

EFFECTS OF MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE IN THE LEARNING AND USE OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: A STUDY OF AFIKPO NORTH EDUCATIONAL ZONE OF EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA.

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Abstract

This research investigated the effects of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language. The work adopted research survey design method and utilized questionnaire validated by two English Language scholars. Three research questions guided the study. 70 English Language teachers in Afikpo North educational zone of Ebonyi State constituted the population. A total of 56 teachers were sampled using balloting technique without replacement. 52 copies of the questionnaire were returned in usable form. Data collected were analyzed using frequency count and mean scores. 2.50 mean benchmark was chosen for the study. Findings revealed that English language teachers are aware of the existence of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language. It was also revealed that the interference occurs at the lexical, syntactic, semantic and phonological levels/areas of English, and also constitutes an impediment to the effort of the second language user at attaining appreciable level of competence and performance in English language. It is recommended, among others, that English language teachers should pay adequate attention to those problematic areas/levels of the English language study that challenge learners and users alike, using appropriate teaching aids and methodology.

Keywords: Interference, mother tongue, second language, phonology, syntax, semantics, learning, language.

Introduction

It is incontrovertibly obvious that language possession is one of the profound distinguishing features of human beings. In other words, language is a natural attribute exclusively reserved for man that enables him to communicate and attract reciprocal action in his speech community. Language in every context implies a means through which man expresses his thought either in words or in written form.

Mother tongue is the first language of a bilingual or multilingual speaker which is natural to him and meets his linguistic needs. It could also be the only language of a monolingual person acquired naturally in his linguistic environment and which has the capability of expressing his thought, world view, culture and tradition. Mother tongue is the language in which a monolingual, bilingual or multilingual speaker conducts his every day activities, and in which he has the greatest facility or intuitive knowledge (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005). The first experiences of life of a language user are acquired through his mother tongue. It is the linguistic medium in which a speaker thinks, dreams and also conveniently expresses his feelings (Uka, 2012). There are over 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria, with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba being officially recognized and taught in schools alongside the English language.

English language occupies a prominent position in the official affairs of Nigeria owing to the pertinent roles it performs in the socio-economic, educational and political lives of Nigerians. However, the consistent assertion in recent times that the

standard of English language usage in Nigeria has fallen is a glaring and indisputable fact. It is regrettably accepted that the spoken and written English of the present secondary school leavers and even undergraduates cannot be compared with those of their counterpart in the past four decades. This abysmal situation has persisted irrespective of the fact that the level of functional literacy in English language is presently higher than what was obtainable forty years ago (Ogbuagu, 2011).

The phenomenon of language learning and use is primarily concerned with how human beings get to understand and use language as a form of social and linguistic behaviour. Both learning and use of language involve cognitive process, and are not only systematic but also progress in specific stages (Ogenyi, 2010). Language learning therefore, centres on the child or even an adult who already has a language (mother tongue) and is striving to internalize the fundamental and rudimentary approaches to the mastery of the standard variety of the target language (or second language).

In the struggle to achieve appreciable level of competence in the second language, there is most often an apparent manifestation of linguistic overlap between the mother tongue and the second language. This is referred to as linguistic interference. The phenomenon implies a re-arrangement of patterns that result from the introduction of foreign elements into the highly structured domain of another language. It becomes pertinent to checkmate linguistic interference by a bilingual speaker as failure to do so would consequently distort the original meaning of a word or expression and certainly results in a breakdown in communication. It is against this background that this study is therefore, designed to find out the effects of mother tongue

interference in the learning and use of English as a second language.

Statement of the problem

English language is the major language of inter-ethnic communication in Nigeria. It is also a learning tool; the access or window to development in the world, be it political, social, economic or technological (Attaman, 2008). English is equally a language of international communication and undeniably the most widespread on earth; which ensures mutual linguistic intelligibility among nations (Ike, 2000; Kuper and Kuper, 2004). Consequently, the Nigerian society cannot operate in isolation especially in the contemporary time where the world is fast becoming a global village. This explicates the need for appropriate learning and use of English in Nigeria.

It is however, indisputable that the English language study and use has been characterized by a myriad of problems (Obiukwu, 2007), especially due to certain socio linguistic inauspicious factors. As a result of this, stakeholders in the education system, including the teachers of the language have continued to make concerted efforts to improve learner's competence and performance in the language. To this end, many scholars have carried out researches and a myriad of insightful recommendations made to ameliorate the linguistic embarrassment and thus, improve the ugly situation. But an inverse relationship appears to be existing between the efforts been made to boost competence of learners and users of the language and their actual performance in the language. The ungrammatical and erroneous expressions being made by Nigerian students and the general users of the language attest to the degree of the deficiency in oral and written forms of the language. Thus, the reason behind the gross inadequacies in the

English language among learners and users of the language in Nigeria is the concern of this research. And whether it is the influence of mother tongue interference that is responsible for this poor performance is one of the possibilities that puzzle the researcher.

Purpose of the study

- i. To ascertain whether English language teachers are aware of the effects of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language.
- ii. To investigate the areas of language study where mother tongue interferes in the learning and use of English as a second language.
- iii. To determine whether or not mother tongue interference negatively affects the learning and use of English as a second language.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

- i. Are English language teachers aware of the mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language?
- ii. In what areas/levels of language study does mother tongue interfere in the learning and use of English as a second language?
- iii. Does mother tongue interference negatively affect the learning and use of English as a second language?

Literature Review

A study of the sociolinguistic perspective of language would explore the interrelationship existing between language and society. Indeed, it is unthinkable to separate language from the society in which it is used. There is no doubt that human

existence and man's relationship with his fellows would have been unimaginably chaotic in the absence of language. This is because man would have lacked 'tongue' to express his thoughts to others and attract reciprocal actions from them through the same medium.

Language is a means by which human beings express themselves vocally and communicate with others. The essence of this communication is to ensure mutual understanding and co-operation among people in a given speech community. To Ike (2007), language is the expression and communication of emotions or ideas between human beings by means of speech or spoken words as well as written words. In the words of Anyachonkeya (2011), "Language is a highly systematized phenomenon audibly and meaningfully uttered and used by mankind in the execution of speech act". The foregoing views on language indicate that language is primarily for communication, and this communication is aimed at fostering unity, social control and mutual understanding (Azikiwe, 2007).

Language can either be learnt or acquired. The language acquired naturally is usually the mother tongue, while the second language is most often learnt through conscious effort and intense scholarship. By acquisition, we mean a gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communication situation. In Nigeria, English is the second language because English is the language a Nigerian child learns after he/she has acquired his or her mother tongue. In consonance with the foregoing, Ogenyi (2010) stated that a second language is a language learnt after the first language or mother tongue, had been known by a bilingual speaker. A language is termed second language when it has a special standing in a country such as being accepted in a court of law

and where there are many publications in it. It is therefore, English that qualifies as a second language in Nigeria.

Obviously, the essence of adopting English language as a second language in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. English is a medium of academic instruction in Nigeria from primary to tertiary levels of education. It is the language of the law court, commerce and industry; it is a medium of communication in the civil and public service; in the National Assembly and among diverse ethnic groups in the country. It is the Nation's unifying language in the absence of an indigenous lingua franca. English is unarguably, according to Kolawole (2004), a language of religion, politics, administration, civilization and commerce in a pluralistic and multilingual Nigerian society. These underscore the need for the intensification of the proper teaching, serious learning and appropriate use of the language in the country.

A Keen observation has shown that one of the situations that constitute a log in the wheel of progress of the English language learners and users is mother tongue interference. The term interference is used in this paper to refer to, in its technical sense, as linguistic overlap between a speaker's first and second language occasioned by the introduction and transfer of certain linguistic elements from one language to another. In most cases, especially in language learning situations, the second language user fails to throw away the garb of his culture and linguistic system, thereby, creating errors as he uses the target or second language. He commits errors because his utterances are most often direct literary translation of expressions in the target language, which stands as grammatical utterances in the native speaker's language. Such errors are referred to as Interlingua errors (Uka, 2012), and are committed because the second

language user has not properly placed himself in the right cultural milieu of the owners of the target language.

According to Jowitt (2012), the learning of English is likely to be marked by interference from the mother tongue of non-native users. This results in communicative incompetence as it constitutes a barrier to the user's/learner's efforts to attain adequate proficiency level in the second language. It equally influences the organ of speech of the speaker, and invariably his grammatical and phonological systems are also influenced, constituting a hindrance to proper articulation and error-free sentence construction (Attaman, 2008). This occurs because the second Language user/learner has already become a linguistic adult in his mother tongue by the time he begins to learn the second language, and this results in the transfer of some linguistic features of the native language (mother tongue) into the target language. It is such a situation that gave birth to what is today referred to as Nigerian English. The linguistic interference that brought about this somewhat variety of English is prominently noticeable at the phonological, syntactic, lexical and even semantic levels of the language.

Phonological interference

Phonology has to do with the sound system of a language and how the sounds are arranged and pronounced. The English Language is organized into 44 speech sounds otherwise called phonemes. These sounds (most of them) are quite dissimilar from the ones found in other languages, including African languages. For example, Swan and Smith (2000) noted that most West African languages (including Nigerian languages) have fewer vowels than English and fewer final consonants and consonant clusters. The languages, according to them, tend to give their English pronunciation jerkiness, both in timing and in

intonation. Thus, the problem arises when say the Nigeria bilingual encounters those sounds that are not found in the phonological system of his mother tongue. For example, a typical Nigerian speaker has some difficulties pronouncing certain English words due to the following reasons:

- (i) The dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ are not present in the orthography of Nigeria of native languages. So, English words that contain them are wrongly pronounced. He is likely to pronounce /θ/ as /t/ and /ð/ as /d/. Examples are in words such as:
Thank / θθank/
Thin / θin/
The / θi/
- (ii) No distinction is made between vowel lengths. So, sounds /i/ and /i:/, for instance, are pronounced the same way. For example, bit /bit/ and beat /bi:t/ are pronounced the same way.
- (iii) The sounds /e/ and /ɜ:/ are not differentiated in pronunciation. Eg. Bed /bed/ and bird/bɜ:d/ are pronounced alike.
- (iv) The Igbo bilingual for example, does not weaken unstressed syllables and the weak vowels.
Eg. About /əbaut/, teacher/ti:tsə/
- (v) The Hausa bilingual mispronounces words containing fricatives /f/, /v/ as well as the plosive sound /k/. Examples are:
Five/faiv/ pipe/paip/
Fifty/fifti/ pipty/pipit/
- (vi) Some diphthongs are usually mispronounced. For example, words bearing (ei) sounds are wrongly pronounced.

E.g., Day /dei/ is pronounced as /dey/

Say /sei/ is pronounced as /sey/ or /see/ as obtainable in their native languages.

- (vii) An Igbo bilingual from Enugu State, Nigeria would usually confuse /L/ and /r/ sounds. Hewould pronounce 'play' in place of 'pray'; 'rolly' in place of lorry; 'rod' in place of "Lord"; 'glass' instead of grass. The list is almost inexhaustible.

Syntactic Interference

Syntax means a systematic arrangement or grouping of words into sense relation to form phrase, clause or sentences. It is the word order and the binding relation existing between lexical items of a language. Syntactic interference manifests when a second language user adopts the syntactic patters of his native language informing sentences/utterances in the target language. The following sentences, exemplify:

Nigerian (Igbo) Speaker's Version

- (i) My head is aching me
- (ii) The girl has a bad mouth
- (iii) I will follow you to the market
- (iv) I am coming (by someone who is leaving).
- (v) We agreed to pay hundred, hundred naira
- (vi) The boy is a longer throat
- (vii) The matter is paining me
- (viii) My wife has delivered a baby

English Version

- My head is aching
- The girl is insulting
- I will accompany you to the market
- I shall soon be back.
- We agreed to pay hundred naira each
- The boy is a glutton
- The matter worries/disturbs me
- My wife has been delivered of a baby

Lexical Interference

Lexical interference occurs when a bilingual or second language user gives a lexical item (word) a meaning which is obtainable in his mother tongue while he is using another language. Attama (2008) calls it lexico-semantic interference. This kind of interference results in the word having an entirely new meaning,

as influenced by the native language, when interpreted from the second language context or point of view. The following statements elucidate our point:

Igbo bilingual Version

English

- | | |
|--|--|
| (i) The treasurer has <u>eaten</u> our money | The treasurer has <u>embezzled</u> our money |
| (ii) The boy's head is not <u>correct</u> | The boy is <u>insane</u> . |
| (iii) The drama was <u>sweet</u> . | The drama was <u>interesting</u> |
| (iv) Please <u>turn</u> the soup | Please <u>stir</u> the soup |
| (v) The girl has <u>open-teeth</u> . | The girl is <u>gaply-toothed</u> . |
| (vi) NEPA has taken the light | NEPA has <u>Switched off</u> the light |
| (vii) The bulb is <u>dead</u> | The bulb is <u>burnt</u> |
| (viii) I have <u>put</u> money on her head | I have <u>paid</u> her dowry. |

Semantic Interference

Semantics means the scientific study of the meaning of a language. The study here concerns words and expressions in a language and what they imply in that language. As we have noted that language and culture are inseparable, we can equally safely assert that certain words denote different things in different cultures. Different cultures in this context imply different languages. Therefore, semantic interference occurs when a second language user interprets the meanings of certain words or things from the point of view of his/her culture and mother tongue's linguistic system. The following can serve as examples:

Igbo bilingual Version

British English Version

- | | |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| (i) Tortoise means cunning | Fox means cunning |
| (ii) Rain represents blessing, | Rain means discomfort, unpleasant |
| (iii) Mask means spirit, sacred | mask means fun or disguise |

(iv) Chief implies 'high rank',

Chief denotes a leader;
highest rank, a rich/wealthy
person

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design method and utilized questionnaire for data collection. It was carried out in Afikpo north educational zone of Ebonyi State. 70 English language teachers in the Government secondary schools constituted the population for the study. 56 teachers were randomly selected from the population using balloting technique without replacement. 52 copies of the questionnaire were returned in usable form. Data collected were analyzed using frequency count and mean scores. 2.50 mean benchmark was chosen for the study.

Data Presentation

Table 1: Mean responses of English teachers on their knowledge of mother tongue interference.

| Questionnaire item | SA | A | D | SD | \bar{X} | Decision |
|---|----|----|---|----|-----------|----------|
| A second language user's mother tongue interferes with the English language | 35 | 15 | 2 | - | 3.63 | Accept |
| Mother tongue interferes in the learning of English as a second language | 31 | 19 | 2 | - | 3.55 | Accept |
| Mother tongue interferes in the use of English as a second language | 34 | 14 | 2 | 2 | 3.53 | Accept |
| Grand mean (\bar{X}) | | | | | 3.57 | |

Table 1 presents data on the teacher's awareness or otherwise of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language. The table clearly revealed that all the respondents agreed that they are aware that mother tongue truly interferes in the learning and use of English as a second language.

Table II: Mean responses of English teachers on the areas of language study where interference occurs.

| Questionnaire item | SA | A | D | SD | \bar{X} | Decision |
|---|----|----|---|----|-----------|----------|
| A second language user forms sentences in English language using the syntactic or sentence formation pattern of his/her mother tongue | 25 | 15 | 7 | 5 | 3.15 | Accept |
| A second language user adopts the phonological system of his/her mother tongue in pronouncing English words | 30 | 18 | 4 | - | 3.5 | Accept |
| A second language user interprets the meaning of certain words/things from the point of view of his/her mother tongue's linguistic system and experience. | 21 | 23 | 5 | 3 | 3.119 | Accept |
| A second language user sometimes ascribes the meaning of a word as obtained in his/her | 23 | 27 | 2 | - | 3.40 | Accept |

| | | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--|--|--|------|--|
| mother tongue to an English word | | | | | | |
| Grand mean (\bar{x}) | | | | | 3.31 | |

Table 2 presents data on the areas of language study where mother tongue interference occurs. The mean responses shown in the table (all above 2.50) indicate that the respondents accepted that mother tongue interference occurs at the syntactic, phonological, lexical and semantic areas/levels of the English language.

Table III: Mean responses of teachers on whether mother tongue interference negatively affects the learning and use of English.

| Questionnaire item | SA | A | D | SD | \bar{X} | Decision |
|--|----|----|---|----|-----------|----------|
| Mother tongue interference affects a second langue user's competence and performance in English language. | 38 | 14 | - | - | 3.73 | Accept |
| Mother tongue interference accounts for the learners' poor performance in English examinations. | 40 | 12 | - | - | 3.76 | Accept |
| Mother tongue interference constitutes a constraint to effective learning and understanding of English language. | 20 | 26 | 4 | 2 | 3.23 | Accept |
| Mother tongue | 16 | 24 | 4 | 8 | 2.92 | Accept |

| | | | | | | |
|--|----|----|---|---|------|--------|
| interference is responsible for the construction of ungrammatical English sentences | | | | | | |
| Mother tongue interference accounts for a second language user's mispronunciation of English words | 34 | 16 | 2 | - | 3.61 | Accept |
| Mother tongue interference is responsible for a second language user's incorrect utterances during conversations in English language | 24 | 20 | 2 | 6 | 3.19 | Accept |
| Grand mean (\bar{x}) | | | | | 3.40 | |

Table 3 presents the respondents' mean responses on whether mother tongue interference negatively affects the learning and use of English as a second language. From the data analyzed above, all the respondents concurred that mother tongue interference has very negative effects on the learning and use of English. The grand mean (3.40) being above 2.50 mean benchmark is a strong indication that it constitutes serious impediment in the learning and use of English as a second language.

Discussion of Findings

The study was on the effect of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language. English language teachers' responses generated data for the study. The result of the empirical study in table one, which sought to know

whether teachers are aware of the interference, revealed that all the English language teachers in the educational zone are aware of the existence of mother tongue interference. This finding is consistent with that of Swan (2015) who observed in his study that research has confirmed that language teachers have always known that mother tongue interferes in a second language user's learning experience, influencing the way the language is learnt and used.

Findings in table two showed that mother tongue interference occurs at the lexical, phonological, syntactic and semantic levels/areas of the English language because all the items in the table were above 2.50 mean benchmark, indicating total acceptance by the respondents. This finding is in conformity with those of Attaman (2008); Owolabi (2007) and Swan and Smith (2000) who noted that second language user mispronounced English words and often forms sentences in English wrongly owing to their native language experiences and influence.

Another pertinent finding of this study is the discovery in table three that mother tongue interference has negative effects in the learning and use of English as a second language. Findings revealed that poor performance of learners in the language is largely attributed to mother tongue interference. The very high mean score obtained under each item (all at over 2.50) authenticated this. The findings corroborated those of Onotere (2007), Oghiato (2005) and Radhika (2013) respectively, who remarked that mother tongue interference is greatly responsible for the poor performance of second language users of English in the language both in oral and written forms. Abubakah's (2008) study had earlier supported this finding when he discovered that

learners performed abysmally in English language due to the negative influence of their indigenous languages.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Language has always been an indispensable asset exclusively used by human beings to communicate. Mother tongue is that language which a speaker naturally relies on for effective communication because it is indigenous to him and meets every aspect of his linguistic needs.

This research centering on the effect of mother tongue interference in the learning and use of English as a second language has revealed those problematic areas and issues associated with most second language learning situations. Firstly, the findings of the research have indicated that English language teachers are aware that the learners' native language interferes in the learning and use of English language usage. Besides, it has become clear that the interference constitutes an impediment to the second language user's effort at attaining appreciable proficiency level in the English language. The problem of interference as can be seen from the foregoing occurs at the lexical, syntactic, phonological and semantic areas or level of the English language, hindering the effective use of the language by the second language user.

Against this backdrop, therefore, the researcher recommends the following as a way out of the problem of first language interference with the English language learning and use:

- Language professionals who write textbooks in Nigeria should take cognizance of the sociolinguistic background of the learners as second language users of English.

- English language teachers should pay adequate attention to those problematic areas of the language that challenge learners.
- There should be vivid distinction, made with adequate illustrations, between English and native languages of the learners.
- Government should provide teaching aids for language instruction such as language laboratories, radios, tapes etc.
- More attention should be devoted to teaching the area of phonology as this challenges learners most. The difference between the phonological system of English and our various mother tongues should be made very clear to learners.

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