THE LANGUAGE PROBLEMS NIGERIAN STUDENTS ENCOUNTER IN LEARNING CHINESE

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ABSTRACT

The problems students encounter in learning a foreign or second language are vast. The topic is common in language teaching and learning, but that of the Chinese language is not, especially as it relates to Nigerian students learning Chinese language. This paper treats the language problems Nigerian students encounter in learning Chinese language. The paper is divided into four sections: introduction; background of the study; language problems in learning Chinese language: phonological problem, morphological problem, semantic problem and syntactic problem and finally conclusion. Some suggestions are made to help the students overcome the language problems in learning Chinese language.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, there are many indigenous languages. Igboanusi (2002:102) has this to say, "Against the background that over 400 indigenous languages exist in Nigeria". Nigerian indigenous languages are grouped under major and minority languages. Bangbose (1992: 73) explains:

> *Nigerian languages are often grouped into 'major languages' and 'minority languages' based on such factors as number of speakers, status in education, acquisition as a second language, and availability of written materials.*

Major languages include Hausa (in the North), Igbo (in the East) and Yoruba (in the West) while minority languages comprise all other languages spoken in the country. Apart from the indigenous languages, which are the mother tongues of Nigerians, there also exist non-indigenous languages. English language is one of them. English has continued to play many roles in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria, a former British colony. Here, it serves as the language of education, the language of administration at different levels, and the language of organized commerce and journalism (Igboanusi, 2002:27). While English is a lingua franca in Nigeria used in both national and international communication, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are also used as lingua franca for regional communication. English is the language in use in most formal situations in Nigeria, particularly in Igboland (Igboanusi, 2002:30).

Teaching and learning Chinese language in Nigeria started around at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and University of Lagos in 2005 and 2007 respectively. The Confucius Institute were established at Nnamdi Azikiwe University and University of Lagos in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Both Nnamdi Azikiwe University and University of Lagos have started and

graduated students in degree programmes of Chinese studies. This research is born out of the experiences of the researcher as a senior lecturer and adjunct senior lecturer in the department of Chinese Studies at Nnamdi Azikiwe University and University of Lagos respectively, from 2017 to 2019.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The Chinese language is one of the oldest languages in the world with its earliest written records going as far back as more than 3,000 years ago (Peihui, 1997:9). What is usually referred to as Chinese is in fact the language of China's largest nationality, the *Hans. Hanyu* or *Mandarin* is China's official language. Modern Chinese is spoken not only by people of the *Han* ethnic group, but also by all ethnic groups of the Chinese nation as the common vehicle of communication.

The variety of Chinese discussed in this paper is the standard variety. This standard variety is Mandarin, popularly called '*Putonghua'* which literally means "common speech". According to *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Mandarin is spoken by about 917 million people that constitute almost three quarters of Chinese speakers and is mostly based on the pronunciation of Chinese speakers of Beijing. The Chinese language belongs to a separate branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. It is a contour tone language. It has many dialect groups. They include *Mandarin, Wu, Min, Cantonese, Hsiang, Hakka*. In their spoken form most of the so-called dialects are mutually unintelligible. Mandarin is the most widely spoken of all the other dialects. It is a large and very diverse group of Chinese dialects spoken across northern and southern China.

Ancient Egyptian and Babylonian characters were invented over 5,000 years ago and have gone through golden ages of development and use, but only the ancient Chinese characters have survived the test of time and continue to be used (Law, 2004:34). Ancient Chinese people used simple pictographs to record events or record notes before the Chinese characters were invented. Peihui (1997:18) says that:

> *The Chinese character in use today developed from the pictographs cut on oracle bones dating from over 3,000 years ago and pictographs found on ancient bronze vessels dating a little later.*

Over time, the pictographs become simplified to a basic outline and developed designs and meanings; this led to the beginning of pictographic characters. Most of the present-day Chinese characters are known as pictophonetic characters, each formed of two elements, with one indicating the meaning and the other the sound. There are two kinds of Chinese characters. They are traditional characters (those that retain their earlier forms) and simplified or modern character (those that have been altered). The use of simplified characters is now an official policy in the People's Republic of China, while traditional characters are restricted mainly to academic use or aesthetic purposes. Simplified characters have the advantages of being easier to learn, memorize, read and write. Here are some examples:

	Simplified characters	Traditional characters
1	妈mā (mother)	媽mā (mother)
2	门 mén (door)	門mén (door)

Chinese characters represent monosyllables, and generally each character represents a single morpheme. The total number of Chinese characters is estimated at over fifty thousand, of which only five to eight thousand are normally adequate for everyday situations (Shehui, 2004:25).

In order to provide phonetic notation for Chinese characters and to facilitate the consultation of dictionaries, phonologists drafted the "Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet", and in 1958 the Chinese government passed an act to promote the application of this scheme, commonly known as the "*pinyin*" (arranged sounds) system. *Pinyin* adopts the Latin alphabet to transcribe Chinese sounds, and four diacritical tone marks to indicate the different tones of the Chinese characters. The use of *pinyin* in the study of Chinese provides many practical advantages for learning the language. Nevertheless, as shall be seen in the next section, learners still encounter all sorts of problems in the course of learning the language.

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LANGUAGE PROBLEMS IN LEARNING CHINESE LANGUAGE

In the course of learning Chinese the language, Nigerian students are faced with many language problems. These linguistic problems are in the areas of phonology, morphology, semantics and syntax. We will examine these one after the other.

THE PHONOLOGICAL PROBLEM

Most of the phonological problems which face the Nigerian-Igbo students learning the Chinese language stem from the presence of certain speech sounds in the language that are not in Nigerian learners' indigenous languages. A comparison of the sound system of the Chinese language and those of Igbo language shall illustrate this point. First, an introduction of tones in Chinese language is important.

Tones of the Standard Chinese

The Chinese language is a tonal language. In Chinese, one character has one syllable, so tone is also called character tone. One of the functions of the tones is to distinguish the meanings of the characters. For example:

kànshū (to read a book)
kànshú (to cut down a tree)

liànxì (to practice)
liánxì (to contact)

The above examples have the same initials and finals, but with different tones marks which distinguish their meanings. There are four tones in standard Chinese: high-level tone, rising tone, falling-rising tone and falling tone. There is also a neutral tone which is unmarked. The tones are marked as follows:

	Tones	Tone marks	Examples
(1)	High-level tone	−	mā
(2)	Rising tone	ˊ	má
(3)	Falling-rising tone	v	mă
(4)	Falling tone	\	mà
(5)	Neutral tone		ma

Sound System of the Chinese Language

The sound system of the Chinese language consists of consonants and vowels. In the Chinese language, consonant sounds are called "initials" while vowel sounds are called "finals". The reason is simple. In the language, almost all words start with consonants, and vowels come finally. This is how the terms "initials and finals" emerged.

Classification of the Initials

The consonant that begins a syllable is called an initial and there are 21 of them in standard Chinese: "b p m f d t n I g k h j q x zh ch sh r z c s". In the production of the initials, the passage of the breath is obstructed. The parts that obstruct the breath are called points of articulation. The manners in which the passage of breath is obstructed are termed as manners of articulation. The differences of the initials are decided by two factors: the points of articulation and the manners of articulation.

According to the points of articulation, the initials of standard Chinese can be classified into 7 types; bilabials (b p m) dentilabial (f), dental (z c s), blade alveolar (d t n l), blade palatals (zh ch sh r), palatals (j q x) and velars (g k h). According to the manners of which the obstructions form and how they are overcome, the initials can be classified as plosives (b p d t g k) assibilation, (f h x sh s r) affricates (j q zh ch z c) nasal sounds (m n)and lateral sound (l)

With the vibration of the vocal cords, the initials can also be decided into two types: the voiceless and the voiced. The voiceless initials are produced merely by obstructing the flow of breath without the vibration of the vocal cords. When the voiced initials are produced, the vocals cords vibrate along with the obstruction of flow of breath. The voiced initials are louder and clearer. The voiceless initials: (b p f d t f g k h j q x zh ch sh z c s), the voiced initials: (m n l r). According to the force of the pent-up breath, plosives and affricates can be classified into the aspirated and the unaspirated. In pronouncing the plosives and the affricates, the passage of the

breath is obstructed. When pent-up air is released with little force, they are unaspirated. If the pent-up air is released with a strong puff, the initials are aspirated. The aspirated (p t k q ch c) the unaspirated: (b d g j zh z).

The following are the initials with word examples:

Sound	**Example**
b [p]	bā (eight) , bù (no/not)
p [p^h]	pí (skin), píngguǒ (apple)
d [t]	dāo (knife), dà (big)
t [t^h]	tā (he/she), tǔ (earth)
g [k]	gāo (cake), gēn (to follow)
k [k^h]	kàn (to see), kǒu (mouth)
m [m]	mā (mom), mù (wood)
n [n]	nán (male), ní (you)
f [f]	fù (father), fǎguó (france)
s [s]	sā (sand), sān (three)
x [ɕ]	xié (shoe), xínzhí (paper)
sh [ʂ]	shēntí (body), shā (fork)
h [x]	hē (drink), hé (and)
z [t^s]	zájì (acrobatics), shàzi (fon)
c [ts^h]	cí (word), césuǒ (rest room)
j [tɕ]	jiào (to teach), jīnplí
q [$tɕ^h$]	qī (seven), qīyuè (july)
zh [tʂ]	zhòng (middle), zhè (this)
ch [$tʂ^h$]	chūntiūn (spring), chūkǒu (exist)
l [l]	lì (strength), liù (six)
r [ʐ]	rè (hot), rì (sun)

There are 38 finals in the language. They are grouped into three:

Simple finals

Orthographic Representation	**Example**
a	ài (love), ān (peaceful)
o	ōuyuán (Euro), ǒurán (by chance)
e	è (hungry), èr (two)
i	bǐ (pen), dì (earth)
u	wǔ (five), fù (pay)
ü	nü (woman), lü (green)
-i	zì (oneself), cì (word)
-i	zhì (rule), chī (eat)
er	ěrduo (ear), èryuè (february)

Compound finals

ai	dài (bag), lái (come)
ei	běi (north), fēi (fly)
ao	bào (newspaper), lǎo (old)
ou	dōu (both), lōu (building)
ia	jiā (family), xiā (shrimp)
ie	bi (not), jiē (road)
üe	lüè (omit), nüe (particle)
ua	guā (melon), huā (flower)
uo	guò (country), huò (live)
iao	biǎo (form), diào (fish)
iou/iu/	yōuxiù (excellent), liùyou (oily)
uai	guǎi (turn), kuài (fast)
uei/ui/	huī (ash), chuī (blow)

Finals with Nasal Ending

an	sān (three), nán (male)
en	hèn (very), gēn (with)
ian	diǎn (dot), qián (money)
in	yín (silver), xīn (new)
uan	luàn (mess), guān (close)
uen/un/	cūn (village), qūn (group)
üan	yuán (dollar), xuǎn (choose)
ün	yún (cloud), xún (ask)
ang	bāng (assist), máng (busy)
eng	fēng (wind), sheng (student)

Table of the Initials

Place► Manner ↓	**Bilabial**	**Denti Labial**	**Alveolar**	**Velar**	**Palatal**	**Blade palatal**	**Blade alveolar**
Plosive	b p		d t	g k			
Affricate					j q	zh ch	z c
Assibilation		f		h	x	sh r	s
Nasal sound	M		n				
Lateral			l				

The Nigerian students learning the Chinese language find it difficult to pronounce most of the sounds, especially the following sounds: j q x zh ch sh r z c. Let us take the problematic sounds one after the other.

The initials "j" is a palatal, voiceless affricate. In the production of this sound, the front of the tongue is raised to the palate and tip of the tongue is dropped to obstruct the air, then the tongue is moved a little forward to form a narrow channel without the vibration of the vocal cords. This initial is unaspirated and the pent-up air is weak. For example:

jiānjù (hard)
jiějué (to solve)
jiānjìng (family circumstances)

The initial "q" is a palatal, voiceless affricate. In the production of this sound, the same process is experienced as if "j" is produced only that the pent-up air of "q" is stronger and it is aspirated. For example:

qīnqiè (kind)
qiàqiǎo (by chance)
qiānqiáng (far-fetched)

The initial "x" is a palatal, voiceless assibilation. In the production of "x", the front tongue is raised near the hard palate to form a narrow channel and then air is allowed to rush out without the vibration of the vocal cords. For example:

xiāngxià (the countryside)
xíngxiàng (image)
xǐxùn (goodnews)

The initial "zh" is blade-palatal, voiceless affricate. When it is produced, the tip of the tongue is raised up against the front of the hard palate to obstruct the breath, then the top of the tongue is removed a little to form a narrow channel and the air is allowed to rush out through the vocal cords. It is unaspirated and the air flow is very weak. For example:

zhēnzhèng (authentic)
zhèngzhì (politics)
zhāozhǎn (to flutter)

The initial "ch" is a blade-palatal, voiceless affricate. In the production of "ch" sound, the same process is experienced as if "zh" is produced only that there is no vibration of the vocal cords. Compared with "zh", it is aspirated and the air flow is very strong. For example:

chóuchú (to hesitate)
chíchěng (to gallop)
chāochǎn (over production)

The initial "sh" is blade-palatal, voiceless assibilation. When it is produced, the tip of the tongue is raised against the hard palate but a narrow slot is left between them and air is allowed to rush out without the vibration of the vocal cords. For example:

shēnshì (one's life experience)
shàngshēng (ascent)
shǎoshù (minority)

The initial "r" is a blade – palatal, voiced assibilation. In the production of this sound, the tip of the tongue is raised up near the hard palate and air is allowed to pass through the channel between the tongue and the palate with the vibration of the vocal cords. For example:

réngrán (still)
róngrěn (to tolerate)
róuruǎn (soft)

The initial "z" is a dental, voiceless affricate. In the production of "z", the tip of tongue is raised against the back of the upper teeth to obstruct the air. The tongue is removed a little to form a narrow slot and air is allowed to rush through the channel without vibration of the vocal cords. For example:

zǒngzé (general principle)
zàngzǔ (Tibetan)
zuòzuò (affected)

The initial "c" is a dental, voiceless affricate. In the production of "c" sound, the same process is experienced as if "z" is produced only that there is no vibration of the vocal cords. Compared with "z", the pent-up air of "c" is stronger. For example:

cāngcù (hasty)
céngci (gradation)
cuīcán (devastate)

It is expected that with constant practice of the production of the above initials that Nigerian-Igbo students find difficult in pronouncing, they will soon master them. This will lead us to the next section.

MORPHOLOGICAL PROBLEM

The next linguistic problem Nigerian students learning Chinese encounter is morphological. According to Anagbogu, Mba and Eme (2001:99), "Morphology is the level of grammar that studies the ways morphemes organize themselves to form words". Crystal (1980: 301) defines morphology as, "the branch of grammar which studies the structure or forms of words, primarily through the use of the morpheme construct".

Morphology is generally divided into two fields: inflectional morphology (the study of inflection) and lexical or derivational morphology (the study of word-formation).

Word Formation in the Chinese Language

Chinese words are formed with initials and finals and with tone marks. In combinations of initials and finals, there are more than 400 meaningful syllables in the common speech of standard Chinese. When four tones are added to these, we can distinguish more than 1,200 syllables (Peihui, 1997:87). For examples:

Initials	**Finals**	**Word formation**	**Tone**
b	a	ba	bā bá bǎ bà
h	eng	heng	hēng héng hěng hèng
ch	e	che	chē, ché, chě, chè

It is important to note here that some initials cannot be combined with some finals. The Nigerian students learning the Chinese language often make the mistake of generalizing the addition of "a" and "e" to the initials. For example:

Initials	Finals	Word formation
b	e	be (wrong)
q	a	qa (wrong)
m	e	me (wrong)
h	a	ha (wrong)

There are no such words as "be, qa, me, ha" in the Chinese language. The students make this mistake because of L_1 interference where the vowels (a,e) can come after all the consonants.

Inflection in the Chinese Language

The Chinese Language has no morphological change in the strict sense. The form of a verb remains unchanged under all circumstances. Differences in person, gender, number or tense do not require changes in the form of a verb. For example, the singular personal pronoun wǒ "I/me", nǐ "you" and tā "he/his, she/her". All go with the same verb "shi" (verb to be) in spite of their differences in person and gender. For example:

1. Wǒ shì zhōngguó rén. (I'm a Chinese)
2. Nǐ shì zhōngguó rén (You are a Chinese
3. Tā shì zhōngguó rén (He/she is a Chinese)

The same thing is applicable to plural person pronouns. We can also take another example from tense. In the Chinese language, tense does not affect the form of the verb. The verb remains unchanged whether in the present, past or future tense. For example:

4. Wǎng chī fàn. (Wang eats)
5. Wǎng chī fàn le (Wang ate)
6. Wǎng yījiàn chī fàn. (Wang has eaten)

In Chinese language the verb does not change form in order to express tenses, rather particles and time-words are used. From the examples, the particle "le" and time word "yījian" are employed to express tense, but the verb remains unchanged. As the students learning the Chinese Language have the morphological problems, they also find it difficult in understanding the meaning of the words. This will lead us to the next section which is semantic problem.

SEMANTIC PROBLEMS

There are semantic problems Nigerian students encounter in learning the Chinese language and this makes consulting a Chinese dictionary difficult. Without the knowledge of the radicals, stroke and pinyin, it is difficult to look up words in a Chinese dictionary.

The Role of Radicals

Many Chinese character dictionaries are organized according to the order of the characters' radicals. Radicals are common components, located on the top, bottom, left, right or outer part of the characters, which usually indicate the meaning to which a character belongs. For example, the character "女" is a word meaning 'a woman or female' and also a radical indicating something that relates to a woman. Let us use the following examples for illustration:

(i) 好hǎo (good)

(ii) 她tā (she/her)

(iii) 妈mā (mother)

(iv) 姐jiě (elder sister)

(v) 姓xìng (family name)

(vi) 娜nuó (graceful)

The above characters are grouped under the radicals "女", which is the common component on the left side of the characters. For the students to understand the words, they will at first understand the radicals.

The students also find it difficult to identify the Chinese characters which are typically polysemous and homonymous in nature. Traditionally, homonyms are said to be different words with the same form. Polysemy is a word with multiple meaning. (Lyons, 1981:146).

One character can be the same in pronunciation but different in meaning from another. They are known as homonyms. There are 435 independent syllables, or 1,152 syllables in varied tones in standard Chinese. However, the number of characters totals up to several 10,000 (including more than 3,000 commonly used characters), therefore the number of Chinese homonyms is unavoidably great. (Cheng, 1988:86). For example: shi

	Character	Pronunciation	Meaning
(i)	是	shì	verb to be
(ii)	师	shī	teacher
(iii)	十	shí	ten
(iv)	使	shǐ	send/make/use
(v)	湿	shī	wet/damp
(vi)	时	shí	time/tense
(vii)	史	shǐ	history
(viii)	事	shì	thing/matter
(ix)	诗	shī	poem

Those characters that have more than two pronunciations are known as polyphonic characters. Polysemous characters help to reduce the total number of characters, but give rise to the difficulties in distinguishing one character from another. Learners are advised to be aware of the dissimilitude of them. For example:

	Character	Pronunciation /meaning
(i)	长	cháng (long) zhǎng (grow)
(ii)	觉	jiào (sleep) jué (perceive)

The Nigerian students learning the Chinese language usually make mistakes in the use of these homonyms and polysemy. These errors are observed during dictation and reading class. Below are some of their errors while writing character and pinyin.

7. zhè ge bú shì ni de shì. (This is not your affair)

8. 你长大了。Nǐ zhǎng dà le. (You have grown big)

In example 7, “shì” occurs twice. They are different words but the same forms and tone. The first one is “to be” while the other is “affair”. In example 8, “长” has the meaning of “grow” and not “long”. In reading class, most students will likely pronounce it as “cháng” instead of “zhǎng”.

SYNTACTIC PROBLEMS

The Nigerian students learning Chinese Language are also faced with syntactic problems. These problems range from word order, measure word, time-words and position-words.

Word Order

In Linguistic description, word-order studies the sequence in which grammatical elements such as subject, verb, and object occur in the sentences of a language. A great deal of attention has been paid to the way in which languages vary the order of these elements, as part of typological studies. (Crystal, 1997:97)

Apart from cases of free word order (e.g. Latin), there are six logical possibilities: SVO, SOV, VSO, VOS, OSV, OVS of these over 75% of the world's languages use SVO (Crystal, 1997:98). Chinese language uses SVO (subject –verb-object) word order. Let us use some sentences as example:

(9) Tā zài Běijīng (He is in Beijing)
(Subj) (Verb) (Obj)

(10) Wǒ Shì jìzhě (I'm a journalist)
(Subj) (Verb) (Obj)

(11) Nǐmen xuéxí Hànyǔ. (You study Chinese)
(Subj) (Verb) (Obj)

The Chinese word order is similar to some of some Nigerian indigenous languages. Where the students find it difficult is in the order of the time-words. The position of time words in Chinese is different from most Nigerian languages. For example：

12. (i) Ọ jere ahia taata. (Igbo Language)
(He went to market today).

(ii) O lọ si ọja loni. (Yoruba language)
(He went to market today).

(iii) Ya tafi kasuwa yau. (Hausa language)
(He went to market today).

(iv) Jintian tā qǔ shìchǎng. (Chinese Language)
(He went to market today).

From the above examples, it is obvious that the position of time-words in Chinese language is quite different from the three major Nigerian languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba, and English language. Time-words in Chinese language come before or after the subject of the sentence, while in Igbo/Hausa/Yoruba/English languages, they come at the end of the sentence. In the above examples, the time-words are underlined.

Measure Words

Measure words seem to be the most difficult aspect of Chinese grammar. Sun points out that;

> *For most foreign students of Chinese, measure words are perhaps one of the major problems to deal with throughout their studies. (Sun 2001:ii).*

Measure words are quantifiers. They come in between the numeral and the object. There are many measure words in the Chinese language and each word (noun) has a different measure word. It is very hard to master the use of measure words. This poses a great problem for Nigerian students. For example:

(14) Yí bèn shū (a book)
Liǎng bèn shǔ (2 books)
Sān bèn shǔ (3 books)

(15) Sān fèn bàozhi (3 pieces of newspapers)
Yí fèn wénjián. (a document)

(16) Yí ge bēizi (a cup)
Yí ge cì (a word)

The underlined words are the measure words. Every word (noun) has a different measure word. Some words can share the same measure word like in the example 15. The nouns (bàozhi and wénjiàn) share the same measure word "fèn". Words (Nouns) without measure words of nouns that you do not know or remember their right measure words, "ge" can be used. It serves as "a universal" measure word.

CONCLUSION

The main thrust of this paper is the language problems Nigerian students encounter in learning Chinese Language. The paper has tried to systematize these problems by way of first categorizing them under phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic problems. The main reason why the Nigerian students have phonological, morphological, semantic and syntactic problems in learning Chinese language is because of the differences in Chinese and most Nigerian languages. There would not be a single solution to these linguistic problems. It is also important to note that there is no 'magic way' to avoid the problems. Suggestions are given according to the nature of the problems.

Problems	**Suggestions**
(i) Phonological	Listen and repeat the sounds as teacher or multimedia (computer, electronic dictionary, etc) produce the sounds.
(ii) Morphological	Be conscious of L_1 interference. Practice with the native speaker who can easily dictate your errors.
(iii) Semantic	Try to master the use of radicals, strokes, and pinyin, then make use of a dictionary.
(iv) syntactic	Learn the position of time word and master the use of measure words.

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