

From Feature Checking to the Classroom: A Hierarchy of Difficulty and Its Pedagogical Implications for Ebira Learners of English

Kingsley Akinade Ajayi

Department of English, University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria

Abstract- Teaching English grammar to Nigerian learners has long rested on the idea that a learner's first language leaves its mark on the second, yet few studies have tied that idea to a modern account of how grammatical features are checked and spelled out. This paper takes the contrastive findings of a Minimalist study of Standard English and Ebira Tao and asks what they mean for the classroom. The data were thirty Ebira constructions elicited from three bilingual speakers in Okene, each paired with an English equivalent and analysed in the TP, vP and CP domains. Every contrast in tense, aspect, number, case and negation was examined against four criteria drawn from the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis: whether Ebira has a matching category, how far the English form lies from the Ebira form, whether English bundles features that Ebira keeps apart, and how easily the English marker is overlooked. The result is a hierarchy of difficulty with eight levels, running from shared word order and time reference at the base to stacked auxiliaries at the top. The analysis suggests that Ebira learners rarely lack the syntactic categories that English needs. Their main task is to learn how English spells those categories out. The paper draws up a staged teaching sequence that builds on what Ebira already provides, and it sets out implications for teachers, materials writers and curriculum planners. Because the hierarchy is predicted from contrast and not observed in learner output, it is offered as a set of claims to be tested

Keywords— Contrastive analysis; hierarchy of difficulty; feature reassembly; Ebira Tao; English language teaching; Nigeria

I. Introduction

For most Nigerian children, English is the language in which they are taught, examined and, in many cases, judged. It is the official language of the country, and it takes over as the main medium of instruction in the later primary years and stays in that role through secondary and tertiary education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). Command of its grammar therefore has direct consequences for how far a learner can go in school. At the same time, English is not the first language of these children. More than 500 indigenous languages are spoken in Nigeria (Eberhard et al., 2023), and each of them organises tense, number, case and negation in its own way. A learner who comes to English from one of these languages meets a second grammar that may differ sharply from the first.

The idea that the first language shapes the learning of the second is one of the oldest in applied linguistics. Lado (1957) held that elements of the second language that resemble the first should be easy to learn and those that differ should be hard, so that



ISSN: 2584-2455

a careful comparison of the two languages could predict where learners would struggle. The strong form of this claim did not survive. Wardhaugh (1970) called it unrealistic, and Schachter (1974) showed that learners sometimes avoid difficult structures altogether, so that an absence of errors does not prove that a structure is easy. Yet the broader point, that earlier knowledge of a language influences later learning, has remained well supported (Odlin, 1989; Gass et al., 2020; Lightbown & Spada, 2021).

What has changed is the way difference is described. Instead of comparing surface forms, recent work asks which grammatical features a language uses, which heads carry them and how they are spelled out in words. Lardiere (2009) argued that the learner's real task is to select the features that the new language uses and to reassemble them into the bundles that its words and affixes expect. Seen in this way, a difference between two languages is not simply a matter of "same" against "different". A feature may be present in both languages but packaged differently, and the amount of repackaging needed is what makes a contrast easy or hard. The Minimalist notion of feature checking (Chomsky, 1995, 2000) gives a precise vocabulary for describing these packages, because it says which feature sits on which head and how it receives its value.

Ebira Tao, spoken mainly in and around Okene in Kogi State, offers a useful test case. Its verb does not change for tense, person or number. These meanings are carried by a subject clitic, preverbal particles and time adverbials (Adiva, 1989). English spells out the same features as verb endings, auxiliaries and pronoun forms. In an earlier paper drawn from the same master's dissertation, the present author described where the feature-checking systems of the two languages converge and diverge (Ajayi, 2026). That paper was descriptive and theoretical. It did not ask what the contrasts mean for a teacher who stands in front of a class of Ebira-speaking learners. That question is the third objective of the dissertation and the concern of the present paper. Existing work on Ebira and English has not yet taken up this question. Onmoke (2016) compared personal pronouns in the two languages, Saliu (2014) compared predicate–argument structure, and Isiaka (2017) studied the phonology of Ebira English. None of these studies ranked grammatical contrasts by their likely difficulty or tied such a ranking to classroom practice. This paper fills that gap.

Objectives of the Study

The paper has three objectives. They are to:

- arrange the morphosyntactic contrasts between English and Ebira Tao in an order of predicted difficulty for Ebira learners of English;
- explain that order using a feature-based account of second language learning; and
- draw out implications for classroom teaching, teaching materials and curriculum planning.
- Research Questions
- In what order of difficulty can the feature-checking contrasts between English and Ebira Tao be placed?
- Why do these contrasts fall in the order proposed?
- What do the findings imply for the teaching of English to Ebira-speaking learners?



ISSN: 2584-2455

Significance and Scope

The study links a theoretical account of grammar to practical teaching decisions, in a setting where learners from minority languages are seldom addressed directly. For linguists, it offers a worked example of how the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis can be applied to a West African language that has received little attention in formal syntax. For teachers, it offers an ordered picture of what is likely to come easily, what needs explicit attention and what kinds of error to expect. For materials writers and curriculum planners, it suggests where time and examples should be concentrated. The paper rests on contrastive description alone. It uses no learner corpus and no test data, so every error mentioned below is a prediction, and the hierarchy is a hypothesis for later testing.

II. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Contrastive Analysis and the Hierarchy of Difficulty

Contrastive analysis began as a practical project. Fries (1945) argued that the most effective teaching materials rest on a scientific description of the language to be learned, set beside an equally careful description of the learner's own language. Lado (1957) turned this into a working hypothesis. Stockwell, Bowen and Martin (1965) took the idea a step further in their comparison of English and Spanish. Instead of treating all differences as equal, they ranked them by the kind of learning each demanded, and the result became known as a hierarchy of difficulty.

Prator (1967) later gave the hierarchy a compact form with six levels. These run from simple transfer, where nothing new has to be learned, through coalescence, underdifferentiation, reinterpretation and overdifferentiation, to split, where one item in the first language must become two or more in the second. The attraction of a hierarchy is that it turns a long list of differences into a teaching order. A teacher cannot give equal time to everything, and a hierarchy points to where extra time is most likely to be needed (see James, 1980, for a discussion). The present paper borrows this logic but not the exact categories. Its levels are built from feature-based criteria that suit the Ebira and English data.

Criticism and the Weak Position

The strong claim, that difficulty can be fully predicted from difference, met serious objections. Wardhaugh (1970) separated a strong version, which predicts errors in advance, from a weak version, which uses comparison to explain errors once they appear, and he judged the strong version unrealistic. Schachter (1974) added that learners may avoid structures that are hard for them, so that a lack of errors can hide a lack of use. Many errors also have nothing to do with the first language and arise when learners overgeneralise rules of the target language itself (Lightbown & Spada, 2021). These objections are fair, and this paper accepts them. It takes the weak, explanatory position. The hierarchy below is meant to show where transfer is most likely to matter and to give reasons. It does not claim that every difference will produce an error or that every error comes from Ebira.



ISSN: 2584-2455

Feature-Based Accounts of Second Language Learning

Generative research on second language learning has asked a sharper question than older contrastive work: what exactly is transferred, and what can be learned? The Full Transfer/Full Access model holds that the learner's grammar begins as a copy of the first language and that Universal Grammar remains available for restructuring it in response to new input (Schwartz & Sprouse, 1996). Others have argued that features absent from the first language cannot be acquired later, so that persistent gaps in functional morphology reflect missing features (Hawkins & Chan, 1997). A third line of evidence points in a different direction.

Prévost and White (2000) found that learners who omit tense and agreement endings nevertheless behave as though the underlying categories are in place, and they described the problem as one of missing surface inflection and not of missing syntax. Ionin and Wexler (2002) reached a similar conclusion for child learners of English, who often left out inflection but rarely supplied the wrong one. Lardiere (1998) studied a Chinese-speaking adult learner of English whose use of nominative case was consistently accurate even though her past tense and agreement endings stayed highly variable. The case showed that different features within one grammar can follow different paths. Lardiere (2009) drew these strands together in the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis. On this view, the learner's task is not to switch a parameter on or off. It is to work out which features the target language uses, which words and affixes express them and how they are bundled. Difficulty is greatest where the first language packages the same features differently and the learner must take them apart and put them together again. Lardiere's own illustration was the feature [plural], which is obligatory on English nouns but optional and differently distributed in Mandarin Chinese and Korean. Westergaard (2021) adds a useful refinement. She argues that cross-linguistic influence works property by property and not language by language, which means that predictions should be made for individual features and structures, as this paper does.

Salience, Attention and the Order of Acquisition

Not all features are equally easy to notice. Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2001) reviewed the order in which English grammatical morphemes are acquired and found that it can be explained largely by a small set of factors: how perceptible the form is, how complex its meaning is, how regular it is in shape, what grammatical category it belongs to and how often it occurs.

The third-person singular -s, which is short, weak in stress and redundant with the subject, is among the forms that typically arrive late. N. Ellis (2006) offers a learning-based reason why forms like this are overlooked. When one cue in the input already predicts a meaning reliably, learners tend to pay less attention to other cues, a process known as blocking or overshadowing. For learners whose first language marks time with adverbials, as Ebira does, this has an obvious consequence. The adverbial may predict past time so well that the verb ending seems unnecessary.

Teachability and Instruction

On the instructional side, Pienemann (1984) argued that a structure can be taught effectively only when the learner is developmentally close to being ready for it, which



ISSN: 2584-2455

is one reason why teaching order matters. Meta-analyses of instruction are encouraging about method. Norris and Ortega (2000) found that explicit instruction produced larger gains than implicit instruction, and Spada and Tomita (2010) found that explicit instruction was more effective than implicit instruction for both simple and complex grammatical features.

Spada and Lightbown (2008) discuss how attention to form can be woven into communicative lessons or given separately, and they treat both as useful. Together these findings suggest that a contrast-based hierarchy works best when it is combined with explicit, well-sequenced attention to form (see also Ellis & Shintani, 2014).

Earlier Work on Ebira and English

Work on Ebira and English remains limited. Adiva (1989) is still the main descriptive source on the Ebira verb. Onmoke (2016) compared personal pronouns in English and Ebira from a parametric perspective and observed that English marks case overtly where Ebira does not. Saliu (2014) compared predicate–argument structure using data from native speakers.

Isiaka (2017) examined Ebira English from a phonological and sociolinguistic angle. Each of these studies adds to what is known about the two languages, but none ranks contrasts by likely difficulty or discusses teaching. The same is true of much of the wider Nigerian literature, which has tended to look at Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa and to concentrate on sounds, vocabulary or single categories (see Ajayi, 2026). The present paper therefore joins the descriptive work on Ebira to the feature-based literature on learning, in order to say something useful about the classroom.

Analytical Framework

The Minimalist Program supplies the descriptive side of the framework. Words enter a derivation with formal features such as tense, number, person and case. Unvalued features on a head such as T probe for a matching goal, receive values through Agree and are deleted before the derivation reaches the interfaces (Chomsky, 1995, 2000). What is pronounced at the surface is a separate matter, decided language by language. This separation is what makes the framework suitable for a pedagogical comparison.

It allows us to say that Ebira and English may check the same features while spelling them out in very different ways, and it lets us place the learner's task in the spell-out and bundling of features and not in the checking itself, a position in line with the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis (Lardiere, 2009).

Four criteria are used to examine each contrast. They are set out in Table 1. The first asks whether the learner must build a new category. The other three ask how much work is needed to spell out, bundle and notice the English form.



ISSN: 2584-2455

Table 1: Criteria used to examine each contrast

Criterion	Question asked	Why it matters
1. Counterpart	Does Ebira have a matching head or feature for what English requires?	If it does, the learner need not build a new syntactic category. If it does not, difficulty rises sharply.
2. Spell-out distance	How far is the English form from the Ebira form (free particle against bound affix, invariant verb against inflected verb)?	The greater the distance, the more new morphology has to be learned.
3. Bundling	Does English fuse features that Ebira keeps apart, or the reverse?	Fused bundles must be taken apart and reassembled (Lardiere, 2009).
4. Risk of being overlooked	How perceptible and how redundant is the English marker?	Short, redundant markers are easily ignored (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001; N. Ellis, 2006).

III. Methodology

This paper is a pedagogical re-analysis of the data and findings of the author's master's dissertation on feature checking in English and Ebira. The dissertation used a qualitative, descriptive and contrastive design. Thirty Ebira Tao constructions were elicited through structured elicitation and introspective judgement from three educated native speakers of Ebira Tao in Okene who are competent in English. Each construction was paired with an English equivalent drawn from BBC English, and all were glossed according to the Leipzig Glossing Rules. The constructions were analysed within the TP, vP and CP domains using the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995). Five features were examined: tense, aspect, number, case and negation. The descriptive findings are reported in Ajayi (2026), and they are summarised here only as far as the pedagogical argument requires. The hierarchy was built in five steps. First, every contrast found in the dissertation was listed. Second, for each contrast the learning task was identified, that is, what an Ebira speaker must add, remap or rebundle in order to produce the English form. Third, each contrast was examined against the four criteria in Table 1.

Fourth, the contrasts were arranged in levels, following the order of difficulty set out in the dissertation and checking that order against the criteria. Fifth, a predicted learner output was worked out for each level by applying the Ebira strategy directly to the English target. This is the weak, explanatory use of contrast described by Wardhaugh (1970). Two limits should be stated plainly. The predicted outputs are constructed, and no learner produced them. They illustrate what a direct carry-over of the Ebira pattern would look like, and they are not evidence that such errors occur. Secondly, the data come from three informants and thirty constructions, so the description of Ebira reflects the patterns found in that sample.



ISSN: 2584-2455

IV. Analysis And Discussion

Level 0: What Ebira Learners Already Have

Before turning to difficulty, it is worth being clear about what learners do not have to learn. The dissertation found that English and Ebira Tao share a basic subject–verb–object order, so a learner who puts the subject first, the verb next and the object last is already following English. Both languages also divide time into past, present and future and can fix an event in time through adverbials, which means that the concept of tense is not new.

Both check agreement-related features in the domain of T. In Ebira the subject clitics *ó* and *á*, which accompany singular and plural subjects, show that the learner's grammar already contains an operation in which T is matched with the subject. Accusative case is licensed inside the verb phrase in both languages, and in both, negation is realised by a functional element. Taken together, these shared properties mean that the syntactic skeleton of the English clause is largely in place before English instruction begins. In Prator's (1967) terms they are cases of simple transfer. This matters for teaching, because it tells the teacher that the problem is rarely the architecture of the sentence. The problem lies in what is attached to that architecture.

The Hierarchy of Difficulty

The differences begin where the shared skeleton ends. To make the learning task concrete, Table 2 shows four Ebira constructions from the dataset beside their English targets and the output that would result if the Ebira pattern were carried straight over.

Note. 3PL = third-person plural subject clitic; PROG = progressive particle; PERF = perfective particle; NEG = negative particle. The predicted outputs are constructed by applying the Ebira pattern to the English target. They are not learner data.

In each of the four Ebira sentences the verb stands in its bare form, and the grammatical information sits around it, in the clitic, the particles and the adverbial. A learner who applies this arrangement to English will leave the verb bare, drop the auxiliary and place the negative element before the verb. In every case the meaning stays clear. What goes missing is the morphology and the auxiliary that English requires.

This is why the errors in Table 2 are best described as failures of spell-out and not failures of understanding. Figure 1 sets out the hierarchy as a ladder, and Table 3 gives, for each level, the Ebira strategy, the English requirement, the error that a direct carry-over would produce and the main source of difficulty.

Contrast and are not drawn from a learner corpus.

The four criteria help to explain this order. Table 4 rates each level against them. The ratings are qualitative judgements and not measurements, but they show a general trend. As we climb the hierarchy, the English form lies further from anything in Ebira, more features are bundled together, and at the top the category itself has no



ISSN: 2584-2455

counterpart. The trend is not perfectly smooth. The order of the middle levels in particular is the least secure, a point taken up at the end of this section

Table 2: Four Ebira constructions and the English output that direct carry-over would predict

Feature	Ebira (glossed)	English target	Predicted carry-over
Past tense	<i>Òsùwòyì á té bùdójèt ènyí òhìè</i> government 3PL approve budget new yesterday	The government approved the new budget yesterday.	*The government approve the new budget yesterday.
Progressive	<i>Òzòzà àyèbà á nà kùzà òkpátá ògìò ìtìni</i> protesters 3PL PROG gather outside city.hall	The protesters are gathering outside the city hall.	*The protesters gathering outside the city hall.
Perfect	<i>Òkènyí á kà zànyì budojet ènyí</i> committee 3PL PERF review budget latest	The committee has reviewed the latest budget proposals.	*The committee have review the latest budget proposals.
Negation	<i>Òsùwòyì á kà mà òkùrò òhì nà òmàhà</i> government 3PL NEG plan taxes year this year	The government does not plan to raise taxes this year.	*The government not plan to raise taxes this year.

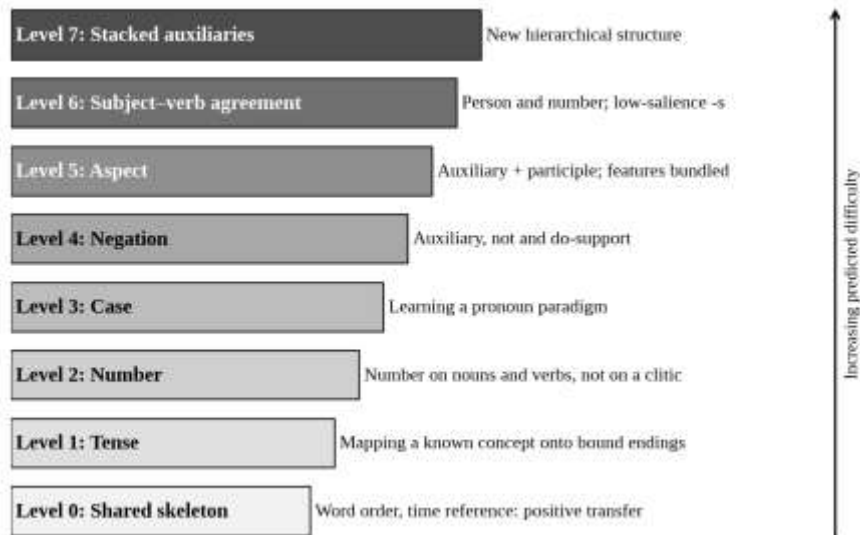


Figure 1: Predicted hierarchy of difficulty for Ebira learners of English



ISSN: 2584-2455

Table 3: The hierarchy of difficulty, with predicted errors

Level	Feature	Ebira strategy and English requirement	Predicted error	Main source of difficulty
0	Word order and time reference	Both languages use subject–verb–object order and can fix time through adverbials.	None expected	Positive transfer
1	Tense	Verb is invariant; time comes from adverbials and context. English needs a bound ending or an irregular form on the verb.	*He go to school yesterday.	A known concept must be mapped onto bound morphology; the adverbial makes the ending seem unnecessary.
2	Number	Nouns are invariant; number sits on the clitic ó or á. English marks number on nouns and again on the verb.	*The children goes to school early.	Number is marked in two places; -s marks plural on nouns but singular on verbs.
3	Case	One pronoun form serves as subject and object. English has separate nominative and accusative forms.	*Me will deliver the report. *The manager sent he the report.	A paradigm of forms must be learned for a distinction that Ebira shows only by position.
4	Negation	Particle kà stands before the verb. English places not after an auxiliary and inserts do where none exists.	*He not go to school. *They not finished the report.	A dummy auxiliary is needed to carry tense and agreement.
5	Aspect	Particles nà and kà precede an invariant verb. English uses be or have with a participle.	*He walking to school now. *They has finished their homework.	The auxiliary bundles tense, agreement and aspect, which Ebira keeps apart.
6	Subject–verb agreement	Clitic marks number only; verb is invariant. English marks person and number on verbs and auxiliaries.	*She go to the market every day. *The team is play football.	Person is a new feature; -s is weak and redundant; auxiliaries have irregular forms.
7	Stacked auxiliaries	Ebira has one fixed sequence of preverbal particles. English chains modal, perfect, progressive and passive in strict order.	*He been questioned by the committee. *They may been being punished.	A new hierarchical structure must be built, with each auxiliary fixing the form of the next.

Note. The order follows the sequence proposed in the dissertation. The errors shown are predictions from contrast and are not drawn from a learner corpus.



Table 4: Ratings of each level against the four criteria

Level and feature	Counterpart in Ebira	Spell-out distance	Bundling	Risk of being overlooked
1. Tense	Yes (T)	Moderate	Low	High
2. Number	Yes (clitic)	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
3. Case	Yes (positional)	High	Low	Low
4. Negation	Yes (kà)	High	Moderate	Low
5. Aspect	Yes (particles)	High	High	Moderate
6. Agreement	Partial (number only)	High	High	High
7. Stacked auxiliaries	No	High	High	Moderate

Note. Ratings are the analyst's qualitative judgements, based on the contrastive findings of the dissertation.

Level 1: Tense

Tense comes first because the learner already has both the concept and the head. Ebira T is present, as the subject clitic shows, and the language already expresses time through adverbials such as òhìè in the first row of Table 2. What is new is a bound morpheme on the verb. The learning task is therefore one of mapping, in which a familiar meaning must be attached to an unfamiliar form. The predicted error is omission of the ending, as in *He go to school yesterday. This is what a missing-surface-inflection account would lead us to expect (Prévost & White, 2000), because the error would reflect difficulty in supplying the ending and not the absence of tense from the learner's grammar. It is also what N. Ellis (2006) would predict. The adverbial yesterday already tells the learner that the event is past, so the verb ending adds no new information and is easy to ignore. Irregular verbs add a second layer of difficulty, since they call for memorised forms and not a general rule.

Level 2: Number

In Ebira, nouns do not change for number, and the number of the subject is shown by the clitic ó or á. English requires plural marking on nouns, usually -s, and agreement on the verb. The learner must therefore discover that number is marked in two places and not one, and that obligatory marking on nouns has no parallel in the first language. This resembles Lardiere's (2009) discussion of [plural], where the question is not whether the feature exists but where and how obligatorily it is spelled out. The predicted errors in Table 3, such as *The children goes to school early, may have a further source. The English suffix -s marks plurals on nouns but marks singular on verbs, whereas the Ebira marker that goes with a plural subject is á. A learner who has noticed that -s has something to do with plurals may attach it to the verb whenever the subject is plural. This is a conjecture suggested by the pairing of ó and á with English -s. It can be tested by comparing errors on singular and plural subjects in learner data.



ISSN: 2584-2455

Level 3: Case

Ebira pronouns do not change form between subject and object position, and in the dataset the same form òvè serves as both “it” and “him”. Grammatical function is read from position. English also relies on position for full noun phrases, but it keeps a set of distinct pronoun forms such as I and me, he and him, they and them. The learner needs no new principle of case licensing, since both languages license the object inside the verb phrase and tie the subject to T. What must be learned is a paradigm. Predicted errors such as *Me will deliver the report show a learner who relies on position alone. Because pronouns form a small, frequent and prominent class, this level may turn out to be easier in practice than its place in the hierarchy suggests. The learner studied by Lardiere (1998), who used nominative case accurately while her tense and agreement endings stayed variable, points the same way. The position of case above tense and number should therefore be read as the most open to revision.

Level 4: Negation

Ebira negates a clause with a single particle, kà, placed before the verb, and nothing else in the clause changes. English places not after an auxiliary and, where there is none, inserts do to carry tense and agreement. The learner already has a negative head, so the category is not new. What is new is the dependence on the auxiliary system. Predicted outputs such as *He not go to school show the Ebira pattern applied directly, with the negative marker before the verb and no auxiliary. Because do has no meaning of its own in these clauses, learners can find it hard to see why it is there, which is a good reason to explain it explicitly and not leave it to be absorbed from input.

Level 5: Aspect

Ebira expresses aspect through the particles nà (progressive) and kà (perfective), which follow the subject clitic and precede an unchanged verb. English uses be with -ing for the progressive and have with the past participle for the perfect, and the auxiliary also carries tense and agreement. In feature terms, English bundles three things on one element where Ebira spells them out separately. The learner must take apart the Ebira arrangement and rebuild it in the English way, which is the kind of reassembly that Lardiere (2009) identifies as demanding. Errors can follow two routes. The auxiliary may be dropped, as in *He walking to school now, or it may be supplied with the wrong agreement form, as in *They has finished their homework. The second route is revealing, because it shows a learner who has understood that an auxiliary is needed but has not yet mastered the agreement that comes with it.

Level 6: Subject–Verb Agreement

Agreement ranks above aspect because it combines several difficulties. Ebira clitics express number only and the verb is invariant, so the learner meets person agreement for the first time, together with different forms for different verbs and auxiliaries (am, is, are; has, have; do, does). The one ending available to lexical verbs, the third-person singular -s, is short, unstressed and redundant with the subject, which is the profile of a form that is learned late (Goldschneider & DeKeyser, 2001). Collective nouns add a further difficulty. In the dataset, the noun for “government” takes the plural clitic á, which reflects a meaning-based reading, while English allows collective nouns to take singular or plural agreement depending on meaning. A



ISSN: 2584-2455

learner may therefore carry over the meaning-based habit without knowing the English conventions. Predicted errors include extending the invariant verb, as in *She go to the market every day.

Level 7: Stacked Auxiliaries

At the top of the hierarchy is a structure with no Ebira counterpart. English can combine modal, perfect, progressive and passive in a fixed order, as in He may have been questioned by the committee, and each auxiliary fixes the form of the next. The Ebira data show a single sequence of preverbal particles and no equivalent of this chain. The learner must build a new hierarchical structure and must also master each part of it separately, so the category problem and the spell-out and bundling problems arise together. Predicted outputs such as *He been questioned by the committee show chains cut short, with auxiliaries dropped. Schachter's (1974) point applies here with particular force. Many learners will simply avoid such structures, so their absence from learner writing should not be mistaken for mastery.

Reading the Hierarchy with Care

Three cautions apply. First, the hierarchy is ordinal. It says that one level is likely to be harder than the one below, but not by how much, and the boundaries between neighbouring levels, especially levels 2 to 4, are not sharp. Second, the hierarchy is predicted from contrast. It rests on thirty constructions from three informants and not on learner data, and learner studies could well reorder the middle levels. Case is the clearest candidate, given the pattern reported by Lardiere (1998). Third, transfer is only one source of error. Learners also overgeneralise rules of English, and they are shaped by the English they hear around them. Some will know other languages as well, and influence from those languages is possible (Westergaard, 2021). The hierarchy therefore describes where Ebira is most likely to matter. It does not describe everything that goes wrong.

V. Pedagogical Implications

Guiding Principles

Six principles follow from the analysis.

Teach the mapping, not the concept. Learners do not need to be taught what time, number or negation mean. They need to be shown how English spells these meanings out. Lessons that spend their time explaining the idea of past time, when the learner already has it, miss the real difficulty, which is the verb ending. Build on the shared skeleton. Subject-verb-object order, the T domain and the verb-phrase licensing of objects are already in place. The Ebira clitics *ó* and *á* can be used as a bridge. They show that the learner's grammar already matches the verb's partner to the subject, so the teacher can say that English does the same thing but writes it on the verb.

Make redundant forms visible. Endings such as *-s* and *-ed* are easy to overlook, especially when an adverbial already supplies the meaning (N. Ellis, 2006). Teachers can respond with input enhancement, such as colour or underlining for endings, with dictation and with tasks in which time is set by a picture or an earlier sentence so that the verb ending becomes the only cue left to supply. Teach explicitly, then practise in



ISSN: 2584-2455

use. The evidence favours explicit instruction (Norris & Ortega, 2000; Spada & Tomita, 2010). Contrasts with Ebira can be stated openly and then practised in communicative tasks, in line with the integrated and isolated options discussed by Spada and Lightbown (2008). Respect the sequence. A structure is taught best when the learner is ready for it (Pienemann, 1984). Stacked auxiliaries should not be taught before single auxiliaries are secure, and negation with *do*-support should not be taught before the auxiliary system has been introduced. Use Ebira as a resource where possible. Where the teacher or the class shares Ebira, word-for-word translation of an Ebira sentence into English can make the gaps visible. Learners see for themselves that the Ebira verb stays bare while the English one does not.

A Staged Teaching Sequence

Table 5 turns the hierarchy into a teaching sequence. The activities for each level draw on the recommendations made in the dissertation and are extended with the principles above

Level	Teaching focus	Suggested classroom activities
1	Tense: linking time expressions to verb endings	Timelines and visual charts; sentences in which time is set by a picture or an earlier sentence so that learners must supply the ending; pairing temporal adverbs with matching verb forms; separate practice for regular and irregular past forms.
2	Number: marking on the noun and on the verb	Exercises that pair singular and plural nouns with matching verb forms; attention to irregular plurals; contrast tasks comparing plural -s on nouns with singular -s on verbs.
3	Case: the pronoun paradigm	Paradigm tables reinforced through sentence construction; drills that move the same pronoun between subject and object positions.
4	Negation: auxiliary placement and <i>do</i> -support	Systematic instruction on placing <i>not</i> after the auxiliary; explanation of why <i>do</i> appears when no auxiliary exists; transformation drills from affirmative to negative.
5	Aspect: auxiliary and participle as one bundle	Begin with single auxiliaries (<i>is walking, has eaten</i>); add tense, aspect and negation gradually; tables showing which auxiliary takes which form.
6	Agreement: person and number on verbs and auxiliaries	Explicit contrasts between singular and plural agreement in varied contexts; attention to collective nouns; dictation and editing tasks focused on -s.
7	Stacked auxiliaries: order and dependency	Stepwise build-up from one auxiliary to two and then three; sentence-building cards that fix the order; passive forms introduced late.



ISSN: 2584-2455

Implications for Teachers, Materials and Curriculum

Teachers. Teacher education should include some awareness of the grammar of the languages that learners bring to class. A teacher does not need to speak Ebira to use the hierarchy, because the predicted errors follow a recognisable pattern: endings left off, auxiliaries dropped and negative particles placed before the verb. When learners show these patterns, the teacher can read them as signs of where the learners stand in the sequence and not as carelessness.

- **Materials.** Materials that treat all grammar points as equally difficult miss the chance to allocate effort where it is needed. Textbooks for Ebira-speaking areas could present short contrast boxes that set an Ebira sentence beside its English equivalent, and could draw their examples from everyday settings such as councils, committees, markets and schools, as the dataset does.
- **Curriculum.** A spiral curriculum would revisit each level at increasing depth, with more time given to levels 4 to 7. The National Policy on Education provides for the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community in the early years of primary school (Federal Ministry of Education, 2013). Where this is done, early lessons can introduce simple ideas such as subject, verb and marker, which would later help in the study of English. This is a suggestion for planners and has not been tested here.
- **Assessment.** Diagnostic tests could be built around the levels. Because learners may avoid structures that are hard for them (Schachter, 1974), tests should elicit the target structures directly, for instance through completion and transformation tasks, and should not rely on free writing alone.

VI. Conclusion

This paper asked what the feature-checking contrasts between English and Ebira Tao mean for the teaching of English to Ebira-speaking learners. Using the contrastive findings of a Minimalist study and four criteria drawn from the Feature Reassembly Hypothesis, it proposed a hierarchy of difficulty with eight levels. At the base are shared word order, time reference and the T domain. Above them come tense, number, case, negation, aspect and agreement, and at the top are stacked auxiliaries, which have no Ebira counterpart.

The central point is that Ebira learners rarely lack the syntactic categories that English needs. They already have a head that hosts agreement, a way of marking aspect, a negative head and a time system. What they must learn is how English spells these categories out, and how it bundles features that Ebira keeps apart. This shifts the emphasis of teaching away from explaining concepts and towards mapping forms, making small endings visible and rebuilding bundled auxiliaries step by step. The staged sequence in Table 5 puts this into practice, and the implications for teachers, materials writers, curriculum planners and test designers follow from it.

The study has clear limits. The hierarchy is predicted and not observed. It rests on thirty constructions from three informants, the learner errors are constructed, and the



ISSN: 2584-2455

order of the middle levels, especially case, may change when learner data are examined. Future research could therefore elicit written and spoken English from Ebira-speaking secondary and university students and compare their errors with the predictions made here. It could compare these learners with speakers of other Nigerian languages in order to separate effects specific to Ebira from effects common to all learners. It could also test the staged sequence in a classroom intervention, and extend the comparison to other Ebira dialects and to structures such as relative clauses that lay outside the scope of the study.

References

1. Adiva, J. R. (1989). The verbal piece in Ebira. SIL International and University of Texas at Arlington.
2. Ajayi, K. A. (2026). Convergence and divergence in feature checking: A contrastive Minimalist analysis of selected morphosyntactic structures in English and Ebira. *International Journal for Research Trends in Social Science & Humanities*, 4(5), 1–16.
3. Chomsky, N. (1995). The minimalist program. MIT Press.
4. Chomsky, N. (2000). Minimalist inquiries: The framework. In R. Martin, D. Michaels, & J. Uriagereka (Eds.), *Step by step: Essays on minimalist syntax in honor of Howard Lasnik* (pp. 89–155). MIT Press.
5. Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2023). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (26th ed.). SIL International.
6. Ellis, N. C. (2006). Selective attention and transfer phenomena in L2 acquisition: Contingency, cue competition, salience, interference, overshadowing, blocking, and perceptual learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 27(2), 164–194.
7. Ellis, R., & Shintani, N. (2014). *Exploring language pedagogy through second language acquisition research*. Routledge.
8. Federal Ministry of Education. (2013). *National policy on education* (6th ed.). NERDC Press.
9. Fries, C. C. (1945). *Teaching and learning English as a foreign language*. University of Michigan Press.
10. Gass, S. M., Behney, J., & Plonsky, L. (2020). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (5th ed.). Routledge.
11. Goldschneider, J. M., & DeKeyser, R. M. (2001). Explaining the “natural order of L2 morpheme acquisition” in English: A meta-analysis of multiple determinants. *Language Learning*, 51(1), 1–50.
12. Hawkins, R., & Chan, C. Y.-H. (1997). The partial availability of Universal Grammar in second language acquisition: The “failed functional features hypothesis”. *Second Language Research*, 13(3), 187–226.
13. Ionin, T., & Wexler, K. (2002). Why is “is” easier than “-s”? Acquisition of tense/agreement morphology by child second language learners of English. *Second Language Research*, 18(2), 95–136.
14. Isiaka, A. L. (2017). *Ebira English in Nigerian supersystem: Inventory and variation* [Doctoral thesis, Chemnitz University of Technology].
15. James, C. (1980). *Contrastive analysis*. Longman.
16. Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. University of Michigan Press.



ISSN: 2584-2455

17. Lardiere, D. (1998). Case and tense in the “fossilized” steady state. *Second Language Research*, 14(1), 1–26.
18. Lardiere, D. (2009). Some thoughts on the contrastive analysis of features in second language acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 25(2), 173–227.
19. Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2021). *How languages are learned* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
20. Norris, J. M., & Ortega, L. (2000). Effectiveness of L2 instruction: A research synthesis and quantitative meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 50(3), 417–528.
21. Odlin, T. (1989). *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*. Cambridge University Press.
22. Onmoke, E. A. (2016). A parametric variation of personal pronouns in English and Ebira. In A. Odebunmi, A. Osisanwo, H. Bodunde, & S. Ekpe (Eds.), *Grammar, applied linguistics and society* (pp. 223–237). Obafemi Awolowo University Press.
23. Pienemann, M. (1984). Psychological constraints on the teachability of languages. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 6(2), 186–214.
24. Prator, C. H. (1967). *Hierarchy of difficulty* [Unpublished classroom lecture]. University of California, Los Angeles.
25. Prévost, P., & White, L. (2000). Missing surface inflection or impairment in second language acquisition? Evidence from tense and agreement. *Second Language Research*, 16(2), 103–133.
26. Saliu, A. E. (2014). *A contrastive analysis of predicate argument structure in English and Ebira* [Unpublished dissertation, University of Ibadan].
27. Schachter, J. (1974). An error in error analysis. *Language Learning*, 24(2), 205–214.
28. Schwartz, B. D., & Sprouse, R. A. (1996). L2 cognitive states and the Full Transfer/Full Access model. *Second Language Research*, 12(1), 40–72.
29. Spada, N., & Lightbown, P. M. (2008). Form-focused instruction: Isolated or integrated? *TESOL Quarterly*, 42(2), 181–207.
30. Spada, N., & Tomita, Y. (2010). Interactions between type of instruction and type of language feature: A meta-analysis. *Language Learning*, 60(2), 263–308.
31. Stockwell, R. P., Bowen, J. D., & Martin, J. W. (1965). *The grammatical structures of English and Spanish*. University of Chicago Press.
32. Wardhaugh, R. (1970). The contrastive analysis hypothesis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 4(2), 123–130.
33. Westergaard, M. (2021). Microvariation in multilingual situations: The importance of property-by-property acquisition. *Second Language Research*, 37(3), 379–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267658319884116>