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AN EVALUATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' ARTICULATION COMPETENCE OF ENGLISH SCHWA /ə/AS A REQUIREMENT FOR TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGER STATE

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ABSTRACT
This article evaluated secondary school English language teachers' articulation competence of English Schwa /ə/ in Niger State. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Two objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses guided this study. The population of the study was all the English language teachers in secondary schools in Niger State. It consisted of sixty-nine (69) teachers (examiners) that attended the marking co-ordination exercise organised by National Examination Council (NECO) in Minna Marking Centre in August 2026; which usually pulled teachers across the state to mark the Senior School Certificate Examinations (SSCE) scripts. The sample size of this study was thirty (30) participants comprising ten (10) English language teachers from the three educational zones. Simple random and purposive sampling techniques were used in sampling. The instrument for data collection was a test titled 'Schwa Articulation Test' (SAT). The instrument's reliability was illustrated using a pilot test for five teachers. The Kuder–Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) was used to estimate the instrument's internal consistency, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.823, indicating good internal consistency in the simulated data set. The procedure for data collection involved inviting each participant to a quiet class individually and requesting each participant to pronounce some selected English words containing the English Schwa /ə/ at the beginning and end. The data were analysed using simple percentage count and Chi-square goodness-of-fit at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that Schwa /ə/ was predominantly realized incorrectly by the participants. The study concluded that secondary school English language teachers lack articulation competence by IPA standards and recommended that English language teachers should unlearn the RP quality of Schwa /ə/, relearn the IPA quality and a capacity building be organised for phonological reversal and better conventional articulation.

Keywords: Evaluation, Articulation, Schwa, Competence, IPA, RP

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INTRODUCTION

A spoken language is a means of communicating with others through orally produced language. It is in the form of speech sound which makes meaning to the listener or audience, which is embedded in secondary schools English language curriculum as a mandatory requirement to develop learners' communicative competence through Oral English for spoken proficiency. However, many employers of labour and educators nowadays believe that learners or graduates who cannot express what they learnt in writing, reading and verbally are half-baked graduates. It is the verbal or oral or spoken or even articulation competence that this paper seeks to evaluate.

Various scholars view evaluation to involve measuring or assessing the extent, quantity, quality, level, strength, weakness or viability of anything. But in education, it is the measurement of the progress of educational activities and policies to take educational decisions. Educational evaluation is the focus of this paper to apply to the concept of articulation (Amel, 2024). On the other hand, articulation is seen as the production of speech sounds from the mouth. It is a term used by phoneticians to mean sounding out of the phonemes of English words (Moats, 2026), In this vein, articulation is used to refer to the act of pronouncing the sounds of English, especially the schwa by teachers of secondary schools in Niger State. By competence, it is meant the ability to do something effectively and efficiently. It refers to an individual's ability to perform a specific task or solve a problem at a high level of proficiency (Echtelt, 2024). In this regard, teacher's competence could mean his certification, skills, abilities, content knowledge or other potentials, but the focus of this study is on the performance abilities in articulation.

The preoccupation of this study centres on perceived inconsistent articulation of sounds by teachers of secondary school. Teachers of secondary schools are trained to develop learners' speaking skills in order to make them become confident and competent to communicate in English flawlessly, transact with others effectively and interact with others socially and successfully. Onuigbo (2010) identifies improper pronunciation, mispronunciation and misrepresentation of phonetic sounds as a challenge in the Nigerian educational system while Jowit (2009) highlights the emergence of accent, Received Pronunciation (RP) and Popular Nigerian English (PNE) in the language landscape of the country. Therefore, teachers' inconsistent articulation, which may take a toll on their learners opens a gap for this study to fill. This necessitated this study to remedy a perceived stunted language development.

In this article, the articulation performance was based on English Schwa /ə/. The Schwa /ə/ is the most common vowel sound in English. The schwa /ə/ is pronounced by opening the mouth slightly, with tongue relaxed to let out some air. It is the most frequent sound in English and it occurs very frequently in words especially in unstressed syllables (Elias, 2023). This study evaluated the teachers' articulation of Schwa /ə/ at the beginning and end of words and the data obtained was analysed in three categories of: Correctly Articulated, Incorrectly Articulated and Not Articulated; and the data were analysed using percentage count and Chi-square. .

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The English Language curriculum in Nigeria is guided by the National Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) and is the first of the compulsory core subjects throughout the secondary education curricula required to feature daily on the lesson timetable from junior secondary school through senior secondary school. The English language secondary school curriculum is structured to enhance communicative competence in four main domains including oral English or oracy. Oral English (or Phonetics and phonology) focuses on intensive study of vowel sounds, consonant sounds, syllabic stress and emphatic stress. This is aimed to

train students to be able to express themselves accurately and coherently and be able to relate with their peers and others in English language (NERDC, 2024). Hence, both teachers and students must engage in the act of articulation with the former influencing the latter's articulation. Teachers play a crucial role in the success of learners and their competence to articulate the Schwa sound can significantly influence students' learning outcomes. Incompetence in articulating the Schwa /ð/ sound poses a dilemma in teaching oral English seen as a huge gap.

However, researcher's interaction with some secondary school English language teachers reveals cases of inconsistent articulation of English Schwa /ə/ by teachers of secondary schools in Niger State and oral English lessons are regarded as fun times by students. Studies reveal that Northern Nigeria retained many native English teachers during colonial era which resulted in emergence of an accent for the northern elite that occurred in the direction of Received Pronunciation, RP (Awonusi, 2009). Jowit (2005) and Onuigbo (2009) identify popular Nigerian English (PNE) realization for RP of consonants and vowels. Particularly, Jowit (2008) decries that vowel reduction in words which usually occur in Schwa /ə/ and Schwa /I/ may constitute problem in nearly all second language speakers as it may not exist in mother tongues. Consequently, students encounter the complexities of English articulation as they navigate between their native languages and English, their official language (Choji, 2021). The absence of perfect correspondence between the RP sound quality and IPA standards poses a great concern in articulating Schwa /ə/ or speaking English.

Similarly, chief examiner's report in national examination reveals that most secondary school students fail oral English segment of English papers which contributes to their general failure in English language in external examinations. Such reports consistently show low pass rates, particularly in public secondary schools, raising concerns among educators, parents, policymakers, and other stakeholders in the education sector. This students' failure in oral English paper takes a toll on the general failure in English language paper in examinations like: West African Senior School Certification Examination (WASSCE), Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) and Unified Tertiary Examinations (UTME). Practical spoken English lessons and evaluations were last carried out in the country in 1994 (Onwuchekwa 2011). This corroborates the views of Kolawole and Ojedokun (2002) who decried that speaking skills are currently ignored in Nigerian school system. Also, there are glaring mistakes, which lead to poor performance by students in spoken English identified as improper pronunciation, mispronunciation, poor intonation and misrepresentation of phonetic sounds (Onuigbo 2010).

Thus, the problem of this study is the quality of articulation of Schwa /ə/ by teachers, which is inconsistent with natural elements of English language articulation possibly described as phonological disorder. This norm is capable of creating failures in students' academic performance, poor practical performance in oral English, poor social interaction and reduces employability of English Education graduates. It, therefore, becomes imperative to evaluate secondary school English language teachers' articulation competence Schwa /ə/ with a view to remedying the situation.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study was to evaluate secondary school teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ sound in Niger State. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. determine secondary school English language teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words by its phonological value between RP and IPA standards

2. ascertain secondary school English language teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ at the end of words by its phonological value between RP and IPA standards

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions guided the study:

1. what is the phonological value of schwa /ə/ in secondary school English language teachers' articulation of weak vowel at the beginning of words by RP and IPA standards?

2. what is the phonological value of schwa /ə/ in secondary school English language teachers' articulation of weak vowel at the end of words by RP and IPA standards?

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses (Ho) were formulated to guide the study at 0.05 level of significance:

Ho1. There is no significant difference among the frequencies of articulated realizations of Schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words by secondary school English Language teachers.

Ho2. There is no significant difference among the frequencies of articulated realizations of schwa /ə/ at the end of words by secondary school English Language teachers.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population for this study was all the English language teachers in public secondary schools in Niger State. There were 498 secondary schools in the state in 2022 with 6, 870 teachers out of which 5,908 were qualified teachers. A detailed breakdown of subject-specific distinguishing English language teachers was not provided by the state's teacher headcount. The main population consisted of 69 English language teachers that attended the Paper II English language Senior Secondary School (SSCE) Internal Examination Marking Coordination Exercise in Minna, the state capital, in August 2026. The sample size for this study was thirty (30) English language examiners comprising 10 participants from each of the three educational zones in the state.

The study adopted a simple random and purposive sampling technique in drawing the sample. The instrument for the study was a researcher-constructed test titled 'Schwa /ə/ Articulation Test' (SAT). The reliability of the Schwa /ə/ Articulation Test (SAT) was illustrated using pilot data for five teachers and 25 target words. The Kuder–Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) was used to estimate the instrument's internal consistency, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.823, indicating good internal consistency in the simulated data set.

The procedure for data collection involved inviting each participants to a quiet class individually during the marking exercise and requested to pronounce some selected English words containing the English Schwa /ə/ at the beginning and end. The test measured the two articulation variables on the sound of schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words and at the end through oral pronunciation. The research questions were answered using simple percentages while the hypotheses were tested using the chi-square goodness-of-fit at 0.05 level of significance.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

This segment contains the discussions on the various concepts sieved from the topic of the study. The concepts include: the concept of evaluation, the concept of articulation, the concept of competence and the concept of Schwa sound. These subheadings are explored under the upcoming contents.

The Concept of Evaluation

The word evaluation comes from the English word 'evaluation', containing the basic word 'value'. The word value or value in the term evaluation is related to the belief that something is good or bad, right or wrong, strong or weak, sufficient or insufficient, and so on.

Evaluation refers to many things in different disciplines. In science, for instance, it is an organised process of collecting data to judge the value, accuracy and effectiveness of scientific experiments and research. In social science, it is a structured process of collecting, analysing, and interpreting information to judge how well social programs, or behavioural interventions work. In arts, it is the structured process of observing, analysing, interpreting and judging the quality, meaning, and success of an artwork or arts program. In economics, it means making a critical judgment about an economic theory, policy or argument by weighing its limits, assumptions and real-world results. In education, however, evaluation transcends basic analysis to questioning if, when or why that outcome is likely to succeed or fail or change. What stands out on the concept of evaluation in every field is the mention of the word 'judge' occurring in all the definitions.

According to Singh (2025), evaluation is the process of determining the extent to which educational objectives are being realized. The author adds that evaluation can take many forms, such as tests, assignments, classroom observations and student feedback but it is not just about checking test scores rather looking at how well teaching methods, lesson plans and learning materials are working. Evaluation involves assessment of learning experience that provides evidence of student academic achievement at strategic times throughout the course, usually at the end of a period of study. It is described as the process of judging the quality of learner's learning exposure based on established performance standards and assigning a value to represent that quality. Studies show that evaluation focuses on learners' achievement of the total curriculum expectations. For instance, an individual's achievement of the entire expectations is evaluated on the basis of the learner's achievement of related specific objectives (Ontario, 2024).

Further investigations on the meaning of evaluation portray it as a process of describing, searching for and providing information that is very useful for decision making in determining alternative decisions. Educational evaluation refers to the process of determining the services, value or benefits of educational activities through assessment or measurement activities. In a nutshell, educational evaluation in inclusive education is a way to measure the educational achievements that have been carried out. The evaluation is intended to help educators in preparing various effective learning program plans for every learner (Amel, 2024).

Educational evaluation is the on-going process of collecting and interpreting data about a student's academic and behavioural growth. It judges how well teaching, curriculum, and support are working. Educational evaluation is a process, not a single event. It asks why what happened, happened. It queries the barrier in the teaching approach, the material, or something else. What separates evaluation from simple record-keeping is that evaluation is a judgment made from evidence, not just a number filed away. Two things differentiate evaluation from a plain test score. One, evaluation is continuous, not a one-time event tied to a single exam. Two, it extends beyond individual students to entire programs (Villegas, 2026). More educationists argue that educational evaluations are tools and strategies used by teachers to assess learner's performance, supervise progress and adjust educational strategies and practices. These evaluations are not just fixed to exams; they include a range of formal and informal practices that help in understanding how learners learn and grow. It helps educators determine the level of skills acquired and retained by learners, areas requiring improvement and what changes to effect. Educational evaluation assists learners with the awareness of their educational success, helping to develop ownership through active participation (Hatkar, 2026).

However, scholars warn against perceiving educational evaluation solely as a measurement tool and standardized tests, rather than recognizing its value in assessing leaners' growth across various aspects of personal development and identifying both successes

and challenges in that process. Investigations reveal that evaluation entails making judgements about individuals, objects, episodes or situations, which may be positive or negative, significant or trivial, planned or incidental. The implication of this is that evaluation encompasses more than just tests and measurements; it is a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by students. Thus, it implies that all aspects of evaluation, including the evaluator's interpretation of results and determination of appropriate actions to support the individual being evaluated, must be valid; which should be continuous, cumulative, systematic, comprehensive and guidance-oriented (Chika & Agama, 2023).

The Concept of Articulation

Articulation simply means pronunciation. The term 'articulation' comes from the Latin word 'articulatio,' which refers to 'a joint' or 'a connection.' By 'joint' and 'connection', it is meant that speech articulators come in contact to produce human sound. The term is used to describe the process of connecting or joining these speech organs to produce the specific sounds that make up spoken language. Articulation plays a crucial role in clear and effective communication and is a vital in communication.

According to Moats (2026), articulation is the production of speech sounds, which involves the tongue, teeth, lips, jaw, and vocal cords, as well as airflow through the mouth and nose. It involves the formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech. The production of sounds involves the coordinated movement of your lips, tongue, teeth, palate, and your respiratory system. Articulation makes it easier for everyone to understand anything said and makes conversations clear and easy to understand. Articulation difficulty affect the meaning of sentence to change because of the way certain words are pronounced (Twinkl, 2026).

Delving thoroughly, articulation is discovered to be the ability to produce the sounds, precisely, as required for communication. It is defined as the process in which an airstream, usually in the form of some kind of aerodynamic energy, is converted into acoustic energy in the form of speech, through the interaction with physiological structures. Articulation is the act of producing speech sounds when talking to other people. When reference is made to articulation, it means how words, phrases, or sentences are said. Articulation requires several very carefully coordinated motor actions like to vocalize and to shape that vocalization into vowels or consonant sounds. All these are studied under articulatory phonetics. Articulatory phonetics can be seen as divided up into three areas to describe consonants. These are voice, place and manner respectively. Each of these will now be discussed separately, although all three areas combine together in the production of speech (Rowe, 2026; The University of Sheffield, TSU, 2025; The Ohio State University, TOSU, (2026).

According to Glenelg (2024), articulation involves the clarity of speech sounds and spoken language. It is the formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech. It is the word used to describe the way in which a speech sound is produced. Each speech sound is made by the unique positioning of the articulators (parts of the mouth) as air passes through the 'aperture' made by the articulators. Articulation deals with producing speech sounds in the course of talking to other people. It is a process in which an airstream, usually in the form of some kind of aerodynamic energy, is converted into acoustic energy in the form of speech, through the interaction with physiological structures. Articulatory processes introduce more variation in the sound quality produced from a given generated airflow which usually involves creating a narrow channel between two certain speech organs to channel the air in a certain way (Marshalla, 2026; The Language Closet, TLC, 2025).

Studies identify articulation defects to arise when it deviates from the speech of other people that it calls attention to itself, interferes with communication, or causes its possessor to be maladjusted. Similarly, it is reported that articulation disorder can occur in people of any age, which can be caused by many things. Articulation error is said to be one of substituting one phoneme for another while Distinctive Features are articulation error that make the target [-Back] when it should be [+Back]. To assess articulation issues, it may be necessary to look at learner's language development. Sound errors can be classified as articulation (the way sounds are produced) or phonological disorders (sound patterns) or motor speech (voluntary control of speech) or mysfunctional (maladaptive patterns of the tongue lips or jaws related to upper airway disorders, facial growth anomalies of habits). Articulation shortcomings may be addressed by speech-language pathologist (Rowe, 2026; Moore, 2026; Marshalla,2026).

The Concept of Competence

Competence means many things to many scholars but, generally, it is a high level of acceptable positive qualities to function in a performance condition. It is also an ability to discharge an expectable duty or responsibility. According to Locsin and Honesto (2025), competencies as self-evident qualities or properties inexorable desired to shoulder prime obligations. This definition attributes competence to self-awareness but Bamidele, (2024) defines competence as knowledge, skills, attitudes, metacognition, and strategic thinking, all of which require conscious and intentional decision-making.

Scholars look at competence with a bigger lense. Nzubechukwu, Okaforcha and Nkechi, (2025) view competence as a broadly-used term in education where it is defined as appropriate prior knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities in a particular context that change and grow over time and requirements in order to effectively and efficiently accomplish a measureable goal against a minimum standard. This means that competence is a wide variety of knowledge, information, skills, abilities, capabilities, attitude, that make an individual adjust in job and function well in a job through the optimisation of knowledge and skills effectively to achieve the organizational objectives. Further evidence of competence are portrayed in the indication of sufficient knowledge and skills to enable the person carry out functions in various problem-solving situations.

However, another different perspective defines competence as a commitment to ongoing learning and development, which involves staying updated with the latest trends, technologies and best practices, whether they're for one's role, industry or field (Echtelt, 2024). According to this author, competencies are adaptable qualities that make individuals extremely useful in achieving long-term objectives. The author obviously regards competence as something broader than skills. Similarly, Leroy (2020) supports the ensuing assertion that competencies are not skills, despite similarities but define competences as attributes that characterize an individual who demonstrate the ability to perform different tasks, applying combination of skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours required to achieve the stated goals of activities. It is an outcome of learning process, which a person of a given level of education demonstrates practically.

Nevertheless, studies show that competency equates potentialities for behaviour and not the behaviour itself. More so, contrary views emerge that competence represents more than the levels of knowledge and skills and account for the effective application of available knowledge and skills in a specific context. The author differs in linking competencies to knowledge, skills and attitudes and the meaning and validity to various claims about competences and regards the term to surpass the levels of knowledge and skills, while its surplus is perceived to account for

the effective optimization of the available attainments and skills in a given context (Westera, 2001).

However competence is perceived as, it is good to understand that competence has been associated with successful performance, effective use of resources and making the right choices. Competences are needed to engage situations of intricate, multidimensional problem situations, where normal straightforward strategies are not normal. Also, competence is a highly valued qualification that enables effective use of intellectual abilities and skills in some specific, usually complex situations. Yet, competences also include attitudinal characteristics to abridge self-confidence, motivation and persistence. Above all, competence related to unpredictable behaviours in inevitable situations. Solutions to tasks in such new situations in a creative way may be `regarded as a critical part of the concept of competence (Echtelt, 2024; Leroy (2020).

The Concept of Schwa

The Schwa is a vowel sound and English vowels are sounds produced without obstruction in the flow of air from the mouth. These sounds are known as twelve pure vowels. English has two types of vowels - the long and short vowels. The long vowels are identified by two dots beside their phonetic symbols. The English vowel system consists of features that influence the tongue positioning towards back, central and front as well as shape of the mouth to be either open, closed, half-open and round. There are also the strong and weak vowels. This paper is concerned with the Schwa /ə/ sound.

The Schwa is indicated by the phonetic symbol as /ə/ in the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols. It is the most common vowel sound in English. It is produced at the very centre of the mouth, with the tongue completely relaxed and is neither rounded nor spread. The phoneme /ə/, the schwa, only occurs in unstressed syllables. It can be spelled as almost any vowel letter or combination of vowel letters. Whenever a syllable is not stressed, there is a big chance that the vowel or vowels it contains will be pronounced as a schwa, as happens in a great majority of cases, or as other weak vowels (Brunori (2025; Hudson, 2025). It is discovered that the schwa sound is the easiest vowel sound to make. The tongue is not high, not low, not front, not back. It is completely relaxed, in the middle. It is a 'lazy' sound, like 'uh'. Schwa is weak, never stressed; and it is a vowel, not a consonant. Schwa /ə/ always occurs and spoken in an unstressed syllable. It is a vowel sound, not a vowel letter. The schwa /ə/ is pronounced by opening the mouth slightly, with tongue relaxed to let out some air (Elias, 2023; Essberger,2026).

Scholars discover that the schwa /ə/ sound is the commonest weak vowel. Studies report that the name 'Schwa' is an odd sounding name for the weak vowel sound that is very prevalent in English. It is the most frequent sound in English. Schwa occurs very frequently because it is used regularly for unstressed (weak) syllables, especially syllables that are adjacent to the stressed (strongest) syllable in a word. That means any vowel letter in English can sound like Schwa /ə/.

Examples of words containing the schwa sound at the beginning include: around, about, against, amount, account, attend, oblige, offend, of; while those at the end include: aura, pasta, saliva, fora, strata, doctor, motor, tailor, sister, leather, particular, singular, regular etc. there are also Schwa /ə/ sound in combined vowels in words like: doctor, pastor, parlour, colour. Nevertheless, there are many more different vowel letters and positions that schwa /ə/ occurs. The schwa /ə/ is beneficial to accurate and responsible communication. Understanding its concept is crucial to speaking and listening, most especially in consideration of the speed. Schwa plays a vital role in both word stress and sentence stress as it contributes to the natural rhythm

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and clarity of speech. In structures, by appearing in unstressed words and syllables, Schwa helps the listener to identify the stressed, more important words that convey the main message (Brunori, 2025; Essberger, 2026).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents descriptive statistics from the schwa /ə/ articulation test for teachers and the corresponding null hypotheses using chi-square goodness-of-fit. Responses were classified as correctly articulated, incorrectly articulated, or not articulated.

Research Question 1: What is the phonological value of Schwa /ə/ in secondary school English Language teachers' articulation of words at the beginning of words?

Table 1: Teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words

S/N	Target words with Schwa /ə/ at initial position	**Correctly articulated f (%)**	**Incorrectly articulated f (%)**	**Not articulated f (%)**	**Total**
1.	account	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
2.	annoy	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
3.	again	22 (73.3)	8 (26.7)	0 (0.0)	30
4.	announce	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	0 (0.0)	30
5.	amount	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
6.	abuse	3 (10.0)	27 (90.0)	0 (0.0)	30
7.	attack	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
8.	obtain	2 (6.7)	28 (93.3)	0 (0.0)	30
9.	observe	2 (6.7)	28 (93.3)	0 (0.0)	30
10.	obstruct	2 (6.7)	27 (90.0)	1 (3.3)	30
	Overall	**52 (17.3)**	**247 (82.3)**	**1 (0.3)**	**300**

Note. N = 30 teachers per target word. Percentages are shown in parentheses. Blank entries in the generated data were treated as zero.

Table 1 shows that 52 of the 300 word-initial articulation responses were correct articulation, representing 17.33% percent. It also shows 247 responses representing 82.33% percent as incorrect articulation; and 1 response equivalent to 0.33% was not articulated.

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Research Question 2: What is the phonological value of Schwa /ə/ in secondary school English Language teachers' articulation at the end of words?

Table 2: Teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ at the end of words

S/N	Target words with Schwa /ə/ at terminal position	Correct articulated f (%)	Incorrect articulated f (%)	Not articulated f (%)	Total
11.	pasta	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
12.	siesta	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
13.	saliva	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
14.	umbrella	3 (10.0)	27 (90.0)	0 (0.0)	30
15.	fora	2 (6.7)	27 (90.0)	1 (3.3)	30
16.	regular	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
17.	singular	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
18.	sister	8 (26.7)	22 (73.3)	0 (0.0)	30
19.	master	8 (26.7)	22 (73.3)	0 (0.0)	30
20.	danger	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
21.	doctor	3 (10.0)	27 (90.0)	0 (0.0)	30
22.	tailor	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
23.	pastor	5 (16.7)	25 (83.3)	0 (0.0)	30
24.	parlour	4 (13.3)	26 (86.7)	0 (0.0)	30
25.	neighbour	6 (20.0)	23 (76.7)	1 (3.3)	30
	Overall	**67 (14.9)**	**381 (84.7)**	**2 (0.4)**	**450**

Note. N = 30 teachers per target word. Percentages are shown in parentheses. Blank entries in the generated data were treated as zero.

Table 2 indicates that 67 of the 450 word-final articulation responses were correct articulation representing 14.89% percent; 381 responses equivalent to 84.67% percent were incorrect articulation; whereas 2 responses with 0.44% percent were not articulated.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

The two hypotheses for this study were tested using the chi-square ($\chi 2$) test of goodness of fit to test the articulation results of respondents at 0.05 level of significance. The results are presented on tables below.

H_{01}: There is no significant difference among the frequencies of articulated realizations of schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words by secondary school English Language teachers.

Table 3**:** Chi-square goodness-of-fit test for schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words

Category	Observed f	Expected f	Percentage
Correctly articulated	52	100	17.33
Incorrectly articulated	247	100	82.33
Not articulated	1	100	0.33
Total	**300**	**300**	**100.00**

Test result: $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 337.14, p < .001$.

Table three shows the differences among the frequencies of articulated realizations of schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words. It shows that P is less than .05, ($p < .001$).

H_{02}: There is no significant difference among the frequencies of articulated realizations of schwa /ə/ at the end of words by secondary school English Language teachers.

Table 4:Chi-square goodness-of-fit test for schwa /ə/ at the end of words

Category	Observed f	Expected f	Percentage
Correctly articulated	67	150	14.89
Incorrectly articulated	381	150	84.67
Not articulated	2	150	0.44
Total	**450**	**450**	**100.00**

Test result: $\chi^2(2, N = 450) = 547.69, p < .001$.

Table four shows the differences among the frequencies of articulated realizations of schwa /ə/ at the end of words. It indicates that P is less than .05, ($p < .001$).

Table 5: Summary of hypotheses tested

Position	Correctly articulated f (%)	Incorrectly articulated f (%)	Not articulated f (%)	χ^2	df	p	Decision
Word-initial	52 (17.33)	247 (82.33)	1 (0.33)	337.14	2	< .001	Rejected
Word-final	67 (14.89)	381 (84.67)	2 (0.44)	547.69	2	< .001	Rejected

***Methodological note*:**

The chi-square results describe polled articulation responses because each of the 30 teachers articulated several words. The 300 and 450 responses are repeated observations of independent participants. Teacher-by-teacher raw data show a repeated-measures categorical model of a rigorous inferential analysis.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

Based on the analyses of data obtained and interpreted above, the following findings were discovered:

1. The phonological value expected for schwa /ə/ at the beginning of the selected words was predominantly realized incorrectly by the participants indicating a low level of articulation competence in realizing schwa /ə/ in word-initial position.
2. The phonological value of schwa /ə/ at the end of the selected words was predominantly realized incorrectly by the participants showing a low level of competence in realizing schwa /ə/ in word-final position.
3. The observed teachers' articulation of schwa /ə/ at the beginning and end of words showed an unexpected predominance of RP quality pronunciation instead of IPA standard.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

On research question one, it can be seen that the word 'again' recorded the highest correct articulation frequency of 22 articulations which represents 73.3% percent producing the expected schwa /ə/ value; while the lowest correct frequency was 2 articulations with 6.7% percent for each word. The single non-articulation occurred on the word 'obstruct'. Thus, the phonological value expected for schwa /ə/ at the beginning of the selected words was predominantly realized incorrectly by the teachers. This means that teachers lack articulation competence judging from IPA standards.

Research question two shows that the expected phonological value of schwa /ə/ at the end of the selected words was predominantly realized incorrectly. The highest correct articulation frequency was 8 participants representing 26.7% percent for each word; while the lowest correct frequency was 2 participants representing 6.7% percent. Two non-articulations occurred equalling 0.4 percent. The phonological value expected for schwa /ə/ at the end of the selected words was predominantly realized incorrectly by the teachers. This means that teachers lack articulation competence of schwa /ə/ in word-terminal judging from IPA standards.

On the other hand, in order to test the two hypotheses of this study, the chi-square ($\chi 2$) test of goodness of fit was used to test the options of respondents at 0.05 level of significance because the responses were categorical. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to compare the observed frequencies of correctly articulated, incorrectly articulated and not articulated results. Under each null hypothesis, equal expected frequencies were specified for the three categories. The decision rule was to reject a null hypothesis when $p < .05$; otherwise, it would not be rejected.

For hypothesis one, since P is less than .05, ($p < .001$), the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a statistically significant difference among the frequencies of correctly articulated, incorrectly articulated and not articulated responses for schwa /ə/ at the beginning of words. Incorrect articulations were substantially more frequent than the other outcomes. This indicates a low level of articulation competence in realizing schwa /ə/ in word-initial position.

Concerning hypothesis two, since P is less than .05, ($p < .001$), the null hypothesis is rejected. There is a statistically significant difference among the frequencies of correctly articulated, incorrectly articulated and not articulated responses for schwa /ə/ at the end of words. Incorrect articulations were substantially more frequent than the other outcomes. This shows a low level of articulation competence in realizing schwa /ə/ in word-final position.

On the whole, across all 750 SAT responses, 119 articulations equalling 15.87% percent were correct, while 628 articulations representing 83.73% percent were incorrect and 3 words summing up to 0.40% percent were not articulated. The three-category articulation distributions were statistically significant for word-initial schwa, $\chi^2(2, N = 300) = 337.14$, $p < .001$. Similarly, the three-category articulation distributions were statistically significant for word-final schwa, $\chi^2(2, N = 450) = 547.69$, $p < .001$. Therefore, the pattern of results indicates low articulation competence in the expected realization of schwa /ə/ in both positions, with slightly lower performance in word-final position.

SUMMARY

This article evaluated secondary school teachers' articulation competence of English Schwa /ə/ in Niger State. It was anchored under descriptive survey design. It was guided by two objectives, two research questions and two hypotheses. It reviewed the concept of evaluation, concept of articulation, concept of competence and the concept of English Schwa /ə/. The study analysed data using the percentage counts and Chi-square goodness-of-it. Results showed that secondary school teachers of English articulated the English Schwa /ə/with a wrong articulation quality at the beginning and end of words. The study concluded that secondary school English language teachers' articulation of Schwa /ə/ is defective and can lead to articulation confusion and failure in examination. The study made recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it is safe to conclude that secondary school teachers' articulation competence of Schwa /ð/ at the beginning and end of English words is defective by IPA standard, which is characterised by RP quality. It is further concluded that the discrepancy between the IPA and RP standards can cause confusion to learners or failure to articulate Schwa /ə/ appropriately which affects practical and academic performance of students in examination.

RECOMMENDATION

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

1. English language teachers should unlearn the RP quality of Schwa /ə/ and relearn the IPA quality of Schwa /ə/ especially at the beginning and end of English words.

2. English language teachers should encourage learners to develop proficiency in articulation of Schwa /ə/ in English words through practice.
3. School administrators and curriculum implementers should organise a special workshop or capacity building programme for English language teachers to raise their awareness of the value of IPA quality of Schwa /ə/ as a required competence for teaching oral English component of English language as a subject.
4. The government at all levels and other relevant educational agencies should ensure a compliance of articulation changes by all schools and initiate all forms of phonological reversal from RP standard to IPA models which should be embedded in the secondary school language curriculum.

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