PRONUNCIATION DIFFICULTIES OF NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION

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Abstract

This paper examined pronunciation difficulties of Nigerian learners of English as a second language. Some major sources of difficulty were identified which include the absence of some consonants like /O/, W, /3/and /O/; the absence of long vowels and diphthongs which results in phonological opposition; the variation between the English syllabic structure and that of Nigerian languages and the nature of Nigerian languages which are syllable-timed while English is stress-timed; all these influence the pronunciation of second language learners of English. One of the

recommendations given is that teachers of English should work hard on their pronunciation in order to be good role models.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of pronunciation in oral communication cannot be over emphasized because it forms the 'nucleus' of speech. Clark and Yallop (1995) observe that for humans (speaker and listener) to understand each other, their ability to communicate effectively depends on recognizing each other's pronunciation among other things. Similarly, Fraser (1999) asserts that pronunciation teaching is an essential part of language courses. He further explains that pronunciation allows learners the interaction with native speakers that is so essential for all aspects of their linguistic development. On the other hand, poor pronunciation can mask otherwise good language skills, condemning learners to less than their deserved social, academic and work advancement. Though English as a second language (ESL) learners may not attain a native-like accent, their intelligibility can be improved by effective pronunciation teaching. Teachers of English as a second language (ESL) may not prescribe a rigid accent norm which learners must assimilate, however, they should strive to teach and encourage learners to reach a level of intelligibility where their communication is not hampered. To achieve this, learners should be given opportunities to express themselves in the acceptable accent that will enable them interact with other English speakers across the world.

Despite the importance of teaching pronunciation in an ESL course, pronunciation is the aspect of language that still receives least attention. Fraser (1999) posits that the reason might not be unwillingness to teach pronunciation, but uncertainty as to how best to help learners. Because of this, some English language • teachers often abandon the teaching of pronunciation. Lin, Fan and Chen (2014) are of the view that the teaching of pronunciation has for too long been neglected in many ESL curricula all over the world because some teachers argue that very few tests require students to show their speaking ability. Others teachers, however,

discover that they do not know how to teach it. Similarly, Onwuchekwa (2002) states that pronunciation is the worst taught (sometimes not taught at all) and the most dreaded (by students and teachers) of all aspects of English language in secondary schools. According to Onwuchekwa, her long experience in teaching in secondary schools in Nigeria show that what the students need is the kind of teaching that can unravel the mysteries surrounding the different skills of correct English pronunciation and at the same time gradually remove the constant interference of the mother-tongue in speech habits.

Recently, global English teaching moved to language functions and communicative competence and a new urgency for teaching pronunciation has arisen (Celce-Murcia, In Lin, Fan & Chen, 2014). In Nigeria however, the teaching of pronunciation has not received any such attention.

From the writers' teaching experience in secondary schools and tertiary institutions, many students have difficulties with pronunciation. When speaking English with their very little or poor pronunciation skills, the students have problems either making themselves understood or understanding others. No pronunciation course according to Roach (2000) should try to make learners speak with the RP accent but the goal should be to develop the learners' pronunciation sufficiently to permit effective communication even with native speakers.

Sources of Pronunciation Difficulties of Nigerian Learners of English as a Second Language

The greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerian learner of English as a second language is from the sound system (Nkamigbo, 2014) Similarly, Bamgbose in Nkamigbo asserted that most of the phonetic characteristics in the English of Nigerians can be traced to the transfer of features from their local languages. Idowu (2014) also stated that Igbo speakers of English tend to transfer the vowel system oftheir language into English. This affects not only Igbo but other

Nigerian languages. In the same vein, Igboanusi (2002) affirmed that the differences which exist in the English vowels, consonants and supra-segmental elements and

Nigerian languages interfere in the pronunciation of English sounds. Ubahakwe also claimed that a great deal of similarity has been observed not only in the Southern Nigerian ethnic groups like Edo, Efik, Tiv, Igbo and Yoruba but all along the West coast of Africa. With Nigeria having about 500 languages, it is not surprising to see the speakers of these languages passing their speech peculiarities to English which brings about non-standard pronunciation of English words. In other words, the three main areas of pronunciation (sound system, stress and rhythm, and intonation) are basically problematic to Nigerian learners of English as a second language.

THE ENGLISH SOUND SYSTEM

In most Nigerian languages, words are pronounced as they are written or spelt and most of the letters represent sounds of the languages. For example, Berom language as at 2003 had 31 letters and these letters represent the Berom sounds (Berom Language and Translation Board, 2013). It therefore means that every letter of the Berom alphabet is a complete sound on its own. This is the case with many other Nigeria languages. The case is however, different in English as sounds and letters are different. English sounds are written phonetically while the letters are written orthographically. Similarly, English words are not pronounced as they are written in all cases. As a result of this variation, learners encounter difficulty in pronouncing English words and that may be why some of them tend to always pronounce English words as they are written. Jowitt (1991) asserts that there are some words that are wrongly pronounced by Nigerian second learners of English. Some of these words are:

- Words that end in 'mb': climb, womb, comb, thumb, tomb, plumber, etc. The 'b' is silent but Nigerians pronounce it.
- Words that the 't' is silent but Nigerians pronounce it. For example listen whistle, etc.

- Others are: Sachet [satfet] instead of /saJei/; honest [honest] instead of /Dnist/; shepherd [p/ realized as [f]; sword /s/ realized as [sw], dwarf ID/ realized as [a] etc.

This is one of the major difficulties Nigerian learners encounter with pronunciation. Secondly, there are quite a number of sounds which exist in English that do not exist in Nigerian languages. This is another source of difficulty to Nigerian learners of English pronunciation. The learners of English often realize these English sounds that are lacking in their Ll using the closetLl sounds.

Consonants

Dental Fricative /0/ and /ö/. Onwuchekwa (2002) asserts that these two consonants do not exist in Nigerian languages. To her, these sounds are among the most difficult sounds for Nigerian speakers of English language. Consequently, most learners realise them as It/ and /d/ respectively. Nkamigbo (2014) also states that learners will not make any contrast between /0/ and /ö/ and It/ and /d/. For instance:

Thin /0in/ will be realised as /tin/

Thought and taught /D:t/ will be realised as /D:t/

Then and den /öen/ and /den/ will be realised as [den]

With and wit /wiö/ and /wit/ will be realised as [wit]

Through and true /0ru:/ and /tru:/ will be realised as [tru:] etc.

The post alveolar fricative /5/

This sound is often realised as /J/ or /d3/. Most Nigerian learners of English will have the following:

Measure — [meds D] instead of/meso/

Vision— [visn] instead of/vi3n/

Leisure — [led; D] instead of/leso/

The velar nasal /0/: Most words that end with the (r)/ sound are realised as [n]. For example: drawing instead of/drɔ:winŋ/, cooking /kukin/ instead of/kukirj/ etc.

Consonant Clusters

Most Nigerian languages do not permit consonant clustering. This is supported by Nkamigbo (2014) and Onwuchekwa (2002). Consequently, most learners engage In what is known as phonological processes in their pronunciation because they find it difficult to pronounce correctly a word that has consonant clusters. Vowels are therefore inserted to break up consonant clusters. As such, a learner of English pronunciation may wrongly pronounce the following words:

Plate /pleit/ as [pileit], stew /stju:/ as [sitju:], three /0ri:/ as [tiri], etc.

Pure vowel sounds

English has both long and short vowels and their pronunciations vary. On the other hand, most Nigerian languages have short vowels but the long vowels are absent in most of these languages. Consequently, learners encounter difficulties in pronouncing English words that have long vowels. The long vowels /i:/, /a:/, /u:/ and /3:/ are absent in most Nigerian languages. These two short vowels are also absent in Nigerian languages: /A/ and /o/. The issue of vowel length compounds the problem as vowel length is difficult to determine. The nature of these short and long vowels becomes a source of difficulty for learners as they can hardly differentiate between words that have the long and short vowel sounds.

Diphthongs

Diphthongs do not exist in Nigerian languages. The non-existence of diphthongs in Nigerian languages therefore mars the pronunciation of learners. What these learners then do is to substitute the diphthongs with any pure vowel closer to the diphthongs.

For example:

Sure [T) instead of/Juo/

Go = [go] instead of/gou/

Day [de] instead of/dei/

The inability of learners to identify the distinction between sounds according to Fraiser (1999) is due to their language backgrounds.

Sources of Pronunciation Difficulties of Hausa Learners of English Consonants There exist many sources of pronounciation difficulties among Nigerian learners of English as an L2. The Hausa case will however be looked into here.

The following examples are given by Jowitt (1991):

- The articulation of /p/ and [f/ presents problems to Hausa speakers; as a result, many pronounce people /pi:pl/ as [fifl];
- Hausa has no /v/, so Hausa speakers of English tend to realise it as /b/, therefore 'value' is realised as 'balue' , 'voice' as 'boice; etc.
- /0/ and /ö/ are absent in all Nigerian mother tongues including Hausa; as a result, Hausa speakers of English realise them as Is/ and /z/. For example, the phrase 'the people' will be realised as 'za feofle'.
- /3/ does not occur in Hausa. It is realised as /d/ and /z/.
- /0/ is often realised as In/ because it is absent in Hausa.

Vowels

- There is no distinction between short and long vowels in Hausa language as in most Nigerian languages. For example, words that have the /i:/ such as heel and steel are realised as and I still, court and port are realised as /kDt/ and [pot], etc.
- /3:/ is realised as ID/ or /a:/. For example, the Hausas will pronounce word as [wDd], sir as [sa], earth as [at], etc.
- /o/ is realised as ID/ in many ways depending on its spelling. It is also realised as [a]. For example, doctor [dDkta] . lei/ does not occur in Nigerian mother tongues. Therefore, Hausa speakers of English realise it as [e], so there is no distinction between words like let and late.
- /ou/ does not occur in Nigerian mother tongues; it is therefore realised as [o:] in Hausa.
- lie/ and /eo/ do not exist in Nigerian mother tongues and many speakers according to Jowitt conflate the two into one diphthong which neither exists in Received

Pronunciation (RP) nor in most mother tongues. Chair and cheer are realised as [tfla] instead of/ tfeo/ and /tfio/.

- /uo/ does not occur in Nigerian mother tongues and it is mostly realised by many Nigerian speakers of English as [ua] or ID/ in words like sure, tour, moor, etc. For example [sua] or [SD] instead of/suo/.

Sources of Pronunciation Difficulties of lgbo Learners of English

Igbo learners of English language also encounter pronunciation difficulties. The following are some sources of difficulties Igbo learners of English encounter learning English pronunciation according to Jowitt (1991) and Nkamigbo (2014).

Consonants

./0/ and /ö/ are the most problematic fricatives Igbo learners encounter when learning English pronunciation because they do not occur in Igbo and are realized as It/ and /d/ respectively. Igbo learners of English cannot make any contrast between words that have /0/ and /ö/ and It/ and /d/.

- /3/ does not occur in Igbo as it is with Hausa. It is realised as either /s/, /d3/ or

- /0/: The standard Igbo has this sound; however when it occurs at the end of a syllable carrying a primary accent, many Igbo speakers introduce a subsequent [g], so that hang is pronounced [hang] instead of/hao/ Vowels

There is no distinction between long and short vowels as it is with Hausa.

- /N is realized as b/ because it does not exist in Igbo language. For example, cup /kAP/ is realized as [lopu], come /kAm/ /lomu/, etc,

/3 this sound does not occur in Igbo. Igbo learners ofEnglish realize it as D/ when its spelling correlate is —ur or-or and as [a] or /E/ when the correlate is —ir, -ear, or —er. So the Igbos will say [b)n] for burn, which should be /b3:n/; [gElu] for girl which should be /g3 : V.

/ö/: This sound is absent in Igbo. It is therefore realized as b/ as in doctor [dDkt)] instead of dDkto/.

- Iou/ is realized as [D] in Igbo . /io/ and /eo/: Same as Hausa. /uo/: Same as Hausa.

Sources of Pronunciation Difficulties of Yoruba Learners of English As it is with Hausa and Igbo, so it is with Yoruba.

The following are therefore some sources and areas of pronunciation difficulties Yoruba learners encounter learning English pronunciation according to Jowitt (1991) and Rahaman (2009):

- As with Hausa, Yoruba has no /v/, so Yoruba speakers tend to realise it as /f/. As a result, there may be no distinction between pairs such as safe-save, belief believe, live-life. Fever is also realised as [fifa]. The confusion arising from these mispronunciations can result to writing problems.
- /U/: Yoruba tends to realise it as /s/ since it does not occur in Yoruba; as such, to pronounce pairs such as chop-shop, cheap-sheep without making any distinction is the norm.

/0/ and /ö/ do not occur in Yoruba. The tendency in Yoruba is to realise them as It/ and /d/ respectively as with Igbo learners of English.

- /z/: This sound does not occur in Yoruba and Yoruba speakers of English tend to realise it as [s], so pairs such as price-prize, rise-rice, cease-seize, etc., may be confused. Zoo is also realised as [su:].
- /f/: Some Yoruba dialects do not have this sound which may therefore be realized as /s/. For example application may be realized as [aplikesion] instead of /oplikeifn/.

/3/: It is very absent in Yoruba and often realized as /s/. For example, vision /vi3n/ may be realized as [visn].

W: It is very rare in Yoruba. Yoruba speakers tend to omit from its syllable initial position. For example, house is realized as [aus] instead of/haus/. There is also a converse tendency in Yoruba sometimes to insert a word-initial /h/ when it is not required. For example [hai] as the pronunciation of eye /ai/.

./0/: Most Yoruba speakers replace it with In/ Vowels

Just like in Hausa and Igbo,

- there is no short and long vowel distinction in Yoruba.
- /A/: Yoruba learners of English realise /A/ as [o] in words such as love, money, etc.

/3:/: It is absent in Yoruba. Same as Igbo realization.

/ö/ this sound is also absent in Yoruba. Its realization is the same as Igbo speakers of English

Iou/ is realized as [o]. Same as Igbo speakers of English.

- /io/and /eo/ do not exist in Yoruba. Same as Hausa and Igbo realizations.
- /uo/ does not occur in Yoruba. Its realisation is the same as Hausa.

Consonant Clusters

Most Nigerian mother tongues including Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba lack consonant clusters that are available in English. Nkamigbo (2014) observes that Igbo language does not permit consonant clustering though there are a few two-consonant clusters in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For example: Hausa (kwano - dish), Igbo (Kwenu — to respond), and Yoruba (Gbenga — male name). These examples appear at the initial positions. On the other hand, English has two to four consonant clusters which can occur in either syllable-initial or syllable-final position or both (Jowitt, 1991). The lack of consonant clusters in Nigerian languages becomes a major source of difficulty for Nigerian learners of English. Jowitt says that Nigerians adopt simplifying strategies like vowel epenthesis (vowels are inserted anywhere consonant clustering occurs). For example, a word like 'straight' may be realized as [sitireti]. Because the syllabic structure of most Nigerian mother tongues is CVCV unlike English which is mostly CVC, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and other Nigerian learners of English tend to impose on the English CVC syllabic structure (Jowitt, 1991).

Rahman (2009) adds that a Yoruba learner of English will pronounce screwdriver as su/kul/di/ra/fa because of the lack of consonant clusters in Yoruba. Similarly, Nkamigbo (2014) states that Igbo learners of English will pronounce fuel as 'fuelu', school as sichoolu', cupboard as 'kobodu; etc. Hausa learners of English

will also pronounce Christmas as 'chirimeti', school as 'sichool', etc.

Stress and rhythm

Stress and rhythm characterize every known human language. Lin, Fan and Chen (2014) observe that it is necessary to teach stress and rhythm because every language has a characteristic speech rhythm. They opine that English tends to be a stressed-timed language with rhythmic patterns based on a fairly regular occurrence of stressed syllables. Roach (2000) observes that English has a rhythmical structure called stress-timed rhythm while other languages like Yoruba, Telugu, French, etc., have syllable-timed rhythm. However, Nigerian languages tend to give equal weight to each syllable making the rhythmic patterns to appear to be more syllable-timed. In her remarks on Nigerian languages, Nkamigbo (2014) declared that there are syllable-timed languages which usually affect English pronunciation. Nkamigbo explains that in Igbo, every syllable is given its own time. The language is spoken with pauses like full stops and commas but in English, stress plays a key role in pronunciation. The stress determines how a word should be pronounced, for example, application. Because of the syllable-timed nature of Nigerian languages, most learners use the Nigerian rhythmic pattern when speaking English. As a result of this, even though they can pronounce each word correctly, their speech does not sound like English. Nigerian learners of English therefore need to learn how to use the primary stress on the correct syllable identity and use shifting stress and emphatic or contrastive stress correctly to be able to communicate effectively in the target language (Onwucheka, 2002).

Intonation

Intonation is another source of difficulty for Nigerian learners of English pronunciation. Roach (2000) observes that English language has intonation in speech. He recognizes intonation as the pitch of the voice which plays the most important part in speech. On the other hand, he posits that there are languages that use tones which determine the meaning of a word. The tone according to

Nkamigbo (2014) is an integral part of a word itself. For example, in Berom, gei means cough,

gei is firm and gei is millet. Roach explains that changing from one tone to another can completely change the meaning of a word. Roach further states that most languages in West Africa are tonal languages. Consequently, Nigerian learners of English find it difficult to employ intonation in English sentences. Their tonal languages become one of the major sources of difficulty in the pronunciation of English words. Another example is in the Olulumo language where we have refu (tomorrow), refu (yesterday) and kokpa (mat), kokpa (shirt).

Implications for the Teaching and Learning of Pronunciation to Learners of English as a Second Language

The teaching of pronunciation is a hard-core area of language teaching often avoided by many language teachers. Dalton (1999) observes that when it comes to teaching reading, writing and listening, teachers are comfortable but when it comes to pronunciation, they often lack the basic knowledge of articulatory phonetics to offer their students anything more than rudimentary advice. He further states that the problem students face in pronunciation is that of reception (that is, what the students do not hear, they cannot say). In this case, teachers are the cause of students' poor reception. The correct sounds are not articulated clearly and the English sounds are not clearly received. Therefore, what the learners receive, their brains convert into the closest sounds in their own languages thereby producing incorrect words. This problem may arise due to lack of confidence among teachers as to how pronunciation should be taught, stemming from their own lack of training in this area.

A summary of the problems are as follows:

- The speakers of various indigenous languages pass their speech peculiarities to English which results in different varieties of Nigerian English.
- Speech sounds that are lacking in Nigerian mother tongues make it difficult for English language teachers and learners to acquire such sounds.

- The fact that most Nigerian languages are tonal while English is stress-timed and uses intonation, creates problems for learners of English as they attempt to produce correct utterances in English as an L2.
- The CVCV syllabic structure of Nigerian languages affects the pronunciation of English words. Vowels are therefore insert» where consonant clustering occurs.
- The rich intonation resources of English are often neglected by the majority of Nigerian learners of English; as a result, the second language learner cannot acquire intonation patterns like the native speaker.
- Teachers of English are uncertain as to how best to teach pronunciation; as a result, they hardly teach it.
- Some teachers of English are also affected by their mother tongue which affects their pronunciation and causes them to teach the subject of pronunciation wrongly or to avoid its teaching completely.

These are some of the consequences or implications of pronunciation difficulties of Nigerian learners of English as a second language. These implications also rub off on the teaching of pronunciation as its teaching is evaded because of the difficulties.

Recommendations

The authors here present their own recommendations as well as those of others considered important in stemming the tide of pronunciation difficulties of Nigerian learners of English as an L2. Teachers should create suitable learning environment for their learners by being role models. When a teacher's pronunciation is poor, he cannot offer something tangible to his learners. On the other hand, if his pronunciation is sound, his learners will imitate him and pronounce words correctly Teachers of English should therefore work hard on their pronunciation so that they can be role models. Pronunciation teaching requires thorough preparation through work on the perception of English sounds and contrast and the formation of English phonology. Even if a teacher was not taught in school, technology and its assistive devices can be employed for the purposes of self-tuition.

English language teachers can organize remedial lessons for those learners

who have difficulties in pronouncing problematic English sounds which do not exist in Nigerian languages. These sounds can be taught in context using sentences, minimal pairs, tongue twisters, question and answer sessions, etc. The following sentences can, for example, be used for practicing the /0/ and /ö/ sounds:

i. They ran hither and thither as though they were frightened.

ii. They taught his daughters things they thought worthy of them.

iii. He had nothing but a farthing, and a farthing wasn't worth anything, even in those days (Onwuchekwa, 2002).

Similarly, Fraiser (2001) declares that pronunciation teaching works better if the focus is on larger chunks of speech such as words, phrases and sentences than if the focus is on individual sounds and syllables. This does not mean that individual sounds and syllables should never be referred to. It simply means that the general focus should be on longer units. Similarly, other consonants, consonant clusters, vowels and diphthongs which are absent in learners' languages can also take this format.

Fraiser (1999) on his part, recommends that pronunciation should be set in a communicative context. He further explains that learners benefit greatly from explicit explanation of how pronunciation fits into the overall process of communication. This can be in form of a very simple model of communication showing a listener trying to interpret a message on the basis of cues in the speaker's speech. This gives learners a framework within which to understand what goes wrong when they are not understood and to gain a clear practical idea of linguistic contrast — not just a classroom drill but the living basis of the learners' ability to communicate in real life context. This changes the goal of pronunciation from one of mimicking a native accent which is extremely difficult to achieve, to one of creating intelligible messages.

Fraiser (1999) also recommends a learner- centred approach in the teaching of pronunciation. According to him, for pronunciation learning to be interesting, enjoyable and more meaningful, the learner-centred approach should be adopted.

This type of teaching naturally encourages the use of naturalistic exercises and practice of real communicative situations. Classes must be learner-centred in the sense that learners

should be able to practice speech that will be directly useful to them in real life. He further suggests that individual sounds and words can be discussed in context of larger structures of communicative language use. Learners should therefore be encouraged to bring examples of communication failure to class for discussion. They should also be encouraged to anticipate situations they will encounter after class and practise speech that will be useful in those situations. In these ways, the material learnt in class will have maximum transferability to the learner's real world if pronunciation teaching is done in context.

Pronunciation lessons work best if they involve the learners in actual speaking rather than in just learning facts or rules of pronunciation. Teachers therefore need to device activities which require learners to actually speak in their pronunciation classes and they should be giving learners enough time to practice the material they have learnt. Fraiser (2001) further suggests that learners can repeat a particular phrase 15-20 times before they can really become comfortable with it.

Also, learners should be given opportunities to listen and interact with native speakers where they can hear correct pronunciation of problematic sounds that pose problems to them. The use of cassettes and audio tapes come in handy here. Teaching of pronunciation should be introduced as early as possible and teachers should not waste those first years of the child's language learning.

Availability of materials for the teaching of pronunciation is also necessary and the use of language laboratory will enhance proper pronunciation. This is an avenue where learners will listen to correct pronunciation from native speakers.

Learners should be taught how to use the dictionary properly in terms of spelling and correct pronunciation. In this regard, the Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English is preferable to other dictionaries.

Conclusion

It is a natural phenomenon for Ll speakers to encounter difficulties with L2 pronunciation because Ll habits have already been formed in the learners. It is the responsibility of the English language teacher to create a suitable and comfortable learning environment for learners to learn correct English pronunciation by being creative and imaginative in his teaching. He should make his lesson enjoyable and

interesting by involving the learners because they are the focus of his lesson. The teacher should also remember that pronunciation is a key ingredient of oral communication and that it is pronunciation that enables the learners to know how English is spoken when it is spoken to them and to express their feelings and experiences in it in a way that is intelligible and convincing. The teacher should also bear in mind the pronunciation model he intends his learners to attain or speak and work towards achieving it for if learners of English are to speak properly so that they can be understood, they must pronounce English words correctly. Our model is the Received Pronunciation (RP); however, the English teacher should note that to attain RP's exact standard is unrealistic but he should aim at intelligibility rather than aiming to sound like a native speaker.

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