

A Contrastive Study of the Phonology of Igbo and Yoruba

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Abstract

This paper, a contrastive study of the phonology of Igbo and Yoruba, is aimed at finding out the phonological problems the Igbo learners of Yoruba and the Yoruba learners of Igbo will encounter in their learning Yoruba and Igbo, respectively, as their L2. Using existing works on the phonology of Igbo and Yoruba, the researchers compared the consonants, vowels and tonal systems of both languages. Igbo is made up of twenty-eight consonants and eight oral vowels, while Yoruba has eighteen consonants, and twelve vowels comprising seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels. The contrastive analysis carried out evinced that there are some sounds in Igbo which are not present in Yoruba; also some sounds in Yoruba are not in Igbo. For example, /p kw gw v z ŋ ŋw ɲ ʄ / are Igbo phonemes which Yoruba lacks. Another striking difference between the two languages is the presence of nasal vowels in Yoruba, /ĩ ẽ ã õ û /, which do not exist in Igbo. Also, /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ are in Igbo and not in Yoruba, while /ɛ/ is present in Yoruba but absent in Igbo. Although both languages have high and low tones, Yoruba also has a mid tone while Igbo also has a downstep tone. Following the tenets of contrastive analysis (CA), these differences are presumed to constitute learning difficulties. To make the learning of these languages easy for our stated learners, all the predicted areas of difficulties must be properly handled by the language teachers to avert the manifestation of the predicted errors in the speech of the learners. This could be achieved by making the Igbo

learners of Yoruba master the production of those Yoruba sounds they are not familiar with; and the Yoruba learners of Igbo to internalise how to produce those Igbo sounds that they are not familiar with. On the issue of tone, the students should be made to be conscious of the tonotactics of mid tone and downstep tone and apply them appropriately in their speech.

Introduction

Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Speakers of different languages come in contact everyday in such areas as business, office, market, school and law courts. There is a need for one to learn an additional indigenous language apart from one's mother tongue, that is, an Igbo man, for instance, to speak, read, write and interact with an Hausa or a Yoruba man, or the other way round. Our interest in this paper is on the Igbo speakers learning Yoruba and vice versa. In line with the findings of Contrastive analysis (CA), Igbo learners of Yoruba, and vice versa, should ordinarily experience language learning problems bordering on interference as a result of differences between Igbo and Yoruba phonology. The problem could make it difficult for the Igbo learners of Yoruba and Yoruba learners of Igbo to achieve success in their language learning endeavour.

In order to assist learners, this paper discusses the consonants, vowels and tonal system of standard Igbo and standard Yoruba, predicting the problem areas and proffering solutions which would help them not to develop the initial pronunciation problem they ordinarily would face during the course of their learning their target language.

Literature Review

Contrastive analysis (CA) is the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957; Filipovi, 1975). James (1980:63) and

Chestermann (1998:52), summarize CA to include two main processes - description and comparison. For them, languages are described and compared in CA; from the comparison, potential difficulties for learners are predicted from the differences and the extent to which the languages are alike are equally shown from the similarities.

According to Firbas (1992:13), “the contrastive method proves to be a useful heuristic tool capable of throwing valuable light on the characteristic features of the languages contrasted.” This means that when we compare languages, the features of each language are clearly seen and this, in addition, contributes to a better description of each individual language. Moreover, CA is often and primarily done for pedagogical purposes, with the aim to provide better descriptions and better teaching materials for language teachers and learners (cf. Lado, 1957; Firbas, 1992). Westermann and Ward (1990) and Wardhaugh (1998) explain that languages and dialects are known to differ from each other in such areas as grammar, idiom, vocabulary, production of the sounds which make up the language, in the way sounds are linked together to make words and sentences i.e. the differences could be at the level of syntax, morphology, lexis or phonology. CA can, therefore, cover a particular level. Obimma (1998) does an introductory analysis of the phonology of Edda dialect and standard Igbo. She shows that there are thirty-eight phonemes in Edda Igbo, comprising twenty-nine consonants and nine vowels while there are thirty-six phonemes in standard Igbo, comprising twenty-eight consonants and eight vowels. According to her, Edda does not have /h/ which standard Igbo has. She explains that nasalization is a significant feature of Edda dialect. Edda, like standard Igbo, does not permit consonant cluster or closed syllable; though these could be found in some borrowed words.

Ogbonnaya (2006) discovers nine vowels and forty-one consonants in Item dialect of Igbo, that is, fifty phonemes. He identifies the half-open unrounded vowel /ɛ/ in Item, pointing out that it does not exist in standard Igbo. In Item, it often occurs at morpheme initial position; and tends to correspond to the open front unrounded vowel /a/ in standard Igbo:

Standard Igbo	Item dialect
anya /áńá/	/éńá/ ‘eye’
aka /áká/	/éká/ ‘hand’
aja /ádʒā/	/édʒā/ ‘sand’

This, he says, reduces the use of /a/ at word initial position in Item to only a few words. He points out some consonants found in Item which are not in standard Igbo:

aspirated plosives	/p ^h t ^h k ^h /
breathy voiced plosives	/b ^h d ^h g ^h /
nasalized alveolar roll	/r̃/
nasalized fricatives	/f̃ ṽ s̃ z̃/

Elugbe (1986), as cited in Uba (2009:18), is a comparative study of Edoid languages. He identifies ten vowel qualities for Edoid. He observes that many of the Edoid languages have ‘weak’ consonants which are different from their corresponding ‘strong’ consonants. According to him, weak consonants could always be distinguished by being written with an ‘h’ in the orthography. In this paper, which is a contrastive study, we shall discuss the vowels, consonants and tones of Igbo and Yoruba languages; bringing out the similarities and differences that exist between the two languages. We shall also provide examples of words where the sound segments and tones of both languages occur. From the contrast, we shall look into the implications for the Igbo

learners of Yoruba and Yoruba learners of Igbo, and suggest ways of making the teaching and learning of the languages easier.

Methodology

As many works have already been done on the phonology of Igbo and that of Yoruba, the researchers have to recourse to the existing literature on the segmental phonemes and tones of both languages. For such works on Igbo phonology, see Emenanjo (1975), Eme and Anagbogu (2000), Iloene (2007), Eme and Odinye (2008), Ikekeonwu, Ezikeojiaku, Ubanị and Ugoji (1999). These show that Igbo is made up of thirty-six phonemes, comprising twenty-eight consonants and eight vowels. Igbo is a tone language with three tones: high, low and downstep. Tone Bearing Units (TBUs) are vowels and syllabic nasals. This study adopts the description of Igbo consonants and tone in Eme and Odinye (2008), and the vowel description of Iloene (2007). For the phonology of Yoruba, see such works as Bamgbose (1990), Oyebade (1992), Akinlabi (2004). This paper adopts Oyebade (1992) on the phonology of Yoruba. According to him, Yoruba has eighteen consonants and twelve vowels made up of seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels. Yoruba is also a tone language with three tones: high, mid and low. Also, the TBUs for the language are vowels and syllabic nasals.

For the two languages of our investigation, we have adopted the tone marking convention where we have marked high tone with acute accent [´], low tone with grave accent [˘], downstep tone with macron [ˉ], and mid tone left unmarked.

Phonology of Igbo

The standard Igbo has thirty-six phonemes comprising twenty-eight consonants and eight vowels.

Igbo vowels

There are eight phonemic vowels in standard Igbo. The vowels, their phonetic description and examples of Igbo words where they occur are shown below:

- a /a/ open front unrounded vowel
áká ‘hand’, àkwá ‘egg’, àlà ‘land’
- e /e/ half-open front unrounded
éké ‘python’, égbé ‘kite’, éféré ‘plate’
- i /i/ close front unrounded vowel
ìtè ‘pot’, ìsè ‘five’, ìrì ‘ten’
- ɪ /ɪ/ half-close front unrounded vowel
ìgbà ‘wooden drum’, ìkpà ‘to weave’
- o /o/ half-close back rounded vowel
òròmá ‘orange’, ótù ‘one’, ólú ‘neck’
- ɔ /ɔ/ half-open back rounded vowel
òkú ‘fire’, òkúkò ‘fowl’, ónṹ ‘mouth’
- u /u/ close back rounded vowel
ùgwù ‘honor’, élú ‘up’, ùdó ‘peace’
- ʊ /ʊ/ half-close back rounded
úsú ‘bat’, ázù ‘fish’, ánú ‘meat’

Igbo consonants

Standard Igbo twenty-eight consonants are listed below:

/p b t d k g kp gb kw gw m n ɲ ŋ ɲw f v s z ʃ ɣ h
tʃ dʒ l r j w /

Consonant chart

We present below the consonant chart of the Igbo language showing all the twenty-eight consonants of the language.

Place▶	Bila	Labi	Alv	Post	Pala	V	Labi	Lab	Glott
Manner↓	bial	o- dent al	eola r	- alve olar	tal	el ar	al velar	ializ ed vela r	al

Plosive	p b		t d			k g	kp gb	kw gw	
Nasal	M		n		ɲ	ŋ		ŋw	
Fricative		f v	s z	ʃ		ʎ			ɸ
Affricate				tʃ dʒ					
Lateral			l						
Trill			r						
Approximant					J			w	

Fig.1 Igbo consonant chart (Adapted from Eme and Odinye, 2008:28)

4.2.2 Consonant description

p	/p/	voiceless bilabial plosive pá ‘carry’, àpà ‘scar’, pàpá ‘father’
b	/b/	voiced bilabial plosive bìá ‘come’, bàá ‘enter’, mbó ‘nail’
t	/t/	voiceless alveolar plosive tá ‘chew’, tòó ‘praise’, átúrū ‘sheep’
d	/d/	voiced alveolar plosive dèé ‘write’ dàá ‘fall’, ndù ‘life’
k	/k/	voiceless velar plosive kèé ‘share’, kámà ‘but’, àkù ‘wealth’
g	/g/	voiced velar plosive gàá ‘go’, gòó ‘buy’, ágū ‘tiger’
kp	/kp/	voiceless labial-velar plosive kpó ‘call’, kpù ‘mould’, àkpa ‘bag’
gb	/gb/	voiced labial-velar plosive

kw	/kw/	gbàá ‘kick’, àgbà ‘jaw’, ìgbé ‘box’ voiceless labialized velar plosive
gw	/gw/	kwú ‘say’, kwé ‘agree’, ákwá ‘cry’ voiced labialized velar plosive
m	/m/	bilabial nasal mbè ‘tortoise’, àmà ‘witness’, ímí ‘nose’
n	/n/	alveolar nasal ń̀nà ‘father’, nèé ‘see’, ánù ‘meat’, éné ‘deer’
ny	/ɲ/	palatal nasal nyàá ‘drive’, nyé ‘give’, ányá ‘eye’, ènyò ‘mirrow’
ñ	/ŋ/	velar nasal nú ‘drink’, áhá ‘cane’, ánū ‘bee’
nw	/ŋw/	labialized velar nasal nwú ‘die’, ọ́nwá ‘moon’, ènwè ‘monkey’
f	/f/	voiceless labio-dental fricative fópù ‘uproot’, fùó ‘get lost’, áfó ‘stomach’
v	/v/	voiced labio-dental fricative Àví, Ùmùàvùl̀à, Ìvó ‘names of towns/people’
s	/s/	voiceless alveolar fricative sùọ́ ‘pound’, sèé ‘draw’, ósè ‘pepper’, àsí ‘lie’
z	/z/	voiced alveolar fricative zèé ‘dodge’, zọ́ọ́ ‘plant’, àzù ‘back’, ázù ‘fish’
sh	/ʃ/	voiceless post-alveolar ìshá ‘crayfish’, áshà ‘weaver bird’
gh	/ɣ/	voiced velar fricative ghọ́ ‘pluck’, ghé ‘fry’, ághá ‘war’
h	/h/	voiced glottal fricative hù ‘see’, há ‘they’, àhù ‘body’, áhà ‘name’

ch	/tʃ/	voiceless post-alveolar affricate chèé ‘think’, ñchà ‘soap’, íchè ‘different’
j	/dʒ/	voiced post-alveolar affricate jàá ‘praise’, jùó ‘ask’, àjà ‘sacrifice’
l	/l/	voiced alveolar lateral lèé ‘look’, lòó ‘swallow’, ílú ‘proverb’
r	/r/	voiced alveolar trill rèé ‘sell’, èrí ‘thread’, érō ‘mushroom’
y	/j/	voiced palatal approximant yó ‘beg’, yá ‘him/her/it’, m̀yò ‘sieve’
w	/w/	voiced labialized approximant wèrè ‘take’, ìwú ‘law’, íwé ‘anger’

Igbo tone system

The Igbo language is a register tone language with three level tones which are high tone, low tone and downstep tone. As stated in 3.0, they are marked using [´], [`], and [¯] respectively. Examples of Igbo words bearing the tones are shown below:

HH	ísí	‘head’
HL	ísì	‘smell’
LL	ìsì	‘blindness’
HS	ísī	‘to cook’
HH	ákwá	‘cry’
HL	ákwà	‘cloth’
LH	àkwá	‘egg’
LL	àkwà	‘bed/bridge’
HH	échí	‘tomorrow’
HH	élé	‘antelope’
HS	égō	‘money’
HS	ónū	‘mouth’

LH	àtó	‘three’
LH	òké	‘rat’
LL	àjà	‘sacrifice’
LL	àlà	‘land’

Whereas the high and low tones can occur at all positions - initial, medial and final - the downstep tone cannot begin a canonical word. Since the downstep tone is acoustically regarded as dropping from a height and is perceived as such, it cannot be preceded by a low tone rather it can only follow a high tone or another downstep tone. (Some of the Igbo words used in our examples in this section are adapted from Eme and Odinye (2008) while the others are provided by the researchers).

Phonology of Yoruba

Yoruba vowels

Yoruba has seven oral vowels /i e ε a o ɔ u/ and five nasal vowels /ĩ ẽ ã õ ù/. Their phonetic description, orthographic and phonemic representations and examples of words where they occur are as follows:

i	/i/	close front unrounded vowel ìyá ‘mother’, orí ‘head’, ìta ‘outside’
e	/e/	half close front unrounded vowel ewé ‘leaf’, ejò ‘snake’, ikólè ‘dustpan’
ε	/ε/	half open front unrounded vowel èpà ‘groundnut’, ègè ‘cassava’, èwà ‘beans’
a	/a/	open central unrounded vowel àgè ‘kettle’, abà ‘hut’, adè ‘chair’
ɔ	/ɔ/	half open back rounded vowel òpòlò ‘frog’, òbe ‘knife’, òsàn ‘orange’
o	/o/	half close back rounded vowel okó ‘hoe’, ikókó ‘pot’, ólógbó ‘cat’

u	/u/	close back rounded vowel ewúré ‘goat’, kúrò ‘leave’, isu ‘yam’
in	/ĩ/	close front unrounded nasal vowel èyìn ‘back’, ìgbín ‘snail’, rìn ‘to walk’
en	/ẽ/	half open front unrounded nasal vowel ìyẹn ‘that one’, hén ‘yes’
an	/ã/	open central unrounded nasal vowel itàn ‘story’, ràn ‘to send’, alákan ‘crab’
on	/õ/	half open back rounded nasal vowel òṣòṣò ‘crocodile’, ìbòṣò ‘gun’
un	/ũ/	close back rounded nasal vowel ràkúnmi ‘camel’, ẹkùn ‘tiger’

Yoruba consonants

Standard Yoruba is made up of eighteen consonants. They are listed below.

/ b t d k g kp gb f s ʃ h ɖ ɗ m n l r j w /

5.2.1 Yoruba consonant chart

Below is the consonant chart of Yoruba showing all the consonants of the language.

Place of	Bilabial	Labiodental	Alveolar	Palatoalveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labiodental	Glottal
Articulation				Alveolar			Velar	
Manner of Articulation								

Plosive	b		t d			k g	kp gb	
Fricative		f s		ʃ				h
Affricate				dʒ				
Nasal	m		n					
Tap			r					
Lateral			l					
Approximant					j		w	

Fig. 2 Yoruba consonant chart (Adapted from Oyebade, 1992:221)

Consonant description

We present the description and distributional pattern of Yoruba consonants.

- b /b/ voiced bilabial plosive
bàtá ‘shoes’, abà ‘huts’, bá ‘meet up with’
- t /t/ voiceless alveolar plosive
tà ‘sell’, etídò ‘river bank’, tò ‘arrange’
- d /d/ voiced alveolar plosive
dà ‘pour’ àdà ‘cutlass’, dúdú ‘black’
- k /k/ voiceless velar plosive
kí ‘what’, kókóró ‘key’, oko ‘farm’
- g /g/ voiced velar plosive
gà ‘spread’, gèlè ‘headgear’
- p /kp/ voiceless labial-velar plosive
pàkúté ‘trap’, àpótí ‘box’, pò ‘be many’
- gb /gb/ voiced labial-velar plosive

f	/f/	gbà ‘take’, ìgbà ‘period’, gbó ‘to hear’ voiceless labio-dental fricative
s	/s/	fèrèsé ‘window’, òfo ‘zero’, ifé ‘love’ voiceless alveolar fricative
s□	/ʃ/	sìsì ‘young lady’, sálúbàtá ‘slippers’, àsè ‘party’ voiceless palato-alveolar fricative
h	/h/	s□ òkòtò ‘trouser’, às□à ‘custom’, às□á ‘eagle’ voiceless glottal fricative
j	/dʒ/	ha ‘scratch’, ihò ‘hole’, háhá ‘sheet of corn’ voiced palato-alveolar affricate
m	/m/	jà ‘fight’, òjò ‘rain’, jàgùdà ‘thief’ voiced bilabial nasal
n	/n/	màmá ‘mother’, màlúú ‘cow’, ómó ‘child’ voiced alveolar nasal
r	/r/	nínú ‘inside’, nà ‘beat’, àná ‘yesterday’ voiced alveolar trill
l	/l/	rà ‘buy’, ara ‘body’, rí ‘see’ voiced alveolar lateral
y	/j/	lá ‘leak’, ìlé raise’, àlá ‘dream’ voiced palatal approximant
w	/w/	ya ‘draw’, iyàwó ‘wife’, iyà ‘mother’ labio-velar approximant
		wá ‘search’, owo ‘money’, wàhála ‘trouble’

(The Yoruba words are adapted from Abidemi, 1996; Ajunwa, Ibiowotisi, Osinomumu and Nzomiwu, 2006).

Yoruba tone system

Yoruba has three tones: high, mid and low. The tone bearing units are vowels and syllabic nasals. Like in Igbo, a

word may have different lexical meanings depending on its tone. For example, ‘ko’ is a monosyllabic word with three way pitch contrasts:

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

Each of the tones can be preceded or followed by any tone. In other words, each of the tones can occur in all the possible environments - initial, medial, and final positions. This is unlike the downstep tone in Igbo whose occurrences are constrained. For instance, in Yoruba we have:

HH	pákó	‘plank’
HL	pákò	‘chewing stick’
LL	ìlù	‘drum’
LH	ìlú	‘town’
LM	ìlu	‘opener’
MH	ọkọ	‘hoe’
MM	ọkọ	‘husband’
ML	ọkọ	‘vehicle’
HM	kése	‘mythological place name’

Discussion

Our discussion is on the CA of Igbo and Yoruba at the phonological level only. Yoruba has eighteen consonants while Igbo has twenty-eight consonants. It is observed that Igbo has all the consonants of Yoruba and an additional ten. Those Igbo consonants that Yoruba lacks are /p kw gw v z ŋ ŋw ɲ ɣ ʃ/. For the vowels, Igbo has eight oral vowels while Yoruba has seven oral vowels and five nasal vowels. The major difference in the vowel system of both languages is that Yoruba has five nasal vowels /ĩ ẽ ã õ ù/ which Igbo lacks. That is, nasal vowels are inherent and phonemic in

Yoruba while in Igbo, a vowel can only be phonetically nasalized as a result of its environment of occurrence. Also, /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ are phonemically present in Igbo and absent in Yoruba, while /ɛ/ is phonemically present in Yoruba but absent in Igbo.

With the above differences, there is every tendency that these phonemes would constitute pronunciation problems for the Igbo learners of Yoruba and the Yoruba learners of Igbo, as they would negatively transfer the habit they formed for their mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1) into their target language (TL) or second language (L2), by often substituting the ‘unfamiliar’ phonemes with some familiar phonemes that do not correspond with their target language sounds.

To prevent these pronunciation errors from rearing their ugly heads, therefore, the Igbo learners of Yoruba should be taught to produce and master those Yoruba sounds they are not familiar with. The same should be done with the Yoruba learners of Igbo concerning those Igbo sounds that they are not familiar with. The language teacher must ensure that this is achieved prior to the commencement of teaching of actual language items. For instance, the Igbo learners of Yoruba should be taught the Yoruba nasal vowels, as such vowels do not exist in their language and would likely pose some learning problems to the learners. The teacher should devote time to teaching their students such sounds. Explaining the phonetics of those sounds, especially the articulatory processes involved in their production, as well as drills, would likely go a long way in enhancing learning. During the teaching and drills, the teacher should be attentive enough to perceive and immediately correct the learners’ pronunciation errors. Afterwards, learners should be tested by their teachers in the process of producing and mastering those unfamiliar and difficult sounds.

It is not expected that such phonemes as /b t d k g gb f m s dʒ / found in both languages would constitute a problem for the Igbo learners of Yoruba and vice versa. What the learners must do is to positively transfer the habit of the production of these sounds into their TL. The teacher has a role here in ensuring that there is proper pronunciation of each segment, in line with the phonotactics of the TL in question.

We must point out that there are some vowels that are present in both languages, but are given different phonetic description (see sections 4.1 and 5.1). Such vowels are /e/, /a/, /ɔ/ and /o/. In Igbo, /e/ is described as ‘half-open front unrounded vowel’, while the same vowel is ‘half-close front unrounded vowel’ in Yoruba. Also, /a/ is ‘open front unrounded vowel’ in Igbo while it is an ‘open central unrounded vowel’ in Yoruba. Then, /ɔ/ is an ‘open back rounded vowel’ in Igbo but turns to be described as ‘half-open back rounded vowel’ in Yoruba. In Igbo, /o/ is ‘half-open back rounded vowel’ while it is ‘half-close back rounded vowel’ in Yoruba. However, we do not predict pronunciation difficulties for the learners, especially as their difference is in their description and not in their pronunciation; and the language teacher is there to guide them aright. We must also point out that the description for the vowels of these languages could differ from author to author (see Emenanjo, 1978; Ikekeonwu, Ezikeojiaku, Ubanj and Ugoji 1999; Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme, 2010).

Concerning tone, Igbo and Yoruba are both tone languages with three tones each: high, low, downstep tones and high, low, mid tones respectively. The learners are unlikely to have any problem with the general perception and use of tones since the two languages are tonal. Both languages have high and low tones in common but differ in mid and down step tones. The difference is that downstep tone is restricted in its occurrence, unlike mid tone which can occur

in any environment. The Yoruba learners of Igbo and the Igbo learners of Yoruba should take note of this and consciously adjust.

Finally, due to the fact that every language is unique, having its own peculiarities, the Yoruba learners of Igbo and the Igbo learners of Yoruba must make conscious effort to produce and use their target sounds as the owners of the language would, whether they are dealing with the unfamiliar sounds and tones or with the familiar ones. This is very important to avoid mixing up the L1 and TL pronunciation that may result to what Kristin and Denham (2013:4) refer to as ‘inter language grammar.’ The language teacher must guard against this, as correcting inter-language pronunciation when they begin to manifest may be more difficult than presenting new material in the TL.

Conclusion

This paper has done a contrastive study of the phonology of the Igbo and Yoruba languages. The discussion started with a comparison of the consonant, vowel and tonal systems of both languages. In line with the tenets of contrastive analysis (CA), the areas of pronunciation difficulties for the learners of either of the languages were predicted based on the differences in the languages’ sound and tonal systems. The differences and similarities in the phonology of the languages formed the basis for our further discussion, showing their implications for L2 learners of either of the languages. We ended by proffering solutions to the learning problems we predicted for the learners, soliciting the active participation of the learners in the language learning process. The teachers, on their part, should assume their proper role in the teaching endeavour by, especially, ensuring that they, using their appropriate knowledge of the CA results for both languages, teach accurate pronunciation to the L2 learners. This way, possible

pronunciation errors are prevented and the issue of the learners developing an inter-language in their target language eliminated. We hope that with this study, the Igbo learners of Yoruba and the Yoruba learners of Igbo will become proficient in their TL without undue difficulties.

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