

Chapter One

IDENTIFICATION OF THE SOURCES AND TREATMENT OF ESL PRONUNCIATION ERRORS: A CASE STUDY OF IGBO SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The notion of competence is the central issue in language learning, especially in the light of error analysis. Learning theorists and language teachers want to know the answers to certain questions. What does the learner know? How did he learn what he knows? Can we measure or define this knowledge? In some respect, error analysis can answer these questions. A person exposed to a foreign/second language makes errors. Anything he speaks before he attains proficiency is called interlanguage, that is, the intermediate stages between the native and target language observable in learners' language. The Igbo speaker of English interlanguage is characterized by errors. The sources of second language learners' errors were identified to be related to material presentation, factors within the language itself and the psychology of the learner. This paper did not only characterize learners' interlanguage; but also suggested methods the teacher should adopt in handling them for learners to achieve proficiency in the target language.

Introduction

Igbo language is one of the three major languages in Nigeria. It is studied and learnt in schools in the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. There is also an expectation for linguistic proficiency in English because of the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic nature of the country - Nigeria. English is, therefore, chosen as a medium of communication. It was adopted as Nigeria's official and second language of legislature, meetings, conferences and seminars. Oluikpe acknowledges this when he states that "English has a delimited function as a language of unity in formal contexts in Nigeria" (6). He went further to state that:

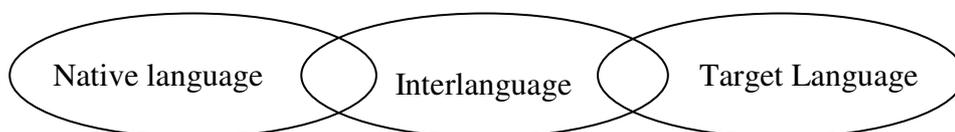
English is ... an international language, used or understood in most part of the globe and in a variety of circumstances. In today's world, it serves as a means of expression and communication not only for people who have acquired it as their mother tongue.... English as a world language does not belong to mother tongue speakers of English alone, but to all those who can make effective use of it (7).

It is against this background that Igbo speakers learn and speak English but their interlanguage is characterized by erroneous expressions some of which are mentioned in this paper.

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A person exposed to a particular language makes errors. Anything he speaks before he attains proficiency is called interlanguage. Larry Selinker first proposed the theory of interlanguage in 1972. He noted that in a given situation, the utterances produced by the learner are different from those native speaker would produce had they attempted to convey the same meaning. When compared, the linguistic system is different. Wikipedia the free encyclopedia defines it as an emerging linguistic system that has been developed by a learner of a second language (L2) who has not become fully proficient yet but is only approximating the target language: preserving some features of their first language (or L1) in speaking or writing the target language and creating innovations.

People's interlanguage may yield to a new linguistic variety as features of a group of speaker's L1 community may be integrated into a dialect of the speakers' L2 community. The figure below shows the relationship between interlanguage, native language and the target language.



Selinker identifies the following as the learning strategies through which a learner's interlanguage is created:

- i. Language transfer
- ii. Transfer of training
- iii. Strategies of second language learning
- iv. Strategies of second language communication and
- v. Overgeneralization of target language (TL) linguistic material. (35-41)

Each of the analyst's prediction of errors or shape of IL utterances should be associated with one or more of these or other processes. Selinker went further to state that performance situations that relevant to interlingual identifications are (1) utterances in the learner's native language produced by the learner; (2) Interlanguage utterances produced by the learner; and (3) target language utterances produced by native speakers of that language. These three sets of utterances or language behaviour, according to him, are the psychological relevant data of second language learning and the theoretical predictions in a relevant psychology of second language learning will be the surface structure of interlanguage sentences. This paper utilized these three sets of utterances in identifying Igbo learners' pronunciation errors on his route to proficiency in the English language.

Error Defined

'Error', 'deviant' or "erroneous production" means a systematic deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner on his way to acquiring the target language. It is defined as 'systematic deviation, when a learner has not learnt something and consistently gets it wrong' (Norrish, 7). Errors are distinguished from what is known as simple "mistake" which refers to performance error that can either be a random guess or slip of the tongue and failure to utilize the known system correctly. Mistakes are not peculiar to the second language learners alone. They are easily corrected by the speaker himself.

Sources of Pronunciation Errors

Speech Errors as a Result of Materials and Material Presentation

Errors may be as a result of

- The choice of teaching materials itself
- Teaching points being presented in a certain order
- Ordering of the examples of the language
- The practice work accompanying the examples or
- From the learner's processing of these materials.(Norrish, 12)

According to Corder, language is a system of systems with all parts being interconnected, therefore, nothing can be 'fully learned' until all the parts are fully learned. The teacher's role is to allow our students to learn the rule systems of the target language by presenting them with sentences which exemplify the rules so as to develop a competence in the language as a whole. (283)

All the sources of errors mentioned by Norrish are all part of activities associated with the teaching process. They are all within the teacher's control except the last one which is learner's processing of materials. Corder noted "The last factor is not within the teacher's control, nor yet within the student's own control, and has been classified as part of human psychology by one writer" (283). Norrish went further to refer to this as "personal factor" involving the student's mind. This borders on the mood of the student, whether it is good or he is distracted which can lead to unnecessary mistakes. Corder calls this 'redundant' as clearly different from error which arises specially from the language-learning activity (i.e., the inherent error which may be a necessary part of learning a language).

Apart from material presentation, pronunciation errors can also arise when the teacher is a poor model. Proficiency is highly required on the part of the teacher because the correction of what is wrongly learnt is never easy.

Learner's Psychology as a Source of Speech Error

The psychology behind pronunciation errors include

- L1 Interference
- Accent
- Motivation
- Sociological factors

L1 Interference

The notion of mother tongue interference as a main contributor to error in learners' use of foreign language is related strongly to behaviourists' notion of language learning – which is that language learning is a matter of habit formation. One set of language habit could interfere with the formation of another. Weinreich defines interference as "... those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language, i.e. as a result of languages in contact ..."

(in Dulay and Burt, 102). He went further to state that when both speakers are bilingual, interference runs rampant in both directions; when one speaker is monolingual and the other bilingual, interference in the bilingual's speech is 'inhibited'. The contrastive analysis states that interference is due to unfamiliarity with L2, i.e. to the learner not having learned the target pattern and is manifested in the language he learns. Lado states concerning this:

We know from the observation of many cases that the grammatical structure of the native language tends to be transferred to the foreign language ... we have here the major source of difficulty or ease in learning the foreign language Those structures that are different will be difficult. (58)

Much of what the Igbo learner does in the field of pronunciation is a matter of habit. The sound of his language forms a system and in listening to a language other than his own, he tends to 'hear' the sounds of his own language, or at least sounds close to those of his own language, rather than those that are being produced in the foreign language, for instance, Igbo language has no dental fricatives and there is a tendency for speakers to substitute /t/ and /d/ for English /θ/ and /ð/, respectively, thus confusing such words as 'tick' and 'thick' 'den' and then'.

Because in most Igbo dialects /e/ and [E] are allophones of one phoneme many Igbo speakers, who tend to use /e/ for English diphthong /ei/ do not clearly distinguish between such words as 'gate' and 'get'. There are also no long vowels in Igbo. Although Igbo /i/ is fairly close to English /i/ in quality, many Igbo speakers have difficulty in making a distinction between such English words as 'ship' and 'sheep', 'cat' and 'cart', 'cot and caught' as there is only one Igbo vowel in these areas of the vowel chart.

The central vowel /ʌ/, /ə/ and /ɪə/ are difficult for Igbo speakers, because there are no Igbo vowels at all similar in quality. Though Igbo has no diphthongs, it is only the centering diphthongs of English that normally cause difficulties, because they involve a central quality as off-guide. In addition, the distinction between such words as “cheer” and “chair” is not always made.

Because of the Igbo vowel harmony system which is that light vowels go together and heavy vowels go together in a word, Igbo speakers, sometimes experience difficulty in pronouncing two distinct vowels, which may seem to them to be close to two Igbo vowels belonging to different sets, in the same English word, thus the word “borrow” in English, may be said as [boro], for the Igbo speaker may feel that otherwise he is placing /o/ which is English /ɔ/ and /o/, /ɒ/ for English in the same morpheme, thus disobeying the Igbo rule of vowel harmony

The same goes with stress and intonation; while English is stress-timed, most indigenous languages are syllable timed. As a result, Igbo speakers have difficulty in:

- (1) Learning to place the stress correctly both in words and sentences.
- (2) Varying the length of English syllables so as to achieve the correct rhythm.
- (3) Learning to produce the appropriate English intonation patterns.
- (4) Syllable final consonants are difficult for Igbo speakers, e.g. for the word ‘part’, an Igbo will say pati.
- (5) Also consonant clusters whether in initial or final position are difficulties (except for any initial consonant cluster of two consonants where the second is /j/ or /w/).

Accent

Students because of the accent they are used to see as ‘funny’ certain expressions and sounds in English. They see using them as losing their identity and looking silly before their peers. To the Igbo speaker, this is often noticeable with the central vowels /ʌ/, /ə/ and /ɪə/. They laugh even in the cause of teaching as the teacher pronounces words like love and bird which they have approximated to their /ɔ/ and /e/ sounds.

Motivation

The errors in pronunciation are limited with the Igbo learners who are integratively motivated. They are the learners who learn the language because they are immensely interested in the language and culture of the people who speak it and want to be regarded as potential members of that linguistic group. Here, the ‘want’ to learn a language is an internally generated one rather than an externally imposed need. This is as opposed to the learners that are instrumentally motivated. They learn the language because it would help

them to achieve something important such as a pass grade in school, good job, ability to communicate in their businesses, etc. Here the learner does not learn because he likes the language but because the language would be useful for achieving another objective. How English words are pronounced does not matter to them.

Sociological Factors

This involves factors in the child's learning environment such as noise, ill health, hearing defect, small classroom, problems associated with large class and so on. These factors may bring about pronunciation errors.

Spelling and Phonetic Inconsistencies

Another source of pronunciation errors in second language learning is spelling and pronunciation inconsistencies typical of the English language. Umera-Okeke identified and explained the areas of sound and spelling inconsistencies to include:

- Where the same letter does not always represent the same sound (the letter g is pronounced /g/ as in gross, and /dʒ/ as in age; also the letter u sounds /u/ as in put, /aɪ/ as in buy and /ə/ as in suspect.
- Where the same sound is not always represented by the same letter (the velar /k/ has as many as five spelling forms: k as in keg, c as in cut, cc as in occasion, ch as in chemist and ck as in pack
- Where some letters are not pronounced at all in a word (comb, know, walk, honour, etc
- Where sounds are inserted in some words without representative letter (the sounds /j/, /w/, and /k/ are inserted in the following words respectively: use /ju:z/, one /wɒn/, accept /əksept/
- Variants of the plural and past tense morphemes (the plural morpheme is realized as /s/ as in cats /kæts/, /z/ as in dogs /dɒgz/ and /ɪz/ as in houses /haʊzɪz/ (64-83)

Treatment of the Errors

Rolf Donald, quoted the work of M. Bartram and R. Walton 'Correction' where the listed questions that could serve a guide to the teacher on whether to ignore or correct a particular speech error. The duty of the teacher is to consider the most important of these questions:

1. Does the mistake affect communication?
2. Are we concentrating on accuracy at the moment?
3. Is it really wrong? Or is it my imagination?
4. Why did the student make the mistake?

5. Is it the first time the student has spoken for a long time?
6. Could the student react badly to my correction?
7. Have they met this language point in the current lesson?
8. Is it something the students have already met?
9. Is this a mistake that several students are making?
10. Would the mistake irritate someone?
11. What time is it?
12. What day is it?
13. What's the weather like? (Online citation, 10/3/2008)

After making the above considerations, the teacher should adopt one or a combination of the following in correcting the pronunciation errors.

Delayed Correction Technique

The job of correcting these errors lies with the teacher. Like Umera-Okeke stated, 'our duty is to teach the language and not about the language. A language is what the native speaker say not what some people think they ought to say...' (73). A speaker could maintain his accent but he should be taught the correct pronunciation of every word in English. Norrish stated that it does not pay for a teacher to interrupt the student when his intention was to express meaning rather, he should have a notebook where he compiles all the erroneous expressions he gets to hear from students either on individual basis or as a group and incorporate them into later teaching points (116). This is called 'delayed correction technique' by Rolf Donald. Where a teacher wants to give an immediate correction, he can use 'mouthing'. This is a situation where the teacher mouths the correct pronunciation without making a sound, for example, when an individual sound is mispronounced or when the word stress is wrong. Of course it can also be used to correct other spoken errors.

Peer Correction

The teacher can also adopt Julia Edge's peer correction (24). Students should be grouped to have conversations, dialogues and acting out parts like making and receiving calls. Some who are not participating should record pronunciation errors made by the role players. This should be reviewed at correction time. Edge identified four advantages of peer correction which are

- When a learner makes mistake another learner corrects it, both learners are involved in listening and thinking about the language.
- When a teacher encourages learners to correct each other's mistakes, the teacher gets a lot of important information about the students' ability. Can they hear a particular mistake? Can they correct it?
- the students become used to the idea that they can learn from each other.
- if students get used to the idea of peer correction without hurting each other's feelings, they will be able to help each other learn when they work in pairs and groups.(24).

Minimal Pairs Drills

The role of minimal pairs cannot be over-emphasized in treating pronunciation errors. Most pronunciation errors as a result of interference can be eradicated by proper drills with the minimal pairs. All the long and short vowels should be contrasted in the pairs and about 5minutes drill done at the beginning of every English lesson. Words with such sounds absent in the child's indigenous Language should also be written out for drills. The teacher should patiently re-teach a given structure a student had learned wrongly and give the learners the chance of using the item or items in an appropriate situation. The minimal pairs not only allow us to target the phoneme in question, they also make it clear to the student how a tiny, sometimes unnoticed, change in pronunciation will actually change the meaning of their utterance.

Some examples of minimal pair drills are:

/l/	/r/	/I: /	/I/
light	right	seat	sit
fly	fry	bean	bin
blight	bright	peak	pick
play	pray	seen	sin
clash	crash	heat	hit
pilate	pirate	leak	lick

After modelling these and having students repeat, put them in pairs and have one partner say the phrases out of order to the other. The listener can identify the phrase heard, either by translating it (in linguistically homogenous group) or by number.

He's ill.

- His hill.
- His heel.
- His eel
- His seal.
- His zeal.

Practise linking (and sensitise students to the intrusive /h/) with a minimal food trio:

- My ham
- My yam
- My jam

Or

- He eats the chicken.
- He heats the chicken.
- He hates the chicken

- In the air
- In the hair

Minimal pairs are a very quick way to sensitise a student to a difference she or he isn't hearing. Using the L1, or a drawing on the board, or a paraphrase, elicit the pair you want like this:

Recording

Another method of correcting speech and pronunciation errors suggested by Rolf Donald is through recording. The teacher, in addition to recording students (individually, in pairs etc.) during a speaking task to make them aware of errors that affect communication can also use a technique from Community Language Learning. This entails students sitting down in a circle with a tape recorder in the centre. In monolingual classes they check with the teacher, who is bilingual, about how to say something in English, then rehearse it and record it. At the end of the lesson they listen back to the tape and can focus on specific utterances etc. With higher level multilingual classes students take part in a discussion which they have prepared for in advance. When they have something to say they record themselves and then pause the tape. Just as with monolingual classes they can use the teacher as a linguistic resource. At the end of the discussion students analyse their performance with the teacher. The focus is on improving the quality of what they say and expanding their inter-language. Rolf gave the advantages of community language learning to include that the:

- Students pay more attention to what they say as they are taking part in a kind of performance (it is being recorded)
- Students not only become more aware of gaps in their spoken English but also can see how their spoken English is improving.

This approach should be very effective for the correction of errors of the liquid /l and r/ and the affricate /tʃ and /dʒ/ The students after listening to the model should also be made to listen to themselves make necessary corrections.

Teaching Spelling/Pronunciation Differences

All the other factors within the language that hinder proper pronunciation should be effectively taught by the teacher. The lessons should encompass all areas of spelling and pronunciation inconsistencies in English, English silent letters, allomorph of the plural and past tense morpheme and other such problems that militate against accent reduction in English.

Conclusion

When it comes to error correction we are dealing with one individual's reaction to a student's piece of writing or utterance. This inevitably means that there will be some disagreement among teachers about what, when, and how to correct. Therefore, handling pronunciation errors is really a sensitive task for the teacher. As mentioned earlier, people's interlanguage may yield to a new linguistic variety as features of a group of speaker's L1 community may be integrated into a dialect of the speakers' L2 community. When they see this as their dialect, some who are not integratively motivated may resist the change the teacher is trying to make.

The teacher should employ the teaching strategies at his disposal including play to deal with this issue; above all, the pupils should be adequately motivated and be involved the correction process.

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*The contention rather is that
in this society, heroism is
not determined by violent actions alone.
A hero must combine physical prowess
with high intellectual ability.*