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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

Section: *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

## Primary Stress Placement: Difference between Theory and Practice

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### ABSTRACT

This study is based on the assumption that, in every department of human thought, theory and practice are mutually related, and hence, it made an investigation into primary stress placement among Nigerian users of English to determine the difference between learning and practice. This is because Nigerian English (NE) exists, and its peculiar, different patterns of stress have been identified as different patterns from the Standard British English (SBE) patterns taught in Nigerian schools. The respondents for the study were randomly selected but stratified into three categories from those that have studied English Language as an area of specialization at the university level; the categories were final-year students of English, Master's students of English, and teachers of English Language in secondary schools. The analysis of the findings, which was based on simple percentages, showed that differences occur between the pattern they mark in writing and the pattern that occurs in their speech. That is, while the respondents indicated the SBE primary stress pattern in writing, they articulated the NE primary stress pattern in their speech.

**KEYWORDS:** Nigerian English, Standard British, Stress Pattern, Teaching/Learning

**African Journal of Linguistics,  
Literary and Cultural Studies**

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2026

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: 31 March 2026

Accepted: 08 June 2026

Published: 29 June 2026

### HOW TO CITE

Ejembi, O. (2026). Primary Stress Placement: Difference between Theory and Practice. *African Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.evonexpublishers.com/index.php/ajllcs/article/view/86>



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Evonex Global, an imprint of Evonex Publishers Limited

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## Introduction

English is the lingua franca and official language in Nigerian society and is used as the language of education, the language of the elite, as well as the medium of social interaction (Ogunyisi, 2007). The Nigerian National Policy on Education specifies the apparent and expected status of English in the Nigerian education system. The policy document also specifies standard British English as the model of English to be taught. (Ayoola, Bankole, & Adegite, 2023).

English Language serves not only as the primary medium of instruction throughout secondary and tertiary education but also as a mandatory subject embedded within the curriculum (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). This emphasis culminates in a compulsory credit pass requirement in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) - a prerequisite for university entry. At every level of education, the required model to be taught and learned is Standard British English (SBE).

However, despite the learning/teaching of standard British English at all levels of schools, the intermingling of indigenous languages and the English language, as Banjo (1971), Jowitt (1991), and Kachru (1992) submit, gave rise to local variety. Many scholars assert that Nigerian English is a variety of English that has distinctive phonological features and culturally based lexical items peculiar to the Nigerian environment and culture (Bamgbose, 1995; Kachru, 1995; Adegbija, 2004; Alabi, 2012; Jowitt, 1991). Bamgbose (1995) and Adegbija (2004) both see the Nigerian variety as peculiar to the socio-cultural landscape of the country.

Owing to the status of Standard British English in the education system, the question of its effective teaching and learning becomes paramount. Hence, this research, therefore, bearing in mind the British model learned at all levels of education and the wide use of Nigerian English, seeks to investigate the difference between theory and practice in the area of primary stress placement among Nigerian users of English. Theory, as used here, does not stand for any grounded principle of thought, science, or idea. It is used to mean the teaching and learning of the subject – i.e., the students and teachers exercise in the classroom, or what is actually taught and learnt. While "practice" means what is actually used outside the teaching and learning environment.

This research work is geared towards arriving at dependable findings that will help in the teaching and learning of NE stress patterns in Nigerian schools as an acceptable variety. This is necessary because many scholars argue that Nigerian English is a dialect/variety of English and should be rightly classified as such (Bamgbose, 1995; Kachru, 1995, Adegbija, 2004; Alabi, 2012). They also suggest harmonisation and standardisation so that obvious errors will be eliminated, considering the fact that, as Kperogi (2010) says, Nigerian English, as a variety of World English, has come to stay.

## Research Methodology

The data were gathered through a text-based research instrument designed to test stress placement in some words by Nigerian users of English. Ninety subjects for the study were randomly selected but stratified into three categories from those that have studied English Language as an area of specialisation at the university level. Thirty of them were final-year undergraduate students of English language; thirty were graduates of English who have been teaching English in secondary schools, and the last thirty were Master's students of English. Words were selected to represent some examples that account for the rules for predicting stress in English, especially morphological and phonological rules.

The tests were in two forms, divided into three sections. First, the respondents were asked in Section 1 to underline the syllable that bears the primary stress in each word – a test we refer to as indicative test. In Section 2, the respondents read the words in isolation while the researcher recorded with a tape recorder. In section 3, they read simple sentences constructed with the words.

## Analysis of the Collected Data

In this analysis, the occurrence of SBE stress patterns, on one hand, and NE stress patterns, on the other hand, are considered. The tables are drawn up in a manner which shows that the words were grouped.

## Abbreviations Used in the Tables

S/N – Serial Number

NR – Number of Responses

FSBE – Frequency of Occurrence of British Standard English Stress Pattern

FNE - Frequency of Occurrence of Nigerian English Stress Pattern

FWP Frequency of Occurrence of Wrong Pattern – i.e. Neither SBE nor NE

OT – Overall Total of Occurrences

## Section 1.

Tables 1-4 depict the responses for the indicative test (test 1)

Table 1

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%	FWP	%
1	Astonish	63	70%	12	13.3%	15	16.7%
2	Calendar	63	70%	21	23.3%	6	6.7%
3	Capitalism	42	46.7%	33	36.7%	15	16.7%
4	Celibacy	9	10%	60	66.7%	21	23.3%
5	Constitutive	21	23.3%	51	56.7%	18	20%
6	Despicable	24	26.7%	30	33.3%	36	40%
7	Establish	69	76.7%	9	10%	12	13.3%
8	Garrulous	60	66.7%	27	30%	3	3.3%
9	Indicative	27	30%	51	56.7%	12	13.3%
10	Radiator	36	40%	15	16.7%	39	43.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>34.3%</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>19.7%</b>

**Table 2**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%	FWP	%
1	Challenge	72	80%	18	20%	-	-
2	Diploid	48	53.3%	42	46.7%	-	-
3	Ferrous	66	73.3%	24	26.7%	-	-
4	Madam	78	96.7%	12	13.3%	-	-
5	Perfume	51	56.7%	39	43.3%	-	-
6	Petrol	75	83.3%	15	16.7%	-	-
7	Plantain	24	26.7%	66	73.3%	-	-
8	Salad	69	76.7%	21	23.3%	-	-
9	Colleague	42	46.7%	48	53.3%	-	-
10	Tribune	60	66.7%	30	33.3%	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>315</b>	<b>35%</b>		

**Table 3**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%	FWP	%
1	Advertise	33	36.7%	36	40%	21	23.3%
2	Analyze	36	40%	39	43.3%	15	16.7%
3	Characterize	36	40%	33	36.7%	21	23.3%
4	Civilize	42	46.7%	39	43.3%	9	10%
5	Complicate	36	40%	30	33.3%	24	26.7%
6	Congratulate	36	40%	12	13.3%	42	46.7%
7	Modify	63	70%	18	20%	9	10%
8	Modulate	45	50%	24	26.7%	21	23.3%
9	Reconcile	24	26.7%	33	36.7%	33	36.7%
10	Satisfy	54	60%	18	20%	18	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>405</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>31.3%</b>	<b>213</b>	<b>23.7%</b>

**Table 4**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%	FWP	%
1	Backfire	27	30%	63	70%	-	-
2	Bullet-proof	36	40%	48	53.3%	6	6.7%
3	Common room	45	50%	33	36.7%	12	13.3%
4	Light-heartedly	27	30%	51	56.7%	12	13.3%
5	Part time	36	40%	54	60%	-	-
6	Post office	51	56.7%	27	30%	12	13.3%
7	Single-mindedly	42	46.7%	39	43.3%	9	10%
8	Sitting room	45	50%	42	46.7%	3	3.3%
9	Spearhead	63	70%	27	30%	-	-
10	Stage manage	30	33.3%	42	46.7%	18	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>402</b>	<b>44.7%</b>	<b>426</b>	<b>47.3%</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>8%</b>

**Table 5: Overall total of occurrences (OT) of tables 1-4 for test 1**

NO. OF WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%	FWP	%
40	1806	50.6	1332	36.4%	462	13%

The above tables illustrate the responses gathered from the *indicative test*. They show the number of the respondents that placed stress on the syllables considered to be stressed in SBE, those that placed it on the syllables often said to be stressed in NE, and those that indicated neither the SBE pattern nor NE pattern – the placement considered as wrong pattern (WP).

In the word MODIFY, for instance, twenty-one (70% of the) respondents placed stress on the first syllable, which bears stress in SBE, while six (20%) of them underlined the syllable which carries stress in NE (i.e. final syllable), and three (10%) marked the penultimate syllable, considered as wrong pattern – a pattern which is neither marked in SBE nor NE. The aggregate responses shown in OT table depict the SBE pattern as the more regular one in this test.

## Section 2

Tables 6-9 below show the tokens for the oral test 1 (reading in isolation)

**Table 6**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
1	Astonish	63	70%	3	30%
2	Calendar	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
3	Capitalism	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
4	Celibacy	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
5	Constitutive	0	0%	90	100%
6	Despicable	84	93.3%	6	6.7%
7	Establish	60	66.7%	30	33.3%
8	Garrulous	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
9	Indicative	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
10	Radiator	0	0%	90	100%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>279</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>69%</b>

**Table 7**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
1	Challenge	36	40%	54	60%
2	Diploid	33	36.7%	57	63.3%
3	Ferrous	78	86.7%	12	13.3%
4	Madam	51	56.7%	39	43.3%
5	Perfume	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
6	Petrol	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
7	Plantain	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
8	Salad	36	40%	54	60%
9	Colleague	12	13.3%	78	86.7%
10	Tribune	33	36.7%	57	63.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>35.3%</b>	<b>582</b>	<b>64.7%</b>

**Table 8**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
1	Advertise	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
2	Analyze	0	0%	90	100
3	Characterize	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
4	Civilize	3	3.3%	57	96.7%
5	Complicate	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
6	Congratulate	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
7	Modify	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
8	Modulate	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
9	Reconcile	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
10	Satisfy	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>96.3%</b>

**Table 9**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
1	Backfire	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
2	Bullet-proof	18	20%	72	80%
3	Common room	33	36.7%	67	63.3%
4	Light-heartedly	63	70%	27	30%
5	Part time	27	30%	63	70%
6	Post office	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
7	Single-mindedly	39	43.3%	51	56.7%
8	Sitting room	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
9	Spearhead	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
10	Stage manage	51	56.7%	39	43.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>339</b>	<b>49.7%</b>	<b>561</b>	<b>50.3%</b>

**Table 10: Overall total of occurrences (OT) of groups 6-9 for test 2**

NO. OF WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
<b>40</b>	<b>969</b>	<b>26.9%</b>	<b>2631</b>	<b>73.1%</b>

The tables for test 2 present the responses obtained from the respondents in the oral test (reading the words in isolation). The tables show that two patterns of stress occurred in the speech of the subjects tested – the SBE stress pattern and the NE stress pattern. For example, stress is assigned to the first syllable of BACKFIRE, SPEARHEAD, and PETROL by six (6.7%), thirty (33.3%), and thirty (33.3%) respondents, while eighty-four (93.3%), sixty (66.7%), and sixty (66.7%) respondents assigned stress to the second syllable of each word, respectively.

In this section, only 969 tokens (26.9%) out of the total 3600 aggregate responses were assigned to the SBE pattern, while 2631 (73.1%) tokens were assigned to the NE pattern. This shows that less tokens are assigned to the SBE pattern than the NE pattern, which occurred more.

### Section 3

**Table 11: Responses for oral test *b* (reading of simple sentences)**

S/N	WORDS	FBSE	%	FNE	%
1	Calendar	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
2	Celibacy	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
3	Establish	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
4	Indicative	0	0%	90	100%
5	Radiator	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
6	Challenge	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
7	Madam	36	40%	54	60%
8	Petrol	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
9	Salad	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
10	Tribune	39	43.3	51	56.7%
11	Analyze	3	33.3%	87	96.7%
12	Characterize	0	0%	90	100%
13	Complicate	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
14	Modify	9	10%	81	90%
15	Reconcile	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
16	Backfire	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
17	Common room	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
18	Light-heartedly	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
19	Part time	45	50%	45	50%
20	Post office	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
21	Garrulous	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
22	Constitutive	0	0%	90	100%
23	Despicable	84	93.3%	6	6.7%
24	Capitalism	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
25	Astonish	60	66.7%	30	33.3%
26	Diploid	33	36.7%	57	63.3%
27	Ferrous	78	86.7%	12	13.3%
28	Perfume	9	10%	81	90%
29	Plantain	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
30	Colleague	9	10%	81	90%
31	Civilize	3	3.3%	57	96.7%
32	Congratulate	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
33	Advertise	6	6.7%	84	93.3%
34	Modulate	3	3.3%	87	96.7%
35	Satisfy	5	5,6%	85	84,4%
36	Bullet-proof	18	20%	72	80%
37	Single-mindedly	39	43.3%	51	56.7%
38	Sitting room	31	34.4%	59	65.6%
39	Spearhead	30	33.3%	60	66.7%
40	Stage manage	42	46.7%	48	53.3%
<b>Total</b>		<b>915</b>	<b>25.4%</b>	<b>2685</b>	<b>74.6%</b>

The above table displays the stress patterns of the words as they occurred in connected speech, as articulated by the respondents. Of the total 3600 responses, tokens of 915 (25.4%) were assigned to SBE stress pattern, while 2685 (74.6%) tokens went for NE stress pattern.

## Discussion of the Findings

It is important to state here that the researcher made some observations with the respondents during the collection of the data, but were not put into the tables in order to avoid clumsiness. However, we will refer to them in the course of this discussion. In addition, since we could not test all English words on the respondents due to limitation of the research work and other difficulties, we will borrow some examples from other studies done on NE to add to those mentioned in this work in order to support any claim we may make.

### *The NE pattern of Stress is used more often among Nigerian Users of English than the SBE Stress Pattern taught in Nigerian schools.*

This point shows the difference between theory and practice of English among Nigerian users of English. NE pattern occurs more often in the speech of Nigerian users of English than the SBE pattern taught to them. It is important to recall here that this study was carried out among those who studied English Language as area of specialization at the university level. However, in this research, we found that, in most cases, the SBE accent (stress) taught to the respondents does not occur in their speech; the accent ‘popular’ and predictable in their speech is the NE accent, as we saw in the data presented.

In section 3—that is, oral test 2 (where the words occur in connected speech)—only 915 tokens of 915 (25.4%) follow the SBE pattern, while 2685 (74.6%) tokens follow the NE pattern, showing that more than two-thirds of the tokens were assigned to the NE pattern by the respondents. However, where the respondents were asked to underline the stress syllable in writing, majority of them underlined the SBE stress syllable that is taught to them.

### *First syllables are rarely stressed in NE, especially in polysyllabic words*

As the data show, the frequency of occurrences of stress on the first syllable of polysyllabic non-compound words is very low compared to other syllables. It is almost so with the disyllabic words, where most of the respondents who assigned stress to the first syllable in isolation changed the pattern in connected speech.

Therefore, NE tends to be NULL-INITIAL, as Ejembi (2022) puts. That is, according to Ejembi (30), “in most cases, the initial syllable is not considered when assigning primary stress to words, most especially polysyllabic words. Therefore, except for the few exceptions, NE could be said to be in complementary distribution with classical Latin, which never stresses the final syllable of polysyllabic words”.

## Conclusion

It is important to reiterate here that, in Nigeria, the pattern of stress taught in all levels of school is the SBE pattern. Even though most of the respondents claimed to know, or rather have studied, stress in English – such that some of them memorized stress rules and factors of stress during the test – their articulation of the words produced different stress syllables from those marked in the *indicative test*. In theory, represented in section 1, SBE has more tokens of the responses than NE, but in practice, represented in sections 2 and 3, SBE has very low tokens of frequency of occurrence compared to NE. This gap is due to the fact that, in the teaching and learning of stress in Nigeria, concentration is given to theory than practice.

The theory of stress does not include how words are pronounced, even though it is in the pronunciation that stress is articulated and determined. So, Nigerians are taught the theory of stress based on the SBE model, whereas they acquire how to pronounce words based on the model prevalent in their society.

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