

SOME LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OF YORUBA LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Most studies on why second language learners have difficulties acquiring English have focussed on sociolinguistic problems with the use of extraneous factors like environment, educational level, social background, occupation, etc. as yardsticks. But, only a few works have examined the language itself with a view to discovering whether the language has compounded the problem due to its unique characteristics and peculiar nature. In this paper, efforts are made to explore the English language with a view to highlighting some of its unique features that may make its acquisition somehow difficult for Yoruba learners of English in Nigeria. This may be as a result of significant differences of English from the major Nigerian indigenous languages, most especially the Yoruba language. Major language teaching theories were reviewed in order to situate them properly in the teaching of English in a second language environment (ESLE) like Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Perhaps the most pertinent question we should ask ourselves to start this discussion is "What English do we present, teach or acquire in Nigerian schools?" Is it EMT - English as it is used in Britain, America, Canada, Australia, etc; or ESL - as in several African countries and parts of Asia; or EFL - as in other countries where English is neither EMT nor ESL. That is, countries like France, Spain, Belgium and several Arab countries?"

Though it is widely believed that any serious attempt at learning a language should aim at acquiring its most standard variety (Quirk, et al, 1985), but the following posers must be resolved for that belief to be sacrosanct. Does an essential or superior English exist anywhere in the world? If it does, is that kind procurable in Nigeria? If it is, does the country have the wherewithal it takes to possess such a type (i.e technology, manpower, materials, economic sustainability)? Attempts at finding a pure model can be described as acts of exclusion, because no such purity exists.

However, English is the world's most prominent language that is sought after by very many people (Quirk, et al, 1985). The language has also met all the criteria which Quirk, et al (1985) have set to judge the importance of any language. These criteria are:

- (i) the numerical strength of the native speakers of that language;
- (ii) the number of continents or countries where it is used;
- (iii) the functional load: how extensive is the range of purposes for which it is used;
- (iv) the economic and political influence of its native speakers.

It is a little wonder then that English is one of the few languages of the world that form the basis of major linguistic discussions.

There is no doubt that the English language and most African languages belong to different linguistic families. As such there are inherent differences which mark these languages different from English and, therefore, make the acquisition and learning of the language quite complicated. Many scholars have carried out studies on Nigerian English (Afolayan, 1979; Banjo, 1974; Jowitt, 1991; etc.). While some of these scholars believe that British Standard English (BSE) is realistic, attainable and should be the goal of every speaker, some are of the opinion that BSE is a myth and unrealistic, given the fact that the "Englishes" Nigerian learners speak have been affected by their various mother tongues (MTs).

Irrespective of the dichotomy in the views of these scholars, what is unique about them is that they examined English from a sociolinguistic perspective; hence, the use of extraneous factors such as educational level, socio-background, environmental peculiarities, occupation, etc. However, this study wishes to be linguistically intrinsic by looking at several inconsistencies 'immanent' in English itself with a view to discovering why the language is difficult to acquire by second language learners, especially in Nigeria.

2. The place of english in Nigeria

English is so important in Nigeria today that there is hardly any academic field in which one can excel without a good knowledge of it. English is the first of the four official languages as stated in Section 55 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is, in this respect, more important than the other indigenous languages. Each of the other three official languages (i.e. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) is associated with a particular region while English is used in all parts of the country and it is generally accepted by citizens from different ethnic groups. As the official language, it also plays the role of politics as it is the language used in discussing legislative proceedings. This is explicitly stated in the 1999 Constitution thus:

the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when *adequate arrangements* have been made therefrom.

(Emphasis ours)

However, the reality is that the 'arrangements' have not been made till now and English is the only language being used in the National Assembly. Many authors across the country prefer to write and publish in English rather than in indigenous languages. In this regard, English can be considered as a literary language. Apart from being the literary language, it is also the language which is used to express national yearnings and aspirations. It is the language of forming and of belonging to political parties. Through it, various people who belong to different tribes are able to speak on national issues that affect the country.

Furthermore, English is the language of administration, the judiciary and the press. Government records are kept in English. Many dailies are written in English and not only this, major Radio and Television programmes are given in English. In support of this, Akindele (1983:2) said that "most Television programmes are broadcast in English. On the national and state radios, news and some programmes are broadcast in English".

In Nigeria today, English is the language of education. It is the medium of instructions in secondary and post-secondary institutions. In respect of the primary education, the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977) states that:

the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, *at a later stage*, English.

(Emphasis,ours)

It needs be pointed out that there are inherent confusions in this language policy. When exactly is the "later stage"? And, what technique should be used to introduce English as the medium of instruction? These are some of the inconsistencies found in the policy. English is also a core subject in our secondary schools and in most post-secondary institutions. In Polytechnics where English is not studied as a core subject, students take it as a general study course and without a pass in it, they cannot graduate. English is therefore a service subject to all other subjects (Seweje, 1998). While stressing the role of English in relation to formal education, Afolayan (1971:14) said:

there cannot be any pretence at formal education wherever and whenever English cannot be used as the medium of instruction or at least taught as subject. In certain places primary education begins with English as the medium and remains English-medium throughout... Secondary education is given and examined throughout in English... As would be expected, university education is given and examined in the English language alone.

To crown it, English functions as an international language. It is the language Nigerians use to transact business with other people from different parts of the world. The world is caught up in the computer web and there is probably no activity in the world that cannot be enhanced by the use of the computer. The English language is unarguably the most widely used language of the computer. One is not overlooking the fact that some other languages could, and are being adapted for computer, but English for now remains the language that has made accessibility to computer more universal than any other language. Perhaps that accounts for Quirk, et al's (1985) view that "not only is English the universal language of international aviation, shipping and sport, it is to a considerable degree the universal language of literacy and public communication".

3.0 Some problem areas of yuruba learnerse of english

Most teachers of English in Nigerian pre-secondary, secondary and post-secondary institutions usually tend to forget that their students have acquired competence in one or two of the 'local' languages and this tends to affect the way they learn the target language. Obviously, there are some features that are common to both indigenous languages and English (for instance, Yoruba and English) and these features are usually learned faster and effectively. On the other hand, there are some features found in the Mother Tongues (MT) that are not present in English. These are features which sometimes pose problems in the learning of English. Given some of

these linguistic differences, teachers of English should employ a contrastive model of teaching. This is achieved through the comparison of the MT(s) of the learners and English, with a view to emphasising and focussing those items that mark the MT(s) and the Target Language (TL) - English different.

We present below some of these trouble spots divided into sub-sections to give room for thorough discussions.

3.1 Sound-spelling relationship

This is about the area where English is most unpredictable. Quirk, et al. (1972:7) even speak of the "notorious oddities of English spelling". There is no one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters in English. Several letters may stand for one sound. For instance, letters *c* and *s* represent the sound /s/ in *cell* and *sell* respectively. The result of this is that *cell* and *sell* are phonetically ambiguous. Similarly, the letters *c*, *k* and *ch* stand for the sound /k/ (voiceless velar plosive) in *cat*, *key* and *chaos* respectively and, to further compound the problem, the letter *ch* is realized as /tʃ/ (voiceless palato-alveolar affricate) in *teach*, *church*, *much*, while it is realized as /ʃ/ (voiceless palato-alveolar fricative) in *chauffeur* and *chateau*, *charade*.

The same sound may have several spellings. The vowel /i:/ is written as *ee* in *meet*, *cheek*, *feel*, *wheel*; as *ie* in *chief*, *field* as *ea* in *bead*, *sea*, *meat*, *beam* and as *uay* in *quay*. The sound /_:/ has the following spellings: *or* in *short*, *norm*, *cord*, *or*; *aw* in *draw*, *drawl*, *gnaw*; *ore* in *store*, *lore*. *Ough* in *bought*, *brought* and *ough* in *naught*. /_:/ is written as *or* in *work*, *word*, *world*; as *-ear* in *search*, *research*, *rehearse*, *-myrrh* in *myrrh*; *-ur* in *curd*, *hurl*; *-our* in *scourge*, *journal*, *journey*, *-ir-* in *shirt*, *third*, *first*. /u/ is realised as *o* in *money*, *wonder*, *come*, *love*; *oo* in *blood*, *flood*; *u* in *must*, *lust*, *hut*, *sum* (Atoye, 1980). The diphthong /ai/ has letters *eye* in *eye*; *uy* in *buy*; *y* in *spy*; *i* in *libel*, *nice*, *like*, *side*, *while*. /e/ has *o* in *go*, *most*; *oa* in *road*, *roam*, *foam*, etc.

As shown above, English is not consistent in spellings, and this poses a great problem to Nigerian learners of English. It is practically impossible for ESL learners to master all the spellings of English and match them with appropriate sounds. There are therefore pronunciation errors in the English spoken by second language learners (L2L). The inconsistency is further compounded by the fact that in most Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba, there is a one-to-one link between spellings and sounds. For instance, the sound /i/ is represented by letter *i* in any word it appears in Yoruba. For instance, /igi\ (tree), /iwe\ (book), /ati\ (and) /buredi\ (bread), etc.

3.2 Morphological inconsistencies

English is not free of inconsistency in the area of morphology. There are ambiguities which usually compound learners' problems. Some of the examples are considered below:

The prefix *in-* can be phonologically conditioned and as such, written differently. For instance, *in-* is written as *un-* in **unfair**, **unwise**, **unexpected**; as *il-* in **illegal**, **illogical**; *ir-* in **irrelevant** and *im-* in **improper** and **immaterial**.

The suffix *-er* usually means "the person who performs the action indicated by the verb". So **writer/producer/teacher** means "somebody who **writes/produces/teaches**" but **brother/sister** does not mean somebody who **brothes/sists**, neither does **type-writer** means "somebody who type-writes". If someone who sings or writes is a **singer** or **writer** respectively; why shouldn't somebody who **cooks**, **gossips**, **cheats**, **sponsors** be a ***cooker**, ***gossiper**, ***cheater**, ***sponsorer**? In an English as a second language environment (ESLE), such as we have in Nigeria, learners are bound to make mistakes such as identified above. Similarly, the suffix *-less* means the opposite of the base to which it is attached in **useless** (not useful), **lawless** (not lawful), but it has a positive meaning in contra-distinction with its meaning in **useless**, **baldness**, **fearless** and **lawless**, in **priceless**. Several of these morphological ambiguities abound in English. According to Quirk, et al (1972:979) "sometimes two analyses are possible, and reflect an ambiguity of interpretation; **unmasked**, for example, may be read:

the *un-* +masked intruder ('the intruder who was not masked')
 the *unmask+* -ed intruder ('the intruder from whom the mask had been removed').

Also, in the formation of compound words, "there are no safe rules-of-thumb that will help in the choice between three possibilities". This shows that there is no predictable rule to guide learners on how to make a choice between the possible conventions.

3.3 Syntactic problems

One of the scholars who have worked extensively on the syntax of English and whose subjects have been Nigerians is Aremo (1987). While working on "Concord in English: Some Problem Areas", he says:

However, confusion often arises as to whether a subject is to be

regarded as singular or plural. If it is one of those quantifiers which may have a plural or a mass meaning (1987:36).

Closely related to the above problem is the formation of plural nouns in English. Concerning this, Muir (1972) says:

The vast majority of English nouns do form the plural by adding a substantial realisation of the plural morpheme to the singular form. In spelling, this means the addition of (e)s (though syllabic /y/ is replaced by /i/

lady: ladies and /f/ may alternate with /v/; in pronunciation, the realisation is various.

The phrase "the vast majority" shows that there are still some nouns whose plurals are formed by other methods apart from the one identified above. The sets below illustrate this:

Set A		Set B		Set C	
SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL
book	books	calf	calves	chief	chiefs
girl	girls	elf	eves	motif	motifs
pen	pens	thief	thieves		

Set D		Set E		Set F	
SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL	SINGULAR	PLURAL
foot	feet	counsel	counsel	phenomenon	phenomena
mouse	mice	sheep	sheep	agendum	agenda
		equipment	equipment		

The formation of the plural form for words in set A involves a mere addition of *s* in writing. The formation of words in set B also involves an addition, but the final *f* of the singular form has to change to *v* before the addition of *-es*. This transformation of final *f* does not apply to the plural formation of the word **chief** and **motif** in set C. This is part of the unique characteristics of the English language that may not be easily acquired by young second language learners in Nigeria.

The plural counterparts of the set D's words are formed through a vowel change. For instance, the sound /au/ in **mouse** changes to /ai/ in **mice** while /u/ in

foot changes to /i:/ in **feet**. Nothing is overtly added to the plural forms of the words in set E, which means there is no distinction between the singular and plural forms. The final vowel sounds /e/ and /u/ in **phenomenon** and **agendum** respectively change to /e/, and the final nasals are cut off.

There is a group of nouns called collective nouns, examples of which include **council, audience, committee, team, flock, police, army**. These nouns are either considered as singular (when the group is regarded as a whole) or plural (when, regarded as individuals). According to Bernard (1976), "this is, of course, only a very general distinction, and there will be many borderline cases and occasions for uncertainty." If an English man can talk of "uncertainty", then there are many trees for ESL learners to fell for them to pass through the thick forest of acquiring English.

Closely related to the above is that by nature, some words are plural in form but they are singular in sense/meaning. Examples are news, bans, economics, politics, mathematics, scissors, trousers, physics, etc. Each of these nouns takes a singular verb, and they must not be confused with nouns (ending in -s plural forms).

Okanlawon (1987) carries out a study on the acquisition of the article system of English and discovers that the English article system constitutes a problem for non-native learners of English irrespective of their first language background.

3.4 Problems of tense

In the formation of past tense, English also has got some complex rules. The popular rule is to add **-ed** to the base forms of a verb to form its past. This rule only applies to the formation of past tense of regular verbs. There are several other irregular verbs whose past tense are formed in diverse ways. Apart from the regular verbs which conform with the above rule (for instance, dance-danced; kill-killed), there are irregular verbs such as we have below which do not conform to the rule:

Set A		Set B		Set C	
PRESENT	PAST	PRESENT	PAST	PRESENT	PAST
buy	bought	go	went	hit	hit
bring	brought	do	did	cut	cut
come	came	is	was	cast	cast
run	ran	are	were		
sing	sang	may	might		
teach	taught				

Under set A words above, the past tense morpheme **-d** is realised through a vowel change. The vowel /u/ in **come** changes to /ei/ in **came**; /u/ in **run** changes to /Ê/ in **ran**. In the formation of the past tense of **buy** and **teach**, the rule is more complex. In **buy**, the vowel (diphthong) (ai) changes to /B:/, and after this, there is an addition of a voiceless alveolar plosive /t/. In **teach**, the vowel sound /i:/ changes to /B:/ in **taught** and a voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ is added to it. There is therefore a case of replacive morpheme being used (Gleason, 1961; Mathews, 1974; Tomori, 1977). The present verbs in set C undergo a complete change, while nothing is overtly added to the words under set D. In other words, there is an addition of a zero morpheme and we have to examine the context of use to know whether they are in present or past form.

This lack of straight-forward rules becomes problematic for ESL learners. For instance, in Yoruba and some other Nigerian languages, tense is not indicated by verbs. So in Yoruba, we can have:

- (1) Mo f.,e l.,o - I want to go
- (2) Mo l.,o lanaa - I went yesterday.
- (3) Mo ti l.,o - I have gone.

In the above sentences, 'l.,o' which is the Yoruba verb did not undergo any morphological change in the three sentences as 'go' which changed to 'went' in (2) and 'gone' in (3). Instead of 'l.,o' to change in form as in English examples, it only had the addition of 'f.,e' in (1), 'lanaa' in (2) and 'ti' in (3). We notice also that the perfective aspect 'ti' in (3) did not affect 'l.,o' in (3) as the aspectual 'have' in the English version of (3) which changed 'go' to 'gone'.

When ESL learners speak or write, they tend to mix up tenses, and this is usually caused by misapplication or over-generalisation of English rules. Unless adequate time is spent by qualified teachers ESL learners will continue to dread almost every aspect of English grammar.

4. Remedies to the linguistic problems

The major remedy which we believe can combat the linguistic problems already highlighted is a comprehensive review of the existing language teaching methods with a conscious effort to making them adaptable to the second language environment. It has been found out through personal interaction with the classroom teachers of English in Nigeria that majority of them are not well informed about the language teaching methods and how they can be effectively used or applied in a second

language environment. There are many language teaching methods or styles because there are so many ideas on how language should be taught. It is to be noted that any language teaching theory should have some objectives and make some assumptions about the learner and the learning process. Thus, whatever learning style adopted to the teaching of English in Nigerian schools should take cognisance of the peculiar linguistic environment of the learners, and the general policy statement of the government concerning the status and role of the English language. We hereby present a review of major language teaching methods and assess their suitability to the Nigerian classroom situation.

Grammar-translation Method: This method has its overriding focus on the translation of concepts from the target language into the learners language and vice versa. It is also characterized by grammatical explanations. It is well suited in the teaching of advanced students in the university system around the world. But its use is also widespread in the teaching of English in the secondary school; a teacher explains how to apologize in the target language - 'When you bump into someone in the street you say "sorry"; a teacher gives a quick grammatical explanation of the present perfect tense - 'I have been to Paris' meaning that the action is relevant to the moment of speaking' ..., a teacher describes where to put the tongue to make the sound /t/ in **think**, etc.

However, this theory is highly deficient to teach English in a second language environment like Nigeria. This is because it does not directly teach people to use the language for some purpose outside the classroom. The theory sees the mastery of the language as lists of vocabulary, it values what the pupils know about the language rather than what they comprehend or produce. The communicative ability is not stressed and students find it difficult to adjust outside the classroom. The grammar-translation method caters for academically gifted students, who will supplement it with their own good language learning strategies and who will probably not be young children. This we find lacking in Nigerian secondary schools where majority of the students are mature speakers of their various indigenous languages. But unfortunately the use of the method is prevalent in Nigerian secondary schools where teachers use it to teach many aspects of the English language like comprehension where difficult words are translated into the students' first language by the teacher.

Audio-lingual Method: This theory emphasizes the teaching of spoken language through dialogues and drills. It attempts a division of language into the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and these have to be taught in that order (with too much emphasis on spoken). To the audiolingual theorists, language is a set of habits, just as driving a car. Each habit is learnt by doing it time and again.

The dialogues concentrate on unconscious 'structures' rather than the conscious 'rules' of the grammar-translation method. Instead of understanding every word or structure, students learn the text more or less by heart.

However, audiolingualism thrives on 'indoctrination', no conscious effort is made to explain rules to the pupils. It has no fall-back advantage. If it does not succeed in indoctrinating the pupils through the regulated habits, there is nothing else to be gained from it - no academic knowledge or problem-solving ability. Again, apart from unavailability of language laboratories which the theory depends upon in most Nigerian schools, its insistence on second language learning as the creation of habits is an over-simplification of the behaviourist models of learning that have been found inadequate explanations for language acquisition for many years.

The Social Communication Method: The method is a complete shift to a re-definition of what students had to learn in terms of communicative competence rather than linguistic competence. It focuses on the ability to use the language appropriately rather than the knowledge of grammatical rules implied in the grammar translation theory or the 'habits' of the Audio-lingual. The behavioural patterns of native speakers were analysed and developed into syllabuses incorporating ideas of language functions, such as 'persuading someone to do something', and notions, such as 'expressing point of time', which were more sophisticated than those possible with the limited concepts of structure and situation which Nigerian learners can experience with the Audio-lingual method.

A key difference from other theories is that the students are not required to produce substantially errorless speech in native terms, instead they use whatever forms and strategies they can devise themselves to solve their communication problems, ending up with sentences that are entirely appropriate to their task but are often highly deviant from a native perspective. But it means their language is still not perfect and may not be intelligible probably when the students are outside their country. The method as it were is purely mentalistic, it does not hold a view about second language learning as such, but maintains it happens automatically provided the student interacts with other people in the proper way. This all-important requirement may be hard to come by in Nigeria since the society is multilingual and a lot of the inputs the students are exposed to are likely to come from the local languages or a 'bastardised' form of the English language. In other words, good model may not be available.

Our mission in this brief review of the major language teaching methods (of course, there are many more) is not to present one as ideal or as the best. But rather the review is to highlight their major strengths and weaknesses with a view to bringing them into proper perspective vis-a-vis the Nigerian peculiar linguistic environ-

ment. To this end, we will want to suggest to the English language teachers in Nigeria to make conscious efforts to learn the various language teaching theories, and as well know where and how they can be used to enhance their trade and improve the learning and acquisition of the English language. If the right method is employed most of the linguistic problems raised in the paper will be combated. We then wish to submit that none of the theories is bad in its entirety and none is perfect in all ramifications, thus an eclectic approach is recommended. Good and strong aspects of the theories can be combined to achieve the goal of effective and efficient teaching of the English language.

5. Conclusion

We have tried to show that the problems of learning English in a second language environment (ESLE) like Nigeria is compounded by the problems observed in this paper. We feel that if linguistic problems, some of which are highlighted above, are addressed through a review of language teaching styles prevalent in Nigerian schools, Nigerian learners of English will acquire the language with much ease. The present writers then make a clarion call to scholars of English not to focus only on sociolinguistic factors as a way of making English more accessible to second language learners. But also they should carry out more contrastive studies on English and major Nigerian and African languages, so as to identify areas of convergence and significant points of departure. This is with a view to making the learning and acquisition of the language less difficult for the learners. Needless to say then that with the appropriate language teaching methods as suggested in this paper, Nigerian learners of English can hope to acquire the language with less difficulties.

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