MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRONUNCIATION AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN OBUDU LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF CROSS RIVER STATE

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Abstract

English language is the official language in Nigeria. It is the language of education and communication. Apart from the different dialects that we have, there are some differences in the variation of some set of sounds that exist among the different languages. No two languages have exactly the same sound system. Interference of mother tongue cuts across all levels of linguistics: phonology, semantics, syntax and morphology. It is based on this premise that this study seeks to investigate the influence of mother tongue of Obudu people which is Bete language on the English language pronunciation among secondary school students in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State. To achieve the objective of this study, four (4) research questions were formulated. Literatures related to the variables were reviewed. A survey research design was adopted using stratified sampling technique to draw the sample from the population. A total of 100 students were randomly selected for the study. A Yes or No questionnaire was developed and used. To analyse the research questions, the simple percentage was used. The total analysis of results showed that pronunciation, the syntactic structure, the intonation and syllable timed rhythm obtained in Bete language interfere with the effective spoken English language.

Introduction

Spoken English is important in making man to really appreciate his existence. Apart from the different dialects that we have, there are some differences in the variation of some sets of sounds that exist among the different languages. No two languages have exactly the same sounds. Interference of mother tongue cuts across all levels of linguistics: phonology, semantics, syntax and morphology. Broadly speaking, interference of mother tongue in spoken English often takes place whenever students of L1 transfer their mother tongue habits into the learning of a new language L2.

At the phonological level, once a learner who wants to perform well in second language (English) is confronted with new sounds which are strange to his native language, the best he will do would be to fall back on the linguistic patterns of his language and then leave those sounds that share features with English sounds as substitutes. For instance, a Yoruba learner of English sounds will need to be properly drilled before being able to drop the substitute of /f/ for /v/ in word such as volvo, five, vibrant: /s/ for /z/ in zebra, zero etc.

Efik – junction for junction, bleed as bread.

Igbo- heavy vowels influence example /v/ for /F/
Hausa- Sukurudireba for screw driver.

Interference is also noticed when English second language learners are confronted with English words of different syllabic structures from their own languages. For instance, most African Languages particularly Nigerian languages disallow the clustering of consonants i.e. two consonants following each other. As the second language learner trying to perform well in English, every English word with clustering consonants will then be restructured in such a way that such clustering becomes neutralized. A Hausa learner of English will restructure the pronunciation of words such as ‘screw driver’ to be ‘Sukurudireba’. Interference can also be at syntactic level.

This knowledge of the syntactic structure of their mother tongue is also transferred to English as in the following: “two two naira” that is, reduplication of one item, “three three kobo”. Furthermore, verb serialization is in an attempt to acquire the new Language (L2), transfer the mother tongue sounds into English to which does not fit into the English Language. Thus, learners of new languages or second language (L2) should not be satisfied to use the sound of the
first language in dealing with the second language. It is this fact that has further spurred this researcher into carrying out this study. The researcher’s interest in the study is also in the aspect that some speakers of English appear to have some difficulties in differentiating between reading and leading etc in their pronunciations. The researcher wants to find out if this is caused by the mother tongue interference. Human knowledge is susceptible to faulty perception of ideas. Certain English Language expressions have been perceived wrongly by the mother tongue speakers. For instance, it is common to hear one saying: “A good driver is one who knows the basic technique in driving”. Therefore, since English Language is the only acceptable means of instruction and formal education among the Obudu students, it is expedient for the students to speak this language accurately. However there exist some challenges among the students in pronunciation of certain words. It is on this background that this research is based: to examine the influence of Bete language on English language pronunciation among secondary students in Obudu Local Government Area of Cross River State.

Also the results of the West African Examination Certificate (WAEC) show that in most languages we can infer that some errors have taken root in the candidates’ expression and were not uprooted before candidates embarked on writing their exams and getting into the higher institution. According to this report, the errors among students of second language affect them especially as it concerns oral English. The consequences of this influence are the poor results students manifest in their final examinations. It is a common phenomenon to see our young students finding it difficult to pronounce some English words due to mother tongue influence. Cross River State Government in a bid to salvage these problems organizes workshops and seminars for English teachers to enhance their proficiency. The government also undertook a comprehensive renovation across the entire secondary schools in the state and even went ahead to provide communication equipment in some schools to enhance the teaching and learning of English Language. However, all government efforts have not yielded any significant result. The question is; could this influence be due to the mandatory use of language of immediate environment at the basic education?

Mother tongue interference

Mother tongue is a native language which a child acquires from his immediate environment. Taiwo (1982) defines mother-tongue as the language which the child first learns in the process of communication. It is the language of the house in which customs are transmitted. It should be noted that the child is often encountering some difficulties when learning English as a second language because he is acquainted with the language of his immediate environment. The language becomes an illusion because of an introduction of foreign language. The result of this is bilingualism.

For great majority of bilingual speakers (L2 foreign language) never replace the L1 (mother tongue) as a way of living. On the other hand, the issue of the inability of L1 to replace L2, Awoniyi (1982) observes that, it must be understood that L1 cannot be easily removed. The effect could be either positive or negative on any language learning. This is so, for one language has been mastered and it becomes part of the learner or person. There are always differences between one language and another.

Moreover, the absence of some vowels and consonants in the mother tongue which are present in the second language (L2) creates problems to learners. Awoniyi (1982:14) says that “many African languages have not more than seven vowels each”. Some have fewer, yet in English, there are twelve monothongs, five closed diphthongs. Students, therefore, have difficulties in learning to make the number of words contrast required in English language that are not present in their mother-tongue.

Tiffen (1969) who treated the problems of mother tongue interference in communication of English words said that the influence of mother tongue cannot allow the students to hear the new sounds of another language, let alone pronounce them. They will rather replace the sounds with a similar sound of their mother tongue pronouncing it in a similar but different way. For example, the consonants /Ø/ as in growth, brother, thing, another and / ð / as in brother and rather do not occur in mother tongue /Ø/ becomes/t/ and /ð/ becomes /d/.

Wilkins (1972:199) observes that “speech of a foreign language learner reflects error caused as a result of mother tongue is incorporated into this speech in the foreign language”. He went further to say that a look at the speech of a foreign language learner will reveal many mistakes traceable to the mother
tongue. The individuals are not aware that so much of what they did was done through complex system of habits. When they attempt to communicate in a foreign language that they partially know, they adopt the same linguistic posture as when they are using their native languages. They may concentrate consciously in addition to one or more matter; it is channeled through the habits of their native or first language. When this transfer occurs, they produce sounds, sentence patterns and structures of their native language in the foreign one except those few units and elements they are able to keep (under conscious control and these they have mastered to the point of habit or perfection). In reading or listening to the foreign language, the same transfer takes place only the sequence is reversed as the listeners are exposed to their native language forms first which they interpret through their native language units into the foreign language.

In most of the African languages where there is more or less equal stress on each syllable, each takes approximately the same amount of time to say. English is stressed time, African languages are tonal, that is individual words have a relatively fixed tone pattern which if altered changes the meaning of the word. Lado (2001) points out that language has differing stress and intonation systems and this will also affect the way English is pronounced. According to him, students transfer the intonation habits of their native language to the foreign language and these intonation habits include the pitch, phonemes, the center boarders, the meaning and the distribution from the native language to the foreign one. Consequently, he will have trouble pronouncing and perceiving those patterns, phonemes, boarders and centers that are structurally different in foreign and native languages.

Olagoke (1979) attempts to give a clear reason for the interference problem faced by children learning English as a second language. He says that, there is considerable linguistic confusion and difficulties on the part of the child as he thinks in his mother tongue, but expresses himself in a foreign language.

Adejanfu (1989) observes that some Nigerian languages e.g. Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Fulani just to mention a few, make qualitative distinction between long and short vowels, especially in open syllables with occasional additional grammatical implication. Thus, making a difference in their intonational pattern in English. The author further states that mother tongue teachers need to be properly trained to acquire suitable linguistic skills and of the target language and appropriate attitudinal orientation as well as professional skills. It is difficult for native speakers to replace the use of syllable structure and rhythm of his mother tongue with that of syllable and rhythm of the language he is learning.

There is proof that mother-tongue interferes basically and structurally with English language. There arises also the problem of correct choice of vocabulary derived from mother-tongue interference. As Okonkwo (1982:7) puts it: “language is composed of words”. The unfortunate danger about this assumption is that it does not give the child a clue as to the structural or proper linguistic differences between utterances in both languages. For example, if the English utterance requires to be translated into Bette, certain prepositions like away, from, off, on etc have no Bette one word equivalent.

Okonkwo (1985) published a study of Hausa speakers learning academic material in English. He concludes that knowledge of vocabulary was a single most important factor affecting reading comprehension. This goes a long way to show that the child cannot learn the basic facts being taught until he has a mastery of the language of instruction. This level of attainment is far to accomplish because there is considerable linguistic confusion where the child thinks in his mother tongue and expresses himself in a foreign language. The unfortunate aspect of all these is that even when the so called educated people are confronted with the basic problems of life, death, disputes, happiness, they tend to use their mother tongue and oftentimes, they express their opinion that some facts of life or feeling cannot be expressed, interference is bound to occur.

Whenever the structure of foreign language differs from both, there is difficulty in learning, and error in performance. In selecting verb tense in learning, one often makes choice according to the way choices are usually made in their mother-tongue. Wilkins (1972) further stressed that learning a language system involves the acquisition of forms but as we see above, the learner does not own language choice.

Barthet (1958) from his study of memory stated that, people remember things according to the organization of their frame work of experience. This experience influences their thinking and their use of
language. Having noted the problem of mother-tongue interference on word structure and sentence pattern, teachers should make effort to clear these problems from the students and even the natives in spoken English language.

Theories of language acquisition and learning

Research and theory of second language learning tend to be intertwined with the development of cognition (Brown, 1980; Caroll and Freedle, 1972; Hayes, 1970 cited in Krashen 1988). Cognitive theories suggest that schema, rule structures and meaning are distinctive characteristics of language learning. Memory has been singled out as the basis for language comprehension. Theories of discourse (Bandura, 1986) argue that interaction with other speakers is the critical dimension in learning a language. It is argued that all cognitive processes, including those involved in language learning, arise from social interaction.

Social learning theory

The Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1986) focuses on the learning that occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation and modelling. It asserts that result in behaviour change.

Bandura further suggests that the environment people can learn by observing the behaviour of others and the outcome of such behaviour. That cognition plays a role in learning and that learning may or may not reinforce modelling. This is in several possible ways: (i) the observer is reinforced by the model. For example, an Obudu child learns and speaks Bete as his first language in order to be accepted by the ethnic group and fit in with others. (ii) The observer is reinforced by a third person. The observer might be modeling the actions of someone else. For example, a teacher or an outstanding pupil of English. (iii) The imitated behaviour itself leads to reinforcing consequences. The behaviour we learn from others produces satisfying or reinforcing results. For example, the pupil in class would observe how a classmate speaks English with fluency. This pupil would do the same and receive enjoyment. (iv) Consequences of the model’s behaviour affect the observer’s behavior vicariously. For example, if a model is reinforced for a response, then the observer shows an increase in that same response.

Krashen’s theory of language learning

According to Krashen (1988), many factors influence the development of a second language. These include age at first arrival, first language proficiency, and type of instruction including contextualized instructional situations and opportunities to use language. Pupils must be exposed to rich learning environments with regular opportunities to practise language and literacy skills in the new language.

Krashen (1988) asserts that the best methods of second language teaching and learning are, therefore, those that supply ‘comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that learners really want to learn. These methods do not force early production in the language, but allow learners to produce when they are ‘ready’, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production.

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study is survey design. A sample of the students was studied with intent of extrapolating sample characteristics of the entire population in Obudu Local Government Area. The population of the study was made up of all students in public schools and teachers of English in Obudu L.G. A. of Cross River State. The students used for the study were senior secondary three students who have written some internal examinations and who are preparing for their final examination. Also, the sampling techniques adopted for the study were the combination of stratified and simple random sampling techniques respectively. The stratified sampling technique was used to select ten (10) secondary schools from ten wards of Obudu Local Government Area, while simple random sampling technique was used to select ten students each of the schools. Rolled pieces of papers were used for the ballot which produced one hundred (100) students. Moreover, the instrument used for data collection was the questionnaire. The teachers and students’ questionnaires were constructed covering the four major research questions formulated for the study, namely;

i. Pronunciation
ii. Syntactic arrangement
iii. Intonation and
iv. Syllable-timed-rhythm
Each of the questionnaires contains sixteen items followed by a set of responses “yes” or “no”.

Results and discussion of findings
The results of this research were analyzed based on the research questions formulated for the study and were discussed below.

Phonological interference
The first research question states that how does the absence of some vowel sounds in mother tongue which are present in English language affect the pronunciation pattern of students? In getting data for this, items 1-5 in the questionnaires were used to get responses from both teachers and students. From the analyzed data, 65.6% responded in the affirmative while 34.4% responded in the negative. Thus, the teachers’ responses agree that, the absence of some vowel sounds in the mother tongue which are present in English Language affects the pronunciation pattern of the students. From the data of student responses, those who responded in the affirmative are 69.4% while those that responded in the negative are 30.6%. This also states that the absence of some vowel sounds in the mother tongue which are present in English Language affects the pronunciation pattern of the students.

According to Lado (2000), individuals tend to transfer the forms, meaning and distribution of their native language and culture to the foreign language. This problem arises because, some of the sounds in English language are absent in the mother tongue. An instance of this, is seen in Bete language where the twelfth vowel sound which is silent vowel in English is absent. Thus, there is difficulty on its pronunciation.

Syntactic interference
The second research question states that, how does the syntactic arrangement of sentences in mother tongue affect students’ pronunciation pattern in English language? In order to determine the veracity of this, items 6-9 of the teachers’ questionnaire and items 6-11 of the students’ questionnaire were used for this interview. This analysis shows that most teachers agreed that the syntactic arrangement of sentences in mother tongue affects students’ pronunciation pattern in English language. Those who agreed positively are 71.45% while those who responded negatively are 28.55%. Students also agreed that the syntactic arrangement of sentences in mother tongue affects students’ pronunciation pattern in English language. This is shown by the percentage of “yes” which is 75.3% and that of “no” which is 24.7%. Therefore, the syntactic arrangement of mother tongue sentences has great influence on the effective use of English by students of secondary schools in Obudu Local Government Area.

According to Awoniyi (1982) mother tongue interference has gone to the extent of having standardized factors which could lead to the emergence of an educated Nigerian variety of English pronunciation. An interesting example is in the case of phonemes distinction between /i/ and /i:]. He asserts that there are many features in the structure of English sentences that are not found in African languages. The noun class is usually marked by an affix but this may appear as a prefix in one language and a suffix in another language and can occur simultaneously in yet another language. The analysis shows that, the syntactic arrangement of Bette sentences, affects the effective use of English language.

Awoniyi (1982) in the teaching of African languages observed that many linguistic elements in the structure of English language are not found in most African languages. And as such, it is observed that, the Bete language does not have the system of sender corresponding to the English ‘he/she’. In Bete /u/ is used for both male and female while /ki/ is used for the neutral gender. This sentence can refer to both masculine and feminine gender, “Uzaa li zi”, meaning either he/she is eating.

Intonation
The third question states that does the intonation obtained in the mother tongue interfere in the effective use of English language? Items 10-13 of the teachers’ questionnaire and items 12-14 of the students’ questionnaire were used for their interview. The data obtained reveals that, more teachers responded in the affirmative while those who responded in negative are few. The percentage of those who responded positively is 78.7% while those who responded in the negative is 21.3%. Thus, this analysis shows that, intonation obtained in the mother tongue interferes with the effective use of English among students in secondary schools in Obudu Local Government Area. From the students’ data, it is shown that 80.7% of the students responded in the positive, while 19.3% responded in the negative. Thus, intonation obtained in mother tongue interferes with the effective use of English among students in
secondary schools in Obudu Local Government Area.

The result of research question three also shows that intonation in mother tongue affects the effective use of English language. The intonation in mother tongue is quite different from that of English language. Intonation determines meaning and what we intend to say, thus, a student tends to transfer intonation in the meaning which may lead to ambiguity. Lado (2000) points out that language has differing stress and intonation systems. According to him, students transfer the intonation habits of their native language to the foreign language and this intonation habits include; the pitch, phonemes, centers, boarders and the distribution from the native language to the foreign one. Consequently, he will have difficulty with intonation. This implies that, the tone system in Bete language has a hitch into the effective use of English language.

**Syllable structure**

Research question four states that the syllable-timed-rhythm obtainable in mother tongue overshadows the stressed timed rhythm obtainable in English language. Items 14-16 of the teachers’ questionnaire and 15-16 of the students’ questionnaire were used for this interview. The analysis states that, the percentage of teachers who responded positively is 66.6% while those in the negative is 33.3%. Since students have responded with an average percentage of 78.8% positively and those who responded in the negative are 21.2%, it is agreed that syllable timed rhythm obtainable in English language affects the effective use of English among students in secondary schools in Obudu Local Government Area. Consequently, the syllable timed rhythm obtained in mother tongue overshadows the stress time rhythm in English language.

**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the research, the deep noted habits of wrong pronunciation are exposed here. This is where insufficient attention is usually paid to pronunciation teaching because very few people are equipped to do this kind of work. Competent teachers who know the best approach to pronunciation teaching in a systematic way should be employed in secondary school so that students may have good foundation. Teachers must have a basic understanding of the individual sounds in English, stress, rhythm and intonation. The learners should be taught the use of sample words through drilling methods to distinguish between sounds.

Aural discrimination exercise in near equivalence in the native and English language should be clearly spelt out. For aural discrimination of English sounds, teachers should be aware of minimal pairs of words which differ in pronunciation of the sounds being practised, for instance:

- Seat/Sit
- Seek/Sick
- Sheep/Ship
- Eat/It

Tape recorder which can be used for teaching English pronunciation can play a vital role. Language laboratories can also be of immense help in English language teaching. Students should be encouraged to use dictionaries often. This encouragement should start at the beginning of primary school, when the learners have mastered and acquired enough vocabulary, other techniques like dictation, pronunciation game can be introduced.

It is true that a person whose pronunciation is correct, but with faulty stress and intonation is more unintelligible than a person whose pronunciation is bad. Teachers should have techniques for teaching intonation. Although intonation is not lexically significant in English language, a change in the intonation pattern of the sentence will add meaning or implication to the basic meaning of the sentences. Constant practice is also the only answer to the problems of teaching intelligible English speech.

**References**


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