# /eɪˌsɪmptəˈmætɪk/ or /asimptoˈmatik/: Coronavirus-related Terms and the Nigerian English Learners' Pronunciation dilemma

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**Abstract**
This paper explores the pronunciation patterns of common coronavirus-related words by Nigerian learners' of English (NigLE). Fifty Nigerian undergraduates in a private university in South West Nigeria read a passage containing 63 COVID-19-related lexical items into a recording device. Their recorded pronunciations were played back and analysed using frequency and percentage distributions to establish their dominant pronunciation features. The findings reveal peculiar NigE accent features, such as phonemic substitution, monophthongisation of RP diphthongs, h-dropping, simplification by insertion, deletion and devoicing, as well as spelling and analogical pronunciations. The prevalence of these features in NigLE pronunciation, despite frequent exposure to native English pronunciations through electronic and social media, suggests that the typical NigE accent has fossilised in their speech repertoire and should, therefore, be codified as the model for teaching and learning in Nigeria.
**Keywords:** COVID-19, Nigerian English, pandemic, pronunciation, vocabulary, Nigerian learners of English

## Introduction

Coronavirus is a strain of virus from the family of coronaviruses, known to cause a severe respiratory illness characterised by fever, coughing and shortness of breath. The outbreak of Coronavirus disease was first reported in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (hence the acronym COVID-19) and later spread to different parts of the world, leading to many deaths, restrictions on air and land travel, and lockdowns on social and economic activities. As of 16th March 2025, 777,664,564 people have been confirmed infected, while 7,091,788 deaths have been recorded globally (WHO COVID-19 Dashboard). COVID-19 so much impacted everyday life that 'a new normal' (new rules of engagement or of doing things) was imposed on human interactions and socio-economic activities worldwide, in a bid to stem the spread of the pandemic. This included working remotely, maintaining social distancing and strict compliance with health protocols.

In terms of language use, the pandemic brought with it an avalanche of novel English lexical items often deployed in COVID-19-related discourses. Thorne (2020) lists over 1000 technical and everyday words that have emerged in the English-speaking communities, which have added to the lexical stocks of English, extended the meaning of existing English words and brought relevance to previous everyday terms (Dictionary.com 2020; Lawson 2020). New additions include *novel coronavirus, infodemic, fomites, hunker down, covidiot, covideo party,* and *covexit*. Among the words that have acquired extended meaning are *asymptomatic, containment, novel* and *social distancing*. Lexical items, such as *stay safe, stay alert, index patient, isolation centres, vaccine, palliatives, containment* and *lockdown* became the new-normal terms with a very high frequency of occurrence in different facets of life and amongst

various categories of people. Accordingly, lexicographers swiftly embraced the opportunity provided by the development to update their dictionary entries to reflect the contextual usage of the COVID-19 terminologies. Dictionary.Com and the Oxford English Dictionary, to mention but a few, were both involved in this novel enterprise.

Scholars have examined some coronavirus-related issues in Nigeria from the multi-modal critical discourse (Aragbuwa & Adejumo 2021; Unuabonah & Oyebode 2021; Oyebode and Unuabonah 2022) and sociolinguistics (Kupolati, Adebileje & Adeleke 2021) perspectives. For example, Kupolati, Adebileje, & Adeleke (2021) investigate lexical innovations and variations in the use of COVID-19 terms by Yoruba-English speakers and establish peculiar and creative use of COVID-19 lexemes through diverse morphological processes. These include *coro, rona, coronise, coromental, cofid, corocious* and *coronated*. In contrast, very little is known about the phonological realisations of COVID-19-related words by Nigerian learners of English (NigLE), which indicates a serious gap in the linguistic research on COVID-19 in Nigeria. Therefore, this paper aims to analyse the pronunciation of common English-based coronavirus-related words by NigLE in order to reveal the phonological features that characterise their usages.

This section has discussed the background of the study. The rest of the paper is arranged as follows: Section 2 provides a brief historical underpinning and unique phonological features of NigE phonology, while the theoretical framework is discussed in Section 3. The methodology for the study is addressed in Section 4; analysis is conducted in Section 5 and discussion of findings and conclusion are undertaken in Sections 6 and 7, respectively.

**Nigerian English Accent**

The advent of the English language in Nigeria is often traced to such factors as commerce, missionary activities and colonisation (Gut 2004, Jowitt 2019; Taiwo 2009. The significance of English in present-day Nigeria is underscored by its hegemonic status and multifaceted functions as the language of government, politics, education, judiciary and technology, among others. Due to its long years of interaction with indigenous Nigerian languages, a domesticated variety, known as Nigerian English (NigE), has evolved (Adegbija 2004; Awonusi 2015). This variety exhibits unique features at the lexico-semantic, discourse-pragmatic, morpho-syntactic and phonological levels, which distinguish it from the native English varieties.

However, it is generally believed that the distinctiveness of NigE is most evident in the spoken form. Scholars (Awonusi 2015; Simo Bobda 2007a; Ugorji 2010) are agreed that a distinct Nigerian English Accent (NEA) has emerged. Simo Bobda (2007a: 279) avers, in this respect, that "Nigerian English has attained a high degree of definability at all levels of analysis, and very noticeably at the phonological level". There are peculiar pronunciation forms at the segmental and suprasegmental domains, as well as in connected speech, which have made English truly a 'Nigerian language' (Jowitt 2019: 26).

At the segmental level, for example, NEA exhibits a reduced vowel inventory compared to RP, which mirrors the vowel systems of the major indigenous languages (Adetugbo 2009; Gut 2004). It consists of 13 vowels (7 monophthongs and 6 diphthongs), unlike the 22 or 23 vowels of RP (Jowitt 2015). Common vocalic features of NEA identified include phonemic under-differentiation, resulting in the merger of tense and lax vowels; and vowel substitution

(Adetugbo 2009; Awonusi 2009). For example, the RP long-short vowels /iː/ and /ɪ/, /ɔː/ and /ɒ/, and /uː/ and /ʊ/ are often merged and their pronunciations neutralised in NEA as /i/, /ɔ/ and /u/ respectively (e.g. *peep*/ *pip* as /pip/, *port/pot* as /pɔt/, *full/fool* as/ful/). Central vowels /ʌ/, /ɜː/ and ə/ are also usually substituted with various sounds, such as /ɔ/, /ɛ/ and /a/ respectively (e.g. *flood* /flʌd/ as /flɔd/, *learn* lɜːn/ as lɛn/ and *arrive* /əraɪv/ as /araiv/). Other vocalic features of NEA are the absence of vowel reduction, whereby reduced vowels /ə, ɪ/ expected in unstressed syllables in RP are often produced strong as *teacher* /tiʧa/, *tutor* /tutɔ/ (Akinjobi 2006), and monophthongisation of the RP diphthongs: /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ as /e/ and /o/ respectively, e.g. *pay* /peɪ/ as /pe/, *home* /həʊm/ as /hom/ (Dyrenko & Fuchs 2018; Simo Bobda 2007b).

At the consonantal level, NEA contrasts minimally with RP (Adetugbo 2009); many consonants are well differentiated. Notable NEA consonantal peculiarities include the lack of the voiced palatal-alveolar fricative /ʒ/, the dental fricatives /θ, ð/ and the velar nasal /ŋ/. These consonant sounds are differentiated by a few sophisticated speakers only, constituting pronunciation difficulty for a majority of speakers who often substitute them with other closer sounds. For instance, /ʒ/ is usually substituted with /ʃ/ (e.g. *vision* /viʃɔn), /j/ (*closure* /klojɔ) or /ʤ/ (beige /beʤ/) (Fajobi & Akande 2018), while /t, s/ and /d, z/ tend to be pronounced in lieu of /θ/ and /ð/ respectively, depending on the speakers' indigenous languages, e.g. /taŋk/ or /saŋk/ for *thank* /θæŋk/, and /do/ or /zo/ for *though* /ðəʊ/ (Gut 2004). The velar nasal /ŋ/ may also be realised as /g/ when it appears before a pause, for example, *king* /kɪŋ/ as /kɪŋg/ (Simo Bobda 2007a). Another distinct consonantal feature is the realisation of <h> which may be dropped in h-full words (e.g. *heat* /hiːt/ as /it/) or inserted in h-less words, e.g. heir /heə/ as /ɛə/ (Awonusi 2015; Soneye & Gut 2011). At the suprasegmental level, NEA tends towards syllable-timed rhythm (Jowitt 2019) and exhibits peculiar stress patterns (Atoye 1991; Simo Bobda 2010) and a restricted system of intonation (Jowitt 2000).

Another important feature of NEA is the tendency for spelling pronunciation (Gut 2004; Simo Bobda 2007a). Due to a lack of sound-spelling correspondences in English, many speakers, regardless of their lectal status, tend to pronounce words as suggested by their orthographic construct. This is evident in the pronunciation of silent letters, for example, *listen* /lɪsᵊn/ as /listin/, *debt* /det/ as /dɛbt/, *sword* /sɔːd/ as /swɔd/ and *Wednesday* /wenzdeɪ/ as /wɛdnɛsde/; loan words, such as crèche /kreʃ/ as /krɛʧ/, plateau /plætəʊ/ as /pletu/ and regime /reɪʒiːm/ as /rɛʤim/, and other varied words, e.g. leopard /lepəd/ as /liɔpad/ swap /swɒp/ as /swap/ and *tortoise* /tɔːtəs/ as /tɔtɔis/.

There are also some commonly occurring phonological processes in NEA. These include yod dropping (e.g. *congratulate* /kəngræʧəleɪt/ as /kɔngratulet/, *computer* /kəmpjuːtə/ as /kɔmputa/), insertion of epenthetic vowels in some consonant clusters and syllabic consonants (e.g. *little* /lɪtᵊl/ as /lɪtul/, *handle* /hændᵊl/ as /handul), glide formation (e.g. *prayer* /preɪə/ as /preja/, *shower* /ʃaʊə/ as /ʃawa/), metathesis (e.g. *ask* /ɑːsk/ as /aks/), voicing (e.g. *December* /dɪsembə/ as /dizɛmba/, booked /bʊkt/ as /bukd/), devoicing (e.g. *roads* /rəʊdz/ as /rods/), and reduction of consonant clusters (e.g. /kw/ *queen* /kwiːn/ as /kuin/, /ks/ *accent* /æksᵊnt/ as /asɛnt/, /kt/ conduct /kɒdʌkt/ as /kɔndɔt/) (Gut 2004; Simo Bobda 2007a).

## Theoretical Framework

The study adopts natural phonology, which was proposed by Stampe (1973) and further developed by Stampe and Donegan (1979, 1983, 2002, 2009). Natural Phonology (NP) views a language's phonology as a system of unconscious mental processes that operate in real-time to transform intended, yet unpronounceable, lexical forms into their pronounceable surface forms. Its fundamental proposal was that phonological frameworks are phonetically roused, with the basic idea that human vocalisation and perception are influenced by the evolving sound patterns of languages (Donegan and Stampe, 1979). It, therefore, considers phonemes as mental images of the sounds of language that are used as perceptual templates and articulatory targets (Nathan, 1982). Hence, it relies on phonological processes (lenition and fortition) as the natural responses of the vocal and perceptual systems of humans to the challenges that come with producing and understanding speech. Fortition processes, comprising dissimilations, diphthongisations, syllabifications, and epenthesis, are employed to enhance perceptual clarity and distinctiveness of lexical forms, while lenition processes, such as assimilations, monophthongisations, disyllabification, reductions and deletions improve the ease of articulations so that the vocal apparatus will do less work (Donegan & Stampe, 1979).

NP accounts for the fact that English learners substitute 'easier' sounds for those absent in their native languages and assume that similar sounds are the same. As a framework that mainly accounts for language variation and change, it presents no artificial limitations on L2 acquisition modeling by restricting its apparatus only to single phonemic inventory, but of the view that no two languages have the same set of sound systems with the same phonetic specifications, thereby accounting for L2 speaker's patterns of phonological variation. Results of related studies, using the natural phonology approach, have revealed the fundamental issues in second language variation (Benjamin-Ohwodede, 2021; Oladipupo, 2014) as they tend to validate the naturalness in the speech of second language users of English in a bid to attain clarity (fortitions) and fluency (lenitions).

## Methodology

The data for this study were supplied by 50 Nigerian undergraduates in a south-western private university in Nigeria, who have received formal education through the medium of English to at least 200 level. A word list containing 63 common coronavirus-related terms was presented to them for reading, and their recorded pronunciations were analysed by the researchers, who are Nigerian L2 speakers of English and trained phonologists. Each listened to the audio clips independently and transcribed the variants produced, after which the findings were compared. Cases of disagreement were resolved by jointly listening to the disputed audio clips. The analysis was carried out auditorily, using frequency and percentage distributions. The performance of the participants was determined by counting the occurrence of production of each sound feature and converting them to percentages; the feature with a higher percentage is taken as the norm.

## Analysis

The analysis of the data is based on NigLE phonological realisations of sound segments, phonological processes and spelling-induced pronunciation in the data. Data analysis under

each of these categories is presented and discussed under separate sub-sections. Section 5.1 and 5.2 focus on vowel and consonant phonemes, respectively; Section 5.3 investigates phonological processes, while Section 5.4 examines spelling-induced pronunciation.

### *5.1 Segment: Vocalic features*

The analysis reveals varied realisations of vowel sounds by NigLE, which largely exhibit peculiar NEA features, such as vowel substitution and monophthogisation of diphthongs.

**Table 1.** Vowel substitution

| **Substitution of /ɜ:/** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| surge, scourge | /ɜ:/ → [ɜ:] | 2 | 1.3 |
| surge, curfew scourge | /ɜ:/ → [ɔ] | 147 | 98 |
| Surge | /ɜ:/ → [u] | 1 | 0.7 |
| **Substitution of /ə/** | | | |
| corona, cluster, thermometer, | /ə/ → [ə] | 103 | 20.6 |
| respirator, ventilator, second, aerosol | /ə/ → [ɔ] | 171 | 34.2 |
| quarantine, thermometer, corona, centre, cluster | /ə/ → [a] | 149 | 29.8 |
| Droplet | /ə/ → [ɛ] | 49 | 9.8 |
| Aerosol | /ə/ → [o] | 21 | 4.2 |
| droplet, aerosol | /ə/ → [i] | 3 | 0.6 |
| respirator, aerosol | /ə/ → Ø | 4 | 0.8 |
| **Substitution of /ʌ/** | | | |
| Cluster | **/ʌ/** → [ɔ] | 50 | 100 |

Table 1 shows that NigLE, in most cases, substituted the RP central vowels /ɜ:/, /ə/ and /ʌ/ with other sounds. The realisation of /ɜ:/ corresponds to the RP [ɜ:] in only 2 instances (1.3%) of *surge*, *scourge* out of 150 tokens, while the sound was dominantly substituted with [ɔ] in 147 (98%) cases of *surge*, *curfew*, *scourge*, and with [u], which is believed to be a spelling-induced pronunciation, in only 1 (0.7%) instance of *surge*. This implies that <ur> and <our>, which are the only grapheme representations of /ɜ:/ in the data, were dominantly realised as [ɔ] by NigLE, resulting in vowel backing.

Table 1 further reveals that, out of 500 cases, the schwa sound /ə/ corresponds to the RP [ə] in 103 (20.6%) tokens only, while it was substituted with other sounds in the remaining cases. It was largely realised as [ɔ] in 171 (34.2%) instances of *respirator, ventilator, second,* and *aerosol*, as [a] in *quarantine, thermometer, corona, centre* and *cluster* in 149 (29.8%) cases, and as [ɛ] in 49 (9.8%) instances of *droplet.* Twenty-one (4.2%) tokens of [o] were also produced in lieu of the vowel in the second syllable of *aerosol*, 3 (0.6%) cases of [i], which is a variable realisation of <e> in *droplet*, were uttered, while there were 4 instances of zero realization of /ə/ in *respirator* and *aerosol***.** The patterns of spelling realisation of the lexical items show that the various spelling symbols for schwa yielded different sounds; for example, <or> and <o> were realised as [ɔ], <a>, <er> and <re> as [a], <e> as [ɛ], and <o> as [o], resulting in vowel backing, lowering, fronting and raising, respectively (see Table 1). However, the [ɔ] variant recorded the highest occurrence. This was also the case in *cluster*, the only lexical item with the central vowel /ʌ/ in the data; it was realised as [ɔ] in all cases. The findings suggest that orthographic representation, to a large extent, determines the realisation of the three RP central vowels /ɜ:/, /ə/, /ʌ/.

**Table 2.** Monophthongisation of the RP diphthongs

| **Monophthongisation of /eɪ/** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | **Variants** | ***f*** | **%** |
| face, ventilator, respirator, patient, case, based, safe, incubation, fumigation, stay, complications, safety, isolation, cases, handshake, wave, teleconsultation, asymptomatic | /eɪ/ → [e] | 955 | 95.5 |
| Asymptomatic | /eɪ/ → [a] | 43 | 4.3 |
| Asymptomatic | /eɪ/ → [ɛ] | 1 | 0.1 |
| Asymptomatic | /eɪ/ → Ø | 1 | 0.1 |
| **Monophthongisation of /əʊ/** | | | |
| protocol, corona, COVID-19, home, closure, nose, pneumonia, total | /əʊ/→ [o] | 400 | 100 |

According to Table 2, the diphthongs /eɪ/ and əʊ/ were dominantly monophthongised by NigLE. The /eɪ/ diphthong was substituted with [e] (e.g. *face, case, alcohol-based, safe, incubation, fumigation, wave)* in 955 (95.5%) cases; with [a] in 43 (4.3%) instances of *asymptomatic* (a case of spelling-induced pronunciation), with 1 (0.1%) token of [ɛ], also in *asymptomatic* (an example of mispronunciation), and was not realised in *asymptomatic*. On the other hand, all the 400 (100%) tokens of /əʊ/ in *protocol, corona, COVID-19, home, closure, nose, pneumonia* and *total* were monophtongised as [o]. In both cases, the findings corroborate the previous claim (Adetugbo 2009; Josiah & Babatunde 2011; Ugoji 2010) that diphthongs /eɪ/ and əʊ/ often undergo the monophthongisation process in NigE. Jowitt (2015), in this respect, recommends that the resultant phonemes, [e] and [o], be adopted as candidates of

endonormative standard spoken NigE (which he refers to as Nigerian RP) in view of their proclivity amongst NigE users.

*5.2 Segment: Consonantal features*

The consonantal features observed in the pronunciation of the coronavirus-related words by NigLE include consonant substitution and h-dropping, which are tabulated in Tables 3 and 4 and discussed accordingly.

**Table 3.** Consonant substitution

| **Substitution of [θ]** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| thermometer, third | /θ/ → [θ] | 80 | 40 |
| health, death | /θ/ → [t] | 117 | 58.5 |
| Death | /θ/ → [d] | 1 | 0.5 |
| Thermometer | /θ/ → [tr] | 1 | 0.5 |
| Death | /θ/ → Ø | 1 | 0.5 |
| **Substitution of /ʃ/** | | | |
| patient, hand wash, incubation, fumigation, isolation, complication, infectious, handshake, transmission, teleconsultation, face shield. | /ʃ/ → [ʃ] | 545 | 99.1 |
| Infectious | /ʃ/ → [t] | 3 | 0.5 |
| Infectious | /ʃ/ → [ʧ] | 2 | 0.4 |
| **Substitution of /ʒ/** | | | |
| safety measure, border closure. | /ʒ/ → [ʒ] | 96 | 96 |
| | /ʒ/ → [ʃ] | 4 | 4 |

Table 3 shows that, in most cases, NigLE replaced the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ with other consonants but substantially articulated the voiceless palato-aveolar fricative /ʃ/ and voiced palato-aveolar fricative /ʒ/. Out of 200 tokens, the /θ/ consonant was realised accordingly in 80 (40%) instances, was substituted with [t] in *thermometer* and *third* in 117 (58.5%) cases, mispronounced as [d] in *death* and [tr] in *thermometer*, and deleted in *death* in 1 (0.5%) instance each. This shows that a substantial number of NigLE were unable to differentiate /θ/ from /t/. This tendency has been previously attested not only in NigE (Awonusi 2015) but also in different ESL contexts (Jenkins 2002).

On the other hand, NigLE predominantly produced the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ in 545 (99.1%) instances. The only few cases of substitution were found in *infectious*, where 3 (0.5%) and 2 (0.4%) instances of /ʃ/ were replaced with [t] and [ʧ]. This implies that NigLE were able to realise the appropriate form notwithstanding the spelling symbols: <t, s, sh, ss>. The same trend was also observed in NigLE articulation of voiced

palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/ in *closure* and *measure* where, out of 100 tokens, [ʒ] was dominantly realised in 96 (96%) cases while substitution with [ʃ] occurred in 4 (4%) instances only. This suggests a significant improvement in the articulation of voiced palato-alveolar fricative /ʒ/, which previous studies (Fajobi and Akande 2018) claim are rarely articulated by NigE speakers.

**Table 4**. /h/-dropping

| **h-dropping** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| *alcohol, handshake* and *home* | /h/ → [h] | 27 | 18 |
| | /h/ → Ø | 123 | 82 |

Table 4 reveals NigLE realisation of glottal fricative /h/ in *alcohol, handshake* and *home*. Out of 150 tokens, /h/ was articulated in 27 (18%) instances, while it was dropped in 123 (80%) cases. The dominant occurrence of h-dropping corroborates previous claims that NigE speakers often delete /h/ in /h/-full words (Awonusi 2009; Soneye and Gut 2011).

*5.3 Phonological processes*

Some phonological processes were also observed in the data which include consonant clusters simplification processes, devoicing, and yod processes. These are presented and discussed below.

**Table 5.** Cluster simplification

| **Cluster simplification** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Reduction of /kw/** | | | |
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| Quarantine | /kw/ → [kw] | 39 | 78 |
| | /kw/ → [k] | 10 | 20 |
| | /kw/ → [g] | 1 | 2 |
| **Reduction of /ks/** | | | |
| index, vaccine | /ks/ → [ks] | 81 | 54 |
| | /ks/ → [s] | 65 | 43.3 |
| | /ks/ → [k] | 3 | 2 |
| | /ks/ → [kst] | 1 | 0.7 |
| **Reduction of /sk/** | | | |
| Mask | /sk/ → [sk] | 61 | 40.7 |
| | /sk/ → [ks] | 74 | 49.3 |
| | /sk/ → [k] | 8 | 5.3 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | /sk/ → [s] | 7 | 4.7 |
| **Insertion of vowels in final syllabic consonants** | | | |
| viral, normal, surgical, total, sample, travel, | /l/ → [l] | 65 | 18.6 |
| viral, normal, surgical, total, personal | /l/ → [a] | 172 | 49.1 |
| sample, travel, surgical | /l/ → [ʊ] | 113 | 32.3 |
| **Post-vocalic l-deletion** | | | |
| shield | /l/ → [l] | 13 | 26 |
| | /l/ → Ø | 37 | 74 |

Table 5 shows that NigLE minimally employed some processes to simplify consonant clusters, such as reduction, insertion and deletion. A few cases of reduction occurred in consonant clusters involving /kw/, /ks/ and /sk/. Out of 50 tokens, participants reduced the /kw/ clusters in the first syllable of *quarantine* to [k] in 10 (20%) instances and to [g] in 1 (2%) case only, while they realised the cluster accordingly in 38 (78%) instances. The /ks/ clusters in *index* and *vaccine* were also articulated substantially by NigLE in 81 (54%) cases, whereas it was reduced to [s] in 65 (43.3) instances, to [k] in 3 (2%) cases and articulated as [kst] in 1 (0.7%) instance only. Out of 150 tokens of *face mask*, *surgical mask* and *nose mask*, /sk/ cluster of *mask* was reduced to [k] and [s] in 8 (5.3%) and 7 (4.7%) cases respectively, 74 (49.3) cases underwent the process of metathesis involving the swapping of /sk/ with [ks], while 61 (40.7%) tokens remained unreduced. This indicates that unlike previous studies (Gut 2004; Simo Bobda 2007a) that claim that reduction is a prominent simplification strategy in NigE, this finding does not substantially support this process but found evidence for metathesis which has also been claimed to be a NigE feature (Simo Bobda 2007a).

On the other hand, simplification by vowel insertion was evident in the data, especially in final syllabic consonants, that is, final /Cl/ (consonant + l) clusters. The front vowel [a] was inserted in 172 (49.1%) cases of the final /Cl/ clusters of *viral*, *normal*, *surgical*, *personal* and *total*, while 113 (32.3%) instances of the back vowel [u] were vocalised in the final /Cl/ clusters of *sample*, *surgical* and *travel*. Only 65 (18.6%) of 300 tokens were realised as syllabic /l/. Another simplification process substantially observed in the data was post-vocalic deletion, in which /l/ was deleted between a vowel and a following consonant in the coda position. This occurred in 37 (74%) cases of /l/ in *shield* and in 285 (81.4%) tokens of /l/ in words with syllabic consonants. These findings are in tandem with the patterns found among NigE speakers by Simo Bobda (2007b).

**Table 6.** Devoicing

| **Devoicing** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | token | *f* | % |
| **Devoicing of /z/** | | | |
| | /z/ → [z] | 134 | 22.3 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| sanitise, protocols, ease transmission, samples, complications, centres, nose, disease, sneeze. | /z/ → [s] | 435 | 72.5 |
| | /z/ → Ø | 31 | 5.2 |
| **Devoicing of /ɪz/** | | | |
| cases, recoveries | /ɪz/ → [iz] | 7 | 7 |
| | /ɪz/ → [is] | 87 | 87 |
| | /ɪz/ → Ø | 6 | 6 |

Table 6 shows evidence of devoicing of voiced consonants by NigLE. In 435 cases, which translate to 72.5%, the voiced alveolar fricative /z/ in *sanitise, ease, transmission, nose, disease, sneeze, protocols, samples, complications,* and *centres* was devoiced and realised as /s/. It was deleted in 31 (5.2%) instances and pronounced as /z/ in 134 (22.3%) cases. The same trend was also observed in *cases* and *recoveries* where 87 (87%) out of the 100 tokens of the plural morpheme /ɪz/ were predominantly articulated as [is]. The voiced form was produced only in 7 (7%) cases and deleted in 6 (6%) instances. The results corroborate earlier findings which claim that NigE tends towards features that require less articulatory efforts, such as devoicing (Adetugbo 2009).

**Table 7.** Yod processes

| **Yod processes** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| pneumonia, incubation, fumigation, curfew, new, community, pneumonia incubation, fumigation, immunity, | yod-retention [ju:] | 73 | 29.2 |
| | yod-deletion [u:] | 96 | 38.4 |
| | post-yod deletion [j] | 74 | 29.6 |
| Incubation | /ju:/ → [o] | 2 | 0.8 |
| Pneumonia | /ju:/ → [ɛ] | 3 | 1.2 |
| Pneumonia | /ju:/ → [ɔ] | 2 | 0.8 |

As revealed in Table 7, various forms of yod processes occurred in each lexical item containing yod /j/. Out of 150 tokens of lexical items with yod, 73 (29.2%) instances of yod retention [ju:] were recorded (e.g. *curfew* [kɔfju], *new* [nju:]); yod deletion occurred in 96 (38.4%) cases (e.g. *fumigation* [fumigeʃɔn], *incubation* [iŋkubeʃɔn]), while 74 (29.6%) tokens underwent post-yod deletion, that is, deletion of [u] after [j] (e.g. *community* [kɔminiti], *pneumonia* [nimonia]). Some deviant forms occurred due to mispronunciation, for example, [o] in *incubation*, [ɛ] in *pneumonia*) and [ɔ] in *pneumonia*. The three yod processes have earlier been attested in varying degrees in NigE (Simo Bobda 2007a).

### *5.4 Spelling-induced pronunciation*

Another prominent feature of NEA found in this study is spelling-induced pronunciation (Awonusi 2009; Akinjobi 2013; Jowitt 2019). The orthographic <a> in *quarantine* and *swab* was articulated as [a] instead of [ɒ] in 78 (78%) cases of their occurrences; it was pronounced as [ɔ] in 21 (21%) cases only and as [e] in 1 (1%) instance. Similarly, the <a> in *asymptomatic* was realised as [a] rather than [eɪ] in 42 (84%) out of 50 instances. Its pronunciation as [ei] had only 6 (12%) occurrences, while [e] and Ø occurred 1 (2%) time each (see Table 8).

**Table 8** Spelling pronunciation

| **Spelling pronunciation** | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Lexical items** | Variants | *f* | % |
| **/ɒ/** | | | |
| quarantine, swab | /ɒ/ → [ɔ] | 21 | 21 |
| | /ɒ/ → [a] | 78 | 78 |
| | /ɒ/ → [e] | 1 | 1 |
| **/eɪ/** | | | |
| Asymptomatic | /eɪ/ → [eɪ] | 6 | 12 |
| | /eɪ/ → [a] | 42 | 84 |
| | /eɪ/ → [e] | 1 | 2 |
| | /eɪ/ → Ø | 1 | 2 |

**Discussion of Findings**

The analysis of NigLE pronunciation of coronavirus-related lexical items reveals distinctive NigE features at the levels of segments, phonological processes and graphology. Segmental realisations include the substitution of the central vowels /ʌ, ɜ:, ə/ and voiceless dental fricative /θ/ with other phonemes, monophtongisation of RP diphthongs, and h-dropping in h-full words (Simo Bobda 2007a). The central vowels /ʌ/ and /ɜ:/ tend to undergo backing to [ɔ] in most cases, the schwa /ə/ often splits into CLOTH, BATH, DRESS and GOAT depending on orthography, while [t] is generally substituted for /θ/. The RP diphthongs /eɪ/ and /əʊ/ are dominantly monophthongised as [e] and [o], respectively, while glottal fricative /h/ is widely deleted in h-full words. However, voiceless alveolar fricative /ʃ/ and, surprisingly, voiced alveolar fricative /ʒ/ are predominantly articulated by NigLE.

Some of these realisations result from the interplay of already established pronunciation tendencies of NigE speakers, which compete to make NEA distinct from native Englishes. For example, the replacement of the central vowels /ʌ, ɜ:, ə/ and voiceless dental fricative /θ/ with other sounds can be said to arise from the tendency for phonemic substitution (Adetugbo 2009), spelling-induced pronunciations (Akinjobi 2013; Simo Bobda 2007a) and analogical pronunciations owing to graphological similarity of two words (Simo Bobda 2007a), for example, *droplet* [droplɛt] cf. *let*. This confirms the previous claim that L2 speakers tend to adopt close substitutes of their native sounds to replace sounds in the target language which are

absent in the phonemic inventory of their native language (Cruz-Ferreira 1987). Although evidence of improvement in the realisation of the voiced alveolar fricative /ʒ/ was found in the data, monophtongisation of RP diphthongs, and h-dropping in h-full words are still preponderant amongst NigLE. These findings further show that NigE shares similar features of pronunciation with other African Englishes. Studies have established these tendencies in neighbouring Cameroon and Ghana (Simo Bobda 2007b), and in Kenya, Ghana and Zimbabwe (Mutonya 2008).

Phonological processes employed by NigLE include cluster simplification, devoicing, and yod processes. The major cluster simplification strategies observed are insertion in final syllabic consonants and deletion of /l/ post-vocalically and in final syllabic consonants. Two patterns of final /Cl/ clusters found in the data were the /-Cul/ and /-Cal/ forms, where vowels [u] and [a] were respectively inserted to simplify the final syllabic consonant, whose realisation is difficult for most NigE speakers (Akinjobi 2006). This process, according to Simo Bobda (2007a), is possibly due to the influence of L-vocalisation rule and spelling. While L-Vocalisation converts /l/ in final /Cl/ clusters to [u] or [o] (e.g. [u] in *sam<u>p</u>le, tra<u>v</u>el*), the insertion of [a] in *surgi<u>cal</u>. vi<u>ral</u>, nor<u>mal</u>* and *to<u>tal</u>* result from the spelling form. Regarding deletion, the lateral /l/ and syllabic /l/ were dominantly deleted post-vocalically in *shield* [ʃi:d] and in the final syllabic consonant (/Cl/) context [sampu, travu]. Reduction of consonant clusters was not found to be predominant. In most cases, the unreduced, simplified, as well as metathesis forms of the /kw, ks, sk/ clusters were in free variation. This is quite unlike previous studies (e.g. Gut 2004) which attest to reduction as a dominant simplification strategy in NigE. Devoicing of /z, ɪz/ to [s, is] both within words and at morpheme boundary was significantly evident in the data, while yod retention [ju:], yod deletion [u:] and post-yod deletion [j] were variably employed by NigLE.

It should be noted that most of the phonological processes adopted by NigLE - insertion, deletion and devoicing - tend towards simplification of the patterns of the native English varieties, which are characteristic not only of NigE but also of L2 English generally (Adetugbo 2009; Simo Bobda 2007b; Gut 2004). Oladipupo (2014), for example, finds that NigE speakers often employ processes such as deletion and devoicing which, according to Hyman (1975), are natural features that require less articulatory effort and are attested in or common to many languages. Simo Bobda (2007b), specifically, identifies the insertion of [u] in final /Cl/ clusters as a common occurrence in West African Englishes, and post-vocalic /l/ deletion as a peculiar feature in NigE. Ellis's (1985) also believes that an attempt to always simplify the patterns of the target language is a common trend amongst second language learners.

Finally, the analysis shows that participants' pronunciations were guided by the graphological construct of words, for example, *a* in *sw<u>a</u>b* was produced as [a] instead of [ɒ], while [a] rather than /eɪ/ was dominantly uttered in ***<u>a</u>****symptomatic*. This, again, establishes the claim by Simo Bobda (2007a) and Akinjobi (2013) that NEA is significantly marked by spelling-cued mispronunciation.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that in spite of the constant exposure of NigLE to the native English varieties through formal education and non-enculturation sources of learning, such as electronic

and social media (Akinjobi 2013), the distinctive features of NigE accent dominate their speech. Such characteristics of NEA found in this study include phonemic substitution, monophthongisation of RP diphthongs, h-dropping, simplification by insertion, deletion and devoicing, spelling pronunciations and analogical pronunciations, which have been reported by previous studies.

This, is unsurprising since NEA is the accent that is readily available within their sociolinguistic milieu. What is worrisome, however, is the unrealistic expectations of the Nigerian education planners from NigLE. The learners are exposed to two models of English in real-time, which Jowitt (2019: 60) refers to as 'two standardising forces'. The first is the native (RP) model, which is taught in school and adopted in the classroom for examination purposes. The other is NEA, which they naturally speak and hear around them but are not permitted to deploy for tests. Typically, a majority of them pronounce *asymptomatic* and *aerosol* as /asimptoˈmatik/ and /aˈrosɔl/, as spoken by their teachers and other English users around them, but are expected to identify the lexical items as /eɪˌsɪmptəˈmatɪk/ and /ˈeərəsɒl/ respectively in an oral English test. This scenario, obviously, has serious implications for NigLE, who are caught between this pronunciation dilemma. It creates confusion and learning difficulties for them and may result in low academic performance due to the wide gap between their linguistic realities and the target accent. Ugwuanyi expresses the same concern, especially as it affects secondary school students as follows:

> The de jure model of English used for education in Nigeria remains British English; however, the de facto model, for the most part, is unarguably Nigerian English both in sound and in structure. Almost all English teachers in Nigerian schools are Nigerians who are significantly influenced by the sociolinguistic milieu of Nigeria. It is a grand irony that WAEC, NECO and JAMB still test students on aspects of 'Oral English', which are completely out of touch with the students' daily linguistic realities. Can this be related to why there is a perpetual high failure rate in English? (2019, para. 5)

This situation poses significant challenges for the Nigerian educational system. As Simo Bobda (2010: 64) warns, having observed the disparity between the stress patterns of L1 and L2 varieties, "any teaching aimed at an exclusive exonormative model like RP is bound to fail".

Therefore, the most practical solution to this challenge is to adopt (NigE) as the standard model for teaching and learning English in Nigeria. As Ugwu (2020) suggests, NigLE should be exposed to the Nigerian variety of English, which is more friendly and accessible, rather than to RP, which is practically out of their reach. Given the efforts being channelled towards the standardisation of the NigE variety and the addition of a good number of peculiar NigE lexical items in the Oxford English Dictionary (Salazar 2020; Tyohemba, 2025), the global acceptability of the variety is no longer in doubt. Therefore, while ensuring the intelligibility of the accent, practical steps towards its codification must be pursued, especially in view of the predicament of NigLE who have had to toggle between the accent widely spoken around them (NEA) and the one often learnt for examination purposes (RP).

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