PHONOLOGICAL INSTRUCTION IN 'MASTERING ENGLISH: HIGH SCHOOL' AND ITS SUITABILITY FOR ADVANCED LEVEL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT

The revised syllabus for Advanced Level English (ENG 0730) in Cameroon prioritizes the development of communicative competence through effective instruction in English phonology, as outlined in the "Speech Work" component. However, a critical evaluation of Mastering English: High School reveals significant misalignments with the principles of the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) and the unique phonological challenges faced by Cameroonian learners. This study examines the breadth and depth of phonological topics in the textbook, the accuracy of phonemic representation, the contextual relevance of vocabulary, and the integration of communicative practice opportunities. Findings indicate that while some lessons provide basic coverage of segmental features, there are substantial gaps in the treatment of suprasegmental aspects such as stress, rhythm, and intonation, inaccuracies in phonemic descriptions, and a lack of learner-centered, communicative activities. These shortcomings undermine the textbook's capacity to foster the development of communicative competence among learners. The study proposes targeted revisions of the textbook, including the integration of contextually relevant vocabulary, task-based activities, and differentiated instruction. Additionally, teacher professional development and curriculum alignment with the GCE Advanced Level English syllabus are recommended to enhance the quality and relevance of phonological instruction. These measures aim to equip Cameroonian learners with the phonological skills necessary for intelligible communication in academic and professional contexts.

Keywords: English Phonology, Cameroonian Education, Mastering English, Phonological Competence, Content Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The English language occupies a prominent position within Cameroon's multilingual educational landscape, serving as a core subject across the secondary school curriculum. Proficiency in English is widely recognized as essential for Cameroonian students, granting them access to a myriad of academic and professional opportunities both domestically and globally (Kouega, 2007). However, the persistent decline in Cameroonian students' performance on the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level English language examinations, along with the general deterioration of English language standards within the country, has been well-documented by facilitators over the past few years (Achiri-Taboh and Lando, 2017; Ayuk, 1987; Ayafor, 1996; Fontem and Oyetade, 2005; Njwe and Yuh, 2020; Ndongmanji, 2005; Tasah, 2002). While scholars have attributed this trend to a variety of factors, including learner motivation, the influence of Pidgin English and French, and various

pedagogical and socio-psychological impediments, the underlying causes may be more convoluted (Chumbow & Bobda, 1996; Fontem & Oyetade, 2005; Fonka, 2014; Schröder, 2003). Emerging research suggests that the competence of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers and the quality of the instructional materials employed in Cameroonian classrooms may also be crucial factors contributing to the declining English language proficiency among Cameroonian students (Achiri-Taboh & Lando, 2017; Njwe & Yuh, 2020).

Against the backdrop of the quality of instructional materials, the present study aims to assess the phonological competence development component within Mastering English: High School (hereinafter Mastering English), the nationally prescribed instructional resource for advanced-level English language learners in Cameroon. Specifically, this research examines the breadth and depth of the phonological topics covered in the textbook, evaluates the accuracy and appropriateness of the phonological descriptions, rules, and examples presented, analyzes the alignment of the speech work component with the specific phonological needs and challenges of Cameroonian English language learners, and identifies gaps and limitations in the phonological instruction while providing recommendations for enhancing the quality and relevance of Mastering English. By scrutinizing this critical aspect of the Cameroonian English language learning experience, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges surrounding English language proficiency development in the country.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Principles of Competence-Based Approach (CBA) in Language Education

This study is situated within the broader context of the Competence-Based Approach (CBA) to language teaching and learning, which has been adopted in Cameroon's secondary education system (Bobda, 2004). The CBA emphasizes the development of learners' communicative competence, defined as the ability to

use language effectively in real-world contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 2018). The CBA in language education, particularly in phonological instruction, represents a significant paradigm shift from traditional teaching methodologies, emphasizing the development of measurable skills and competencies rather than mere theoretical knowledge (Pennington & Richards, 1986). This approach has revolutionized how educators and material developers should conceptualize and implement phonological instruction in language learning environments.

At its core, CBA in phonological instruction is built upon three fundamental principles. First, authentic assessment prioritizes real-world performance over isolated sound production. Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) argued learners should demonstrate their ability to navigate actual communicative situations rather than merely reproducing sounds in controlled environments. Second, the integration of skills, as emphasized by Celce-Murcia (2007), ensured that phonological instruction is not treated in isolation but rather contextualized within broader communicative tasks, including listening comprehension and spoken interaction. Third, learner-centered progression, as highlighted by Jenkins (2000), acknowledges and accommodates individual learning trajectories, particularly when addressing issues of accent and intelligibility in international communication contexts, thus calling for higher standards in material development.

The practical implementation of CBA in phonological instruction typically involves task-based activities, clear performance indicators, and comprehensive assessment criteria. Task-based activities include real-world communication scenarios, problem-solving activities involving phonological discrimination, and engagement with authentic listening materials. Pennington and Richards (1986) outlined essential performance indicators, including intelligibility in various contexts, the ability to self-monitor and self-correct, and successful participation in extended discourse. Assessment criteria focus on functional intelligibility, communicative effectiveness, and strategic competence in handling phonological challenges,

issues that material developers should ensure are incorporated in the course book design.

However, it is obvious that the implementation of CBA in phonological instruction is not without its challenges. Several facilitators, including Derwing and Munro (2005), have identified significant hurdles, including the need for standardized assessment criteria that remain flexible enough to accommodate diverse learning contexts, the balance between accuracy and fluency in phonological production, and the integration of suprasegmental features into competency frameworks, issues that are of great concern in this research and clearly articulated in the GCE Advanced Level English Syllabus (2023:6-7) for Cameroonian learners.

These challenges notwithstanding, the pedagogical implications of implementing a competency-based approach (CBA) in phonological instruction are clear for both educators and material developers. They must design activities that reflect real-world communication needs, develop clear and measurable competency indicators, provide regular opportunities for authentic practice, and integrate technology-enhanced learning tools where possible. This approach represents a significant departure from traditional pronunciation teaching methods, which focused exclusively on drill-based activities and isolated sound production. Rather than prioritizing the mastery of grammatical structures or vocabulary alone, CBA promotes the integration of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies to enable learners to engage in meaningful and appropriate communication. Within this framework, phonological competence, the ability to perceive, produce, and manipulate the sound system of the target language, is recognized as a crucial component of overall communicative competence. This rationale underpins its emphasis in the GCE Advanced Level English Syllabus for Cameroonian high schools.

1.2 Role of Phonological Awareness and Instruction in Language Learning

The development of phonological awareness, defined as the ability to recognize, identify, and manipulate the sound structures of a language, is closely linked to the acquisition of language skills, including reading, writing, and oral communication (Rvachew & Savage, 2006; Yopp & Yopp, 2000). For English language learners, explicit phonological instruction enhances their ability to accurately perceive, produce, and apply the target language's sound system. Effective instruction involves systematic teaching of segmental features, individual vowels and consonants, and suprasegmental aspects, stress, rhythm, and intonation (Hedge, 2001). Furthermore, integrating phonological awareness and production activities with broader communicative language teaching is widely recognized as a best practice for advancing learners' overall linguistic competence.

Within Cameroon's high school English language education, the GCE Advanced Level English Language syllabus addresses phonological development through its "Speech Work" component. This examination-aligned component summarily aims to:

- Learners' ability to speak fluently and interactively is to be developed.

- Practice of language components such as grammar and vocabulary is to be enabled in meaningful contexts.

- The production of spoken English that is easily understood and meets communicative needs is to be fostered.

- Speech-monitoring abilities, speech-modification strategies, and appropriate articulation with a focus on stress and intonation are to be enhanced.

To achieve these objectives, the syllabus mandates mastery of English consonant and vowel sound combinations, differentiation between vowel and consonant sounds, development of sight-word vocabulary, and phonetic transcription skills. Learners are also expected to analyze authentic speech data to identify segmental and suprasegmental phonological elements. This alignment explains the inclusion of a dedicated "Speech Work" section in Paper 1 of the GCE examination. It contains 10 multiple-choice questions

worth 10 marks total, directly assessing targeted phonological skills across knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation levels (GCE Board, 2023). These objectives underscore the vital importance of phonological competence for Cameroonian learners.

However, concerns persist about the accuracy and appropriateness of the phonological content in Mastering English. Consequently, this study critically examines the textbook's alignment with both Competency-Based Approach (CBA) principles and the specific phonological needs of Cameroonian learners outlined in the syllabus.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to evaluate the phonological instruction provided in "Mastering English" for advanced-level learners in Cameroon (Krippendorff, 2018). The analysis focuses on the textbook's alignment with Competency-Based Approach (CBA) principles, specifically examining phonemic accuracy, the contextual relevance of examples, the integration of communicative practice, the use of differentiation strategies, and the implementation of learner-centered pedagogy. The "Speech Work" component of "Mastering English" was systematically analyzed using 20 lessons selected across five modules. These lessons were chosen to represent consonant sounds (e.g., /b/ vs. /p/, /ʃ/ vs. /ʒ/), vowel contrasts (e.g., /ɒ/ vs. /ʌ/, /ei/ vs. /ai/), and suprasegmental features (e.g., past tense markers /t/, /d/, /id/). Data collection involved two key steps: textual extraction, where target lessons were extracted along with their exercises, examples, and assessment tasks, and the development of an evaluation rubric to assess lessons against CBA criteria. The CBA alignment rubric included evaluation metrics for each principle: correct IPA symbols and minimal-pair examples for phonemic accuracy; the use of Cameroonian/British English cultural references for contextual relevance; the inclusion of role-plays, debates, and peer feedback for communicative practice; scaffolded tasks and tiered activities for differentiation; and opportunities for autonomy,

collaboration, and reflection for learner-centered pedagogy. Data analysis involved a systematic assessment of the extracted lessons using the developed rubric to identify the presence or absence of CBA principles. The findings were then triangulated with Cameroon's GCE advanced-level English language syllabus and prior studies on CBA implementation to provide a comprehensive understanding of the textbook's alignment with the curriculum and established pedagogical practices (GCE Board, 2023). Recurring gaps such as inconsistent phonemic notation and decontextualized drills were categorized into themes to highlight areas of potential improvement. Ethical considerations were addressed through copyright compliance, ensuring that text excerpts from "Mastering English" were used under fair use for academic critique, and a conscious effort to avoid over-interpretation of cultural relevance criteria.

3. Findings

3.1 Breadth and Depth of Phonological Topics Covered in Mastering English

An examination of the "Speech Work" component within Mastering English reveals a pronounced emphasis on the explicit instruction of individual vowel and consonant sounds. The textbook dedicates a total of 20 lessons across 5 distinct modules to the teaching of various English phonemes, including stop consonants (/b/, /p/, /k/, /g/), fricatives (/ð/, /θ/, /f/, /v/, /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/), affricates (/tʃ/, /dʒ/), approximants (/j/, /w/), and a range of monophthongal and diphthongal vowel sounds (/ɒ/, /ʌ/, /ei/, /ai/, /u/, /u:/, /ɔ:/, /ɔɪ/, /ə/, /ɜ:/, /ʊə/, /æ/, /ɑ:/, /i/, /i:/). Table 1 shows an exhaustive list of the sounds covered in lower sixths and upper sixths within Mastering English.

While the breadth of segmental features covered within Mastering English is undoubtedly commendable, the depth of instruction provided for each individual sound is comparatively limited, confined to a single lesson or module. Moreover, the textbook's treatment of suprasegmental aspects of English phonology, such as stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns, is conspicuously absent, despite their recognized importance for the

Speech Work Component	Lesson and Module	Page
/b/ and /p/	1 module 1	16
/k/ and /g/	2 module 1	44
/tʃ/ and /dʒ/	3 module 1	65
/ð/ and /θ /	4 module 1	83
/f/ and /v/	1 module 2	101
/s/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /ʒ/	2 module 2	108
/j/ and /w/	3 module 2	131
/ɒ/ and /ʌ/	1 module 3	189
/ei/ and /ai/	2 module 3	193
/u/ and /u:/	3 module 3	215
/ɔ: / and /ɔɪ/	4 module 3	224
Past tense markers:		
/t/, /d/ and /id/	1 module 4	238
/ʃ/ and /ʒ/	2 module 4	250
/ei/ and /ai/ (review)	3 module 4	261
/ə/ and /ɜ:/	4 module 4	273
/ʊə/	1 module 5	294
/æ/ and /ɑ:/	2 module 5	300
/n/ and /ŋ/	3 module 5	316
/i/ and /ɪ:/	4 module 5	326

Table 1. Breadth and Depth of Phonological
Coverage within Mastering English

development of overall communicative competence and their clear articulation in the objectives of the GCE Advanced Level English syllabus (GCE Board, 2023).

The lack of sustained and comprehensive coverage of both segmental and suprasegmental phonological features within Mastering English undermines the effectiveness of the phonological instruction provided in the book, raising critical concerns regarding the alignment of the textbook's phonological content with the principles of the Competence-Based Approach and the articulations of the GCE advanced-level English syllabus. The implications of this limited phonological coverage in Mastering English for Cameroonian learners are manifold. The lack of sustained and comprehensive instruction on both segmental and suprasegmental features of the English sound system could potentially undermine learners' ability to accurately perceive, produce, and apply the target language's phonological properties. Without robust phonological awareness and production skills, Cameroonian students may struggle to comprehend spoken English, engage in intelligible oral communication, and effectively participate in the linguistic demands of the secondary education curriculum, where English serves as the primary medium of instruction. This could, in turn, hamper their academic performance and limit their access to educational and professional opportunities that require a high level of English language competence.

3.2 Alignment of the Speech Work Component with the Needs of Cameroonian Learners

Beyond the breadth and accuracy of the phonological content covered, it is crucial to examine the extent to which the "Speech Work" component of Mastering English is aligned with the specific needs and challenges faced by Cameroonian English language learners. This alignment is paramount, as it directly impacts the relevance and efficacy of the phonological instruction for the target student population. For a particular component in a course book to align with the needs of the target learners, the course book developers must draw from existing research and the objectives of the curriculum and/or the syllabus.

Research has highlighted the unique phonological features of Cameroon English (CamE) compared to Standard English (Bobda, 1997; Simo Bobda, 2000; Simo Bobda & Chumbow, 1999). Rather than focusing on "difficulties" faced by English language learners, Bobda (1997) described how CamE has developed an autonomous phonological system with distinct vowel and consonant patterns, exhibiting numerous vowel splits and mergers, leading to the establishment of new lexical sets like paintEd, villAge, and TERM that are not present in received pronunciation. This descriptivist approach shows that CamE has its own set of phonological processes, such as E-tensing, glide formation, and consonant cluster simplification, that diverge from the rules of the standard variety. Rather than "struggles" with English phonology, this descriptivist research demonstrates the systematic nature of CamE's phonological restructuring, which has resulted in a so-called stable and homogeneous variety within the Anglophone regions of Cameroon. This, however, does not or should not preclude the efforts on the part of materials developers to incorporate standard phonological features in the course books, especially in line with the demands of the syllabus. This effort is justified by the fact that the so-called stable and homogenous variety of CamE does not possess a standardized

dictionary with phonetic transcriptions in the variety. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary and the Cambridge English Dictionary are widely used in Cameroon, thus warranting phonological instructions that align with standard Received Pronunciation to the extent possible (Levis, 2005).

An examination of the "Speech Work" component within Mastering English reveals that, while some attention is given to the pronunciation of individual vowel and consonant sounds, the instructional approach and the selection of target phonemes do not appear to be strategically aligned with the documented needs of Cameroonian learners. For instance, the textbook dedicates considerable time to the differentiation between sounds like /b/ and /p/, /k/ and /g/, and /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, which may not necessarily be the most pressing phonological challenges faced by this student population at the advanced level. Or, to say the least, even if these sounds constitute major challenges faced by the learners, the approach in the book should be more advanced, as they are already covered in the Prime English books 1 to 5, which are used in secondary classrooms in Cameroon.

The textbook's treatment of suprasegmental features is conspicuously absent. Suprasegmental features, which include stress, rhythm, and intonation, are important for intelligible communication, as they convey important meaning and can significantly impact a speaker's intelligibility and communicative competence. Research has shown that ESL/EFL learners have difficulty mastering the appropriate use of English suprasegmental features, which can lead to communication breakdowns and negative perceptions of the learner's language proficiency. Hahn (2004) found that English learners' misuse of sentence-level stress significantly impacted native speakers' comprehension and perceptions of the learners' oral proficiency. Derwing and Munro (2005) highlighted the importance of suprasegmental features in ESL/EFL instruction, noting that learners who have difficulty with stress, rhythm, and intonation may be intelligible but still difficult to understand. Given the crucial role of suprasegmental features in intelligible communication, the textbook's lack of coverage of this important aspect of English language learning is indeed a significant oversight that may hinder the development of advanced-level learners' communicative competence.

The lack of alignment between the "Speech Work" component and the specific phonological needs of Cameroonian learners is further exacerbated by the textbook's overreliance on decontextualized, drill-based activities. While such exercises may contribute to the development of phonological awareness and discrimination skills, they fail to provide learners with adequate opportunities to apply their newfound knowledge in authentic, communicative settings.

To address these shortcomings and enhance the relevance of Mastering English for Cameroonian learners, it is essential that the authors and curriculum developers undertake a comprehensive needs analysis and align the phonological content and instructional strategies with the documented challenges and learning trajectories of this student population. This may involve, for example, a greater focus on the remediation of problematic vowel and consonant sounds, the systematic integration of suprasegmental features, and the design of task-based activities that provide opportunities for learners to engage in authentic, contextualized communication following the CBA paradigm.

3.3 Gaps and Limitations in the Phonological Content of Mastering English

While Mastering English displays some strengths in its coverage of phonological instruction, such as the inclusion of specific words with silent /b/ and /p/ letters, there are notable gaps and limitations in its overall approach that merit further consideration.

3.3.1 Conceptual Framing of the Silent /b/ and /p/ Sound Instruction

The title of the "Speech Work" section, "The silent /b/ and /p/ sound," (p.16) reveals a misunderstanding of phonetics and phonology on the part of the textbook authors. Here's what Yoshida (2016) has to say on the difference between 'sounds' and 'letters'

Letters are written symbols. We can see them, but we can't

hear them. Sounds are vibrations that our ears can hear and our brains can interpret. We can hear sounds, but we can't see them. Even though people sometimes talk about "the g sound" or "the a sound," g and a are letters, not sounds. In the English spelling system, a letter can often represent more than one sound, depending on the word it's used in. For example, the letter g represents two completely different sounds in the words go [/goʊ/ /gəʊ/] and gentle /dʒɛntəl/. Also, a written letter sometimes represents no sound at all, like the k in knee or the e in bake (Yoshida, 2016).

This distinction between letters and sounds is crucial since a "sound" cannot be "silent" or "mute" – so, this title of the "Speech Work" represents a contradictory concept in the field of linguistics. However, in the course of developing the lesson, the authors do correctly refer to "letters" in the course of developing the lesson that are silent or mute in certain English words. But by framing the instruction around "silent sounds" rather than "silent letters," the textbook conveys a fundamental misunderstanding of phonetics and phonology, a conceptual flaw that undermines the effectiveness of the "Speech Work" component in developing learners' phonological awareness and production skills. Also, the section fails to provide any explanations or insights into the mechanics of these silent letters. The authors do not enlighten learners on why certain letters in the English alphabet are not pronounced in specific words, or the underlying phonological rules and patterns governing these silent letters (Hedge, 2001; Roach, 2009). Specifically, the lessons neglect to mention how the presence or absence of certain silent letters, such as the letter 'b,' can impact the meaning and pronunciation of words. For instance, the word 'number' can have two distinct pronunciations depending on the context - with the 'b' being pronounced when the word is used in a mathematical context (e.g., "the number five"), but silent when the word is used as the comparative form of the adjective 'numb' (e.g., "my arm feels number than before"). This semantic dimension is a crucial aspect of English phonology that the textbook authors have overlooked.

Furthermore, the lessons do not acknowledge the role of silent letters in letter combinations, such as 'btle' in words like 'subtle.' By failing to explore these subtleties of silent letters, the "Speech Work" instruction misses an opportunity to provide learners with a more comprehensive understanding of English phonology and its connection to meaning. In the absence of this conceptual foundation, the activity then jumps straight into a decontextualized list of words, asking learners to "attempt the pronunciation" without any guidance or feedback mechanisms (Celce-Murcia, 2007; Savignon, 2018). This lack of theoretical grounding and explicit instruction on the nature of silent letters is a significant shortcoming that undermines the effectiveness of this "Speech Work" component, leaving learners to blindly memorize and practice these words without developing a deeper understanding of the phonological system of English.

3.3.2 Voiced and Voiceless Velar Plosives /g/ and /k/

On a general note, the "Speech Work" component of Mastering English (p. 44) covering the pronunciation of the /k/ and /g/ sounds reveals a more comprehensive approach compared to the previous section on silent letters (p. 16). The textbook authors have structured the instructional content to systematically guide learners through the phonological features and patterns associated with these voiced and voiceless velar sounds. The first part of the section provides a clear overview of the /k/ and /g/ sounds, including the various graphemes (spellings) that represent these phonemes in English words. This structured presentation helps establish a foundational understanding of the target sounds and their orthographic representations.

The subsequent practice activities further reinforce this knowledge by engaging learners in tasks that require them to classify words according to the specific velar sounds (c, k, ck, ch, and que) and their derivatives (g, gi, and gy). This emphasis on phonological awareness and pattern recognition is a positive step towards developing learners' mastery of these critical English sounds. The "Exercise 1.10" and "Exercise 1.11" components introduce opportunities for deeper engagement with the target vocabulary, including writing down words and using a

dictionary to explore the meanings of difficult words. These productive and analytical tasks are valuable in facilitating learners' ability to apply their phonological knowledge in more meaningful, contextualized settings.

While the overall approach to the /k/ and /g/ sounds appears more robust compared to the previous section on silent letters, there are still areas for potential improvement. For instance, the lack of explicit instruction on the phonetic distinctions between voiced and voiceless velar sounds and the absence of opportunities for guided practice and feedback limit the depth of learners' understanding and ability to accurately produce these sounds (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Hedge, 2001). Also, the classification of the words under the "g, gi, and gy" section is highly problematic and inconsistent with the principles of phonetics and phonology. The claim that "ge, gi, i, and gy are derivatives of the /g/ sound" (p. 44) is simply inaccurate. As per the standard descriptions in phonetics references, the graphemes "ge," "gi," "j," and "gy" actually represent the /dʒ/ (voiced palatal affricate) sound, not the /g/ (voiced velar plosive) sound (Roach, 2009).

Furthermore, the examples provided under the "/g/" sound column, such as "January," "gym," "job," "giant," "genius," "engineer," "gesture," and "gem," do not actually contain the /g/ phoneme. These words either have the /dʒ/ sound (as in "giant," "genius," "engineer," and "gesture") or the /dʒ/ sound (as in "job"), which are distinct from the /g/ sound. So, this lack of phonetic accuracy and consistency in the categorization of the words is a significant flaw in the instructional design of this textbook component. It suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of the phonological system of English on the part of the authors, which leads to confusion and misinformation for learners, especially in the absence of a competent instructor.

To ensure the effectiveness of this pronunciation instruction, it would be crucial for the textbook to be revised and aligned with authoritative sources in phonetics and phonology, such as the references cited above. Only then can learners develop a robust and accurate understanding of the targeted velar sounds and

their associated graphemes in the English language and other notions in phonetics and phonology.

3.3.3 Voiced and Voiceless Palatal Affricates /dʒ/ and /tʃ/

The lesson begins by providing explicit instruction on the pronunciation of specific graphemes and their corresponding sounds. For instance, learners are introduced to the alveolar fricative /s/ sound, as represented by the letter "s" in words like "sound," "spelling," and "also." Similarly, the palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ sound, denoted by the digraph "c+i+e," is explained in the context of words such as "cite," "receive," and "accept." This systematic examination of the phoneme-grapheme correspondences lays a strong foundation for learners to develop phonological awareness. The instructional approach then transitions to a listening and repetition task, wherein students are asked to attend to the teacher's model pronunciations of the target sounds and subsequently replicate them. This audio-lingual methodology is effective in reinforcing the aural-oral connection and helping learners internalize the articulatory features of the phonemes.

However, given that it is an advanced-level class, the case can be made that the lesson lacks a solid theoretical foundation rooted in the orthographic rules and phonological patterns that govern the realization of the targeted sibilant sounds in English. This is a serious shortcoming, particularly for learners at an advanced level, where understanding of pronunciation patterns is essential for achieving precision and communicative competence. The absence of this theoretical underpinning not only limits the learners' ability to grasp the systematic nature of English pronunciation but also hinders their capacity to generalize these patterns to new lexical items. Furthermore, the role of etymology in how the historical development of words influences their orthographic and phonological realizations is an important aspect that is overlooked but warrants attention in this context.

For example, the lesson's treatment of the /ʃ/ sound is overly simplistic, focusing primarily on the basic grapheme "sh," as seen in words like ship /ʃɪp/ and shape

/ʃeɪp/. While this is a logical starting point, it fails to address the more complex orthographic patterns that also yield the /ʃ/ sound in English. These include the "s" in words like sure /ʃʊə/ or /ʃɜː/ (depending on dialect) and sugar /ˈʃʊgə/ and the "ch" in chic /ʃiːk/ and chauffeur /ʃəʊˈfɜː/. Additionally, rules involving "ti+V" and "ci+V" frequently result in the /ʃ/ sound in words such as nation /ˈneɪʃən/, negotiation /nɪˌɡ əʊʃiˈeɪʃən/, special /ˈspeʃəl/, and suspicion /səˈspɪʃən/. These patterns are not arbitrary; many of them are deeply influenced by the etymological origins of the words, particularly their borrowing from Latin and French. For instance, the "ti+V" pattern in nation and negotiation reflects Latin word formation conventions, where the "ti" cluster corresponds to the /ʃ/ sound in English.

Similarly, the lesson's coverage of the /s/ sound is limited to the grapheme "s" in words like sun /sʌn/, which disregards the broader orthographic patterns learners need to recognize. These include "ss" in words like class /klɑ ːs/ or /klæs/, "c" when followed by "e," "i," or "y" in words like cell /sɛl/, city /ˈsɪti/, and cycle /ˈsaɪkəl/ (alluded to, but in an overly simplistic manner in the book), and even alternating patterns in multi-syllabic words such as basic /ˈbeɪsɪk/. The role of etymology here is equally significant, as the use of "c" to represent /s/ is a feature inherited from French and Latin spelling conventions.

The /z/ sound, while common in English, is another area where the lesson falls short of providing comprehensive instruction. The voiced /z/ sound arises in predictable phonological environments, such as plural endings after voiced sounds (dogs /dɒgz/ or /dɔːgz/, friends /frɛndz/), third-person singular verb endings (runs /rʌnz/, swims /swɪmz/), and possessive forms (James's /ˈdʒeɪmzɪz/). Beyond these morphological contexts, the /z/ sound is also found in less intuitive orthographic representations, such as the "x" in xylophone /ˈzaɪləfəʊn/ or /ˈzaɪləfoʊn/ and the "s" in words like close /kləʊz/ or /kloʊz/ (verb form). Etymology plays a fascinating role here: the "x" in xylophone reflects its Greek origin (xylon, meaning "wood"), where the /z/ sound was preserved through transliteration. Similarly, the variation in "s" as /z/ in close stems from Middle English and Old French influences, where voiced and voiceless forms alternated depending on grammatical function.

The coverage of the /ʒ/ sound in the lesson is also problematic, given that this sound, while relatively rare in English, occurs in high-frequency words advanced learners encounter. The /ʒ/ sound appears in several orthographic contexts, such as

- "s" in pleasure /ˈplɛʒə/ and vision /ˈvɪʒən/
- "g" in genre /ˈʒɑːn.rə/ and rouge /ruːʒ/
- "z" in seizure /ˈsiː.ʒər/
- "si" in division /dɪˈvɪʒ.ən/

The suffix -sion, derived from the Latin -tio through French, produces the sound /ʒ/, as in decision /dɪˈsɪʒ.ən/ and equation /ɪˈkweɪ.ʒən/. The etymological roots of many /ʒ/ words are French, with the sound entering English primarily through Norman French loanwords during the Middle English period, though some words, such as genre and rouge, were borrowed later, in the 18th to 19th centuries. For instance, pleasure derives from Old French plaisir, while genre and rouge were adopted directly from Modern French. Teaching learners to recognize these French-derived orthographic patterns, which is particularly relevant in Cameroon, where French is a co-official language, would aid pronunciation and decoding of unfamiliar words.

In light of these omissions, the lesson fails to provide learners with a robust framework for understanding English sibilant sounds. This gap hinders their ability to internalize pronunciation rules and generalize them to new vocabulary. A deeper exploration of orthographic principles, phonological rules, and French-derived etymological patterns would empower learners to tackle English pronunciation with greater confidence, enhancing communicative competence.

3.3.4 Instruction of Vowel Sounds in Mastering English: Gaps and Recommendations

The instruction of vowel sounds plays a pivotal role in fostering communicative competence for advanced-level learners within Cameroon's educational context. However, an analysis of the "Speech Work" lessons in Mastering English reveals critical discrepancies with Competency-Based Approach (CBA) principles, particularly in phonemic representation accuracy,

contextual relevance of vocabulary, the extent of communicative practice, the degree of differentiation, and the teaching approach. The following lessons were analyzed: /ɒ/ and /ʌ/ (Lesson 1, Module 3, page 189), /ei/ and /ai/ (Lesson 2, Module 3, page 193), /u/ and /u:/ (Lesson 3, Module 3, page 215), /ɔ:/ and /ɔɪ/ (Lesson 4, Module 3, page 224), /ə/ and /ɜ:/ (Lesson 4, Module 4, page 273), /ʊə/ (Lesson 1, Module 5, page 294), /æ/ and /ɑ:/ (Lesson 2, Module 5, page 300), and /i/ and /i:/ (Lesson 4, Module 5, page 326).

The textbook occasionally employs phonemically inconsistent examples. For instance, the word "fought" (pronounced /fɔ:t/ in Standard British English) is presented to illustrate the /ɒ/ sound, which is more accurately represented in words like "hot" (/hɒt/). Similar ambiguities arise in contrasts such as /ɒ/ vs. /ʌ/ ("cot" vs. "cut"), /eɪ/ vs. /aɪ/ ("late" vs. "light"), and /ɔɪ/ vs. /ɔ:/ ("coin" vs. "caught"). Such inaccuracies may perpetuate mispronunciation and hinder learners' ability to internalize sound distinctions.

Furthermore, while "Mastering English" covers target sounds, many lexical choices (e.g., "aught," "fought") lack relevance to Cameroonian learners' communicative needs. A CBA-aligned approach would prioritize high-frequency, culturally resonant vocabulary such as "conflict" (/ɒ/), "employ" (/ɔɪ/), or "debate" (/eɪ/) to reflect learners' academic, social, and professional realities. As with the coverage of consonants, lessons overly rely on decontextualized drills and repetition exercises rather than fostering meaningful interaction.

To align with CBA objectives, "Mastering English" should integrate activities like role-plays (e.g., simulating parliamentary debates) or collaborative tasks (e.g., designing community health campaigns) that require learners to apply vowel sounds in purposeful communication. The textbook also adopts a uniform instructional approach, despite advanced-level learners' diverse proficiencies. Differentiated strategies, such as tiered tasks (basic sound discrimination vs. dialect comparison analyses) or scaffolded feedback via audio journals, could better address individual needs.

Finally, while Mastering English provides structured content, it neglects opportunities for learner autonomy. CBA-aligned revisions could incorporate self-assessment checklists, student-generated pronunciation guides, or project-based learning (e.g., creating advocacy podcasts).

4. Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study highlight several critical challenges in the implementation of the "Speech Work" component within Mastering English: High School, particularly in its alignment with the Competency-Based Approach (CBA) and the specific phonological needs of Cameroonian Advanced Level learners. The textbook's coverage of phonological topics, while broad in scope, is marred by a lack of depth, particularly in its treatment of suprasegmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation. These elements are not only essential for intelligible communication but are also explicitly outlined as key objectives in the GCE Advanced Level English syllabus. The omission of these features undermines the textbook's ability to foster the development of learners' communicative competence.

Moreover, the study reveals significant inaccuracies in the textbook's phonemic descriptions and exemplification, such as the flawed categorization of velar plosives and palatal affricates. These errors risk perpetuating misinformation and confusion among learners, ultimately hindering their ability to internalize and apply phonological rules accurately. The textbook's overreliance on decontextualized, drill-based activities further exacerbates these limitations, as it fails to provide learners with opportunities to engage in authentic, meaning-making communication, a core principle of the CBA.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. The textbook's current design and content may hinder learners' ability to develop the phonological awareness and production skills necessary for effective communication in academic and professional contexts. This, in turn, could perpetuate the decline in English language proficiency observed among Cameroonian

learners. To address these challenges, a comprehensive revision of the "Speech Work" component is essential. Such a revision must prioritize conceptual accuracy, the integration of contextually relevant vocabulary, and the inclusion of task-based activities that align with the principles of the CBA.

In addition to textbook revisions, the study underscores the need for teacher professional development programs. These programs should equip educators with a deeper understanding of English phonetics and phonology and the pedagogical strategies required to integrate phonological instruction with broader communicative goals. By addressing these gaps, educators can better support learners in developing the phonological competence necessary for intelligible and contextually appropriate communication.

Finally, the alignment of the textbook's content and instructional approaches with the GCE Advanced Level English syllabus is crucial. The "Speech Work" component must be systematically mapped to the syllabus's learning objectives and assessment criteria to ensure that learners are adequately prepared for the linguistic demands of high-stakes examinations. By fostering a cohesive educational framework that integrates phonological proficiency with communicative competence, the revised textbook can play a pivotal role in enhancing the quality of English language education in Cameroon.

Conclusion

The present study has undertaken a comprehensive content analysis of the "Speech Work" component within Mastering English, the nationally prescribed instructional resource for advanced-level English language learners in Cameroon. The investigation has revealed several significant limitations and shortcomings in the phonological instruction provided to this target student population.

The breadth of phonological topics covered in the textbook, while commendable, is undermined by the lack of depth and accuracy in the presentation of individual vowel and consonant sounds. The authors' conceptual framing of "silent sounds" rather than "silent letters" betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the principles of phonetics and phonology. Furthermore, the categorization and exemplification of certain sounds, such as the velar plosives and palatal affricates, exhibit glaring inaccuracies that could potentially lead to misinformation and confusion among learners.

The alignment of the "Speech Work" component with the specific phonological needs and challenges of Cameroonian advanced-level English language learners is severely lacking. The textbook's overemphasis on decontextualized, drill-based activities fails to provide learners with adequate opportunities to develop communicative competence, a core tenet of the competency-based approach adopted in Cameroon's secondary education system. The absence of explicit instruction on suprasegmental features, such as stress, rhythm, and intonation, further undermines the textbook's capacity to equip learners with the phonological awareness and production skills required for intelligible communication in the target language.

This investigation of the phonological instruction within Mastering English offers several valuable contributions to the field of English language education in Cameroon. It illuminates the critical gaps and limitations in the current instructional materials, thereby providing a foundation for targeted revisions and improvements. By identifying the conceptual, pedagogical, and contextual deficiencies, this study catalyzes a much-needed re-evaluation of the phonological content and its alignment with the principles of the competency-based approach being applied in Cameroon. Also, the findings of this research underscore the necessity for a needs analysis to inform the tailoring of phonological instruction to the specific challenges faced by Cameroonian advanced-level learners, emphasizing the contextualization of the teaching of English pronunciation to the target population's linguistic profile as a significant step towards enhancing the relevance and efficacy of the instructional materials.

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