

**MOTHER-TONGUE INTERFERENCE AND CLASHING PHONETIC AND
PHONOLOGICAL MANIFESTATIONS IN SPEECHES OF EHUGBO NON-
NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH**

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Abstract

Native tongue interferes with students' phonological ability to study English as a second language in Ehugbo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria. This study investigates the place of mother-tongue interference in the phonological competence of Ehugbo non-native speakers of English. Questionnaires were used to source primary data from five secondary schools in Ehugbo. The data were analysed using Contrastive and Error Analysis. The analysis reveals that following the differences in the phonological features of English and Ehugbo dialect of Igbo, these student speakers find it very difficult to correctly pronounce some English words. Such words include English silent letters and those that their phonemes and phonemic representations are lacking in Ehugbo dialect. The study concludes that the cumbersome nature of English phonology and Ehugbo speakers' poor knowledge of it are the bane of the mother-tongue interference. The study recommends that these speakers should be familiarised with a comparative contrastive phonological analysis of Igbo and English languages so as to master the phonological differences and similarities between them.

Keywords: Mother-tongue, Interference, Manifestations, Speeches, Phonological features Ehugbo non-native speakers

Introduction

The importance of English in the global scene and specifically in Nigeria remains sacrosanct. English occupies the centre of every national activity in Nigeria notwithstanding the multilingual nature of the country (Emeka-Nwobia, 2007). Its position in the Nigerian society prompts Eyisi (2007 p.14) to assert that 'there is no immediate nor formidable threat to its suzerainty.' The linguistic influence of English in Nigeria is obviously overwhelming, considering the existence of numerous native languages. Ohiri-Aniche (2017) is of the view that Nigeria's over four hundred (400) indigenous languages are overshadowed by English language. In Nigeria, the three major indigenous languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, serve as the official languages used mainly in the North, Southeast and Southwest respectively (Emeka-Nwobia, 2017). This means that multilingualism is a reality in the country. The multilingual lingual nature of Nigeria affects the study of English as a second language in Ebonyi, where this study is situated. The native language of this population is Igbo, while English takes the position of a second language. These two languages operate side-by-side.

With bilingualism in place in Nigeria, mother-tongue interference, as a linguistic phenomenon, becomes inevitable. Interference and transfer cut across the four levels of linguistic analyses and beyond (Emeka-Nwobia & Onu, 2016). As Odeunmi (2017 p. 16) affirms, as non-native speakers of a second language speak it, there is usually cultural transfer involving 'the speaker's cognitive

dependence on their first language.’ Given the foregoing linguistic situation, Ehugbo non-native speakers of the English language most often experience some difficulty pronouncing and using some English words, since English phonology is not only cumbersome but also differs considerably from that of Igbo language as well as Ehugbo dialect of Igbo. The study carried out by Emeka-Nwobia and Onu (2016) lends credence to this one, as it empirically reveals ample cases of mother-tongue interference and language transfer among students of selected tertiary institutions in South-eastern Nigeria.

Phonology is of primary importance to language studies, communication and speech acts. The importance is seen in the reality that although phonology is the oldest level of language analysis, it remains the most important level, without which language would not be possible (Mbah & Mbah, 2000, p. 13). The knowledge of phonology is needed in all other levels of language/linguistic analysis and all disciplines (Chapman, 1973). In other words, phonology plays a crucial role in the other levels of linguistic analysis and accounts for some morphemic forms and structures– plural formation, present tense formation and past tense formation. The effect of phonology is also evident at the level of syntax, where it explains the phonological process such as assimilation and elision (Agbede, 2000; Mbah & Mbah, 2000; Nwala, 2008). Given the pursuit of this study, it shall be guided by the following research questions:

1. Do linguistic mother-tongue interference and language transfer constrain the phonological study of English, as a second language in Ehugbo?
2. To what extent do mother-tongue interference and language transfer affect the phonological study of English, as a second language, in Ehugbo zone?

The Concept of First and Second Language

First language is one of the classifications of language. It is the language a person is exposed to from birth. Some refer to it as native language, while others call it mother-tongue or primary language. First language, otherwise called native tongue, is the language of one’s immediate environment, to which one is exposed early in life. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1999, p. 333), first language is ‘the language that fully identifies with the native culture of a bilingual person,’ with which bilingual persons conduct their daily activities. Most often, first language is regarded as mother-tongue, which is structured and upheld by the local laws of nature that invariably structure the physiology of the individual. It is part and parcel of a person’s development. One speaks one’s first language better, since it is acquired from childhood. People are bound to learn better and faster in their native language, when it is taught in school. Mother-tongue helps to mould children’s early concepts.

The concept of second language presupposes that there is a first language, which the learner had garnered a reasonable level of competence. In this case, certain habits had been formed already in relation to phonological and communicative competence in the first language. McGregor (2009, p. 217) observes that sometimes a person acquires or attempts to acquire another language as an adult. This study considers such a language as a second language (L₂), regardless of whether it is the person’s second or third or later language. The study refers to the process of acquiring such a language as second language learning (or L2 learning). It is also called adult language learning. Language learning encompasses learning new ways of thinking and behaviour, leaving out the learnt/acquired culture. In the process, the individual develops new linguistic and communicative competence. In all, our native language is optimally necessary in linguistic development. Conceptualisation takes place in it and educational system must be hinged on it, if learners must be psychologically and educationally balanced. However, it is not without blemishes. Native tongue regularly interferes with students’ efforts to study the English language, which is the official language in Nigeria. Hence, this study

delves into those phonological constraints faced in the course of studying English as a second language in Ehugbo, with regard to linguistic interference and language transfer.

Concepts of Linguistic Interference and Language Transfer

The term 'interference' has been defined in various ways by different scholars. Merio (1987) has seen it as the influence exerted by the grammatical system of the first language on that of the second language in violation of the latter's normative grammar. In the same vein, Igboanusi (2000) is of the view that speakers who have acquired one language, tend to transfer some of the linguistic property of their first acquired language to any second language they use, and the transfer causes linguistic interference. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2008) opine that interference from mother-tongue is clearly a major source of difficulty in second language learning. According to them, 'there is the inevitable tendency to transfer the ingrained native language attributes to those of the target language thereby hindering effective mastery of pronunciation of the new language' (Onuigbo & Eyisi, 2008, p. 64). McGregor (2009, p. 133) maintains that grammatical systems of L₁ and L₂, pragmatic functions such as manners and strategies of asking for information, requesting actions, refusing offers and the like can also be transferred from L₁ to L₂. In the same vein, James (1980, p. 8) points out that second language learners tend to transfer to their second language utterances and formal features of their first language.

Igboanusi (2000) presents Odlin's (1989) definition of transfer as the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired. Igboanusi reasons that Odlin's definition of transfer implies that any language (whether mother-tongue or not), which a child acquired, is capable of causing transfer. Odlin talks about positive and negative interference or transfer. For him, positive transfer or interference refers to that which enhances language mastery as a result of language similarities. Then the negative interference is the one that obstructs learning, because of obvious differences in the systems of the two languages that have come in contact. He further acknowledges that transfer reflects in both formal and informal contexts, all linguistic subsystems among children and adults and in some other areas. In a nutshell, first language interferes in the learning of any other second language— English in this case. The interference cuts across different levels of linguistic analysis. In the light of this, learners resort to transferring some of the habits they have formed in their first language into the second language, as a way of crossing the hurdles encountered in second language learning. Most times, this transfer injures the structure and system of the second language and thereby results in the errors being committed by the learners.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Theory of Contrastive and Error Analysis. The paper hinges on Contrastive Analysis Theory because of its reliability in the identification of second language learners' problems. This analytical model is an inter-linguistic enterprise that deals with the analysis of the structural systems of two or more languages with the main purpose of bringing out similarities and differences in these systems in relation to second language learning, in order to predict difficulties that may occur. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2008) maintain that contrastive analysis is one of the oldest theoretical approaches for the analysis of the problems of second language teaching and learning. James (1980) notes that Contrastive Analysis is seen as a hybrid linguistic enterprise concerned with a pair of languages and founded on the assumption that languages can be compared. For him, Contrastive Analysis (CA) can be called an inter-linguistic study.

Moreover, Dechart (1983) has asserted that the farther apart the first and second languages are structurally, the higher the instances of error made in L₂ that bears traces of first language structures. Thus, the theory is apt for the phonological analysis of linguistic interference and transfer in the study

of English as a second language in Ehugbo, Ebonyi, Nigeria. On the other hand, Otagburuagu, Ogenyi and Ezema (2013) define errors as systematic deviations from the native speaker’s standard or accepted usage. In their opinion, errors are integral parts of the language process that represent the system the learner is using. In the same vein, Onuigbo & Eyisi (2008) see Error Analysis as a theoretical procedure in handling the difficulties in learning a second language and the error that may result from it. They contend that Error Analysis examines every error that could be intra-language or inter-language error.

The suitability of the theory of Error Analysis for a study of this kind is strongly affirmed and demonstrated by Emeka-Nwobia and Onu (2016). According to them, Error Analysis (EA) bridges the gap between ‘the adult native speaker of a language and a second language learner of a language’ (Emeka-Nwobia & Onu, 2016, p. 14). They add that EA dwells on differences and similarities between the ways language learners and adult native speakers of a language use it, with a view ‘to identifying learners’ errors, [and] outlining causes and significance of such errors in the speeches of second language learners.’ Given the foregoing, it is imperative to state at this juncture that Contrastive Analysis is used in this work to pinpoint the phonological constraints, while Error Analysis is used in the analysis of errors that occur as a result of interference and transfer within the study area.

Methodology

This study employs the theories of Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis in determining the constraints students encounter in the phonological study of English as a second language in Ehugbo. To find out how well students in the study area could pronounce English words with reference to phonological interference, fifteen (15) students from each of the five selected schools were given a set of words on the board to pronounce. The selected schools are Government Secondary School, Afikpo; Holy Child Secondary School, Afikpo; Sir Francis Ibiam Grammar School, Afikpo; Ozizza Comprehensive Secondary School, Afikpo; and Nkpogoro Community Secondary School, Afikpo.

Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Data

Table 1: Students Performance in Pronunciation

S/N	Words	Correctly pronounced	No of Respondents	%	Wrongly pronounced	Resp.	%
1	Thank, theme	/θæŋk/, /θi:m/	15	20	/tæŋk/, /ti:m/	60	80
2	Father, mother	/fæðə/, /mʌðə/	30	40	/fædæ/, /modæ/	45	60
4	Sin, fill	/sin/, /fil/	25	33.3	/si:n/, /fi:n/	50	66.7
5	Seen, feel	/si:n/, /fi:l/	35	46.7	/sin/, /fil/	40	53.3
6	Fart, dart	/fa:t/, /da:t/	40	53.3	/fæt/, /dæt/	35	46.7
7	No, grow	/nəu/, /grəu/	20	26.7	/no/, /gro/	55	73.3
8	Gate, hate	/geit/, /heit/	50	66.7	/get/, /het/	25	33.3
9	Away, again	/əwei/, /əgein/	15	20	/æwe/, /ægen/	60	80
10	Thursday, first	/θɜ:zdei/, /fɜ:st/	30	40	/tozde/, /fost/	45	60
11	Son, sun	/sʌn/, /sʌn/	10	13.3	/son/, /son/	65	86.7
12	Chance, chop	/tʃæns/, /tʃop/	15	20	ʃæns/, /ʃop/	60	80
13	She, shop	/ʃi:/, /ʃop/	20	26.7	/tʃi:/, /tʃop/	55	73.3

Source: Authors’ Field Survey, 2020

The table above obviously exposes the respondents' native tongue interference phonologically. Their mother tongue interference makes it difficult for them to pronounce the correct forms of some English words. One of the reasons can be attributed to the absence of some of the English vowel and consonant sounds in their native language (Igbo). Consequently, students erroneously substitute the available Igbo phonemes for such English phonemes that are absent in Igbo. The substitution does not go down well with the second language learners. It affects their oral performance significantly. The evidence is seen in this table where only 20% of the respondents could correctly pronounce the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ in the words "thank and theme". The other 55 respondents representing 80% of the population wrongly substitute it for the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/. The same thing is applicable to the voiced dental fricative /ð/, where 40% (that is 30) of the respondents got the correct pronunciation of the words "father, mother" which the sound occurs in. The other 60% (representing 45 respondents) pronounce the voiceless alveolar plosive /d/ in the place of dental fricative/ð/.

Besides, the phoneme, /ŋ/ which is a voiced velar nasal exists in the two languages- English and Igbo, but it is realized in different positions in words. However, in the Igbo language, this same phoneme /ŋ/ occurs only at the initial and medial positions in words. It cannot occur at the final position. For instance,

Ñuru (drink) /ŋuru/

Ñuo (command to drink: Drink!) /ŋuru/

Ñuria (jubilate) /ŋuria/

Añuri (joy) /aŋuri/

Añara (garden egg) /aŋara/

Thus, when it occurs in any English word, Igbo students of English substitute it for /n/ or /g/. This accounts for why the greater percentage of the respondents did not get the correct pronunciation of the words given to them where the sound occurs. Meanwhile, for vowels number one and two: /i/ and /I:/, only 25 (i.e. 33.3%) and 50 (46%) of the respondents got the correct pronunciation of the words "sin, fill" and "seen, feel" where they occur respectively while 66.7% (representing 35 of the population) and 53.3% of 40 out of the entire population pronounced the sounds wrongly respectively in the words given. This is because in English, a pure vowel can either be long or short, but in the native language of the area of this study, length does not distinguish one vowel from another. It is thus predicted that the long English vowels can be pronounced as their Igbo counterparts.

The same thing applies to vowel number 5 in the words "fart and dart". 53.3% of the respondents (representing 40 of the population) got the correct pronunciation of the words given, unlike the other 46.7% of the population (that is 35 of the respondents) that failed to get the correct pronunciation of the sound in the words given. Moreover, there are no diphthongs in the language (Igbo) of the study. Although vowels may be doubled, they are still not equivalents of the English diphthongs. This creates some interference in their phonological study of English, as a second language. This accounts for the reason why only 26.7%, representing 20 of the population, got the words "no and grow" and 66.7% (55 of the respondents) got the words "gate and hate" correctly pronounced for the diphthongs /əu/ and /ei/ respectively, while 73.3%, representing 55 and 26.7% representing 20 of the population could not pronounce the words correctly.

Furthermore, in the English language, the schwa sound /ə/ is always found in an unstressed syllable. This is not so in Igbo. Therefore, the pronunciation of this phoneme is problematic to students of this study because of mother tongue interference. Evidently, only 20% of the respondents (i.e., 15 out of the population) correctly pronounced the words where it occurs, such as "away and again". The remaining 80%, representing 65 respondents replaced the sound with the short /æ/ sound and this distorted meaning and sound.

The same table reveals that 60%, representing 45 out of the total population, could not correctly pronounce the English vowel number eleven /ɜ:/ in the words “Thursday and first”. This is because the phoneme is not in their native language. 40%, representing 30 of the respondents, got the sound correctly pronounced. For the English pure vowel number ten in the words “son and sun”, only 13,3 (10 out of the population) could pronounce it well in the given words, but the other 86.7 representing 65 of the population could get the sound correctly pronounced.

This study as well ventured into the determination of the knowledge of silent letters with regard to the population in question. A total of 50 students within the selected schools were tested with a set of words containing silent letters to ascertain how they could pronounce the words observing the silent letters. The words were written on the board and they were required to pronounce them. Their responses are shown in the table below.

Table 2: Students’ Performance in reference to Silent Letter

Words	Correctly Pronounced	Frequency	Percentage Response	Wrongly Pronounced	Freq	Percentage Response
Pestle	/pesl/	16	32%	/pestl//	34	68
Womb	/wu:m/	14	28%	/wu:mb/	36	72
Sachet	/Sæ ei/	17	34%	/sæt et/	33	66
Receipt	/risi:t/	7	14%	/risipt/	43	86
debut	/debju:/	8	16%	/Debu:t/	42	84

Source: Authors’ Field Survey, 2020

From the table above, one can see that the respondents have problems with regard to silent letters. This is caused by mother tongue interference, since their native language does not have anything like silent letters in its phonological structure. In the native language of this population, words are spelt the way they are pronounced. Briston (1983) has maintained that if there is one thing certain about English pronunciation, it is that there is nothing that is steady about it. Meanwhile, it is only 32% of the student respondents (representing 16 out of the entire population) that got the correct pronunciation of the word “pestle” when it was written on the board. The other 68% (34 of the respondents) could not pronounce it well.

Again, 72% of 36 respondents were ignorant of the correct pronunciation of the word “womb”, while it was only 28% (14 of the population) that correctly pronounced it. In the same vein, 34% (only 17 of the entire population) got the correct pronunciation of the word sachet; but up to 66% (33 of the respondents) failed to correctly pronounce the word “sachet”. For the word “receipt”, just 7 (14%) out of the whole population correctly pronounced it, while 43 (86%) of the population could not make out the correct spelling of the word. In the same vein, only an insignificant number (8 of 16%) of the population could correctly pronounce the word “debut”, containing a silent letter “t”. The other respondents numbering 43 (94%) wrongly included the letter “t” in their pronunciation. All these errors are attributable to the absence of silent letters in the system of the native language of the population. This is to demonstrate that native tongue actually interferes with students’ phonological study of the English language.

Conclusion

This study has extensively examined the phonological difficulties posed by linguistic interference and language transfer in the study of English, as a second language in Ehugbo, Ebonyi, Nigeria. These constraints, according to the study, are as a result of the disparities in the phonological features of Igbo and English. The study found out that, to a reasonable extent, native language creates some phonological constraints in the study of English in Ehugbo. These barriers can be minimized if a contrastive study of the two languages is constantly carried out.

Recommendation

English teachers in Ehugbo should strive for an in-depth knowledge of the Igbo language in order to identify areas of similarities and differences between the phonological systems of the two languages. A contrastive analysis of the two languages would help the students to appreciate the different features of their indigenous language in relation to English. This would eventually reduce the constraints posed by linguistic interference as well as language transfer in the phonological study of English, as a second language in Ehugbo, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.

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