

THE UNDERLYING PEDAGOGIC PROBLEMS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA: A DIACHRONIC VIEW.

Introduction

Language is of prime importance to man because it is the basic medium of communication. If there is a breakdown in communication, social stability is disrupted. But if communication is effective, social harmony and mutual understanding are ensured. This makes language study indispensable in the school curriculum even when children have achieved a degree of proficiency in their mother tongue before attaining school age.

The mother tongue suffices in the initial years of school life, as the medium of instruction. English, the only foreign language introduced at this stage, is novel and exciting to the pupils. The lessons are based mainly on lexis and rudimentary syntax, and children are enthusiastic to learn new words and to express simple ideas in the new language. The problems encountered in learning the skills of this new language are, therefore, minimal.

The need soon arises, with its attendant problems, for proficiency in English. This need stems from the fact that English is used as the medium of instruction in the post-primary schools while the mother tongue becomes only a single subject. Yet, the students are required to attain proficiency in both the mother tongue and English. They communicate in the mother tongue at home but revert to English at school because English is the official language in Nigeria. Besides, the mixing of different ethnic groups in the metropolitan centres makes English convenient and necessary for mutual intelligibility. English, therefore, serves not only for international but also for national intelligibility. Though Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are also official languages in Nigeria, English has remained the only medium of communication in the National Assembly. As a result, every educated Nigerian is bilingual.

Bilingualism is the crux of the complex linguistic problems experienced in Nigeria today.

The problem of students' poor performance in English language examinations has emerged despite the long history of English in Nigeria. The English language assumed official status when Britain colonized this country in the first decade of the 20th century. Its long history notwithstanding, students' problems in the language are here with us. As a linguist puts it, "Parents are, indeed, alarmed at, and teachers concerned about, the poor performance of our youth in the English language" (Oluikpe, 1974:28). The gravity of parents' and teachers' concern is discerned in their outcry over the fallen standard of English language performance among the present generation of students. This challenging problem has consequently spurred many teachers of the English language to investigate the causes of the problem in order to find a permanent solution.

Causes of the Problem

Prior to delving into the causes of the problem enumerated by researchers, it is revealing to take a bird's eye-view of the status and role of the English language right from the colonial to the post-independence eras in Nigeria. As to its inception, L.A. Sofenwa (1975:120) states, "The Christian Missionaries brought the English language. (The) English language was the medium of education and education was the sole instrument of social and economic mobility. The Church, Commerce, and Colonial Administration operated through the medium of the English language." English had tremendous prestige at that time. The prerequisite for success in public life was the smattering of and fairly good performance in English. But with Nigerian independence, there grew national awareness and cultural revival. The popular expression, "When I was in England", was replaced by the derisive appellation, "been-to" (Sofenwa, 1975). The respect accorded to the English language started waning, and the West African Examinations Council soon yielded to this change by the removal of a pass in the English language as a precondition for obtaining the School Certificate. Thus,

the era of students' poor performance in English was ushered in. And, the fact that English still remained the official language did not alter this adverse "back-wash effect" of the change on students' performance.

The question that arises is: "What are the causes of students' poor performance in the English language?" The initial cause, it has been suggested, was the colonialists' patronising attitude towards English language usage in Nigeria. They were in urgent need of "a cadre of indigenous staff who could assist the colonial administration in various capacities - interpreters, office hands, clerks, etc" (Ubahakwe, 1974:45). Consequently, the colonial masters encouraged the establishment of schools by the missionaries. The compellingly superior position of the English language in the schools made the pupils strive to attain a reasonable level of proficiency in it. They saw the language as "the gate of educational advancement, of job opportunities ... (which) is blocked for those who cannot speak and understand the English language and its literature" (Ubahakwe, 1973:8). But, though the products of these schools got absorbed in the colonial administration, their employers "did not insist on the best," in terms of their performance in the English language; "rather they sympathetically and patronizingly accepted poor approximation of correct English both in speech and writing" (Ezeakunne, 1973:67). This utilitarian attitude of the colonialists stifled the motivation among many Nigerians to attain proficiency in English.

Teachers' incompetence has been pointed out as another cause of the problem. It started in the colonial period too. The persistent need for literate staff compelled the colonialists to recruit many school leavers as teachers. These untrained teachers taught English as well as other subjects. This practice of allowing unqualified teachers to teach English still obtains due to the scarcity of qualified teachers of English as a second language (TESL). "In effect", Ebo Ubahakwe (1974:45) comments, "the English language teaching in the country all these years (is) largely handled by teachers who (are) untrained for the job." It has given rise to the statement that every teacher is a teacher of English, as well as the complaint that teachers

are not doing their work. According to I.U. Ezeakunne (1993:66), "the complaining parents are right to accuse all teachers because their yardstick for measuring a successful education is the extent to which the student beneficiaries of that education can express themselves in English The standard of education evaluation is therefore English." They know nothing about the scarcity of TESL as a contributory factor to the students' poor performance.

Viewing the problem from a different perspective, C.O. Agunwa (1973:93-97) attributes the cause of students' poor performance not only to teachers' incompetence but also to lack of situationally based materials and environmental interference. By environmental interference, he means the influence of everyday usage on the performance of students in English in schools. Adebisi Afolayan (1973:176), emphasizing the above notion, condemns the use of English as the medium of instruction in the early years of the primary school. He rather advocates the adoption of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, to avoid untrained teachers constituting themselves into bad models of English for the pupils.

Other investigators believe that students' lack of motivation and nonchalance go a long way in worsening this problem of poor performance. Science students have the erroneous impression that the emphasis on the English language is misplaced, and the time spent on its study a waste to them. "Theirs," they claim, "will be the esoteric language of science and technology" (Ezeakunne, 1973:67). Students inclined to nationalism and cultural revival condemn the prominence given to the English language, the prominence which rightly belongs to a Nigerian language. They forget that the multilingualism of Nigeria makes it imperative that English will, for many decades to come, continue to be our official language. It is, therefore, obvious that for English to be effectively learnt, teachers must be qualified and students properly motivated.

Another cause of the poor performance is inadequacy of texts. Oluikpe (1974:30), in this regard, condemns the disjointed treatment of grammatical forms observed in some school text books. He advocates better organisation whereby one grammatical form is finished with before other structures are introduced.

Although students' poor performance can be attributed to the various causes enumerated above, a central problem, by consensus, is the interference of the first language (L_1). The theory of interference presupposes an adverse influence of the L_1 on second language (L_2) learning – "the special problems arising out of any effort to develop a new set of language habits against a background of different native habits" (Fries, 1975:9). Since many teachers of English in Nigeria have attempted to improve the quality of English language teaching and learning in schools by investigating this problem, this paper will now cite some works in the area of contrastive analysis to illustrate the nature of interference problem.

Phonological problems result from the influence of the L_1 on the L_2 . Many Nigerians, reports K.J. Stevenson (1974:66), disregard the English stress and intonation and speak English words using the sound system of the L_1 . This involves the practice whereby the "grammatical and phonological features are often transferred from the first to the foreign language." As Babatunde Folarin (1975:55) puts it, "Because the phonological patterns of one's native language are so ingrained in one's speech habits, there is, as Elizabeth Dunstan observes, a strong tendency on the part of anyone learning a second language to use the sounds, syllable structure and rhythm of his mother tongue in place of the sounds, syllable structure and rhythm of the language he is learning." Some of these phono-graphological problems can be attributed to bad pronunciation of words or inaccurate listening – what Elizabeth Eke (1973:163) calls "inadequate auditory discrimination of sounds." Folarin (1975:52-55) quotes some examples:

*To **guide** against the danger.

*They are of **outmost** importance.

***Long** tennis.

*I told you in my **formal** letter.

In these examples, **guide** is used for **guard**, **outmost** for **utmost**, **long** for **lawn** and **formal** for **former**. The existence of homophones in English, he adds, complicates this problem; hence, students use **weak** for **week**, **break** for **brake**, **two** for **too**, **hear** for **here**, and so on. He also illustrates how the Nigerian solves the problem he

encounters with consonant clusters in English. The learner either leaves out one element of the problematic cluster as in /vas/ for **vast**, or inserts a vowel within the cluster as in **penality**. Dealing with the phonological problem arising from homonymy, Oluikpe (1975:61-62) exposes the difficulty consequent upon the grammatical inconsistency in the patterns of pluralization of substantives and singularization of verbal structures. This involves the use of the homonymous morpheme. {-S}, which performs the two functions. A student, therefore, writes:

*Clever students always does their assignments
rather than

Clever students always do their assignments;
and also

*A clever student always do his assignments
rather than

A clever student always does his assignments.

The student simply forgets that {-S} is used for pluralizing substantives and also for singularizing verbals.

Inference and Attempted Solutions

The inference drawn from these investigations is that, to achieve efficient performance in written English, students must learn efficient speech habits; because most of the lexical and grammatical errors in students' writing can be traced ultimately to wrong operations on the phonological plane.

Interference of the L_1 with the L_2 is even more pronounced in syntax which is "complicated by interference from the already mastered structures of the primary language" (Ngwaba, 1973:253). E.C.C. Uzodinma (1973:117) reminds teachers that as phonological features are transferred from the L_1 to the L_2 , so are thoughts and ideas. A case in point is this statement:

*You carry mouth come to work and

Yet you are calling snuff.

This is a typical example of direct translation of Igbo idiomatic expressions into English without due regard to the meaning achieved in the translation. The statement means:

You have come to work without eating any food, and yet you are taking snuff.

Summarizing this situation, Oluikpe (1974:30) states: "Consequently, we notice to our greatest dismay that, in spite of the many years of English studies, errors which have close correlation with structural and cultural contrasts seem to be endemic with us and pass for the newly discovered variant form of English called 'Nigerian English'." He cites instances of such errors:

watchnight = night watchman

hide secret = keep secret

win an opponent = beat an opponent

He stresses the need for proficiency in the L_1 in order to appreciate and so surmount the problems arising from structural and cultural contrasts. He recalls that children learn better if they are steered from the known to the unknown; hence, if they know that *osisi ato* is plural in Igbo, they will appreciate the need for the suffixation of the plural morpheme, {-S}, to "three tree" to achieve the correct pluralization. Reiterating the importance of proficiency in the L_1 , T.A. Awoniyi (1974:56) observes that utilization rather than neglect of the mother tongue is an essential principle of language methodology because complete mastery of the mother tongue is essential to the effective teaching and learning of English.

However, with further researches into English language teaching and learning in Nigeria, it was discovered that the causes of errors derive from various factors. As J.C. Richards (1974:182) puts it: "Interference from the mother tongue is clearly a major source of difficulty in second-language learning, and contrastive analysis has proved valuable in locating areas of inter-language interference. Many errors, however, derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition, and from the mutual interference of items within the target language (TL). These cannot be accounted for by contrastive analysis." With this development, applied linguists started accepting that L_2 learners' errors are attributable to various sources. According to Anasiudu (1983:124), they derive from L_1 interference (interlingual errors), from the interference of items within the English language itself

(intralingual errors) and from the formulation of false hypotheses (developmental errors). The two latter sources are obviously not native-language induced, being inherent in the TL system itself.

Seeing that contrastive analysis could not account for intralingual and developmental errors, its critics developed the tool of error analysis. Headbloom (1979:28) summarizes the reasons for the new tool as follows:

Proponents of error analysis say that a contrastive analysis takes far too much time to conduct and yields poor results. It predicts some problems which in effect never show up in the learner's production, while failing to predict other errors which actually do occur .

The term **error** has to be specific, hence the need to distinguish it from **mistake**. Both are types of deviance, but while the latter is sporadic and unsystematic and due to "negative physical and psychological conditions such as tiredness, nervousness, strong emotions, memory lapses, and preoccupation," the former is regular and systematic and due to ignorance. While mistakes, made by both native and non-native speakers, are easily corrected when identified; errors are restrictedly committed by the latter, who cannot correct them (Anasiudu, 1983:123). Therefore, because of their relevance, the learners' errors are the focus of attention in this tool, not their mistakes.

With error analysis came a new view of errors. They are now seen as "facilitative rather than inhibitory," as signposts in the learner's tortuous path to the TL mastery. They are now exploited, not avoided, in the effort to guide the learner to the mastery of the TL. That is why, at the explanation stage of error analysis, a comprehensive look is taken at the causes of the errors identified, whether interlingual, intralingual, or developmental. The explanatory power of error analysis guides the teacher in not only preparing the remedial syllabus but also in tackling students' linguistic deviance at its roots. However, the comprehensive goal of error analysis notwithstanding, "advocates of the contrastive method feel that error analysis does not give full appreciation to

the problem of native language interference," says Headbloom (1979:28). "They claim that an analysis of learners' errors only is superficial and therefore misleading. The classification of errors is also problematic in terms of determining their underlying causes."

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that both contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) are tools of the formalist school that sees language as a code, a system of forms. Language teaching, therefore, consists in the teaching of the formal features of language - the rules of usage - which constitute the grammar. Underlying this approach is the assumption that the knowledge of grammar predisposes one to an effective use of the TL. However, in the 1960s it was becoming clear that the knowledge of grammar does not simply translate into the ability to communicate in that language. For example, a lot of Nigerian secondary school students in the 1940s and 1950s knew the grammar of Latin but few could communicate in it.

Consequently, emphasis started shifting from the code to the use of it, from the language-centred to the learning-centred approach. The learning, rather than the language, was beginning to receive the focus of attention in language teaching. The new development began through the effort of some applied linguists to identify what the learners needed in the TL. They did this by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of the learners' specialist area of work or study. So began register analysis (Halliday, McIntosh and Strevens, 1964; Ewer and Latorre, 1969; Swales, 1971). At this stage, register analysis still focused on grammar as the sentence remained the unit of analysis.

Soon "the concern of research ... was to identify the organizational patterns in texts and to specify the linguistic means by which these patterns are signalled" (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987:11). This is because the focus of attention had now shifted from the sentence to the text, the concern of English for specific purposes (ESP). Given that the purpose of an ESP course is to enable learners to function adequately in a target situation (that is, the situation in which the learners will use the language they are learning), the ESP course design process should proceed by first identifying the target

situation and then carrying out a **rigorous analysis of the linguistic features of that situation**. (Emphasis mine). The identified features will form the syllabus of the ESP course. This process is usually known as **needs analysis** (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987:12). It is the needs of the learner that determine what he is to be taught. That is why the approach is learning-centred. Therefore, apart from General English (GE) meant for examination purposes, English language teaching (ELT) has branched out into ESP, which further branches into different disciplinary areas where English could be taught for either academic or occupational purposes. Therefore, the tool - needs analysis - aims at instilling in the learner the skills that will enable him to communicate effectively in any situation he finds himself. Its goal is communicative competence as opposed to grammatical competence.

Conclusion

English language pedagogy in Nigeria has been beset with a number of problems over time that have led to deviance. The first major cause of deviance identified was interference of the L_1 with the L_2 , a problem tackled with the tool of CA. The need soon arose to introduce EA to take care of intralingual and developmental errors which characterize not only L_1 acquisition but also language learning. CA and EA are the formalistic tools employed in the language-centred approach, whose goal is grammatical competence. Recent developments having shown that grammatical competence is not enough equipment for effective communication, the learning centred approach has been introduced. With it the focus of attention has become the organizational patterns in texts, which are now used as instructional material to ensure that L_2 learners function adequately in target situations. The current goal of communicative competence has popularized the tool of needs analysis.

Taking the peculiarities of the L_2 situation into consideration, the tools of CA and EA cannot be regarded as obsolete. They still serve a useful purpose because the L_2 learner requires the strong foundation of grammatical competence for his attainment of

communicative competence. This fact explains the recent resurgence of interest in the earlier tools of CA and EA, particularly the former.

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