

## MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE AND OVERGENERALIZATION AS CHALLENGES TO THE HAUSA L1 SPEAKERS LEARNING ENGLISH AS L2 FOR RESTRUCTURING NIGERIA THROUGH LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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### Abstract

*Language involves speech production in a conscious manner, and this is only possible when organs of speech, as they are called by linguists who are concerned with phonetics and phonology, are manipulated by the speech producer. These organs of speech are available in any complete and healthy individual, and what follows is involving the appropriate ones to the language the individual intends to speak. The language may be individual's mother tongue or any second language the individual comes across at his/her later life. The organs of speech of such individual are familiar with the sound systems of his/her mother tongue language. Thus, the speech production becomes very simple and easy, but when the organs of speech are not acquainted with the language, there is tendency for problems to occur which can lead to mispronunciation of some sounds in particular and some words in general. This paper explores the issue of mother tongue interference and overgeneralization as forms of negative transfer which lead Hausa L1 speaker learning English as L2 to be pronouncing some English sounds/words erroneously. The manner and place of articulation of difficult English consonants (/f/,/v/, /□/ and /ð/) for Hausa L1 speaker are discussed as they are predicted to be problem to the Hausa L1 learning English as L2. The paper also sheds light on the distinction between alphabets and phonemes, and then, finally suggestions are provided on how to improve the situation.*

### Introduction

Languages, through which human beings communicate and identify their common needs, aspirations, problems and also work together towards achieving such needs and aspirations and solving the problems vary phonologically, morphologically, syntactically and lexically. People differ in their languages and, for one reason or the other, you may find other people speaking others' language and their effort to speak such language as second, they encounter difficulties such as in the phonology, morphology or syntax of the language. People migrate from one place to another for reasons such as trading, exploration, colonization, search for knowledge or grazing land, evangelism or any other factor militating for the migration and this leads other people learning other

people's language so as to live in harmony. The most area of language which indicates differences in speech between the native speakers of a language and second language speakers is phonology. In speaking a second language, a speaker comes across certain challenges phonologically such as in the areas of stress or intonation pattern and articulation of the phonemes. In articulation of the phonemes, the second language speaker of a language is not familiar with the phonemes of the second language. Thus, the first language is bound to interfere with the second. In Nigeria, English is a second language and it is also recognized as official language as well as language of instructions in Nigerian schools. Hausa people are among the second language speakers of English in Nigeria. Therefore, there are some phonemes that are available in English

but absent in Hausa. Thus, this leads to phonological mother tongue interference. Based on this ground, this paper intends to expose how transfer and overgeneralization lead to the Hausa L1 (First language) speaker learning English as L2 (second language) mispronounces certain English phonemes erroneously, and this also has negative effect on the pronunciation of the English words which contain such phonemes.

### **Mother Tongue Interference and Overgeneralization in Learning Second Language**

Nigerians speak English as their second language. As such, most of the time, their mother tongues interfere with English especially in regards to phonology. Olaniyi, (2016:74) defines second language as “A language other than a person’s mother tongue, which is learned in order to meet a communicative need”. There are many phonemes that are present in English but absent in most Nigerian languages. Therefore, their production becomes difficult to Nigerians. Learning a second language is actually very difficult because the learner has already developed the phonological, morphological, grammatical and syntactic patterns of his/her first or mother tongue and this leads to the tendency that, the first or mother tongue interferes with the second language in the course of learning it. Behaviorist linguists such as Brown, (2007) refers to this situation as “transfer”. Transfer in learning language can be positive or negative. The positive transfer does not cause problem in learning that is why it is welcomed because knowledge of the first language which is similar to the second can help learning it easily. For instance, a Hausa L1 speaker learning English as L2 may not find it difficult in learning the pronunciation of words such as book/b<sup>U</sup>k/, how/hau / and kick /kik / because

both English and Hausa have similar consonants and vowels which appear in the words. On the other hand, negative transfer in learning refers to the kind of transfer in learning which the learner uses prior knowledge of the first or mother tongue in learning the second while what is transferred is absent or has different distribution in the second language, thereby causing error in using the language. Negative transfer is classified into two- Overgeneralization and interference. Overgeneralization can be L1-L1 or L2-L2 while transfer can be L1-L2 or L2-L1 (Brown, 2007:103). The Hausa L1 speaker who pronounces the consonant /p/ as /f/, the problem can be connected to what Brown, (2007) calls overgeneralization. The consonant is bilabial and it has been described by Yule, (2007) as “Bilabial stop” and the Hausa consonant/ɸ/ is also a bilabial sound. Therefore, the two consonants behave the same since they have the same manner and place of articulation. Thus, mispronunciation of the consonant /p/ is not mother tongue interference rather overgeneralization because the error is as a result of the consonant sound/f/ which is overgeneralized and this is what Brown, (2007) terms L2-L2 transfer. He further defines overgeneralization as “the incorrect application-negative transfer-of previously learned second language material to a present context” (p. 104).

Watson, (1991:28) points out that “... both the differences and similarities between the two systems may lead to interference which hampers the acquisition process. That cross-linguistic differences should cause interference is obvious”. This draws the attention to the fact that, similarities and differences exist between two or more languages and these similarities and differences may be in pronunciation of the phonemes-vowels or consonants. There is no doubt that, similarities and differences exist in the phonological features of English

and Hausa. Sani, (1999) finds out the consonants that are present in English but absent in Hausa. Therefore, the Hausa L1 speakers find them difficult in pronouncing. These consonants include “/f/, /v/, /□/ and /ð/”. He further gives examples of words in which these consonants appear such as in “feel, van, think and father” respectively. Mother tongue interference phenomenon in learning second language is inevitable because language is a vocal system of sounds, and it is as a result of human beings manipulating some of their biological organs which are primarily meant for beautifying the structure of human body and, as well help in keeping the body healthy for the services they render. Organs of the body such as the larynx, mouth, nose and tongue play important role in the production of speech sounds. Yule, (2007) states that” the air is passed through the larynx, mouth and nose and sounds are produced using the tongue and other parts of the mouth. He further elaborates the situation as follows:

*Once the air has passed through the larynx, it comes up and out through the mouth and/ or the nose. Most consonant sounds are produced by using the tongue and other parts of the mouth to constrict, in some way, the shape of the oral cavity through which the air is passing (p. 41-42).*

The larynx, nose, and the other parts of the mouth used in speech production by Hausa L1 speaker are acquainted with the sound systems of Hausa language. Thus, any deviation from this may cause problem, therefore, the consonants that require the use of any place or manner of articulation which the Hausa L1 speaker is not familiar with, mother tongue interference may likely occur. The situation in which the first language affects learning the second language is termed as mother tongue interference from the Behaviorists point of

view. For instance, Nunan, (2007) states that, Skinner one of the Behaviourists argued that “Language was acquired in the same way as all other forms of human behavior; that is through a process of imitation and habit formation” (p. 146). In this regards, one can assertively believe that, the L1 speaker of a language has formed the habit of using his or her organs of speech in the production of the speech sounds of the language. Therefore, any effort to make in learning another language faces serious problems. Charlie, (2013) holds that three processes lead to the creation of interlanguages:

\*Language transfer: Learners fall back on their mother tongues to help create their language system. This is now recognized not as mistake, but as a process that all learners go through.

\*Overgeneralization: Learners use rules from the second language in a way that native speakers would not. For example, a learner may say: “I goed home”, overgeneralizing the English rule of adding –ed to create past tense verb forms.

\*Simplification: Learners use a highly simplified form of language, similar to speech by children or in pidgin. This may be related to linguistic universals. (P.4-5)

### **The English Consonant Sounds /f/, /v/, /□/ and /ð/ and the Hausa L1 Speakers**

As stated in the introduction to this paper that a Hausa native speaker who is learning English as second language comes across certain challenges in pronouncing some English consonants. Studies have shown that the consonants /f/, /v/, /□/and /ð/ are absent in Hausa language. Herefore, the organs involved in their production are available biologically but they are not used to being manipulated by Hausa speaker because none of the sounds in his/her language demands that. The organs of speech used in the production of /f/ is the

edge of the upper teeth and the lower lip. Crutteden, (2008:193) describes this sound as a consonant in which “The soft palate being raised and the nasal resonance shut off, the inner surface of the lower lip makes a light contact with edge of the upper teeth”. Okorodudu (2015) describes it as “Voiceless labiodental fricative”. He further states that “the fricative /f/ and /v/ are produced with the upper teeth, thus, forming a narrow passage through which the air escapes” (p.47). In another development, the consonants /f/, /v/, /ɸ/ and /ð/ are fricatives and these sounds involve almost blocking the airstream, and having the air pushed through the narrow opening and the air is produced with friction.

Careful study of the way in which any of the consonants /f/, /v/, /ɸ/ and /ð/ is described above and relating the process with the production of consonant sounds in Hausa, one definitely arrives at the conclusion that, such consonant sounds do not exist in Hausa language because no Hausa word requires the use of the edge of the upper teeth and the tip of the lower lip in its production or articulation but Hausa has fricatives such as /s/, /z/ and /ʃ/ but they are pronounced differently considering the manner and place of articulation. The consonants /f/ and /v/ are labiodental fricatives while /ɸ/ and /ð/ are dental fricatives. Therefore, by contrast these consonants can easily be distinguished from Hausa consonants because none of the consonants in Hausa is labiodental or dental.

### **Is the Symbol ‘f’ a Letter in the Orthography of Hausa or Sound Symbol?**

Nunan, (2007:34) states that “It is important to realize that letter and sound are two different concepts and that, as a consequence, written and spoken language can be quite different”. Thus, to this effect, there is the need for language learners to differentiate between orthography and transcription, as well as, letters of alphabet

and sound symbols so as to reduce confusion when it comes to the issue of speech production. The Hausa L1 speakers of English are often found pronouncing English words such as ‘people’, ‘pan’, ‘port’ and a host of English words which contain the /p/ sounds erroneously. This is because they are assumed to be substituting the /p/ sound with the /f/ sound which, in English, is a labiodental fricative consonant which is absent in Hausa but the consonant /p/ is similar to the /ɸ/ consonant which is bilabial plosive like the English one. The substitution of /p/ with /f/ by Hausa L1 speaker is not mother tongue interference but it is a sign of overgeneralization. Brown (2007:103) states that “Generalization is a crucially important and pervading strategy in human learning”. The Hausa language is not lacking bilabial plosive sound such as /p/ but the symbol ‘f’ is used in ordinary writing that is orthography and if the words are pronounced, the positions occupied by ‘f’ do not need the use of the upper teeth and tip of the lower lip. Yusuf, (1981) describes /p/ as voiceless bilabial plosive and he further gives an example of a Hausa word in which the consonant appears. The word exemplified is ‘parii’ which means ‘white’ which in normal or ordinary Hausa orthography is written as ‘fari’. The ‘f’ is not a sound symbol in Hausa but letter of alphabet which is used in ordinary writing but the bilabial plosive sound of Hausa is symbolized as /ɸ/(Sani,1999:1). The /p/ for English and /ɸ/ for Hausa are consonant sounds which are described as the lips are closed firmly and the soft palate is raised so that the breath cannot get out of either the nose or mouth but trapped for a short time, when the lips are opened, suddenly the breath rushes out with slight explosion or popping (Mbah, 2000:39). In learning English as a second language especially by Hausa L1 speakers, distinction should be made between sound symbols and letters of

alphabet. The mastery in the production of sound segment helps in effective pronunciation of English words.

### **English Language and National Development**

There is no doubt that, language plays a very vital role in human development. Nigeria's national goals aim at developing the nation in all sectors of human life. These goals can only be achieved through the provision of effective and appropriate education for the Nigerian citizens. These national goals are:

- a. a free and democratic society;
- b. a just and egalitarian society;
- c. a united, strong and self-reliant nation;
- d. a great and dynamic economy;
- e. a land full of bright opportunities for all citizens. (FRN, 2004).

The philosophy of Nigerian education is based upon the achievement of these goals and that is why the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2004) categorically states that "Education has to be geared towards self-realization, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, cultural, economic, political, scientific and technological progress". This means the national goals, national education goals as well as the philosophy of Nigerian education cannot be realized if the language of instruction in the Nigerian schools is not given priority in its teaching/learning. This is why the National Policy on Education posits that, every child should learn language of the immediate environment, should also learn one of the Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba and French should be second official language of Nigeria and should be compulsory in schools whereas English is recognized as

medium of instructions from primary four to tertiary level.

National development entails anything having to do with the infrastructural, economic, educational, cultural, social and political advancement or growth of a nation (Owolabi, 2006:4). This shows that the word 'development' in very wide, it encompasses all phases of human life. He further remarks that:

*One of the important factors that militate against the dissemination of knowledge and skills and therefore of a rapid social and economic well being of the majority of people in developing countries is the imposed medium of communication...English as in the case of Nigeria for instance, is language of commerce, trade, administration, politics, education and international communication (p. 13).*

Though Owolabi (2006) pays emphasis on the development of native languages as to the national development because according to him, if native languages are used, the people find it easy to communicate among themselves. Thus, this leads to easy accumulation of knowledge and skills. Since up to this time, none of the Nigerian native languages is chosen as national language due to the multilingual nature of the country. It is imperative for government to find means of improving the standard of English language which is dwindling everyday due to certain factors, such as, lack of enough and qualified teachers, lack of enough and effective textbooks, overpopulated classes and poor teaching methods. When these are taken care of, the problems of transfer and overgeneralization in learning English as a second language can be tackled and learners in Nigerian schools become fluent in the language of instruction. Thus, knowledge and skills can be accumulated and be used for national development.

### Suggestions

Since no two languages are the same in their linguistic components, therefore, learning similarities and differences among languages should be given utmost attention so that, such differences could be identified and taken care of. Teachers who are the custodians of knowledge should involve into finding means through which such difficulties can be dealt with. The Hausa L1 speakers learning English should not be making errors in pronunciation of English words due to interference or over-generalization. Kazemian and Mustafai (2015) posit that “The extending use of certain form refers to the overgeneralization and becomes the cause of errors in language learning”. Government should device means of decongesting the classrooms to allow teachers attain to individual learner as well as groups during lessons. English language teachers in Nigerian schools should pay much attention in teaching pronunciation.

### Conclusion

Learning language, especially when the learner has developed linguistic patterns of his/her first or mother tongue language, is not easy. Thus, it requires the learners and the teachers to be attentive in areas of the first language which they think my cause problem. Oral English is part of the curriculum in Nigerian schools at all levels but maybe due the fact that, teaching such parts becomes difficult to most teachers, this part is most of the times, being neglected. Thus, learners lag behind in the area causing problem in pronunciation. Mohammed, (2014:74) posits that, “...one will find that primary schools’ pupils’ actual performance in oral, selection of lexical items and written discourse in English language negates and makes nonsense of such claimed of prestigious foundation”. The teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria should start at the early stage so that, the organs of speech of the learners become acquainted with them at that stage and at this, there is no doubt that this

will aid correct pronunciation of the English words.

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