

## INVESTIGATING THE IMPACTS OF YORUBA AND TOLI ON BENINESE EFL BEGINNER LEARNERS' LINGUISTIC PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY OF CEG ATCHOUKPA AND CEG 1 AVRANKOU

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**Abstract:** This research work investigates the impacts of Yoruba and Toli mother tongues on Beninese EFL beginner learners' linguistic performance with a particular focus on CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou in Ouémé region of Benin. These areas are predominated by people speaking these two dialects. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used in this paper. The study reveals that students' mother tongue impacts negatively learners' linguistic performance. Indeed, 100% of teachers of English recognize that students' mother tongue has impact on their pronunciations. Despite this critical situation, teachers do not really take corrective measures to build a solid foundation for students at this critical beginner stage. Only 20% of teachers of English assert that they refer to phonetic transcription to teach pronunciation whereas 80% do not do so. It has thus been contended that learners cannot learn successfully a new language without the fundamental issue of phonetics. They need to be taught the pronunciation of speech sounds in isolation, the combination of the speech sounds into words and words into sentences. In addition, the study reveals that 50% of teachers of English explain some English words in their learners' mother tongue. This situation also contributes to the negative transfer of mother tongue in English. Considering these statistical results, teachers of English are invited to design specific speaking and listening activities that their students should practise repeatedly so as to improve their linguistic performance.

**Keywords:** Dialect, mother tongue, second language, interference.

### ETUDE DES IMPACTS DU YORUBA ET TOLI SUR LA PERFORMANCE LINGUISTIQUE DES ÉLÈVES BÉNINOIS DE 6<sup>ÈME</sup> ET 5<sup>ÈME</sup> : CAS DU CEG Atchoukpa et du CEG1 Avrankou

**Résumé :** Cette étude examine les impacts des langues maternelles Yoruba et Toli sur la performance linguistique des élèves béninois de 6<sup>ème</sup> et 5<sup>ème</sup> du CEG Atchoukpa et du CEG1 Avrankou dans le Département de l'Ouémé au Bénin. Ces localités sont dominées par les locuteurs de ces deux dialectes. Les approches quantitative et qualitative ont été toutes les deux utilisées dans cette étude. L'étude a révélé que les langues maternelles influencent négativement la performance linguistique des apprenants. En effet, 100% des enseignants d'Anglais reconnaissent que la langue maternelle influence les prononciations des élèves. Malgré cette situation critique, les enseignants ne prennent pas des mesures correctives pour construire une base solide aux élèves à cette étape critique de débutants. Seulement 20% des enseignants d'Anglais affirment qu'ils font recours à la transcription phonétique pour enseigner la prononciation tandis que 80% des enseignants d'Anglais ne le font pas.

Il a été donc soutenu que les élèves ne sauraient apprendre avec succès une nouvelle langue sans la question fondamentale de la phonétique. Les enseignants devront apprendre aux élèves d'abord la prononciation des sons vocaux, de leur combinaison en mots puis en phrases. En plus, l'étude a révélé que 50% des enseignants d'Anglais expliquent certains mots anglais dans la langue maternelle de leurs apprenants. Cette situation aussi contribue au transfert négatif de la langue maternelle en Anglais. Se basant sur ces résultats statistiques, les enseignants d'Anglais ont été invités à concevoir des activités spécifiques du parler et de l'écoute à pratiquer de façon répétitive par leurs apprenants en vue de booster leur performance linguistique.

**Mots-clés:** Dialecte, langue maternelle, seconde langue, interférence.

## Introduction

Language is a system of human communication by means of structured arrangement of sounds to form larger unit. (Richards, Platt and Weber, 1985). This means of communication is very useful for human beings living in human communities. It is used for many purposes enabling social interactions among humans. In this sense, Bloch and Trager (1942: 5) observe that "A language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperate." Thus, different kind of languages are used throughout the world. English language is one of the most important languages spoken world widely. It must be noted that Benin is a French speaking country where English is taught as a Foreign Language. In this context of Foreign Language acquisition specifically in a French speaking country, learners' mother tongues may impact their English language proficiency. As a matter of fact, learners are commonly confronted with problems related to pronunciation. Such problems are pieces of evidence of interference of their mother tongue on English language. It is in this perspective that this research work investigates the impacts of mother tongue on Beninese EFL beginner learners' linguistic performance: a case study of CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou. In Ouémé region of Benin, more precisely at Atchoukpa and Avrankou, the selected dialects are predominantly spoken by people. This explains the reason why the focus is on Toli and Yorouba. This research work aims at identifying and analyzing factors that affect Beninese EFL beginner learners' linguistic performance. The research question here is as follows: What are the main causes of the interference of mother tongue on Beninese EFL beginner learners' English language proficiency in CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou? Considering the different linguistic backgrounds of Beninese learners in general, the main causes of the interference of mother tongue on their English language proficiency may be related to similarities either of phonemes or graphemes of some mother tongue words with English language that learners at the beginner stage are unable to distinguish.

## 1. Methodology

This work mainly focuses on the impacts of Toli and Yorouba mother tongues on English as Foreign Language acquisition: a case study of CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou. The investigation is limited to 6ème and 5ème EFL learners and teachers in CEG Atchoukpa and CEG 1 Avrankou in Ouémé region of Benin. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used in this paper. Thus, eighty questionnaires have been addressed to learners

reliable data. Moreover, a classroom observation has been carried out in order to crosscheck the data collected by the means of the questionnaires. Specific tables and figures are used to present statistically the results which have been analyzed and interpreted following qualitative research method principles.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

This section accounts for the theories that underpin this research work. It thus gives insight to Toli, Yoruba, and English language as well as their phonology.

### 2.1 The Toli Language and its Phonology

Toli (Toli) is a Gbé language of Benin. It is a dialect of Gun which Capo (1988) considers as one of the Phla–Pherá languages. Toli is one of about 20 Gbé dialects spoken in West Africa. Those who speak the Toli dialect live in the small West African nation of Benin. They are part of the Guinean people cluster within the Sub-Saharan African affinity block. It must be noted here that Toli (Toli) is a group only located in Benin. Their primary language is Gun. As far as its phonology is concerned, Capo (1991) observes that all Gbe languages have the following twenty-three consonants: / b; m; t; d; ɖ; n; k; g; kp; gb; ɲ; f; v; s; z; χ; ʁ; r; ʀ; ʎ; l; y; w/ eleven vowels / i; ĩ; u; ũ; e; o; ɛ; ɔ; ɔ̃; a; ā/ in common. Nasalisation is the effect on speech sound when air escapes through the nose. In line with this, Capo (1991) identifies for all Gbe languages in general, seven oral vowels /i; u; e; ɔ; o; ɔ; a /, five nasalized vowels / ĩ; ũ; ɛ̃; ɔ̃; ā/. Gbéto, (2005) in his “Esquisse de la Tonologie Synchronique du Toli” states that Toli has two tones: high and low. Basing on this, the following illustration is provided: Bé (high) = pick up; Bè (low) = start

**Table 1: Gbé Vowels Chart**

	Front	Central	Back
Close	i • ĩ		u • ũ
Close-mid	e • ɛ̃		o • ɔ̃
Open-mid	ɛ • ɛ̃		ɔ • ɔ̃
Open		a • ā	

Source: Adapted from Capo (1991)

Table 2: Gbé Consonants Chart

		Labial	Labio-dental	Lamino-inter-dental	Lami-no-alveolar	Apico-post-alveolar	Alveolar-palatal	palatal	Velar		Uvular		
								Plain	Lab	Plain	Lab	Plain	Lab
Nasal		m			n			ɲ		ŋ	ŋ <sup>w</sup>		
Plosive/ Affricate	Voice-less	p		t	t s		t ʃ			k	p		
	Voiced	b		d	dz	ɖ	d ʒ		g	ɡb			
fricative	Voice-less	ɸ	f		s		ʃ					χ	χ <sup>w</sup>
	Voiced	β	v		z		ʒ					ʁ	ʁ <sup>w</sup>
Trill	Plain					r							
	Nasalized					ṛ							
Approximant	Plain					l		j	ɥ	ɥ	w		
	Nasalized					l̃		ṽ	ṽ		ṽ		

Source: adapted from Capo (1991)

## 2.2 The Yoruba language and its phonology

According to Bendor-Samuel (2013), the Yoruba language emerges from one of a small group of languages that comprise the Yoruboid cluster of the Defoid subbranch of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family. As for him, the other Yoruboid languages include Igala and Itsekiri. Bendor-Samuel (2013) contends that Yoruba language is used by more than 20 million people in southwestern Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo. It is also used widely as a second language in this area. It is important to note that Yoruba has many other dialects. The one that is now considered as standardized dialect may be viewed as a generalization of the Bishop Samuel Crowther 1884's work. Indeed, the Bishop Samuel Crowther translates the Bible in Yoruba in 1884 and his work has greatly contributed to the development of a standard written Yoruba (Bendor-Samuel, (2013). Dealing with the phonology of Yoruba, Oyebade (1992) observes that Yoruba has eighteen consonants /b; t; d; k; g; kp; gb; f; s; ʃ; h; dʒ; m; n; l; r; j; w/ and twelve vowels made up of seven oral vowels /i; e; ε; a; o; ɔ; u/ and five nasal vowels / ĩ; ẽ; ā; ã; ũ/. Oyebade (1992) also shows that Yoruba language is tonal and has three tones: high, mid and low and the tone bearing units are vowels and syllabic nasals. This has been illustrated with the Yoruba monosyllabic word “ko” which has three ways pitch contrasts:

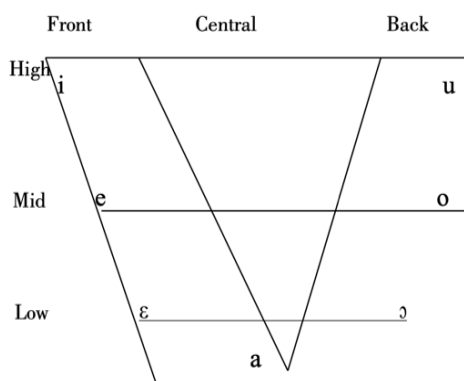
- kó (high) ‘build’
- ko (mid) ‘sing’
- kò (low) ‘reject’

**Table 3: Consonant Chart of Yoruba Language**

	PLACE OF ARTICULATION							
	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labial-Velar	Glottal
Occlusives	b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Fricatives		f	s	ʃ				h
Affricates				tʃ				
Nasals	m		n					
Tap			r					
Laterals			l					
Approximants					j		w	

Source: Oyebade (1992)

**Table 4: Vowel Chart of Yoruba Language**



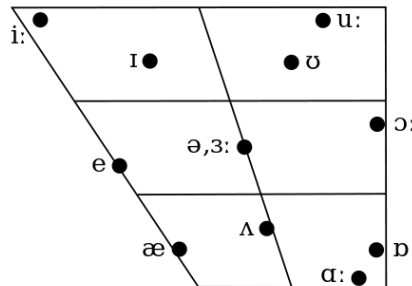
Source: Oyabade (1982)

### 2.3 The English language and its phonology

According to Nordquist (2020) the term ‘English’ is derived from *Anglisc*, the speech of the Angles one of the three Germanic tribes that invaded England during the fifth century. In the same line, Nordquist (2020) observes that the English language emerges from the primary language of different countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and many of its former colonies, and the United States, and the second language in a number of multilingual countries such as India, Singapore to mention just a few examples. Nordquist (2020) further advocates that English is an official language in many African countries namely Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa and Ghana. It must be noted that English language is spoken worldwide in more than 100 countries. It is learned around the world by children in school as a foreign language and often becomes a common denominator between people of different nationalities when they meet while traveling, doing business, or in other contexts (Nordquist, 2020). English is also learned in Benin as a foreign language. According to Roach (1983), there are 24 English consonants including 15 voiced /b; d; g; v; ð; z; ʒ; l; r; j; w; dʒ; m;

n; ŋ/ and 9 voiceless /p; t; k; f; θ; s; ʃ; h; tʃ/. English vowels are composed of monophthongs, diphthongs and more.

**Table 5: English Vowel Chart**



(Source: adapted from Roach, 1983)

**2.4 Linguistic performance**

Chomsky (1965) contrasts linguistic competence with linguistic performance. As for him, linguistic competence is the unconscious knowledge of grammar that allows a speaker to use and understand a language whereas linguistic performance refers to the ability to produce and comprehend sentences in a language. It must be noted that most often, speakers' actual speeches are full of false starts, hesitations, speech errors, and corrections. Linguistic performance deals with what a speaker actually does with his/her knowledge of a language. In this perspective, this study seeks to investigate the use of e-learning as innovative strategy to improve EFL learners' linguistic performance. A number of factors influence linguistic performance according to Botha (1981). Such factors include: the linguistic competence or unconscious linguistic knowledge of the speaker-hearer; the nature and limitations of the speaker-hearer's speech production and speech perception mechanisms; the nature and limitations of the speaker-hearer's memory, concentration, attention and other mental capacities; the social environment and status of the speaker-hearer; the dialectal environment of the speaker-hearer; the idiolect and individual style of speaking of the speaker-hearer; the speaker-hearer's factual knowledge and view of the world in which he lives; the speaker-hearer's state of health, his emotional state and other similar incidental circumstances.

**3. Data analysis**

This section deals with the presentation and analysis of data collected from the questionnaire addressed to the teachers and students including the classroom observations.

**3.1 Questionnaire Addressed to Teachers**

There are eight close ended questions addressed to the teachers. These questions as well as teachers' responses are recapitulated in Table 7 below.

**Table 6: Teachers’ Perception about the Students’ Speaking and Pronunciation**

Questionnaire Addressed to Teachers	Answers + percentages between square brackets							
	Yes	No	Good	Accep-table	Poor	Al-ways	Some-times	never
1.How do you find students’ linguistic performance level?				04 [40%]	06 [60%]			
2.Do students have difficulties to pronounce some words?	10 [100%]	00 [0%]						
3.Do students’ pronunciations differ ones from the others?	10 [100%]	00 [0%]						
4.Does students’ mother tongue have any impact on students’ pronunciations?	10 [100%]	00 [0%]						
5.How often do you make debates with your students to improve their pronunciations?						04 [40%]	06 [60%]	
6.Do you make students listen and repeat words that you utter?	10 [100%]	00 [0%]						
7.Do you refer to phonetic transcription to teach pronunciation?	02 [20%]	08 [80%]						
.Do you explain some English words in students’ mother tongue?	05 [50%]	05 [50%]						

Questions N° 1 and 2 seek to have the teachers’ point of view about their students speaking and pronunciations. Both questions N° 3 and 4 seek to have their opinion about students’ difficulties and the impact their mother tongue has on their pronunciations. Question N° 5 seeks to have an idea about the frequency of speaking sessions teachers have with students. Question N° 6 seeks to have an idea about strategies teachers use to teach speaking. Questions N° 7 and 8 seek to have an idea about the different corrective measures that teachers take to help students improve their pronunciations.

### 3.2 Questionnaire to Students

Questions addressed to students can be classified into two categories: close ended questions and open-ended questions. The first category aims at finding out learners' interest in English, their difficulties as far as pronunciations are concerned and then the similarities of English words with their mother tongue that could lead to interference. The second category seeks to know learners' mother tongue in order to determine the most dominant mother tongues in CEG Atchoukpa and CEG 1 Avrankou in Ouémé region of Benin.

- **Close Ended Questions to Students**

There are five close ended questions addressed to the students. These questions as well as students' responses are recapitulated in Table 8 below.

**Table 7: Questions to Students and their Responses**

Questionnaire Addressed to Students	Answers + Percentages Between Square Brackets							
	Yes	No	Good	Accep-table	Poor	Al-ways	Some-times	never
1.Do you like English language?	78 [97.5%]	02 [2.5%]						
2.Do you find it difficult to pronounce some English words?	37 [46.25%]	43 [53.75%]						
3.Is there any similarity between some English words and Yoruba and Toli words?	32 [40%]	48 [60%]						
4.Does your teacher explain you how to pronounce difficult English words?	80 [100%]	00 [0%]						
5.Does your teacher use phonetic transcription to help you improve your pronunciations?	11 [13.75%]	69 [86.25%]						

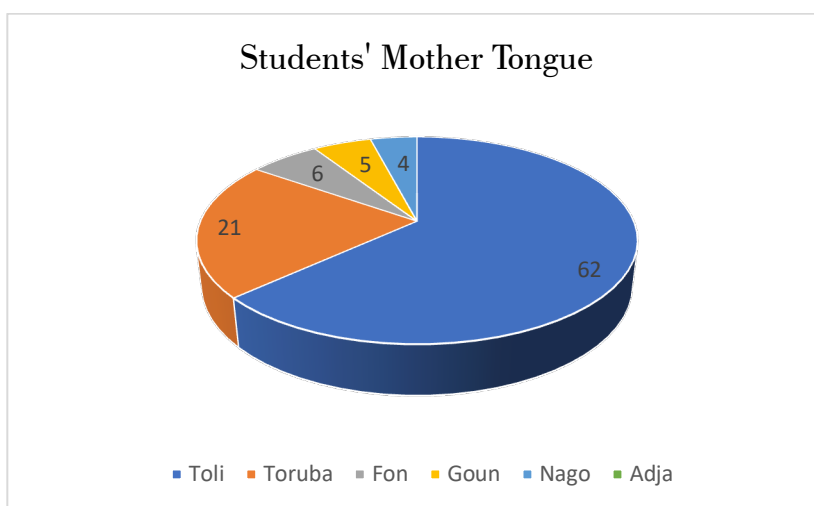
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- **Open Ended Questions to Students**

As mentioned above, this second category of question seeks to know learners’ mother tongue in order to determine the most dominant mother tongues in CEG Atchoukpa and CEG 1 Avrankou in Ouémé region of Benin. It includes only one question which is: What is your native language? To this question, students provide different information as follows: Toli (62%), Yoruba (21%), Fon (6%), Goun (5%), Nago (4%), Adja (2%). This information is recapitulated in the graph below:

**Graph 1: Students’ Mother Tongue at CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou**



Source: Dadjo (2023)

As it appears in this graph, the most dominant mother tongues in CEG1 Avrankou and CEG Atchoukpa are Toli and Yoruba. This explains the reason why this study focuses on these two dialects.

### **3.3 Classroom Observation**

Two classes of 6ème and 5ème have been observed for the purpose of listing learners’ pronunciations in order to examine the influence of Toli and Yoruba on their linguistic performance. As results, it has been observed that students use their mother tongue namely Toli and Yoruba to explain some concepts to their peers while the teacher is speaking English. Such Toli and Yoruba concepts do have similar graphemes but different phonemes and meanings with some English concepts. It has thus been observed the interference of Yoruba and Toli in students’ oral productions as detailed below:

- **Ago** is pronounced as *Agôr* meaning ‘party’ in Yoruba,
- **Firewood** is pronounced as *Fayawor* meaning ‘informal importation of goods’ in Yoruba,
- **A door** is pronounced as *yedor* meaning ‘they say’ in Toli,
- **About** is pronounced as *Abou* which is a ‘proper noun’ in Yoruba

#### 4. Discussions of the Findings

The results of this study show that learners' linguistic performance is acceptable according to 60 % of teachers and poor according to 40 % of teachers. This situation is critical as the target population of this study concerns beginners. At this stage, students are generally enthusiastic, full of energy and eager to learn English. This suggests that many things go wrong. Teachers' responses to questions 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 confirm this assumption that many things go wrong. As a matter of fact, 100 % of teachers recognize that students have difficulties to pronounce some words in English and their pronunciations differ one from the others. More importantly, 100% of teachers recognize that students' mother tongue has impact on their pronunciation. Despite this critical situation, teachers do not really take corrective measures to build a solid foundation for students at this critical beginner stage. Only 20% of them assert that they refer to phonetic transcription to teach pronunciation whereas 80% do not do so. Learners cannot learn successfully a new language without the fundamental issue of phonetics. On the one hand, learners need to be taught the pronunciation of speech sounds in isolation, the combination of the speech sounds into words and words into sentences. On the other hand, they need to be immersed into repeated speaking and listening practical activities due to many reasons namely: the rich dialectal environment of Benin characterized by more than 56 languages; the fact that Benin is a French speaking country, the limited contact hour class.

Considering these factors, teachers must design many speaking and listening activities that their students should practise repeatedly so as to improve their linguistic performance. The results also show that 50% of teachers do explain some English words in their learners' mother tongue. This situation also is critical as learners are facing problem of interference of mother tongue in English. As a matter of fact, the class observations have helped find out some pieces of evidence confirming the interference of learners' mother tongue in English. Such pieces of evidence include the words **ago** pronounced as *Agôr* by students, **firewood** pronounced as *fayawor* by students, **a door** pronounced as *yedor* by students, **about** pronounced as *abou* by students. A deep scrutiny has led to find out that these English words mispronounced by students are nothing but the negative transfer of students' mother tongue in English. Indeed, these mispronounced words do exist in Toli and Yoruba with almost similar graphemes but with different phonemes and meanings. Respectively, the meaning of these words in Toli and Yoruba are provided as follows:

- **Ago** is pronounced as *Agôr* meaning 'party' in Yoruba,
- **Firewood** is pronounced as *Fayawor* meaning 'informal importation of goods' in Yoruba,
- **A door** is pronounced as *yedor* meaning 'they say' in Toli,
- **About** is pronounced as *Abou* which is a 'proper noun' in Yoruba

All the above arguments and illustrations confirm that students' mother tongue impacts negatively learners' linguistic performance. In other words, learners' habits namely patterns, systems or rules of Toli and Yoruba phonemes and graphemes, prevent them to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of English phonemes and graphemes. The fact that 50%

of teachers explain some English words in their students' mother tongue may contribute to this negative transfer of mother tongue in English.

### Conclusion

This research work has attempted to investigate the impacts of mother tongue on English as a Foreign Language acquisition with a particular focus on two dialects of Benin namely Yoruba and Toli in CEG Atchoukpa and CEG1 Avrankou in Ouémé region in Benin, areas predominated by learners speaking these two dialects. Both quantitative and qualitative research methods have been used in this paper. The study reveals that students' mother tongue impacts negatively learners' linguistic performance. Indeed, learners' habits namely patterns, systems or rules of Toli and Yoruba phonemes and graphemes, prevent them to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of English phonemes and graphemes. The fact that 50% of teachers explain some English words in their students' mother tongue contributes to the negative transfer of mother tongue in English. Considering these arguments, teachers are invited to design many speaking and listening activities that their students should practise repeatedly so as to improve their linguistic performance.

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