

# The Phonetic Challenges of Vowel Elision for Nigerian Students of French for Specific Purpose (FOS).

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## Abstract

This article examines the specific phonetic challenges faced by Nigerian students regarding vowel elision in French for Specific Purposes (FOS). The study analyzes the difficulties related to vowel elision, a crucial phonetic process for acquiring advanced linguistic skills in FOS. The research methodology includes classroom observations, student assessments, and interviews with students and teachers, providing an in-depth analysis of error patterns and contributing factors. The results show that the main obstacles stem from the interference of mother tongues (L1), insufficient phonetic training, and a lack of awareness of the nuances of French phonology. The study proposes tailored pedagogical strategies focused on targeted phonetic training and awareness-raising activities to improve the effectiveness of FOS instruction for Nigerian students. The implications for teaching practices and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** vowel elision, French for Specific Purposes, Nigerian students, phonetic challenges, linguistic interference, phonetic training.

## Introduction

### Contexte de l'enseignement du FOS au Nigeria

Teaching French for Specific Purposes (FOS) in Nigeria is becoming increasingly important due to the growing economic and diplomatic relations between Nigeria and French-speaking West African countries. Nigerian educational institutions are now integrating FOS courses to meet the specific needs of students and professionals who wish to improve their French language proficiency for academic, commercial or diplomatic reasons. However, despite this positive development, Nigerian students face significant challenges, particularly in acquiring the phonetic skills necessary for effective communication in French.

### Importance of phonetics in FOS, particularly vowel elision

Mastery of phonetics is crucial in language learning, particularly in the context of FOS. Phonetics not only makes it possible to understand and produce the sounds of a language, but also to facilitate the fluidity and intelligibility of communication. In French, vowel elision, which is the omission of unstressed vowels in connected speech, plays a fundamental role in pronunciation and listening. Poor mastery of this phonetic rule can lead to misunderstandings and non-native pronunciation, which poses additional obstacles for FOS learners (Awodeha, 2018).

### Objectives of the study and its relevance to FOS

This study aims to identify and analyze the specific difficulties encountered by Nigerian students in vowel elision in the context of FOS. More precisely, the study seeks to understand why these phonetic errors occur and how they can be corrected through adapted educational strategies. By focusing on vowel elision, this research contributes significantly to the improvement of FOS teaching. Indeed, a better understanding and application of vowel elision rules can not only improve learners' pronunciation, but also their overall communicative competence in French, which is essential to achieve the specific objectives of their language learning (Awodeha, 2018).

This study is therefore part of a didactic perspective aimed at proposing concrete educational solutions to overcome the phonetic obstacles encountered by Nigerian students. By integrating phonetic awareness

activities and specific training, it offers avenues for more effective phonetic training adapted to the needs of FOS learners.

- **Literature paper**
- **Overview of theories and studies on phonetic challenges in second language acquisition**

Phonetic acquisition in second language learning is a well-researched area of research, with several theories explaining the challenges faced by learners. Linguistic interference theory suggests that the phonological characteristics of learners' native language (L1) influence the perception and production of target language (L2) sounds (Flege, 1995). For example, learners may transfer articulatory habits from their L1 to the L2, leading to pronunciation errors. Critical period theory proposes that phonetic acquisition abilities decline with age, making it more difficult for adult learners to achieve native pronunciation (Lenneberg, 1967). Furthermore, Flege's (1995) theory of production and perception emphasizes that learners' ability to discriminate and produce L2 sounds depends on the similarity between L1 and L2 phonemes.

- **Specific focus on vowel elision in French**

Vowel elision in French is a phonetic phenomenon where certain unstressed vowels, often schwa (ə), are omitted in connected speech. This process is governed by specific phonological rules and depends on the syntactic and phonetic context (Dell, 1985). Elision can be obligatory, optional or prohibited, and its correct application is essential for fluent and natural pronunciation in French. However, for FLE learners, vowel elision presents significant challenges due to its variability and complex rules. Common errors include incorrectly omitting vowels and inappropriately applying elision in contexts where it is not required (Awodeha, 2018).

- **Previous research on phonetic problems in FLE and FOS**

Previous research on phonetic problems in the teaching of FLE and FOS has highlighted the impact of L1 interference and the lack of adapted phonetic training on learners' performance. For example, Flege and Munro (1994) showed that learners whose L1 differs phonologically from the L2 have more difficulty perceiving and producing L2 sounds. In the context of FLE in Nigeria, Awodeha (2018) identified that Nigerian students experience specific problems with vowel elision, mainly due to the absence of this phenomenon in their native languages and the limited phonetic training they receive. These studies highlight the need to develop specific teaching strategies to address phonetic challenges and improve the pronunciation competence of FOS learners.

In conclusion, a thorough understanding of theories on phonetic acquisition and previous research on vowel elision in French is essential for developing effective teaching methods that meet the needs of FOS learners.

- **Methodology**

## **2.2. Mixed approach: qualitative and quantitative**

For this study, a mixed approach integrating qualitative and quantitative methods was adopted to provide a comprehensive analysis of the phonetic challenges related to vowel elision encountered by Nigerian students learning French. The qualitative approach collects in-depth data on students' and teachers' experiences and perceptions through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The quantitative approach, on the other hand, includes formal assessments of students' phonetic skills, allowing the types and frequency of vowel elision errors to be quantified.

## **2.3. Data sources: classroom observations, student evaluations, interviews**

- **Observations in class :**
  - Classroom observations focused on students' pronunciation exercises and spontaneous speech. These observations made it possible to document vowel elision errors in real time and to contextualize phonetic challenges in a natural educational framework. Observation notes were coded and analyzed to identify recurring patterns of errors.
- **Student Ratings :**
  - Pronunciation tests and phonetic transcription tasks were used to quantitatively assess students' vowel elision skills. These assessments included reading passages aloud and

transcribing sentences using phonetic symbols. The results were analyzed to determine the frequency and types of errors made by the students.

- **Interviews :**

- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and teachers to collect qualitative data on perceived challenges and strategies used to address vowel elision. Interviews with students explored their learning experiences and specific challenges, while interviews with teachers examined teaching approaches and observations of student performance. The interview transcripts were thematically analyzed to extract relevant insights.

#### **2.4. Participants: Nigerian university students learning French**

The participants in this study were Nigerian students enrolled in university French programs. The choice of participants aimed to include a diversity of students at different learning levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) in order to capture a full range of phonics skills and challenges. In total, 50 students were selected for observations and evaluations, and 20 of them participated in the interviews. This diversity made it possible to generalize the results of the study while taking into account individual variations in the learning of French phonetics.

By combining qualitative and quantitative data, this methodology provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the phonetic difficulties experienced by Nigerian students in the context of FOS. It also makes it possible to formulate educational recommendations based on solid empirical evidence.

- **Results**

- **Detailed analysis of common errors in vowel elision of Nigerian students**

Analysis of the data collected reveals several recurring errors in vowel elision among Nigerian students learning French. The errors identified fall mainly into three categories: omission of obligatory elision, incorrect elision of vowels that should not be elision, and inconsistent application of elision rules.

- **Omission of elision OBLIGATORY :**

- Students often fail to elide schwa (ə) in contexts where elision is phonetically necessary, such as in the phrase "I don't know" (/ ʒə nə sɛ pa / instead of / ʒ nə sɛ pa /).

- **Elision incorrect :**

- Some students elide vowels in contexts where elision is not appropriate, for example, elide the final vowel in "she a" to produce /ɛ la/ instead of /ɛ l a/.

- **Inconsistent application of elision rules :**

- Students often show inconsistent application of elision rules, sometimes succeeding in applying the rules correctly and failing in other similar cases, indicating a lack of systematic understanding of the rules.

- **Frequency and types of errors**

To quantify errors, an analysis of pronunciation assessments and phonetic transcription tasks was performed.

The results indicate the frequencies following :

- **Omission of elision OBLIGATORY :**

- This error is the most common, occurring in approximately 60% of contexts where elision is required.

- **Elision incorrect :**

- Incorrect elisions account for approximately 25% of the total errors observed.

- **Inconsistent application of elision rules :**

- Inconsistencies in the application of elision rules are present in approximately 15% of cases, reflecting a partial understanding of the rules.

- **Contributing factors: L1 interference, teaching methods, student perceptions**

The study identified several factors contributing to the observed vowel elision errors:

- **Interference from L1 :**

- The phonological structure of students' native languages considerably influences their ability to perceive and produce vowel elision in French. Nigerian languages, not having a similar elision process, induce negative interference where phonetic rules from the L1 are transferred to the L2 ( Awodeha , 2018).

- **Methods teaching :**

- Current teaching approaches do not appear to focus sufficiently on practical phonetic training, limiting students' ability to correctly apply elision rules. Teaching often focuses on memorizing rules rather than their practical application in real speaking contexts.
- **Student perceptions :**
  - The interviews revealed that many students do not perceive the crucial importance of vowel elision in achieving fluent and natural pronunciation. This lack of awareness leads to insufficient and irregular practice of elision rules.

The findings of this study highlight the complexity of the phonetic challenges faced by Nigerian FOS students. They highlight the need for a more targeted teaching approach and increased awareness of the importance of vowel elision rules to improve learners' phonetic competence.

- **Discussion**

#### **4.1. Interpretation of results and comparison with previous research**

The results of this study show that vowel elision errors among Nigerian students learning French are largely due to interference from their native language, inadequate phonetic training, and a lack of awareness of the phonological intricacies of French. These findings are consistent with previous research on second language phonetic acquisition, which indicates that phonological differences between the L1 and L2 can lead to difficulties in perceiving and producing L2 sounds ( Flege , 1995). Furthermore, studies by Flege and Munro (1994) demonstrated that learners whose mother tongue does not have phonological processes similar to those of the target language experience more difficulties. Awodeha 's (2018) observations of Nigerian students support these findings, highlighting the importance of tailored teaching strategies to overcome these barriers.

#### **4.2. Pedagogical implications: recommendations for teaching strategies in FOS**

The results of this study suggest several recommendations for improving teaching strategies in FOS, particularly with regard to vowel elision:

- **Integration of phonetics training into the curriculum :**
  - It is essential to include specific phonics training modules in the FOS program. These modules should focus on vowel elision rules and their practical application in real speech contexts.
- **Use of interactive and practical methods :**
  - Interactive activities such as pronunciation exercises, phonetic games, and real-life conversation practices can help students better understand and apply the rules of elision. Teachers should encourage active student participation and provide immediate feedback to correct errors.
- **Development of adapted educational resources :**
  - Creating suitable teaching materials, including recordings of native speakers and phonetic transcription exercises, can provide students with concrete examples of vowel elision in use. These resources should be easily accessible for regular practice.

#### **4.3. Importance of targeted phonics training and awareness activities**

Targeted phonetic training is crucial to helping students overcome vowel elision challenges. Such training should include :

- **Awareness sessions phonetic :**
  - Organize specific sessions to make students aware of the importance of vowel elision and its impacts on the fluidity and naturalness of pronunciation. These sessions may include active listening activities and transcription analyses.
- **Regular practice and continuous feedback :**
  - Encourage students to practice elision rules regularly and receive ongoing feedback from teachers. This helps strengthen their understanding and application of phonetic rules.
- **Use of educational technologies :**
  - Integrate educational technologies such as language apps and speech recognition software to provide students with interactive tools and real-time feedback on their pronunciation. These tools can help identify and fix errors more effectively.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of a nuanced and targeted pedagogical approach to improve the phonetic proficiency of Nigerian FOS students. By adopting suitable teaching strategies and

increasing students' awareness of the rules of vowel elision, teachers can significantly contribute to improving the pronunciation and overall communicative competence of learners in French.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1. Summary of the main challenges identified and their implications for the FOS**

This study highlighted several major phonetic challenges faced by Nigerian students in learning French for Specific Purposes (FOS), particularly with regard to vowel elision. Common errors include omission of obligatory elision, incorrect elision in inappropriate contexts, and inconsistent application of elision rules. These difficulties are mainly due to interference from students' native languages, insufficient phonetic training and a lack of awareness of the phonological specificities of French. The implications for FOS are significant, as insufficient proficiency in vowel elision can impair the fluency and accuracy of communication in French, thereby affecting the effectiveness of learning and using French at different levels. specific purposes.

### **5.2. Practical Suggestions for FOS Teachers and Curriculum Developers**

To overcome these challenges, several practical suggestions can be implemented by FOS teachers and program developers:

- **Strengthening phonetic training :**
  - Integrate specific phonetic training modules focused on vowel elision into the FOS curriculum. These modules should include theoretical explanations of elision rules as well as practical exercises.
- **Methods teaching interactive :**
  - Use interactive and engaging teaching methods, such as phonics games, pronunciation exercises, and conversation activities. These methods encourage active practice and allow students to receive immediate feedback.
- **Development of adapted educational materials :**
  - Create and use suitable teaching materials, such as recordings of native speakers, phonetic transcription exercises and speech recognition applications. These tools can help students understand and practice vowel elision more effectively.
- **Raising awareness of the importance of vowel elision :**
  - Organize awareness sessions to inform students about the importance of vowel elision for natural and fluid pronunciation in French. These sessions may include listening activities and analyzes of phonetic transcriptions.
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### **5.3. Suggestions for future research**

To deepen the understanding of phonetic challenges in FOS and improve instructional strategies, future research should explore the following areas:

- **Longitudinal studies :**
  - Conduct longitudinal studies to track the development of students' phonics skills over an extended period of time. This would make it possible to evaluate the effectiveness of educational interventions and teaching methods over the long term.
- **Diversity of contexts educational :**
  - Explore phonetic challenges and teaching strategies in various educational contexts, including different learning levels (secondary schools, vocational training institutions, etc.) and different learner profiles (adolescents, adults, professionals, etc.).
- **Impact of educational technologies :**
  - Study the impact of educational technologies, such as language apps and speech recognition software, on the learning and mastery of vowel elision rules. This research can identify the most effective technological tools for improving student pronunciation.
- **Approaches interdisciplinary :**
  - Encourage interdisciplinary approaches by combining perspectives from applied linguistics, psychology of learning and educational technology to develop innovative and effective teaching strategies.



By implementing these practical suggestions and continuing in-depth research, FOS teachers and program developers can better meet the phonetic needs of learners and improve their communicative competence in French.

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