often omits articles, auxiliary verbs, and prepositions, which are mandatory in English.

Consequently, learners may write sentences such as "I saw cat" instead of "I saw a cat" or "He went market" instead of "He went to the market," reflecting the direct transfer of L1 patterns into L2 production (Adegbija, 2000, Bamgbose, 2013). They further submitted that tense-marking errors are also prevalent because Yoruba expresses temporal relations contextually, relying on adverbs rather than verb conjugation, resulting in sentences like "She go school yesterday" instead of "She went to school yesterday (Awobuluyi, 2017; Atoyebi, 2010).

Variations at the level of syntactic structures are examined in this study from the Interlanguage and Complex-Dynamic Systems theoretical perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is a blend of the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) propounded by Larsen-Freeman (1994), and Interlanguage Theory by Selinker (1972). The Complex Dynamic Systems theorist holds that language is characterised by interconnected subsystems which combine the aspects of language appraisal— phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. According to Freeman (1997) and De Bot et al. (2007), these aspects of language study are capable of interacting based on contextual influences. As a result, language learning itself is affected by both individual and contextual differences. This position is also held by De Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007), Verspoor et al. (2011), Mercer (2011), Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) and Olugbodi (2025b), as they are of the view that language learning like other forms of learning is highly individualistic, context-sensitive, and shaped by ongoing interaction with the learning environment. This perspective is particularly valuable to the discussion of why learners demonstrate different levels of the English language proficiency.

Interlanguage Theory highlights the significant role of L1 transfer in second language learning. The theory explaining that learners construct linguistic systems while acquiring a second language. By interlanguage, we mean the representational, transitional and evolving system that is distinct from both the learner's native language and the target language. It is developed by learners through the processes of language transfer, overgeneralisation, learning strategies, and communication strategies (Selinker, 1972; Odlin, 1989). Interlanguage Theory therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding the persistence of L1-influenced morphological and syntactic patterns among L2 learners of English.

Methodology

Data selection for this study is guided by the need to examine natural language usage patterns among adolescent L2 learners of the English language in secondary schools. This was achieved through a phono-syntactic evaluation of the reading and essay writing tasks of selected students. A qualitative method was employed for the analysis of the data using a blend of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory and Interlanguage Theory. The data for this study constituted 15 purposively selected recurring words that were extracted from the recordings of reading tasks assigned to 60 adolescent learners at two secondary schools at Ogbomosho metropolis, Nigeria. Also, data were drawn from sample essay writings of the studied secondary students. The instruments for data collection were WASSCE questions on English Language test 2017 passage six and an essay writing question. Tape recorder was adopted for recording participants utterances for phonological analysis.

Data Analysis

Phono-syntactic variations are evident in the reading/ pronunciation task and essay writing of the participants examined in this study. Therefore, in this section, the analysis is carried out at the phonological level and subsequently at the syntactic level with emphasis on the data samples where phono-syntactic variations are observed.

Phonological Analysis

The phonological analysis is carried out in this section. The data samples constituting fifteen (15) selected recurring phonemes in the reading/pronunciation task are presented on Table 1 and interpreted based on the findings that were peculiar to the realisations of the words. The analysis is supported with the application of the Interlanguage Theory.

Table 1: Presentation of the variant phonemes and participants' realisations

S/N	Variant Word	SBE Transcription	Participants' Realisations	Variant Phonemes
1	these	/ði:z/	[di:z]	/ð/ → /d/
2	throw	/θrəu/	[trəu]	/θ/ → /t/
3	gazing	/geɪzɪŋ/	[geɪsɪŋ]	/z/ → /s/
4	delicious	/dɪ'liʃəs/	[de'liʃəs]	/ɪ/ → /e/
5	our	/aʊə/	[awə]	/aʊ/ → [aw]
6	the	/ðə/	[də]	/ð/ → /d/
7	weekend	/wi:kend/	[wikend]	/i:/ → /i/
8	shore	/ʃɔ:/	[dɔ:]	/ʃ/ → /d/
9	son	/sʌn/	[sɒn]	/ʌ/ → /ɒ/
10	abuse	/əbju:s/	[əbju:z]	/s/ → /z/
11	asked	/ɑ:skt/	[ɑ:skd]	/t/ → [d]
12	that	/ðæt/	[dæt]	/ð/ → /d/
13	usual	/ju:ʒuəl/	[ju:ʒuəl]	/ʒ/ → /ʃ/
14	mother	/mʌðə/	[mɒdə]	/ʌ/ → /ɒ/
15	away	/əweɪ/	[eɪweɪ]	/ə/ → /eɪ/

The participant's pronunciation of the selected (fifteen-15) recurring words are presented on Table 1 exhibits several phonological variations attributable to first-language (L1) influence and phonological interference. The voiced dental fricative /ð/ in these was realised as the voiced alveolar plosive /d/, while the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ in throw was replaced with the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/. These substitutions reflect negative crosslinguistic transfer arising from the absence of the English dental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ in the Yoruba phonological system, leading the learner to substitute them with the closest native consonants.

In gazing, the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ was devoiced to /s/, demonstrating phonological interference through the loss of the voicing contrast. Similarly, the lax front vowel /ɪ/ in the initial syllable of 'delicious' was realised as the close-mid front vowel /e/, indicating vowel substitution influenced by the comparatively smaller Yoruba vowel inventory. The diphthong /aʊ/ in 'our' was produced as [aw], reflecting a phonetic simplification of the glide. Collectively, these variations reveal the influence of the learners' first language on their

production of English consonants and vowels, particularly where English phonemes have no direct equivalents in Yoruba. They further demonstrate that both segmental substitutions and phonetic simplifications contribute to variations from Standard British English pronunciation among adolescent English language learners.

Phonemic variations also abound in the realisations of /ð/→[d] in *the*, /i:/→[i] in *weekend*, /ʃ/→[d] in *shore*, /ʌ/→[ɒ] in *son*, /s/→[z] in *abuse*, /t/→[d] in *asked*, and /ɪ/→[e] in *escaped*. The substitution of /ð/ with [d] in *the* represents positive transfer, resulting from the absence of /ð/ in Yoruba. The shortening of /i:/ to [i] in *weekend* reflects phonological interference associated with difficulty maintaining English vowel-length distinctions. The realisation of /ʃ/ as [d] in *shore* constitutes negative transfer, reflecting the replacement of an unfamiliar fricative with a more familiar stop consonant from the participant's phonological inventory. The substitution of /ʌ/ with [ɒ] in *son* represents another instance of negative transfer, arising from differences between Yoruba and English vowel systems.

Likewise, the realisation of /s/ as [z] in *abuse* demonstrates phonological interference involving voicing, while the pronunciation of *asked* as [ɑ:skd] reflects voicing interference through /t/→[d] substitution. The participant produced seven phonological variations: /ð/→[d] in *that*, /ʒ/→[ʃ] in *usual*, /ʌ/→[ɒ] in *mother*, /e/→[i:] in *heavy*, /ə/→[eɪ] in *away*, /ə/→[əu] in *profusely*, and /ɪ/→[e] in *retorted*. The substitution of /ð/ with [d] in *that* represents positive transfer, resulting from the absence of the voiced dental fricative in Yoruba. The realisation of /ʒ/ as [ʃ] in *usual* reflects phonological interference through devoicing.

The participant replaced the voiced postalveolar fricative with its voiceless counterpart, indicating incomplete acquisition of English voicing contrasts. The substitution of /ʌ/ with [ɒ] in *mother* constitutes negative transfer, while the realisation of /e/ as [i:] in *heavy* demonstrates

phonological interference through vowel raising. The realisation of /ə/ as [eɪ] in *away* represent negative transfer involving schwa replacement. Yoruba generally lacks the extensive vowel reduction processes found in English; therefore, the participant replaced the reduced vowel with fuller vowel realisations. Together, these variations reveal a pronunciation system strongly influenced by Yoruba phonology and characterized by systematic interlanguage development.

Syntactic Analysis:

Syntactic analysis is carried out in this section. Each data extract is presented in figures, and the interpretation follows. The data are analysed based on the positions of the Interlanguage Theory and the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory.

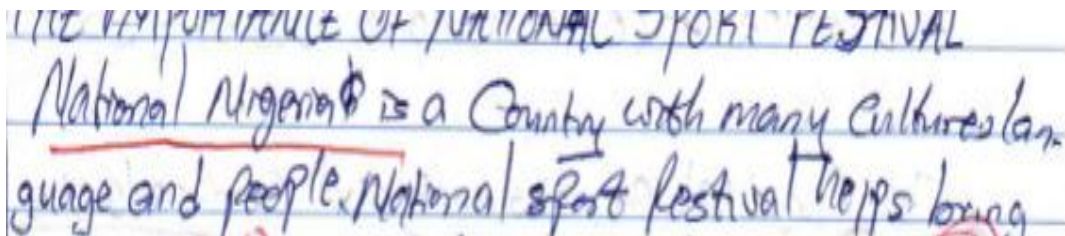


Figure 1: writing sample i

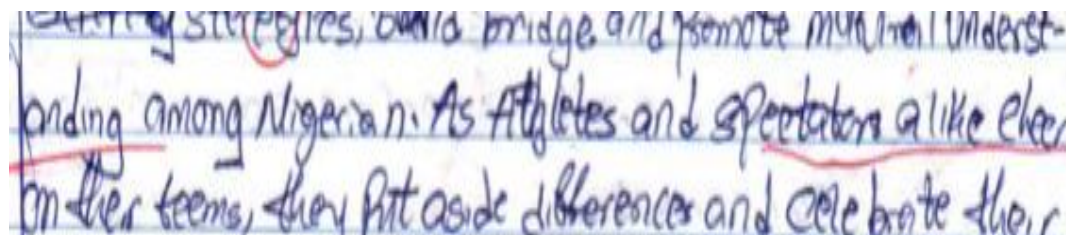


Figure 2: writing sample ii

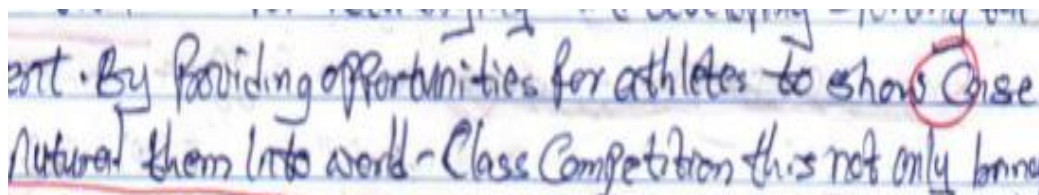


Figure 3: writing sample iii

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate the syntactic variations evident in the expressions “National Nigeria,” “spectation,” “a like,” “cheer on their teams,” “natural them into world-class

competition,” and “connectivity an digital learning theory” demonstrate instability in the learners’ developing syntactic system, particularly in noun phrase construction, word-class selection, coordination, and clause formation. The incorrect constituent ordering in “National Nigeria,” the faulty segmentation in “a like,” the misuse of “natural” as a verb in “natural them into world-class competition,” the omission of the coordinating conjunction in “connectivity and digital learning theory,” and the fragmentary use of “cheer on their teams” all indicate that the learners have not yet achieved stable control of English syntactic rules.

The observed variations therefore represent developmental fluctuations characteristic of a self-organising linguistic system that is gradually adapting to the structural conventions of Standard English. CDST thus explains these syntactic patterns as evidence that second-language development is nonlinear, adaptive, and continually evolving, with learners progressively restructuring their grammatical knowledge as they receive additional linguistic input and communicative experience. From the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), these variations are not isolated or random errors but manifestations of a dynamic language system in which syntactic competence develops through continuous interaction among multiple linguistic subsystems, including vocabulary, morphology, semantics, and syntax. As these subsystems develop at different rates, temporary instability in one subsystem can influence the organisation of another, resulting in structurally ill-formed expressions such as those identified in the data.

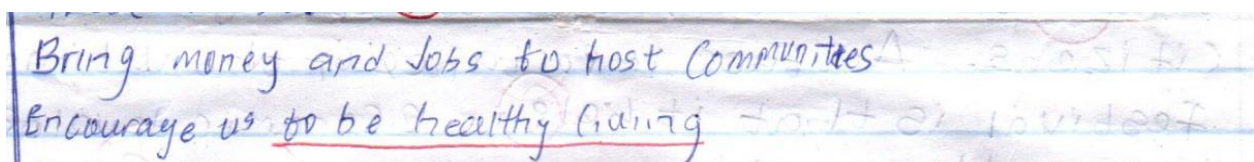


Figure 4: writing sample iv

The expression “to be healthy living” in Figure 4 exhibits a syntactic variation resulting from the incorrect combination of an infinitive construction and a participial phrase. In Standard

English, the complement following the infinitive “to be” should be an adjective or a noun phrase; however, the combination of the adjective “healthy” with “living” produces an ill-formed structure because “living” is not appropriately functioning as a complement in this context. The intended expressions are “to be healthy,” “to live a healthy life,” or “healthy living,” depending on the intended meaning.

From the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), this syntactic variation reflects the dynamic and evolving nature of second-language development, where learners’ syntactic knowledge is continuously re-organised through the interaction of lexical, morphological, and grammatical subsystems. The inappropriate combination of familiar lexical items demonstrates temporary instability within the developing syntactic system rather than a fixed grammatical deficiency, indicating that the learner is still refining the structural rules governing complement formation in Standard English.

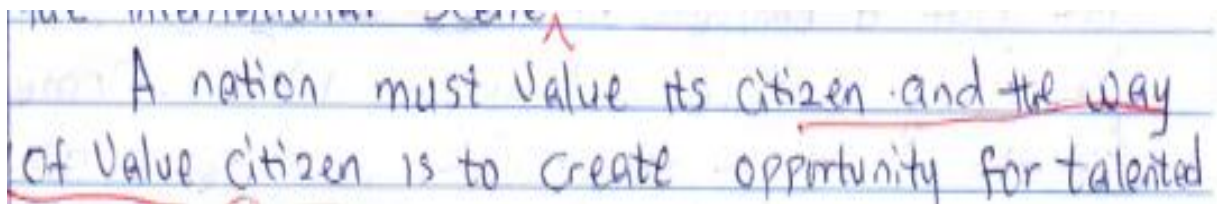


Figure 5: writing sample v

In Figure 5, the expression “A nation must value it’s citizen and the way of value citizen is to” contains several syntactic variations that affect grammatical well-formedness. The clause “the way of value citizen” is structurally ill-formed because it violates the syntactic rules governing noun phrase and verb phrase formation. Specifically, “value” is incorrectly used in place of the gerund “valuing”, while “citizen” should appear in the plural form “citizens” to agree with the generic reference. A grammatically appropriate construction would be “the way of valuing citizens is to...” or more naturally, “the way to value citizens is to...” Additionally, “it’s” should be “its” because the possessive determiner, rather than the contraction “it is,” is required.

The learner demonstrates partial knowledge of English grammatical structures but has not yet stabilised the rules governing possessive determiners, gerund formation, noun number agreement, and noun phrase construction. Such fluctuations are characteristic of a developing system that is continuously reorganising toward greater syntactic accuracy through increased language exposure and use. From the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), these syntactic variations reflect the dynamic interaction of lexical, morphological, and syntactic subsystems during second-language development.

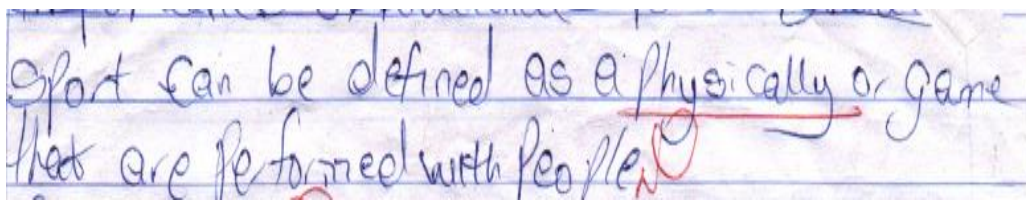


Figure 6: writing sample vi

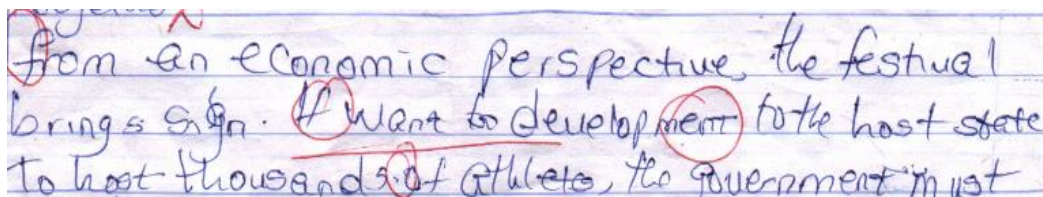


Figure 7: writing sample vii

On Figures 6 and 7 above, the expressions "Sports can be defined as a physically or game that are performed" and "if want to development" exhibit syntactic variations involving noun phrase construction, subject-verb agreement, and clause formation. In the first expression, "physically" is incorrectly used in place of the adjective "physical," while the omission of the head noun "activity" results in an incomplete noun phrase. Additionally, the relative clause "that are performed" violates the rule of subject-verb agreement because the singular coordinated noun phrase "a physical activity or game" requires the singular verb "is performed." In the second expression, "if want to development" is syntactically incomplete due to the omission of the grammatical subject before "want" and the incorrect use of the noun "development" instead of the base verb "develop" after the infinitive marker "to."

These variations can be explained through Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), which posits that second-language syntactic development is a dynamic, interconnected, and non-linear process. The observed errors indicate that the learner's syntactic system is still self-organising, with instability in one grammatical subsystem—such as word class selection, phrase structure, or agreement—affecting the accuracy of other subsystems. Rather than representing isolated mistakes, these forms illustrate developmental variability that emerges as learners continuously restructure their grammatical knowledge through ongoing linguistic experience. As exposure to English increases, these interacting subsystems gradually become more stable, leading to greater syntactic accuracy and conformity with Standard English norms.

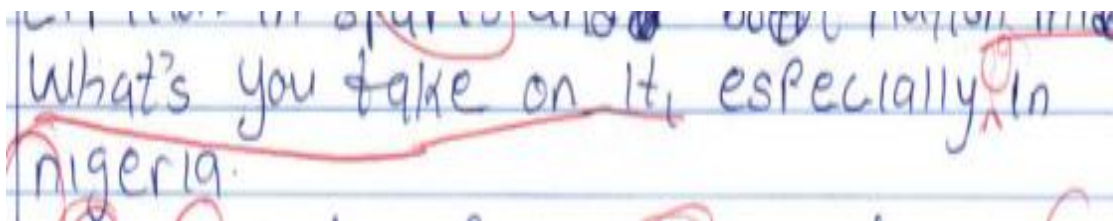


Figure 8: writing sample viii

The expression, “What’s you take on it” in Figure 8 exhibits a syntactic variation involving the formation of an interrogative sentence. The contraction “What’s” (meaning “what is” or “what has”) is incorrectly used before the noun phrase “you take.” In Standard English, the possessive determiner “your” is required to modify the noun “take,” making the correct expression “What’s your take on it?” The error disrupts the noun phrase because “you” functions as a subject pronoun rather than a possessive determiner, thereby violating the syntactic rule governing noun modification.

This variation reflects the dynamic interaction of grammatical subsystems during second-language development from the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). The learner demonstrates partial mastery of interrogative sentence formation but has not yet stabilised the syntactic distinction between subject pronouns and possessive determiners. This

temporary instability illustrates the nonlinear nature of language acquisition, in which grammatical structures are continuously re-organised and refined through ongoing exposure to and use of the target language.

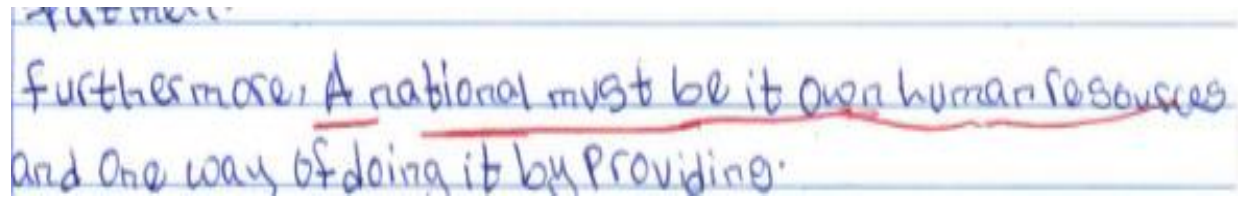


Figure 9: writing sample ix

In figure 9, the expression “A national must be it own human resources” exhibits syntactic variations involving possessive determination, noun selection, and subject–complement agreement. First, the possessive determiner “it” is incorrectly used instead of “its,” resulting in the ungrammatical sequence “it own.” Second, the noun “national” is inappropriately used as the subject where “nation” is required, thereby creating an ill-formed subject noun phrase. Furthermore, the complement “human resources” is plural and semantically incompatible with the singular subject in the context of the verb “be.” A grammatically appropriate construction would be “A nation must develop its own human resources” or “A nation must rely on its own human resources,” depending on the intended meaning.

The learner’s partial knowledge of possessive forms, noun selection, and clause structure has not yet stabilised, resulting in temporary grammatical variability that is characteristic of the nonlinear and self-organising process of language acquisition. From the perspective of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), these variations reflect the dynamic interaction of lexical, morphological, and syntactic subsystems during second-language development.

Findings

The analysis of the learners' pronunciations and writing have shown that there are phono-syntactic variations and those variations have accompanying implications for meaning explication. Phonologically, the analysis has revealed that the L2 learners' first-language, predominantly Yoruba language, influences their second-language development as there were recurrent substitutions of phonemes, including /d/→[d], /θ/→[t], /t/→[ʃ], /ʒ/→[ʃ], /ɑ:/→[æ], /ʌ/→[ɒ], /i:/→[i], /ɪ/→[e], /ə/→[eɪ], /ə/→[əʊ], /z/→[s], and /s/→[z]. This has demonstrated the continuing influence of Yoruba phonology on the learners' English pronunciation. Although these substitutions rarely prevent communication, they reduce conformity to Standard British English pronunciation and indicate incomplete acquisition of certain English phonological contrasts.

Syntactically, the learners exhibit errors cutting across incorrect word formation, misspellings, and inappropriate compound formations, all of which impact on the intended meaning communicated in the writing pieces. Even though these variations are noticeable, the writers' intended messages remain largely recoverable by virtue of contextual interpretation. This is evidence that the learners are equipped lexically and they have semantic knowledge by they have not adequately master English morpho-syntactic conventions of the English language.

Additionally, the writing pieces of the learners are filled with syntactic variations in the forms of sentence structure anomaly, problem with word ordering, subject-verb agreement, tense, and the omission or misuse of grammatical elements. All of these, put together have a more pronounced effect on meaning creations. These variations also reduce semantic clarity, create ambiguity, and weaken the logical organisation of ideas. As a result, there is an increasing need for the readers. cognitive efforts to be able to interpret the texts. In this situation, readers can only infer the writers' intended meanings based on contextual cues. This suggests that, while the learners are able to communicate intended ideas in the English language, the syntactic

variations that characterise their English language usage reduce precision, clarity and coherence in their essay writing pieces.

These findings could be supported from the perspective of Interlanguage Theory. Interlanguage Theory views learners as those with evolving linguistic systems, a stronger semantic competence than the phonological, morphological and syntactic competence and whose components of language develop at different rates, with semantic competence often preceding full morphological and syntactic mastery.

Conclusion

This study has examined selected adolescent learners' English language usage at the level of phono-syntactic variation to characterise their level of pronunciation proficiency in reading task as well as their syntactic proficiency in essay writing task. Data were interpreted using the Interlanguage Theory as well as the Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. The study submits that phonemes substitutions and characterise the phonological variations of the adolescents which reflect overriding influence of Yoruba phonology on the learners' English pronunciation. Also, at the level of syntactic analysis, the study recorded syntactic variations in forms of incorrect word formation, mis-spellings, and inappropriate compound formations, all of which impact on the intended meaning communicated in the selected essays. The study concludes that even though pho-syntactic variations are noticeable, the writers' intended messages remain largely recoverable by virtue of contextual interpretations.

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