
Re-Examining the Problems of Teaching and Learning of English as a Second Language in Nigeria: The Igbo L2 Users Example

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Abstract

The English Language stands out as a colossus bestriding over 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Due to political, social and economic reasons, the English Language was adopted as a second language (L2) in Nigeria. The Nigerian learner of English is assumed to have already acquired an indigenous language as his/her first language (L1) before being exposed to English especially for those in the rural areas. The tendency therefore is for learners to carry over the system of his/her L1 into L2 amongst other problems encountered in teaching and learning English as a second language. This study is therefore aimed at re-examining the problems of teaching and learning English as a second language in Nigeria. The objectives include: To review the linguistic factors such as interference from the learners L1; to examine the difficulties inherent in English Language itself and to proffer possible solutions to the identified problems. The result of the study shows that the linguistic problems that students encounter are: phonological errors, syntactic errors, improper separation of codes amongst others. This work adopts a contrastive analysis approach. It is recommended that the teaching of English should not be made an all comers affairs. Government should provide

periodic in service training and language learning materials for all language teachers and schools respectively.

Keywords: First Language (L1), Second Language (L2), English as a Second Language (ESL), Teaching, Learning.

1.0 Introduction

The English language plays many roles in Nigeria. The nature of the country as a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic nation compels the Nigerian child to learn and use English in order to communicate with people outside their linguistic environment. Hence, the English language functions as the language of inter-ethnic communication. It is a uniting factor in Nigeria.

Despite the over 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria, English was adopted as a second language, as well as the nation's official language. Till date, none of the indigenous languages has evolved to fill this important gap because of the stiff opposition amongst them. Consequently, English is the language of politics and administration in Nigeria. It is the language of the law courts, the language of trade and commerce, as well as the social media. Most importantly, English is the language of education in Nigeria. Apart from being a core subject, it is the language through which other subjects in the curriculum are taught (with the exception of other languages). It is the language of instruction from mid-primary through secondary education, to tertiary education in Nigeria. The majority of text books are written in English. In fact, competence in English (spoken and written) is an index of good education in Nigeria. For now, and for a long time to come, English remains an indispensable language in the Nigerian education system.

Suffice it then to say that competence in English language is a basic necessity for every Nigerian who desires to be relevant in the socio-political and economic processes in the country. Hence, the importance of teaching and learning English in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. A child, who has already mastered the grammar rules and the oral skills of his L1, is suddenly introduced to the English language at a certain point in his formal education. He is bound to face certain difficulties in trying to integrate the systems of his L1 with that of the L2. The Igbo/English bilinguals, as well as other Nigerians, face these difficulties. As educators, it is important to note what these difficulties are, and how to help our students grapple with them.

Based on this backdrop, the paper examines some of the problems encountered in the teaching and learning of English as a second language as it affects the Igbo L2 users, with the aim of proffering possible novel solutions to them.

2.0 Conceptual framework

2.1 First language (L₁)

Nwigwe (2007) describes first language as “the language that a person acquires in infancy and early childhood in one’s native setting and within one’s family”. This implies that first language (L₁) is the language a child acquires in his immediate environment, within the enclave where he/she is born and brought up. There is the possibility that the language of the wider environment where the parents are domiciled could be different from the child’s first language. For instance, if a Yoruba couple lives in Owerri where Igbo language is predominantly spoken, and they have a child who picks up Yoruba language within the enclave of their home, Yoruba becomes the child’s first language. If the child later

acquires Igbo, (the language of the wider environment) then Igbo becomes the child's sequential second language.

First language is used interchangeably with Mother Tongue (MT), and native language. Akindele and Adebite (2005) define mother tongue as “the sequential first language of a bilingual or multilingual person” They further aver that MT is the language that fully identifies a person with his native culture and tradition. For instance, Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo are mother tongues for Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo cultural groups. The child is exposed to the language daily and it is used to express the world views of the speech community that owns it. According to Adebite (2005), MT is the language in which the bi/multilingual person conducts his everyday activities, in which he has the greatest linguistic facility”. So, first language or mother tongue is the first language that a child acquires in his/her natural setting. It is also that preferred language of expression of a bilingual/multilingual person, even when there are other options.

2.1.1 Second language (L₂)

Second language (L₂) is defined by Akindele and Adebite (2005), as “the sequential second language of a bilingual person”. The concept of ‘second language’ implies that the language user already has a first language and the acquisition of a second language makes him/her bilingual. We have to make a distinction between the meanings of second language as it affects an individual and second language as it affects a nation. With reference to the illustration of a Yoruba couple used earlier, it is possible for an individual to have two indigenous languages as first and second languages, especially in a multilingual situation as we have in Nigeria.

The L₂ arises in a situation where a nation adopts a non-native language to play the role of its second language in the face of so many indigenous languages competing with one another. This is the case of Nigeria, which adopted English as a second language and accorded it an official status.

2.1.2 English as a second language (ESL)

Nwigwe (2007:69), avers that:

The statement, ‘English is a Second Language in Nigeria’ does not imply a sequential second language. Rather, it is a technical term and second language in this sense implies that it is a non-native language which is used alongside other languages for purposes of communication and has been accorded official status.

Many countries, including Nigeria, have adopted English as a second language. Such countries are Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Ghana, Kenya, and India.

According to Ike (2007:182)

English is a second language when it has a special standing in a country, such as being acceptable in the courts of law, being a medium of instruction in major sectors of the educational system, being used in regional or national administration, being commonly used on radio or television, and where there are major newspaper published in English.

This colossal stance of English in nations where it is adopted as a second language underscores the need for a vigorous teaching and learning of the language in such nations.

2.2 The concept of teaching

Smith (2018:1) defines teaching as “the process of attending to people’s needs, experiences and feelings, and intervening so that they learn particular things and go beyond the given”. According to him, interventions can take the form of questioning, giving information, explaining some phenomenon, demonstrating a skill or process, testing understanding and capacity, and facilitating learning activity.

Center for Teaching and Learning (2013:1) also defines teaching as “engagement with learners to enable their understanding and application of knowledge, concepts and processes. It includes design, content selection, delivery and reflection”. They further state that the aim of teaching is not only to transmit information, but also to transform students from passive recipients of others’ knowledge into active constructors of their own and others’ knowledge.

Teaching can also be seen as a series of activities geared towards enabling an individual to acquire and utilize attitudes, skills and knowledge that will make him/her become a productive and useful citizen. It is a process of influencing someone to change his/her behavior to a desirable direction. In essence, the goal of teaching is learning. Narrowing this down to language teaching, especially in a second language situation, it is the totality of activities that are intended to bring about language learning.

2.3 The concept of learning

Smith (1999) observes that in the 1990s, learning was popularly described as “the relatively permanent change in a person’s knowledge or behavior due to experience” Smith (2018:4) further posits that “this change may be deliberate or unintentional, for better or for worse; to qualify as learning, this change must be brought about by experience, by the interaction of a person with

his or her environment”. In the above definition, learning is approached as an outcome, that is, the product of some process. It is seen as an effect of experience on behavior.

Dharmaraj (2015) reasons that learning does not happen only within the school, it is something that happens in our everyday life. It starts right from birth and continues throughout our life time. Every stage in our life is molded to bring modifications in our knowledge and behavior. According to him, these modifications or changes are brought by the experience that we gained through the interaction with the environment and its people. In other words, we learn something either incidentally or accidentally in common and natural situations in our life. Learning prepares the individuals for adjusting and adapting with the existing environment. However, changes due to maturation and hunger, and response to instincts and reflexes cannot be attributed to learning. So, generally speaking, learning is a process by which one acquires, processes, and stores information. The main objective of learning is to bring desirable changes to our behavior.

We cannot talk about learning without referring to memory. In psychology, learning, retention, recall and recognition constitute what we call memory. Things we learn and all our experiences are stored in our memory so that they can be recalled and be utilized when they are required. Memory is a function of the mind which has the capacity to record, retain, recognize and produce ideas when the need arises (Dharmaraj 2015). Hence, the state of a learner’s memory is very important in the process of learning. Inability to recall what has been learned earlier is as bad as not learning at all.

According to Dharmaraj (2015:26), “We learn a new language by studying it, but we speak it by using our memory to retrieve the words that we have learned earlier”. Memory provides

the framework by which the knowledge stored in it is linked with a new knowledge by association. In fact, memory is essential to all learning, including language learning, because it lets us store and retrieve the information that we learn.

3.0 Theoretical framework

This paper is hinged on the contrastive analysis hypothesis propounded by Robert Lado in 1957, in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures*. Lado claims that those elements which are similar to the learner's L1 will be simple; and those elements that are different, will be difficult. Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment, and to suggest a way for the contrastive study of languages. This involves describing the language using structural linguistics, comparing them and predicting learning difficulties. Other proponents of CA include Selinka, Carlborn & Schacter (1973) representing audio-lingual theorists. They drew much of their stance from the field of behavioural psychology which sees language learning as acquiring a new set of habits. They believe that previously learned habits interfere with the acquisition of new ones. In relation to L2 learning, the learners' previous language, usually inhibits or enhances the learning of the new language. Based on this CA hypothesis, selected areas of the two languages (English and Igbo) will be contrasted. We also adopt the descriptive method in our data analysis. The data analyzed were taken from different published resources.

4.0 Data presentation and analysis

The data presented here were drawn from two broad areas: mother tongue interference and problems inherent in the English language itself.

4.1 Mother tongue interference

This is also known as inter-lingual transfer or what some linguists refer to as ‘cross-linguistic influence’. Each child, within the Igbo extraction, in Nigeria is assumed to have acquired his or her mother tongue (L₁) before being exposed to English language (L₂). There is a tendency therefore, for the learner to confuse the rules and structures of the second language with those of their first language. Application of L₁ rules to L₂ learning is known as ‘language transfer’.

Headbloom (1979), citing Osgood (1953), defines ‘transfer’ as “the effect of a preceding activity upon the learning of a given task”. This transfer is termed ‘positive’ when it enhances the learning of the second language. It is ‘negative’ when it impedes the learning of the second language. This negative language transfer is what is regarded as interference. Interference therefore can be defined as the negative influence of the learner’s previous language on the learning of a second language. Thus, most of the problems associated with L₂ learning are assumed to be caused by mother-tongue interference.

This interference can occur at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels. The contrastive analysis hypothesis propounded by Robert Lado (1957) asserts that areas of differences between the learner’s first language and the second language constitute or pose problems for the learner; whereas areas of similarities enhance the learning of the target language. Based on this premise, the following instances are reviewed:

4.1.1 Interference at the phonological level

According to Nwachukwu (2007), there are sounds in the target language that do not occur in the learners L₁. For instance, the English long vowels do not occur in Igbo language. The tendency therefore is for the Igbo L₂ learner to approximate these vowels to the closest ones in his L₁.

1. /a:/ is approximated to /æ/
/ɜ:/ is approximated to /e/
/i:/ is approximated to /ɪ/
/ɔ:/ is approximated to /ɔ/

When they listen to English phonemes, they tend to hear the nearest familiar ones in their L₁ phonemes; hence they approximate, ignoring the difference as insignificant. This causes confusion. For instance, a child who hears:

*His **hat** is broken instead of His **heart** is broken or*

*I have a **bed** instead of I have a **bird**, or*

*The **pot** is closed instead of The **port** is closed or*

*He **bit** me instead of He **beat** me; certainly gets the wrong information.*

Njoku (2014) states that the Igbo learners of English as a second language find it difficult to make the phonetic distinction in the following words:

2.								
	/æ/ &	/a:/	/ʌ/ &	/ɔ/	/e/ &	/ɜ:/	/ɔ:/ &	
	/ɜ:/							
bad	barred	cut	cot	bed	bird	born		
burn								
cat	cart	hut	hot	head	heard	torn		
turn								

Table 1 English phonemes contrasted with Igbo phonemes¹

Word	Transcription	English Phonemes	Igbo Phonemes	Word	Translation
seat	/si:t/	/i:/	/i/	igwe	sky
sit	/sɪt/	/ɪ/	/ɪ/	Ida	to fall
bed	/bed/ or /ɛ/	/e/ or /ɛ/	/e/	ede	cocoyam
back	/bæk/	/æ/	/ɑ/	agu	lion
bark	/bɑ:k/	/ɑ:/	-	-	-
pot	/pɒt/ or /ɒ/	/ɔ/ or /ɒ/	/ɔ/	oku	light
port	/pɔ:t/	/ɔ:/	-	-	-
foot	/fʊt/	/ʊ/	/ʊ/	ulo	house
you	/ju:/	/u:/	/u:/	udo	peace
but	/bʌt/	/ʌ/	-	-	-
first	/fɜ:st/	/ɜ:/	-	-	-
again	/əgeɪn/	/ə/	-	-	-
go	/gəʊ/	/əʊ/	-	-	-
			/o/	oche	chair
pit	/pɪt/	/p/	/p/	puo	leave
book	/bʊk/	/b/	/b/	bia	come
ten	/ten/ or /ɛ/	/t/	/t/	taa	chew
deep	/di:p/	/d/	/d/	dee	write
thick	/θɪk/	/θ/	-	-	-
then	/ðen/ or /ɛ/	/ð/	-	-	-

¹ Note that this table is not exhaustive. Only the most important sounds have been represented.

From the table above, we can see that in the Igbo language, there is no differentiation in the vowel phonemes /æ/ and /ɑ:/ as in *man* and *farm*; /ɔ/, /ɔ:/ and /ʌ/ as in *cot*, *court* and *cut*. Again, there is no schwa /ə/ in Igbo as English has in again /əgɪn/, away /əweɪ/ and so on. Hence, the Igbo L2 user approximates the problematic vowels to the closest ones in his/her L1. The same goes for the problematic consonants /θ/ and /ð/, substituted with /t/ and /d/ respectively.

4.1.2 Interference at the syntactic level

Nwachukwu (2007:42) posits that “Nigerian languages do not have the article system”. The Igbo language in particular does not have the articles ‘a, an, the’; rather quantifiers such as *otu* ‘one’, *abuo* ‘two’ etc. are used. This means that there is article omission in the syntactic structure of the learners’ L₁ which has occasioned some erroneous productions such as:

- 6) ‘She has problem’ instead of She has a problem
‘She killed snake’ instead of She killed a snake

Nwachukwu further states that there is no gender distinction in the use of pronouns in Igbo language. *o/o* can stand for both male and female

- 7) *O na-eri nri* – He/she is eating.
O zuru oshi - He/she stole.

This accounts for the gender mix-up in the ESL learners’ output.

4.1.3 Interference at the lexical and semantic levels

According to Nwachukwu (2007), interference at this level occurs as a result of transliteration whereby the learners first think in their

L₁ before they translate their thoughts in the second language. Thus, we have such expressions as:

8.

Anyi anaghi anụ oyibo.	We don't <u>hear</u> English (understand)
Bia ngwa ngwa.	Come <u>now now</u> (immediately)
Ọ bụ na inughị ushi ahu?	Do you not hear the smell?
(perceive)	

Language is culture bound. There is a danger when contexts in the English language that appear to correspond with the L₁ contexts are actually different. For example, a brother in Igbo and Nigeria by extension (and some parts of Africa), includes not only male children of the same biological parents; the meaning is extended to include half-brothers, cousins, and fellow-clansmen and so on. Again, a family is not thought of as a father, a mother and their children. It has a semantic extension including uncles, aunts, grandparents and so on. The second language teacher has to take note of these interferences from the mother-tongue and devise means of eliminating them.

4.2 Difficulties inherent in the English Language

When considering the problems encountered in the teaching and learning of English as a second language, what usually comes first to the mind is mother-tongue interference. Incidentally, this is not the only problem; there are some inherent features of English itself which create problems for ESL learners. These would be treated under the following sub-headings:

- Complex grammar rules of English
- Lack of correlation between the English spelling system and pronunciation

- Multiplicity of meaning as in polysemous words
- Lack of consistency in word formation rules.

4.2.1 The Complex Grammar Rules of English

The grammar of English consists of a system of rules and principles for speaking and writing the language. These rules are sometimes complex that they become problematic for learners. They sometimes become confused and tend to misapply or over-generalize these rules. This usually happens when the learners are not told that there are exceptions to the rules. Let us consider the following:

i) Tense formation rules: Headbloom (1979:33), states that “the fact that many English verbs are irregular causes unaware learners to over-generalize inflections”. For instance, regular verbs such as walk, call, attend etc. form their past tense by adding the suffix -ed to the base form. But English irregular verbs do not follow the same rule for tense formation. Examples are:

Verb	past form	past participle form
bite	bit	bitten
eat	ate	eaten
drive	drove	driven
build	built	built
make	made	made
hit	hit	hit
cut	cut	cut

If the exceptions to the rule of tense formation are not emphasized, learners could make inductive generalizations and produce such wrong forms as:

The engineer builded the road (instead of built)

The ball hitted the post (instead of hit)

ii). **Irregular Plural Formation:** The basic rule for forming plurals in English is by adding the marker – s to the base of a noun. Examples are: boy + s =boys, yam + s = yams, book + s =books etc. The ESL learner can over generalize this rule and produce such wrong forms as:

foots	instead of feet	}	mutation plural
mouses	instead of mice		
Sheeps	instead of sheep		
		}	zero plural

iii). **Comparison rules:** Regular comparison of adjectives is made by adding – er and –est to the positive forms. Examples are:

Positive	Comparison	Superlative
hot	hotter	hottest
bright	brighter	brightest

But there are irregular comparisons that can be problematic for the learner such as:

Positive	Comparison	Superlative
good	better	best
bad	worse	worst
honest	more honest	most honest

The ESL learner can misapply the rule and produce such forms as:

bad badder baddest

4.2.2 Lack of Correlation between the English Spelling System and Pronunciation

English language uses the letters of the alphabet for spelling and writing. The orthographic system does not correspond with the sound system. It has been discovered that different letters can represent just one sound in English, which shows that English

words are not pronounced the way they are spelt. Let us consider the following:

- The sound /f/ can have three different orthographic representations such as: f, gh and ph; as in fight, cough and phone.
- The sound /k/ can also be represented by the following letters: k, c, ch and q; as in kettle, cat, chaos and quay.

In fact, many English words give little or no clue as to how they may be pronounced. Examples are:

Lieutenant	/ləftənənt/
ewe	/ju:/
yacht	/jɔt/
quay	/ki:/

- Again, the letter ‘a’ can be pronounced in six different ways as shown in these examples:

/ei/	as in day, made, chain
/æ/	as in mad, ant, bag
/ɔ/	as in want wash, wand
/a:/	as in far, art, star
/ɔ:/	as in walk, saw, pause
/ə/	as in above, about, again

(Akindele & Adegbite 2005: 144-155, Nwachukwu 2007: 46-47)

The implication is that Igbo ESL learners who have a close correspondence between spelling and pronunciation in their L₁, may have difficulty in pronouncing English words.

4.2.3 Multiplicity of meaning in polysemous words

Most English words can mean different things depending on the context of usage. Some expressions can actually yield more than one interpretation. This usually results in ambiguity especially when the context is not defined. Polysemous words have the same

spelling, same pronunciation, but multiple meaning. Some examples are taken from Omorodion (2011):

- bear - carry, animal, patience
- head - part of the body, leader of a group, part of a coin, part of furniture
- foot - part of the body, part of a mountain, part of a bridge, part of a bed
- bank - mouth of a river, financial institution, blood bank

According to Headbloom (1999:34):

This may cause the learner problems in distinguishing a wood - working file from an office file, a boy from a bouy, a bow on stage from a bow on a package, and window glass from a looking glass or a drinking glass. These intricacies are all added burden to the learner.

Omorodion (2011:128), states that one of the meanings of a polysemous word “is central while other meanings are mere figurative or metaphorical extensions of the core sense”. For instance, the core meaning of the word *foot* is ‘part of the body’. Other senses such as foot of the mountain, foot of the bed etc. are metaphorical extensions of the core meaning. These polysemous words can pose difficulty for the ESL learner, if they are not situated in appropriate contexts. The following sentences contain polysemous words which make them ambiguous:

- She went to the bank (which bank?)
- Give me the file (which file?)
- The goals are quite impressive
- Where is the pen?
- Keep the bat on the ground

4.2.4 Lack of consistency in word formation rules

This refers to morphological rules guiding the use of affixes. Akindele and Adegbite (2005:144) state that:

in -, im -, il – means ‘not’ in informal, impossible and illogical; but in – means ‘highly’ in inflammable.

less means ‘without’ in childless, useless, powerless; but not in priceless (very costly)

one who writes is a writer; one who reads is a reader, one who acts is an actor; but one who cooks is a ‘cook’.

The learner of English as a second language has to make up his/her mind to overcome these difficulties so as to become proficient in the use of the language.

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has reviewed the linguistic factors that affect the teaching and learning of English. The pedagogical implications are enormous. An ESL teacher has to envisage the diverse linguistic problems that the students are bound to face. These problems include: pronunciation problems, errors of syntax, improper separation of codes, confusing items of vocabulary and so on. The ESL teacher has to brace up and devise strategies that will help the learners grapple with these problems. Some recommendations are given below, if they are followed, many of the problems will be eliminated and competence in the use of English language will increase. In fact, there will be a total over-haul in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria.

5.1 Recommendations

- The teaching of English Language should not be made an all – comers affair. The subject should be handled by professionally trained language teachers. Therefore, more trained language

teachers should be posted to the rural areas. The state government should attach incentives to posting to rural areas.

- There should be periodic in-service training for all language teachers, in form of seminars and workshops. This would enable them to get acquainted with the current trends and techniques in second language teaching.
- The classroom environment should be made conducive for teaching and learning to be effective. Government officials should go round the schools to ensure that the teacher -student ratio for each class as stipulated by the National Policy on Education is implemented. To this effect, it is recommended that more classroom blocks be built in the schools and more trained language teachers be recruited into the system.
- Language learning materials such as books, libraries, audio-visual aids and language laboratories should be provided for schools. Parents-Teachers' association of schools can step in, in this regard to provide the needful for their children's schools.
- The L₂ teacher has to combine a variety of language teaching methods in order to take care of the needs of the individual learners. This is because no single method can suffice to take care of all the learners at all times. Enlightened eclecticism is therefore recommended.
- Knowing the background of students is very crucial in TESL. For language groups with peculiar MT interferences at the phonological level, it is recommended that remedial teaching be given to them to correct these tendencies.
The use of contrastive minimal pairs for drills will help the learners to overcome their difficulties.

- Teachers of English are advised to use task-based activities and materials to get the students to generate meaningful communication. Such activities as:
 - i) Giving simple composition topics for oral composition
 - ii) Assigning specific tasks to students such as: dialogue, dramatization, news casting etc.
 - iii) Using flip-charts and cartoons for demonstration and illustration
 - iv) Reading of interesting stories or passages with particular sounds for oral production
 - v) Reading short poems to practice particular sounds and rhythm
 - vi) Listening to and responding to recorded pieces in language laboratory

All these would go a long way in enhancing the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

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