

Mechanisms And Variegated Manifestations Of Inteferece In Nigerian English Usage: The Pedagogical Implications

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Abstract

Nigerian bilinguals' use of English as a second language is fraught with interference from L1 to L2, a phenomenon that is commonplace world-wide as a linguistic enterprise. But the extent of this trend in bilinguals varies from one language to another based on socio-linguistic and cultural variables. In Nigeria, manifestations of interference in the use of English bilinguals can be clearly noticed in their spoken and written English at the different levels of linguistic description with far-reaching negative consequences. As worrisome as this might be, this is part of efforts to revivify the needful to mitigate its effects on Nigerians. The investigation renders a lucid exposition on interference, its mechanisms and variegated manifestations, and a clear roadmap situated in pedagogical implications.

Introduction

The most influential and useful legacy left behind by British occupation of Nigeria up to date is the introduction of English language, which has launched her a place in the comity of nations in the world. The historical development of this phenomenon called English in Nigeria, falls under three main cycles, according to Awonusi (2009: 48 – 60). These include: the period of the early incursion, between 1400 – 1842, the era of missionary adventurism, between 1843 -1914 and the period of independence and experimentation, between 1915 – 1990. In other words, the 15th century marked the beginning of new lease of life for a people who hitherto could not reach out to one another by means of social interaction. Today, the functions of English in Nigeria are better appreciated than imagined and these can be clearly seen locally and internationally.

The status of English as a Second Language (ESL) learner/user which Nigeria enjoys implies that Nigeria doesn't belong to the nations of the world, whose mother tongue is English, for instance, Britain, USA etc, but who use English as a second language. In other words, Nigerian bilinguals learn to use English after they had acquired their mother tongue, for instance, Yoruba, Igbo, Effik etc. The issues of acquiring a first language and learning a second or a third language are somehow confusing but acquiring and learning a language patently are not the same. Krashen (1982) made a well articulated investigation on the notions and established that “acquired” pertains to an established inherent experiences of learning through communicative process of unconsciousness, while “learned” relates to an instructional environment where attention is drawn to the regularities of language systems and the learner remains conscious in efficiency and in learning and language use. Nigeria belongs to this later group where English is learned consciously as a second language.

All over the world, ESL learning environments are fraught with problems, some of which have contributed to the numerous errors identified in the use of ESL. The expected target of the user of language is unmistakably as a means of communication with clear and ease process. This however, is achievable when users attain competence in their language. Errors inhibit competence and Headbloom (1979) avers that errors are caused by socio-cultural and linguistic factors. Knowledge of linguistic studies, especially applied linguistics (Anyadiegwu and Obi-Okoye 2008) has shown that errors in ESL learning are broadly classified into two areas of interlingual and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors pertain to errors of interference while intralingual errors are those that hinge on the nature of the target language. In what follows, I will focus on language transfer or interference as a linguistic phenomenon.

Interference

Interference refers to a situation where a speaker or writer applies his knowledge of one language to another (Weinreich 1953). It means the transfer of linguistic features between languages in the speech or writing of a bilingual or multilingual from L1 to L2 or vice visa. Transfer can be positive or negative. When the relevant units and structures are the same, in both languages transfer can be termed positive because of the resultant correct usage. But in language studies,

negative transfer is most commonly discussed because it is a source of learners errors. Negative transfers occur when speakers or writers transfer items and structures that are dissimilar in both languages. The idea of similarity and dissimilarity was made more popular by the theory of contrastive analysis which insist that the greater the difference between the two languages, the more negative transfer that will be recorded in the production of linguistic units and structures. (James 1980). Normally, all new learning involves transfer of some of the previous learning and that makes it apparent for the initial learning of L1 to impart on L2 which this paper is inclined to address.

In foreign language learning, “the prime or even the sole cause of difficulty and error is interference coming from the learners native language” (Anyadiegwu and Obi-Okoye 2009:181). Interference is borne out of languages in contact and as bilinguals learn and use English, some of the elements of their native language which have formed a base in their systems are transferred into their new learning. Those transferred units, structures and elements of the L1 hinder the performance of English in some way when even he becomes proficient, and it is not only young learners that make interference errors but also adult users of English. In Nigeria, interference errors are making a devastating damage on the ESL bilinguals' speech and writing and making him incompetent especially when measured against the standard usages.

Generally, interference occurs in the performance of the bilingual/multilingual because of certain prevalent reasons. Some of them include the fact that interference is a result of languages in contact, that means whenever there is interference, the bilingual is exposed to at least two different codes, each of these codes has its distinct and separate linguistic features and characteristics. The brain being the only apartment which receives and stores all the linguistic systems often find it not easy to separate the codes and therefore one system may intrude on the other. Again, if any of the code is not used often, the brain tends to drop and loose some of its features learnt, in other words, depreciation may affect the less used code. But interference is much more a phenomenon of an earlier acquired learning habit which has already got its root in the bilingual to the extent that when a new linguistic habit is formed, features of L1 still shows up even in the speech of the educated.

Variegated manifestations of interference in Nigerian English usage

There are many ways in which interference has manifested in the speech and writing of the Nigerian bilingual. Prominent among such levels include phonological, grammatical (including syntax and morphological), orthographical, lexical, semantic, dialectical, idiomatical and so on.

Phonological Level

Interference in Nigerian English usage is not as apparent in other levels as in the phonological to the extent that when a Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Efik and so on is speaking, you can easily identify his mother tongue through his production of phonological sounds. This transfer is necessitated by the fact that the sounds in his mother tongue which he has already acquired and those of the second language are not the same. For instance, the number of consonant sounds in Yoruba language and English are not exactly the same and English consonant sounds are more. Hausa has fewer sounds meaning some of the sounds in English are absent in Hausa (Jubril 1982). Igbo language and numerous other languages in Nigeria have similar problems of non-exactness of sounds with the target language. To be more precise, most Nigerian languages lack dental fricatives [θ]-[ʃ], the [r] sound differs phonetically in all languages, and Igbo has the largest number of sounds while the Yoruba has the least (Awonusi 2009 :209).

In all of these, what the Nigerian user of English is doing is to use the equivalent of sounds available in his mother tongue to English just to get a sort of sound equivalence. Hence, many Nigerian English Bilinguals pronounce the following words as follow.

Journey - /dɔɔni/ - Jo ni

Bank - /bɔɔk/ - bank

Faith - /feiθ/ - fet

Vowel harmony in Nigerian languages and English pose a lot of difficulty to Nigerian user. In most Nigerian languages, for instance Igbo, vowel harmony has a clear system but this is not so in English.

Most Nigerian languages have CVCV syllabic structure while English has the structure C⁰⁻³ VC⁰⁻⁴ (Anyadiegwe 2008:78). Unlike the local languages, English is stressed timed, intonation, rhythm and accent are

lost to local languages. English, to be precise is an intonational language while Nigerian languages are tonal. The result of all these and more are phonological deviation from the standard RP which are clearly manifested unconsciously from Nigerian English usage.

Syntactic/semantic levels

The syntactic network is to some linguists the soul of any language without which it ceases to exist (Dadzie 2009:226). Syntax refers to the structuring and ordering of components within a sentence and the nature of rules governing them. Syntax is often discussed in relation to meaning because language is used to mean, not just any technical accuracy or formulation. The burden of this unit is that there is an acceptable way of expression in English in which the user is seen as having intuition about grammatical structures and grammatical well-formedness in his language. Yet, there are certain times users of English as a second language try to express themselves in ways and manners that fall short of the standard and acceptable because of their limited intuition about their language resulting in obvious incompetence. It may be as a result of fracturing of L2 codes or forms which may be strange but which gives them what they intend in their own code.

The aforementioned situation can be described as 'negative transfer' or 'interference error' and it is wide-spread in L2 learning manifesting in a low competent learner. In Nigeria, such interlingual transfers are numerous and they affect the daily user of English as second language. Some transfer errors are caused by differences in the rules of L1 and L2 sentence formation or even due to social and linguistic attitudes of L2 speakers. Examine the structures below:

1. He asked me that where I was going
2. I have kill a snake
3. I employed a watchman yesterday
4. John is too good
5. He has a new brand car
6. I didn't know his condition for health
7. The boy was cured from his ailment
8. I congratulate you for your promotion
9. God saves this our nation

A cursory look at the sentences above, one will notice that all of them are far away from the acceptable standard variation of the

competent speaker of English. For instance, no 1 is direct transfer of the structure of reported statement in the native language to L2, while no 9 is a consequence of sociolinguistic attitude of the speaker where the meaning of "too" in the context is different from the native speaker's meaning in English. In all the cases above, it is obvious that deviations from the norms are varied but still have their roots in transfer in linguistic and social context. Other areas where Nigerian English has shown clear instances of potential meaning deviation are included in structures as:

1. The food is sweet
2. He has a bad mouth
3. We heard the smell
4. She eats bribe in the Nation's judiciary
5. Go well

Lexical level

A lexical item is a word or group of words which forms the smallest meaningful segment of a language. It may be a word, words or even a phrase in as much as it consists of a unit of meaning in that language. In Nigerian English usage, certain areas have been identified as obvious deviations from the standard norms and these are mostly in errors emanating from spelling, prepositions and wrong choice of lexical items (Daramola 2008:246). In all the three areas of errors identified, especially lexical choices, where redundancies and distorted meaning are rife, meanings are normally understood by users because these errors are mostly transfer errors. Nigerian bilingual, like others, do not only think but also have to use the various codes together and even substitute one for another at times. This linguistic practice is found among educated bilinguals who are competent in the two codes and are unable to separate the codes in their use situations. The result is transfer of lexical items from L1 to L2. At other instances, Nigerian bilinguals can neither transliterate nor translate some lexical items into English which result in using the English lexical items together.

Some errors in lexical choices are noticed in the following structures.

1. He's corrupt - He's immoral
2. Senior sister - Elder sister
3. They beat themselves - They beat each other

4. Seek for honour - Seek honour
5. With regards to - With regard to
6. Please, dress a bit - Please, shift/move a little
7. She is my tight friend - She's a close friend
8. She has arrived - She has become rich
9. Drop - Alight
10. Go slow - Traffic jam

In all the error stricken structures above, either there is an omission or redundant preposition, substitution of one idea from L1 to L2 or their use together, or the error is understood by the Nigerian bilinguals. But these errors have been and still being passed on from one generation to another even by the educated elites especially in an informal setting.

Orthographic level

The Nigerian bilingual do not have any problem spelling words in his L1 because the structure of words have the simple CVCV pattern of spelling as tonal languages. English, on the other hand, has incongruity of spelling and pronunciation as there is no one-on-one correspondence between sound and spelling systems. Its spelling system is based on phonemic segmentation culminating in various spelling behavior quite unpredictable unlike L1. Therefore, when the Nigerian English bilingual tries to spell the English word with the same background of one-on-one correspondence that he runs into the problem of interference from L1. An Igbo English user may spell these words as:

- Obvious - ovious
- Island - ailand
- Motor - moto
- Cream - krimu
- School - skulu

Dialectical level

Instances of dialectical interference are recorded when the same meaning could be signified in different words from area to area within the same language community, yet such varieties are quite mutually intelligible to the users in a larger linguistic environment. Anyadiegwu (2008:90) gives an evidence of how the dialectical varieties of Chukwu, Obasi and Olisa are signaling God

in Igbo which are mutually intelligible to Igbo speakers of English language in Nigeria.

Very significant at this level of interference is code mixing and code switching between L1 and the English language in Nigeria. All the numerous languages spoken in Nigeria manifest these phenomena. Subsuming the former, code switching, Gal (1985:247) says “ is a conversational strategy used to establish, cross or destroy group boundaries; to create, evoke or change interpersonal relations with their rights and obligations.

In Nigeria, using or mixing codes together in the speech patterns whether at the word, phrase, clause or sentential levels of discourse is quite an established phenomenon. Some examples suffice

1. I no go school - Igbo/English
2. Bo, lets go - Ijo/English
3. Se o ti ko essay I won fun wa? - Yoruba/English
4. I am going to school. Ina-abila - Etche/English

Code mixing according to Wardhaugh (1998:3) is “when conversants use both languages together to the extent that they change from one language to the other in the course of a single utterance”. These twin features of code-mixing and code-switching no doubt, are significant aspects of interference of the bilinguals' use of English.

Pedagogical Implications

The discussions above so far clearly point to the fact that interference as a linguistic feature pervades the Nigerian English bilingual in his daily use of English as a second language. It is also significant to mention that all over the world, such features are rife, some of which have resulted in part to varieties of English in accent, grammar, vocabulary and so on. Yet, other features of linguistic and cultural backgrounds are all intertwine to the extent that there are plethora of varieties of English, each having a right of existence and valid for the purpose of communication. Hence, it is known among linguists that no dialect of a language (English) is superior to the other as long as they fulfill the objective of its existence among the people.

The issue of linguistic common core in English is real and it relates to the very standard fundamentals that ensure mutual international intelligibility. English with its numerous dialects, has first, the two main national dialects (British and American dialects), second, English as L1 varieties, as L2 varieties and so many other regional and sub-regional varieties are all relevant in their purpose. In all these

varieties of English, the standard form is maintained for the purpose of international intelligibility and is the form used by the educated elites, schools, press, media and publications in the various regions. This standard form is distinctive not mostly in aspects of pronunciation but in grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Above all, the little difference in grammar, vocabulary and spelling among the standard forms are well-known to users of the various standard forms. For instance, where the American is talking about the gasoline, casket and candy, you hear the British, say, petrol, coffin and sweets respectively.

Grammar, vocabulary and spelling are linguistic features attainable through external acquisition process to an extent but the aspect of accent is a natural inheritance. (Yule 2007:227) describes it as an aspect of pronunciation which identifies where an individual speaker is from, regionally or socially. In other words, it is easy to have a standard form (Standard English), as we have today, except perhaps in accent. In Nigeria, like elsewhere in the world, Interference is no where apparent as much as in pronunciation than in other levels including syntactic, semantics, lexical and so on. But in the face of these undaunting interference problems to contend with by the Nigerian user of English, some measures discussed below are necessary steps in enhancing pedagogy.

Recognition of common core values is indispensable in Nigerian English usage. By common core here refers to the ability of the Nigerian user to maintain relationship with other users by approximately closely to mutual international intelligibility of English in terms of usage at all levels of linguistic descriptive. It is clear that by virtue of some unavoidable reasons, every language like English, has varieties but there is always mutual intelligibility because these varieties relates to a common core. A Nigerian can conveniently discuss with an American or a British because all exhibit the language in its common core which is intelligible to all and the minor differences between them are even known to all. Accent is idiosyncratic therefore competence in a language matters much in grammar, vocabulary and spelling rather than aspects of pronunciation.

In order to maintain the common core of English usage in Nigeria and to maintain mutual international intelligibility, standardization of the numerous regional varieties is imperative. Standardization will further introduce Nigerians to the standard educated English usage in spoken and written media whose linguistic components are not heavily been influenced or dependent on regional varieties as it is presently. Standardization implies that each regional

variety be synchronized to the accepted standard at the same time accommodating the peculiarities of the region as all are within the purview of the common core.

To standardize Nigerian English usage requires that you adapt the works of renowned and notable writers in Nigeria who have attained not only local but international repute. It is on record that Nigeria is blessed with such writers notable among them are: Chinua Achebe, whose initial work has been translated in over fifty countries of the world, Wole Soyinka, a playwright and Nobel Prize Winner for Literature (1987), Flora Nwapa, G.C Ike and a host of others. In the works of these elite writers, Nigerian learners of English can complement the study of English through literature in the areas of syntax, morphology, lexis, semantics and so on. For instance, through the works of Chinua Achebe, Nigerians learnt how to use proverbs effectively in their daily lives and its communicative role has been revived.

Certain Educational authorities in Nigeria in view of uniformity and maintenance of acceptable standards have been in the vanguard of standardization of linguistic values since decades ago. The West African Examination Council (WAEC), GCE, NECO etc must be mentioned in this respect, to galvanize effort internationally in charactering emergent variegated varieties without losing sight of jealously guiding acceptable standards in the regions. This can be clearly seen through their examination questions which specify what the candidate needs to know before qualifying at a particular level. The roles played by this body are particularly significant since they are a concentric of experts in applied linguistics.

At the acme of TESL practice in Nigeria is the teacher who ensures the real implementation of programmes and policies to filter to the ultimate beneficiary. It implies therefore that the teacher ought to be grounded in the philosophy of linguistic education in itself and to the overall benefit of the educational objectives. TESL practitioners do not only need to be abreast of the rudiments of impacting knowledge , strong insights in linguistics, but also in applied linguistics to be acquainted with the problems of interference, its nature, manifestations and how to handle same in Nigerian context. TESL practitioners driven by knowledge will curb most cases that arise from interference problems in Nigerian English usage thereby taking cognizance of the local colouring and managing it to the best, at the same time maintaining the common core of language for purposes of mutual international intelligibility.

Conclusion

In this paper, we tried to look at the phenomenon of interference in Nigerian English usage and saw its numerous manifestations at the various levels. Interference is more apparent at the phonological than in either the syntactic, semantics, lexical or even orthographical levels. But this linguistic feature has a diverse implication for pedagogy and it is concluded that adequate knowledge of the problems of interference in Nigerian context and professional readiness on the part of the TESL practitioners will give Nigerians the desired results.

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