

## The Emergence of Elocution and the Language Learner's Dilemma.

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### Abstract

*The emergence of Elocution as a subject in most private schools in Nigeria over the past one decade has left many shades to the teaching and learning of speaking. This paper examines the current trends in the teaching of elocution and the language learner's dilemma in adapting to the varied speech forms in their linguistic domains. It utilises words drawn from the Ibadan 400 wordlist with some textual materials. Data were elicited from some elocutionists and learners in Warri Delta State using purposive sampling method. This work adopts the variationist and speech accommodation theories to investigate the communicative competence, proficiency and how learners apply these theories to adjust their accents, diction and communication styles based on the participants in the discourse. The qualitative analytical method was employed to analyse the data. Task and text-based approaches of teaching were used to check the fluency and proficiency level of the Elocution instructors and learners. The findings show that there are proficiency and information gaps due to limited competence in English, hence, the instructors develop communication strategies that suit their accents and proficiency level and that learners adjust their styles of speaking based on the environment to suit the communication patterns of the elocutionists and switch when the environment changes. The study recommends, among others, that accuracy should be encouraged to facilitate a more coherent language use. The elocutionists should understand that learners could show divergence due to certain individualised factors, hence, learners' feedback should be based on communicative competence since learners' personalities, learning styles and linguistic backgrounds could result in their variation or accommodation in the elocution process.*

**Keywords:** Elocution, dilemma, communicative competence, speech accommodation, variationist theory, Nigerian education.

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## **1. Introduction**

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the teaching of Elocution in private schools across Nigeria. This rise correlates with increasing parental and institutional concern for spoken English proficiency among learners. As an emerging subject, elocution in Nigeria is largely shaped by local innovations and the linguistic limitations of instructors. This study investigates the current trends in the teaching of elocution and the language learners' dilemma in adapting to the varied speech forms in their linguistic domains. It focuses on Warri, Delta State, a multilingual and sociolinguistically dynamic region, to explore the interplay between instructional competence, learners' adaptation and speech patterns.

Elocution is the study of oral presentation, control of breath, voice modulation, pronunciation, gestures and the way people speak or read in the public with eloquence. It was a literary style embedded in the department of Rhetoric with its focus on the presentational style. Elocution was one of the core disciplines of pronunciation which teach orators how to properly select their diction, the right gestures and stance to portray their arguments. It emerged as a formal discipline in England during the eighteenth century, and in America in the nineteenth century. According to Cohen (1994), Elocution otherwise known as Speech Communication is, admittedly, a derivative discipline. Yet, many present-day members of the profession have no clear idea of what disciplines we have drawn on and with what consequences. Many graduate students and faculty, for example, are ignorant of the fact that the contemporary Speech Communication discipline came into being by seceding from its then parent discipline, English. Cohen states that there is hardly anyone in the discipline who is aware that, for almost a century, the rhetorical tradition was preserved in literary studies in the Departments of English. He demonstrates that while elocution was the dominant oral form, rhetoric was the concern, and even the property, of English departments. This is seen in the examination of rhetoric and composition text books of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The association was founded by seventeen dissenting members of the National Council of Teachers of English at an N.C.T.E. convention who were

sufficiently venturesome to form a new association. Cohen noted further that the formation of the new profession came into being, primarily, to escape the domination of English departments, where the teachers of Oral English occupied a place below the teachers of Literature and English Composition. Woolbert (1916) thus saw the need to distinguish between the new profession and its parent 'English' in order to justify disciplinary autonomy and departmental separation. He declared that English and speech science were "two lines of study, because they are essentially different disciplines since elocution was limited to orality, that is, thoughts that are spoken while English deals with thoughts that are written.

He constructed a scheme for the new discipline which made it look like a performance field. It is a broader field that housed many other fields that did not have academic homes and were largely regarded as extra-curricular activities. Persons interested in voice and diction, anatomy, physiology, phonetics, dialects and speech defects were included. He presented the following scope: Phonology, The Technique of Expression, The Psychology of Expression Application of Laws of Expression, The Acting Drama, Extempore Speaking, Argumentation and Debate, Persuasion, The Pedagogy of Oral Expression and The Aesthetics of Speaking, Interpreting, and Acting.

Walker (1781) provided directions for reading passages aloud from literary texts and details on voice control, gestures, pronunciation and emphasis. Hence, many elocutionists worked to incorporate the subject of elocution into the public-school curriculum. There were elocutionists who offered adult education courses for those who were interested in improving their speaking and reading skills, and giving oral presentation (Bode, 1956). According to Cohen (1916), there was so much confusion as to what the content focus of this new profession should be. Thus, Woolbert (1917) advocates that people who were interested in this new field should maintain the training and education they got from other fields and so borrow from the approaches of those fields. Hence, those who are specialists in Literature will find some exceedingly interesting problems in the literature of speech; those in English, political

campaign, drama and other fields can just apply their method. This kind of suggestion can only lead to confusion and problems in the language classroom. Many of these proposals made their way into the profession and still influence the discipline in the contemporary time as the elocution instructors are not specialists in the field of language study.

## 1.2 The Problem

Since the elocutionists are professionals from different fields, this poses a major challenge in the style, proficiency and pattern of delivery. The elocutionists are general specialists. This assertion is based on the argument that individual specialization in a certain field will prevent instruction from reaching his highest effectiveness since it requires specialization in versatility. This position has led to many shades in the profession in the contemporary time; since most instructors do not have language background, they, therefore, do not understand the peculiarities that exist with varied learners. In the earlier times, the major motivation was to teach orators presentation, control of breath, voice modulation, pronunciation, gestures and the way people speak or read in the public. The emphasis was thus on pronunciation. The current trends however in this noble sub-field of English in Nigeria and Warri Delta State in particular, have left not so much to be desired in the profession. They have suddenly become like the 'orphan' child who is left alone to decide their fate as it has become a profession for 'everybody and for no nobody' The motivation for becoming a professional in the field is now highly due to the financial independence and benefits it gives. The resultant effect is a dilemma in the classroom as learners struggle to comprehend and show performance in what is taught since the learners have different personalities, learning styles and linguistic backgrounds.

Over my past one decade as an elocution coach, I have noticed that most of those who teach elocution can barely articulate and transcribe the sounds of English. They do not have the right knowledge of word stress nor intonation. Their patterns mostly show *fakeism* and laden with different accents ranging from American to regional, yet they expect learners to accommodate their

speaking styles. This creates some form of social distance to some learners who obviously want to show their divergence by maintaining their speech styles.

Elocution is basically focused on pronunciation, which is the building block to communication and delivery. Thus, this paper questions the assessment of learners' competence based on performance and learners' achievement based on the instructor's preferred style and accent. It argues that when presentation is done wrongly, it can drain the learners and throw them into confusion. This is because performance should be backed by competence so that there is a balance, in line with Kumo (2019) who specifies that teaching of pronunciation should be built on competence. Language teachers should be equipped with the required skills to handle pronunciation practice to stimulate learners' interest. When learners' interests are well captured, they show convergence to the accent, articulation, diction and styles of the elocutionists who they see as the model. The paper argues that elocutionists who are not trained, who do not have a language background, would not understand from the variationists point of view that learners may vary in the way they learn and apply knowledge and that you do not impose a certain style since performance error may not always imply lack of competence. Rather, they may choose to be distinct based on the reinforcements from their varied language domains. The learners discourse setting may be context-sensitive hence both the native and non-native speakers' usage should serve the same communicative role. The competence-based approach supports a context and reality-built assessments that show real life experiences. In line with this, Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) note that today's pronunciation curriculum should try to find the most suitable aspects of both the segmentals and suprasegmentals and incorporate them to suit the needs of any given learner. Inasmuch as learners want to communicate fluently, they understand the reality of being understood hence the instructor should assess the learners on their communicative competence.

This work examines the current trends in the teaching of elocution and the effects on the learners in relation to the sounds, inflections and mode of

presentation. It seeks to correct the approaches, styles and contents and show that learners' variation or accommodation may be based on a couple of factors.

### **Extant Positions**

Existing literature on elocution highlights its historical role in grooming orators and refining speech in formal settings (Crystal, 2003). In Nigeria, however, elocution is a relatively new educational development, often characterized by improvisational teaching techniques and a lack of standardized curriculum (Akanbi, 2018). Scholars such as Adegbite (2003) and Bamgbose (1995) have noted the challenges of teaching English in a multilingual society, including the interference from local languages and varieties of Nigerian English. The adoption of task-based learning and communicative competence as guiding principles in language education has gained traction (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), yet little empirical research has examined their application in elocution classrooms in Nigeria.

The variationists believe that there is more than one way of saying the same thing. The role of social practice often defines the groups. The central premise in the variationist approach is that the variations in language at the different linguistic levels are not random but structured. It provides that one has sufficient information about speakers' background and the linguistic contexts in which variation occurs. One can conveniently predict which speakers will be more likely to choose a certain variant or the other. The variationists believe that variation is an important characteristic of language change, thus, it is highly systematic (Labov 1963).

Baley (2007) states that there is the tendency of SLA researchers to use the standard language as the target variety when assessing acquisition of forms in obligatory contexts. He notes the inappropriateness of this if the primary native speaker input learners receive comes from speakers of a variety in which the form under investigation is used. Paikeday (1985) argues that we no longer need the native speaker as a norm since there are models in world English varieties in proficient second language speakers. Stressing this point, Davies 2003 & 2013, Faez 2011 and Halliday 2013 assert that speakerhood is not

biological but socially constructed trait. They point out that there are no linguistic grounds to maintain the distinction between native and non-native speakers as speakerhood is assigned on the basis of social and contextual factors such as ethnic background, nationality, accent and willingness to self-identify as a native speaker (Bonfiglio 2010, Alim, 2011, Inbar-Lourie2005). The scenario is painted thus of two types of teachers: the native and non-native teachers where the elocutionists see themselves as the native speakers and the other teachers as non-native speaker teachers.

Chomsky in a response to Paikeday summarizes that everyone is a native speaker of a particular language that they have grown in their brain and that since experience varies and anybody can attain such status, the question of difference between native and non-native is pointless. This clearly shows that only nativity cannot account for the wide variety in language use since there are non-natives who are quite fluent and accurate in a language while there are natives who are not.

Like the variationist approach is the speech accommodation theory presented by Howard Giles (1973). Speech accommodation refers to a process whereby participants in a discourse adjust their accents, diction, or other language aspects to converge at the styles of the other speakers, although some speakers may decide to exhibit divergence when there is a signal of social distance or disapproval by the other participants in the conversational exchange. Accommodation enables speakers to sound more like others they talk with to achieve greater social interaction. Giles notes that certain participants in a conversation may decide to show divergence to prove their linguistic background, speaking styles or personalities. Such identity helps them to assert their distinct identity. People accommodate their communicative process to provoke positive image and get acceptance from their interactants (Giles 1993, 1977). In line with this, Clark (2013) points out that attitudes towards variations of spoken English are deep-rooted in prejudice when a standard form of the language was chosen. The prejudices we all seem to hold towards people who speak with certain accents and dialects are deep-rooted in the

British psyche. Those speaking Standard English with a Received Pronunciation accent are at the top of the pecking order; those speaking with a Northern or Southern accent in the middle; and those speaking with a Midlands accent, particularly a West Midlands one, at the bottom. It is better to remain silent than to speak with a West Midlands accent. This is the case of the attitude of the elocutionists as discovered in our study. They see their variety which they claim to be the Received Pronunciation, yet far away from it, as the standard and consider others who speak with different accents as inferior to them. The current study, however, supports that learners should be given adequate language information and equipped with the knowledge they need to make an informed decision about how they choose to speak; whether to opt in or out of social hierarchies. Thus, elocution instructors should understand the nature of language and, specifically, variation.

### **3. Methodology**

This paper employs the variationist and speech accommodation theories to investigate the teaching and practice of elocution in schools in Warri Delta State, and how learners' language use demonstrates the application of the theories to adjust their accents, pronunciations and speaking styles. A qualitative research design was employed to capture the live experiences of elocution instructors and learners. Data were collected using observation and purposive sampling from selected private schools in Warri, Delta State. Instruments included observational notes, audio recordings of class sessions, and informal interviews. The words were transcribed and phonemically presented to show the sounds and stress placements. Words from the Ibadan 400 wordlist and selected textual materials were used to test pronunciation, fluency, and comprehension. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns of speech adaptation and proficiency.

### **I. Results and discussion**

This section presents some of the data from the field, interprets and analyses them on the basis of the theories of accommodation and variation and shows the observations made.

4.1 Elocution Class Session with Learners

During the Elocution class, it was observed that whilst learners were engaged in a task-based activity by the elocutionist, some learners showed some level of interest and willingness to imitate the speech forms of the instructors since they see them as their model and thus admired their accent and wanted to speak like them. For the non-elocution instructor, the case is different as they don't have knowledge of elocution, hence, they pronounce without recourse to sounds or inflection. The learners, in turn, follow their speech forms and engage with them in their style. We also observed that some of the learners showed diversion when asked to perform some of the tasks by the elocution instructors. These observations are shown in the inflections of the spoken format of the learners below:

Task 1

Read the following sentences correctly applying your inflections and right pronunciation

S/N	Sentences	Trascription
1.	A sailor sails a boat	[ə seilə seilz ə bəʊt]
2.	Jane was in labour for ten days	[dʒem wɒz ɪn leɪbə fɔː ten deɪz]
3.	A banker works in a bank	[ə bæŋkə wɜːks ɪn ə bæŋk]
4.	A monitor is a screen that shows information in a computer	[ə mɒnɪtə ɪz ə skriːn ðæt ʃəʊz ɪnfəːmeɪʃn ɪn ə kəmˈpjʊtə]
5.	My aunt is a teacher	maɪ aːnt ɪz ə tiːtʃə

Task 2

S/N		
1.	The weather is cloudy	ðə weðə ɪz klaʊdi
2.	I have a leather shoe	aɪ hæv ə leðə ʃuː
3.	Please stop bothering me.	plɪːz stɒp bəðərɪŋ miː
4.	My family and I will travel to the northern part of Nigeria	maɪ fæməli ən aɪ wɪl trævəl tə ðə nɔːðən paːt əv naɪdʒərɪə
5	Gather the sticks together	ɡaðə ðə strks təgeðə

## 4.2 Class Session with Other Non Elocution Teachers

### Task 3

S/N	Sentences	Trascription
1.	A sailor sails a boat	[ə selɔ selz ə bɔt]
2.	Jane was in labour for ten days	[dʒen wɔz in lebo fɔ ten dez]
3.	A banker works in a bank	[ə banka wɔks in ə bank]
4.	A monitor is a screen that shows information in a computer	[ə mɒnɪtɔ ɪz ə skri:n dat ʃɔz ɪnfɔ:meʃən in ə kɒmpjʊtə]
5.	My aunt is a teacher	[maɪ a:nt ɪz ə ti:tʃə]

### Task 4

S/N		
1.	The weather is cloudy	[di wedə ɪs klaʊdi]
2.	I have a leather shoe	[aɪ hav ə leðə ʃu:]
3.	Please stop bothering me.	plɪ:z stɒp bədərɪn mi:
4.	My family and I will travel to the northern part of Nigeria	maɪ famɪli ən aɪ wɪl trævəl tə di nɔ:tan pɑ:t ɒv naɪdʒɪrɪə
5	Gather the sticks together	ɡaðə di stɪks təɡedə

Findings show significant gaps in instructors' proficiency, which often lead them to adapt communication strategies that match their own speech competence. For instance, some instructors consciously avoid complex phonological forms and instead favour local speech patterns that they perceive as easier for learners to emulate. Learners, in turn, mimic these forms but demonstrate flexibility by adjusting their speech based on different communicative contexts. When exposed to more proficient speakers, learners

tend to converge their speech toward Standard English; however, in informal or peer-centered environments, they revert to local speech patterns.

The use of task-based teaching strategies such as role-play and reading aloud helped to reveal learners' abilities to switch registers and apply learned elocution principles in varied contexts. These activities also exposed inconsistencies in the instructors' own usage, suggesting that their competence directly affects the linguistic models learners are exposed to.

From tasks 1 and 2, the learners showed enthusiasm in pronouncing based on the elocution instructors' articulation. Through imitation method, the learners repeat the sentences following the direction of the elocutionist. This is where the learners also transmit the errors of the instructors since they are made to speak on the model of the elocution instructors. Tasks 3 and 4 show learners' engagement with the non-elocution teachers. They maintain their speech form showing convergence with the non-standard form. The learners are at a dilemma as to maintaining the seeming standard form of the elocutionists or the non-standard form of the non-elocutionists. Since their language domains favour more of the non-standard form, they tilt towards the form that is more often reinforced.

#### **4.4 Discussion of Findings**

The analysis of data gathered from elocution instructors and learners in Warri, Delta State, reveals significant trends in the current pedagogical approaches to elocution in private Nigerian schools. The use of the Ibadan 400 wordlist and various textual materials provided a practical lens through which the speaking proficiency and communicative competence of the participants were assessed.

A prominent finding of this study is the prevalence of proficiency and information gaps among both instructors and learners. These gaps often stem from limited competence in Standard English pronunciation and usage. In response to these limitations, instructors adopt adaptive communication

strategies that align with their own accents and proficiency levels. This suggests a conscious or subconscious application of the speech accommodation theory, whereby speakers adjust their communicative behaviour to manage social distance and enhance intelligibility (Giles, 1973).

Moreover, learners were observed to adjust their speaking styles according to their immediate linguistic environments and interlocutors. This adaptive behaviour aligns with the variationist theory which posits that language variation is influenced by social and contextual variables (Labov, 1972). For instance, learners exhibited tendencies to converge their speech patterns when interacting with elocutionists, reflecting efforts to fit into the perceived standard of spoken English. However, these same learners diverged in different social settings, especially where local norms dominate or when interacting with peers of similar linguistic backgrounds.

The study also highlighted the implementation of task-based and text-based approaches to teaching elocution. These approaches were found to enhance learners' fluency and allow instructors to assess learners' proficiency levels in real-time and contextually relevant situations. However, the effectiveness of these methods was moderated by the instructors' own linguistic competence. Instructors who lacked strong command of the English language were less able to model accurate pronunciation, thereby reinforcing non-standard forms among learners.

Another important insight is the role of environmental and individualised factors in learners' language adaptation. The study underscores that learners' personalities, learning styles, and linguistic backgrounds significantly affect how they internalize and reproduce spoken English. Consequently, the learners' observable linguistic divergence or convergence is not merely a reflection of instruction but also a manifestation of deeper socio-cognitive and affective variables.

The research further reveals that although elocution instruction is gaining

momentum in private Nigerian schools, there is a pressing need to re-evaluate the qualification and training of elocutionists. Accuracy and coherence in language use should be a pedagogical priority. As such, elocution instructors must be linguistically competent and aware of the theoretical underpinnings of language variation and accommodation. This awareness will enable them to give feedback rooted in communicative competence, which accounts for contextual and learner-specific variations rather than enforcing rigid linguistic norms.

In summary, this study contributes to the growing body of work on elocution and language learning in Nigeria by demonstrating how learners and instructors negotiate meaning within a dynamic linguistic ecosystem. It calls for a more nuanced, theory-informed, and learner-centered approach to elocution instruction, one that balances accuracy with adaptability and recognizes the sociolinguistic realities of the Nigerian classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Elocution teaching in Nigerian private schools reflects a dynamic interplay between instructional capability and learner adaptation. This study has shown that communicative competence, rather than strict adherence to linguistic norms, should be the foundation of elocution instruction. The adaptation of learners to varying speech models highlights the practical application of speech accommodation and variationist theories in real classroom settings.

To improve elocution outcomes, the following recommendations are made:

1. Elocution instructors should undergo formal training in phonetics and spoken English.
2. Task-based and text-based approaches should be enriched with feedback mechanisms that address communicative competence.
3. Educational policy should support the development of a standardized elocution curriculum tailored to the Nigerian sociolinguistic context.

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