

Teachers' Perception of Sentence Strips in Teaching English Supra-Segmental Features in Senior Secondary School in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated teachers' perception of the effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching English suprasegmental features in Senior Secondary Schools in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria. The study was motivated by the difficulty many teachers experience in teaching oral English, particularly suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. A total of 10 SSS2 English language teachers from selected public secondary schools participated in the study. One instrument was used for data collection: Teachers' Perception of the Effectiveness of Sentence Strips Questionnaire ($r=0.91$). The finding revealed that teachers perceived sentence strips as an effective instructional strategy for teaching suprasegmental features of English, with a weighted mean of 3.51 against the threshold of 2.50. Based on the findings, the study concluded that sentence strips are useful instructional materials that can enhance the teaching of oral English in secondary schools. The study recommended that English language teachers should incorporate sentence strips and other interactive teaching aids in teaching suprasegmental features in order to improve students' pronunciation and oral communication skills.

Keywords: Sentence strips, Teachers' perceptions, Effectiveness, English suprasegmental features

Introduction

Oral English is essential for effective communication and interaction in an English – speaking environment, whether in a professional, academic, or social setting. It allows people to express themselves clearly, understand others, and build relationships based on mutual understanding. Learning Oral English requires more than just knowing grammar rules and vocabulary. It involves mastering the pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm of the language, as well as the cultural nuances and social norms that accompany spoken language. In recent years, there has been a growing demand for proficiency in Oral English, as English has become the global language of business, technology and academia. As a result, many individuals and organizations have sought out resources and opportunities to improve their Oral English skills.

The basic language skills are broadly categorised into oracy and literacy skills (Babalola, 2016). The language skills are usually listed in the natural order of acquisition, which begins with listening, followed by speaking,

reading and writing in that order. Oracy which is the focus of this study deals with the capacity to express oneself and understand speech. Listening involves identifying the sounds of speech and processing them into words and sentences. When we listen, we use our ears to receive individual sounds (letters, stress and rhythm). Conversely speaking involves oral production of human speech. To speak, we create sounds using many parts of our body including the lungs, vocal tract, vocal chord, tongue, teeth and lips. This vocalised form of language usually requires at least one listener. In our speech, segmental and supra-segmental are used, both segmental and supra-segmental features of speech sounds come under phonology which is the study of sounds in a language and it is today being taught as Oral English in schools (McGregor, 2009).

The sounds system of English could be segmental or supra-segmental. The segmental aspect deals with distinct phonemes which are subdivided into vowels and consonants including their functional characteristics in isolation or in company of other sounds

(Richards, 2010; Aina, 2018). Supra-segmental features are paralinguistic devices such as stress, pitch, rhythm, and intonation each of which carries a distinct meaning about the mood and attitude of the speaker. It extends beyond one sound segment. Therefore, meaningful speech relies extensively on the supra-segmental features (Crystal, 2008).

Understanding supra-segmental elements is, therefore, one of the significant tasks that have to be achieved by teachers and students studying the English language. Supra-segmental elements determine the meaning and the intention of the speaker (Babalola, 2016). They are stress and intonation. Adeniyi (2017) states that stress is a supra-segmental feature of utterances that operates beyond the segments. Stress, intonation, and rhythm are also crucial in debates, presentations, and oral interviews. Roach (2009) emphasizes their centrality to intelligibility. Despite their reported effectiveness, there is limited empirical evidence on how both teachers and students perceive the use of sentence strips in the teaching of supra-segmental. Understanding these perceptions is crucial for improving classroom practice and promoting communicative competence among senior secondary school learners. The accuracy gained in segmental and supra-segmental features in speech is regarded as pronunciation (Ma, 2015). Furthermore, the aspect of the sound system of the English language (suprasegmental) has to do with stress, intonation and words rhymes which carry distinct meanings respectively in terms of the mood and attitude of the speaker (Popoola, 2021).

Supra-segmental features, such as stress, intonation, and rhythm, are crucial aspects of spoken English. The supra-segmental features of English: stress, intonation, and rhythm play a vital role in effective oral communication. However, these features often pose challenges for second-language learners, especially in non-native contexts like Nigeria. Traditional methods of teaching supra-segmental tend to be abstract and teacher-centered, making it difficult for students to

internalise these patterns.

Roach (2010) indicates that English speech has a rhythm which is the product of alternation of stressed syllables at regular intervals of time called feet. This means that stressed syllables tend to occur at regular and equal intervals irrespective of the number of unstressed syllables between them. Rhythm is, simply, the prosodic feature of the foot. Intonation is the rising and falling of voice in connected speeches (Wahid and Sulong, 2013). Intonation is very important to the production of meaningful speech, and the changing tune affects the range of meaning. English intonation can change grammatical function in phrases or sentences. In addition, the intonation pattern: a rise-fall and a fall-rise is used with different intention and feeling. Learners must notice intonation pattern when listening.

On pitch, when people speak, the pitch of their voice is changed all the time. Glewwe, *et al* (2018) explain that the pitch depends on how fast the vocal cords vibrate. The faster they vibrate, the higher the pitch. Murphy (2014) indicated that the pressure of the air coming out of the lungs and the tension of the vocal cords affect the pitch of the voice. Pitch is varied; people sometimes speak with their normal pitch, a low pitch, a high pitch, a rising pitch, or a falling pitch. The pitch is altered appropriately from the lowest note to the highest not depending on each kind of situation.

Therefore, pronunciation is very important to be taught well to learners so as not to make them experience the wrong meaning in English conversation (Babalola, 2016; Aina, 2018). The teaching of oral English focuses on English phonology which deals with the way speech sounds are produced. According to Clark *et al* (2007), phonology is the systematic use of sounds to encode meaning in any spoken human language. It is a branch of linguistics concerned with the systematic organization of sounds in languages and these sounds are produced through the oral cavity.

Suprasegmental features must be well taught to learners if they want to produce meaningful speech that will be intelligible to

other users of the English language. The difficulties and challenges learners are facing in this aspect of oral English might not be farfetched. According to Adeyemi (2014), the importance of spoken English in most English-speaking countries as a medium of education and as a means of national and international communication demands a high general level of proficiency, in performance and understanding than exists at present. This is to say, not much attention has been given to the study of oral English particularly in the aspects of syllables, stress and intonation. This has, therefore, discouraged learners of English in learning and understanding oral English.

Akinjobi and Aina (2014) made an informal observation that as important as the suprasegmental features were to effect oral communication in English, many teachers in Oyo State are not well grounded in it, oral English lessons in secondary schools in Ibadan revealed that most teachers of English lack adequate knowledge of English suprasegmental features as evident in their poor articulation of stress, emphatic/contrastive stress and intonation. In a study, Akinjobi and Aina (2014) also reported that many English Language teachers in Nigeria could not model stress assignment appropriately. Toki (2014) also reported that most Nigerian teachers of English could not pronounce English segmental correctly. As a result; they do not serve as good models to students. This, invariably, affects their lesson delivery. When teachers, who are supposed to have adequate content knowledge of English suprasegmental features do not possess the required knowledge, it stands to reason that they would not teach well. The result is that they would turn out on yearly basis, students who will have difficulty in making themselves intelligible to others in their oral communication.

This deficiency on the part of the teachers, explains why the teaching of English supra-segmental is not given adequate attention in oral English instruction. In the words of Babalola (2016), there is, generally speaking, more emphasis placed on segmental features

than the prosodic features of English speech. The neglect in teaching suprasegmentals does not seem to augur well for effective teaching of speaking skill as scholars (Adeniyi, 2017; Aina, 2018) have in fact highlighted the need to concentrate more on rhythm and intonation than any other aspect of pronunciation because of their importance in communicating meaning (Popoola, 2021). The lack of attention seems more to be due to the deficiency of teachers in the knowledge of the prosody of the language. As rightly observed by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2010), teachers who are expected to model correct articulation of the suprasegmental features are themselves deficient in it.

Although supra segmental features significantly influence comprehensibility, the teaching of stress, rhythm and intonation often receives minimal attention in many English language classrooms. One reason is that these features are more abstract and less tangible than segmental sounds, making them more challenging for teachers to explain and for learners to internalize. Recent study in applied phonetics show that learners frequently struggle to interpret prominence, pausing and pitch variation without clear visual or tactile support Cantaruti and Reed (2021). Furthermore, teachers themselves often report feeling underprepared to teach suprasegmental due to insufficient training in pedagogy or a lack of user- friendly instructional materials Froote, et al (2020).

The above conclusion indicates that oral English has a part to play in the general learning of English. Nigeria Secondary School students have problems in the learning of oral English as revealed in their wrong assignment of stress and intonation when engaged in oral communication. According to Babalola (2016), the problems of learning English language cut across all aspects of English language not excluding English supra segmental that is the focus of this study. According to Adeyemi (2014), not much has been achieved since the introduction of oral English in our West African and National Examinations Council Senior

School Certificate due to the problems associated with the teaching and learning of oral English. The teaching of oral English is therefore weighed down by various factors which have contributed to the slow pace and ineffectiveness in teaching the course (Akanbi, 2018). Adegbile (2007) confirmed that second language learners pronounce English supra-segmental features very badly.

National Reading Panel 2000 defines sentence strips as manipulative tools like word or sentence cards for developing phonemic awareness, fluency, and oral language. Sentence strips, as instructional aids, have been found to promote interactive and student-centered learning as it gave rise to the aid of visual and audio-visual learning of the features of supra-segmental features. According to Smith (2015), visual aids like sentence strips enhance learners' awareness of stress patterns by allowing them to see and manipulate sentence elements. Akinbote (2019) notes that in Nigerian secondary schools, sentence strips improve students' engagement and pronunciation accuracy when teaching oral English. Furthermore, visual and kinesthetic strategies such as sentence strip activities help students identify and practice rising and falling intonation, making abstract concepts more concrete (Brown, 2007). Teachers also benefit from sentence strips as they provide a flexible, low-tech method of promoting oral drills and repetition, especially in large classrooms. Okoro (2020) added that sentence strips will be more efficient with audio reinforcement or teacher modeling, especially for rhythm and connected speech. This suggests that sentence strips are most effective when integrated with other multimodal teaching tools.

Sentence strips have gained positive recognition among educators and learners as a cost-effective, interactive method for teaching supra-segmental, especially in senior secondary classrooms. Sentence strips are narrow pieces of paper, cardboard, or other material used as a teaching tool to help learners with reading, writing, sentence structure, and grammar. They typically have one sentence written on them and are often used in early childhood and language

education. Sentence strips are widely used in educational practice, especially in literacy and language instructions, they are more often discussed in practical and pedagogical contexts than formally defined in scholarly literature.

Sentence strips are described as “a literacy tool that allows students to manipulate and reconstruct sentences, encouraging active learning of syntax, grammar, and fluency.” It is a literacy teaching materials that allow students to manipulate words or phrases and rearrange them to form meaningful sentences, strengthening comprehension and fluency, Wolfe (2022). It is used to teach reading, writing, and speaking through interactive learning. Stahl et al (2006) they describe sentence strips as part of a hands-on vocabulary and language development strategy, promoting visual and kinesthetic learning of sentence structure and oral fluency. Morrow and Mandel (2005) describe Sentence strips are “strips of paper on which sentences are written, used to help students see sentence structure and practice reading fluently.” Morrow and Mandel emphasises their use in emergent literacy and guided reading, but they are also adaptable for oral language instruction.

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Repeated practice with sentence strips

in a controlled and supportive environment helps students gain confidence in producing correct stress and intonation. Supra-segmental is abstract; sentence strips make them concrete and manipulable, for example: students can physically place a pause (/ /), underline stressed words, or mark pitch rises. Teachers can tailor sentence strips to different levels of proficiency e.g., simple sentences for beginners, complex intonation units for advanced learners. Through matching, repetition, and reading aloud, students sharpen their listening for stress and rhythm while also practicing clear articulation. The physical interaction and visual reinforcement provided by sentence strips improve retention of pronunciation patterns and speech rhythm. Teachers can use sentence strips for formative assessment, such as oral drills, reading tasks, or stress placement exercises.

Statement of the Problem

Suprasegmental features play a crucial role in English communicative competence, their instruction often receives insufficient attention in many English as a second language classroom due to teachers lack of training, confidence or appropriate resources to teach stress, rhythm and intonation effectively. Simple, low- cost instructional tool like sentence strips have the potential to enhance students' understanding of prosodic features which is being neglected as more studies focuses on methods of teaching of oral English, students' performance on oral English with less concern on teaching suprasegmental features with the use of sentence strips as a pedagogical strategy, This study therefore addressed the problem of insufficient empirical evidence regarding teachers' perception of using sentence strips to teach English suprasegmental features by investigating the perception and effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching of English suprasegmental features in senior secondary school.

Objectives of the Study

The general objectives of this study are to explore teachers' perception of the

effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching English Suprasegmental features in senior secondary school in Ibadan Metropolis, Nigeria. Therefore, the study set out to:

- a. Examine teachers' perception of the effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching English suprasegmental features in senior secondary school schools.
- b. Investigate the significant differences of male and female teachers' perception on the effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching English suprasegmental features.

Research Questions

The study would provide answers to the following question:

What is the perception of teachers in the effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching oral English?

Hypothesis

One hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀1: There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female teachers on the effectiveness of sentence strips.

Scope of the Study

This study investigated the perceptions of English language teachers on the effectiveness of sentence strips as a strategy for teaching supra-segmental features of English specifically stress, intonation, and rhythm. Senior Secondary School Two (SSS2) teachers participated in the study. The research will be conducted in selected senior secondary schools within Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria.

Significance of the Study

This research will serve as a springboard to teachers and students on the perception of effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching English supra- segmental features. Therefore, the study would investigate and provide valuable information about the effectiveness of using sentence strips in teaching

English supra-segmental by teachers and students, it will contribute various feedbacks to teachers and stakeholders of education for use in teaching any aspect of the supra-segmental and promotes students- teachers participation in teaching.

This study will also contribute to the growing body of knowledge on innovative learner-centered strategies for teaching English supra-segmental in second language contexts. By focusing on the uses of sentence strips: a low cost, visual and interactive tool, the study offers practical insights for English Language teachers especially in resource- constrained secondary schools. This study will be beneficial to students and teachers as it will provide information to them on students' and teachers' perception of effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching supra-segmental in senior secondary school in Ibadan metropolis.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. This design is appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather data from a sample population and describe the current perceptions of teachers regarding the use of sentence strips in teaching English suprasegmentals in oral English in Ibadan metropolis, Nigeria. A total of 10 English Language teachers teaching senior secondary school two students were purposively selected (one per school). In all, 10 English Language teachers participated in the study. One research instrument was used for data collection of this study, namely: Teachers' Perception of Using Sentence Strips in Teaching of English Suprasegmental Features Questionnaire ($r=0.91$). On getting to the schools, the principals handed the researcher over to the Head of English Language Department. The questionnaires on the teachers' perception of effectiveness of sentence strips in teaching of English supra segmental features was administered on teachers. The copies of the completed questionnaires were collected back immediately. Data collected were analysed

using descriptive statistics such as frequency counts, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations and inferential statistics of independent sample T-test for the hypotheses.

Answering the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the perception of teachers on sentence strips in the teaching and learning of oral English?

Table 1 presents the results for the perception of teachers on sentence strips in the teaching and learning of oral English. The table presents a weighted mean of 3.51 which is greater than the threshold set at 2.50, implying that teachers display positive perception towards the use of sentence strips in the teaching and learning of oral English. Of the twenty (20) items that constitute the instrument, eight (8) items whose mean values were greater than 3.50 contributed to the conclusion of teachers' positive perception of sentence strips. In order of magnitude, the items include item 4 - Manipulating strips helps students understand the rhythm of spoken English ($\bar{x}=3.90>3.50$); item 3 - Sentence Strips are effective for demonstrating the rise and fall of pitch (intonation patterns) ($\bar{x}=3.80>3.50$); item 7 - Sentence strips facilitate collaborative learning (pair/group work) in practicing suprasegmentals ($\bar{x}=3.80>3.50$); item 18 - Sentence strips increase student interest and participation during lessons ($\bar{x}=3.70>3.50$); item 19 - Students find sentence strip tasks enjoyable and motivating ($\bar{x}=3.60>3.50$); item 20 - Using sentence strips is feasible in large classes ($\bar{x}=3.60>3.50$); item 14 - Sentence strips clarify the role of intonation in expressing meaning (questions, statements, surprise) ($\bar{x}=3.60>3.50$); item 12 - I am confident in my ability to use sentence strips effectively to teach suprasegmental features ($\bar{x}=3.60>3.50$); item 2 - Using sentence strips helps students visually identify stressed versus unstressed syllables in a sentence ($\bar{x}=3.60>3.50$), with the weighted mean of 3.42 against the threshold of 2.50, it can be concluded that teachers perception towards the use of sentence strips was positive.

Table 1: Perception of teachers on Sentence Strips

S/N	ITEMS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	$\bar{x}$	Std.D
1.	Sentence strips make abstract suprasegmental features more concrete for students	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	3.50	.71
2.	Using sentence strips helps students visually identify stressed versus unstressed syllables in a sentence	6(60%)	4(40%)	-	-	3.60	.52
3.	Sentence Strips are effective for demonstrating the rise and fall of pitch (intonation patterns)	8(80%)	2(20%)	-	-	3.80	.42
4.	Manipulating strips helps students understand the rhythm of spoken English	3(30%)	4(40%)	2(20%)	1(10%)	2.90	.99
5.	The tool is suitable for the age and cognitive level of senior secondary students.	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	3.50	.71
6.	Using sentence strips increases student engagement and participation during pronunciation lessons	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	3.50	.71
7.	Sentence strips facilitate collaborative learning (pair/group work) in practicing suprasegmentals	8(80%)	2(20%)	-	-	3.80	.42
8.	Preparing sentence strips for lessons is time efficient for the teacher	3(30%)	5(50%)	1(10%)	1(10%)	3.00	.94
9.	The benefits of using sentence strips justify the time and efforts required to prepare them	6(60%)	2(20%)	2(20%)	-	3.40	.84
10.	I observed noticeable improvements in students' spoken intelligibility after using sentence strips	6(60%)	3(30%)	1(10%)	-	3.50	.71
11.	Sentence strips are more effective than traditional methods (e.g. repetition, teacher modelling alone)	6(60%)	4(40%)	-	-	3.40	.51
12.	I am confident in my ability to use sentence strips effectively to teach suprasegmental features	6(60%)	4(40%)			3.60	.52
13.	I intend to use (or continue using) sentence strips in teaching pronunciation in the future	5(50%)	5(50%)	-	-	3.50	.53
14.	Sentence strips clarify the role of intonation in expressing meaning (questions, statements, surprise)	6(60%)	4(40%)	-	-	3.60	.52
15.	Sentence strips help students distinguish between meanings created by juncture (e.g. "I scream" vs "ice cream")	5(50%)	5(50%)	-	-	3.50	.53
16.	Sentence strips help students reduce mother tongue interference in suprasegmental patterns	5(50%)	4(40%)	1(10%)		3.40	.69
17.	Sentence strips lead to better fluency in oral reading and speaking	5(50%)	5(50%)	-	-	3.50	.53
18.	Sentence strips increase student interest and participation during lessons	7(70%)	3(30%)	-	-	3.70	.48
19.	Students find sentence strip tasks enjoyable and motivating	7(70%)	2(20%)	1(10%)		3.60	.69

Testing the Null Hypothesis

Ho1: There is no significant difference in the perception of male and female teachers on the

use of sentence strips in the teaching and learning of oral English?

Table 2: Summary of t-test comparison of Perception of Male and Female Teachers

Variable		N	Mean	Std.D	t	Df	Sig. (2 - tailed)	Remark
Perception of Male and Female Teachers on the Effectiveness of Sentence Strips	Male	4	3.3875	.17017	-1.410	8	.196	Not Significant
	Female	6	3.5667	.21134				

Table 2 shows that there is no significant difference between male and female teachers in their perception of sentence strips in the teaching and learning of Oral English ($t = -.1410$; $df = 8$; $p = .196 > 0.05$). Hence, the null hypothesis is not rejected. This suggests that male and female teachers did not significantly differ in their perception of how effective sentence strips are in the Oral English classroom.

Discussion of Finding**Perception of Teachers of Sentence Strips**

Findings showed that teachers had positive perception about sentence strips in teaching and learning Oral English, suggesting that teachers were favourably disposed towards deploying sentence strips in teaching elements of Oral English in the classroom. This finding agrees with that of Baker (2014) who affirmed that teachers generally indicate preference for physical aids like sentence strips which can facilitate the teaching of sound features as well as abstract sound concepts such as “intonation”. In addition, this study supports the finding of Foote et al (2011, 2016) who reported that a good number of teachers valued and were prepared to learn using concrete materials that could be physically manipulated to teach sound features like prosody. However, this study's finding negates Levis et al (2016) who claimed that there is a deficit in the training and knowledge of teachers concerning the use of sentence strips, as teachers, in their study, claimed insufficiency both in the know-how of and in access to materials like sentence strips that could facilitate

the teaching of speech sound features.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. English Language teachers should incorporate sentence strips and other visual instructional materials into their teaching of oral English to enhance students' understanding of suprasegmental features.
2. Teacher training programmes should include more emphasis on pronunciation pedagogy, particularly in the teaching of suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation.
3. Schools should provide adequate instructional materials that can support the teaching of oral English in secondary schools.
4. Workshops and seminars should be organized for English teachers to improve their knowledge and teaching skills in pronunciation and suprasegmental instruction.

Further research should be conducted on other innovative teaching strategies that can improve the teaching and learning of oral English in Nigerian secondary schools.

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