SECOND LANGUAGE AND LEXICAL INTERFERENCE: KNELL TO RE-ENGINEERING EDUCATION FOR EMPLOYMENT AND SELF PRODUCTIVITY IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The crux of human existence depends on language. All thoughts and actions depend on one's understanding of language and the ability to use it. An L2 speaker as a bilingual faces the problem of competence in the use of the L2 because he had already had the mastery of the L1 which is the mother tongue and all his thought is based on the L1 which he later transfers to English, which in Nigeria today, is a potent means of gaining access into the world of scholarship. This paper attempts to explore the causes of lexical interference and also puts forward some remedial suggestions which teachers of the English language and other courses should try to embrace to see that there is adequate improvement in teaching/learning of the English language which will enhance functional communication and strengthen networking with other countries. These will make re-engineering of education for gainful employment and self-productivity in Nigeria a reality.

Going into history, the present form and status of English in Nigeria is as a result of the contact between the English language and Nigerian languages in the socio-cultural and political situations. The initial contact, according to Bamgbose (1995), through trade led to a more formalized relationship during the colonial period and subsequent developments were to convert English into a second language with a distinctive Nigerian flavour, and ensure for it a dominant position as the country’s official language.

For easy understanding, English serves as a second language in a situation where users of the language have their own indigenous languages but use English as a mandatory means of communication in official and public life. Nigeria being a multilingual nation-state, apparently, has to adopt English as a second language for socio-cultural and geo-political day-to-day activities. According to Ogbuchi (2002), English as a second language is:

An alternative to the mother tongue in a country with multiplicity of indigenous languages, English serves in administration, education, law mass media, international commerce, and diplomacy and in all other official situations, the indigenous languages operate alongside English especially in the private sector. In the Nigerian situation, English is acquired as a second language (L2). It is a language for specialized education. Olaoye (2007) asserted that English is used as the medium of instruction from elementary to the university level. This means that the Nigerian learner’s access to the cultural and scientific knowledge of the world is largely through English.

The English language largely occupies a pride of place in Nigerian educational system apart from being a distinctive subject in the curriculum. It is also the medium of instruction through which other subjects from primary school to all levels of tertiary institutions are learned. On the other hand, first language is spoken as L1 (mother tongue). It performs imaginative function in the sense that, the child’s thought and imagination which are not physical, but ideas and concepts, are imagined before they are put into practice. These are done in our mother tongue which facilitates the psycho-motor process.
Secondly, the representational function of L1 gives it the description of being symbolic because through L1, one can convey massages, information or even proposition. It is pertinent to say that numeracy is usually begun in mother tongue.

It is crystal clear that, academically, English has assumed an incomparable history and achievements as a *lingua franca* in Nigeria. Achebe (1975), holding on this idea says; “today for good or ill, that language is English. Tomorrow it may be something else, although I very much doubt it”. In view of the place of the English language in Nigerian educational values, the issue of poor performance at the SSCE level, Mohammed (1995) asserted that; “the close correlation between failure in English and failure in the other subjects, particularly Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics and Geography, is quite evident and very alarming”.

This seems to lend strong support to the suggestion that many failures in subjects are really failures in English (Banjo, 1989). This is to say that once there is poor mastery and performance in English, there must be poor performance in other subjects because of the close relationship between communicative competence and educational performance in general.

Now that the English language and mother tongue have been placed side by side, where does the marriage of these two relatively important aspects of language occur? Does it make or mar our academic success? It is in view of this that this paper opts to look into lexical interference which emanates from this marriage of the English language (L2) and mother tongue (L1) and tries to proffer some solutions to the problems that arise at second language situation because English being the language of instruction in our citadel of learning, language of employment and above all, English being a language of prestige, the competence and performance of an individual is measured on how he could communicate in English. This is more important in this era of globalization where networking is very important. Our education should be re-engineered for employment, productivity and sustainability.

**What is Lexis?**

The Greek word *lexis* means “word”. Lexis is also used for the word vocabulary. The components of effective communication that would be examined are restricted to grammar and mechanics. The meaning of any lexical item is reached through “reference” or “sense” which are two different but related aspects of meanings of lexical items.

**Reference:** according to Aremo (2004); “in each language, there are particular lexical items, and not others, for referring to particular entities in the physical world”. Going further to making meaning out of lexical items, Aremo posits;

Since, on the whole, every language has its own way of referring to the world of reality, it should be realized that English has its own pattern of referential meaning relationships (i.e. lexical item/referential relationships), and this pattern has to be learnt as such if one is actually to be able to form and understand sentences in the language. And in this regard, it certainly helps for the non-native learner to have a great deal of exposure to the language as used by competent speakers/writers.

The teaching of English language as a second language in our institutions in Nigeria is basically to improve the students’ competence and performance in oral and written communication skills so as to be able to compete globally in academic fields. Though there are Nigerian indigenous languages but the English language is the only medium of communication through which other courses are taught. This language has assumed various varieties based on the region where it is in use. In Nigeria today, there is so called “Nigerian English” which incorporates the Nigerian ways of relaying thoughts and experiences with their little knowledge of the English language which brings
about the use of the vocabulary of the first language (indigenous) in the matrix of the English language culture. The issue then is, how effectively can an L2 learner handle these languages to be able to vary our formal and informal communications and for the sake of global intelligibility.

**What Is Lexical Interference**

Lexical interference, according to Nwazuoke (1978), “results when a lexical item of vocabulary of language “X” is used in the matrix of language “Y” culture”. Here language “X” has to do with L1 which is the mother tongue, while language “Y” is the L2 which is the target language, English language. Ekundayo Salami and Oni state that;

Language and cultures, very often, come into contact as a result of migration, colonization, war, trade contract and so on. The bilingual whose coming into being is as a result of such contact between two languages (and culture) tends to manifest in his/her communication (written/oral (mine)) some structural problems arising from the overlap of one of the language on another.

Where this overlap occurs at the lexical level, it is referred as “Lexical interference”.

**Illustration Of Cases of Lexical Interference Are:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interference</th>
<th>Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chop food</td>
<td>Eat food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hear a language</td>
<td>Understand a language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A black woman</td>
<td>A dark in complexion woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Say the truth</td>
<td>Tell/speak the truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put mouth in a matter</td>
<td>Interfere in a matter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big man</td>
<td>Rich/affluent man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet food</td>
<td>Delicious food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hear smell</td>
<td>Perceive smell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tight friend</td>
<td>Close friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat money</td>
<td>Embezzle money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borrow me money</td>
<td>Lend me money</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A yellow man</td>
<td>Fair in complexion man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First born</td>
<td>Eldest child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watch night</td>
<td>Night watchman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door mouth</td>
<td>Entrance/door way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low current</td>
<td>Low voltage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No market</td>
<td>No sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broken plate</td>
<td>Breakable plate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweet story</td>
<td>Interesting story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Throw an opponent</td>
<td>Defeat an opponent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go slow</td>
<td>Hold up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The underlined lexical items are born out of interference of L1 in the L2 matrix. This is as a result of transliteration from mother tongue or Nigerian pidgin. Banjo(1989) explained this sort of English as a type that is socially accepted in Nigeria, but this paper being in support of a situation where Nigerians would be in network with other international bodies, posits that the English language should be learnt with seriousness. In this view, Oji (1997) asserted that “the strongest reason against the introduction of a Nigerian version of English in this country is that it will smack of unprecedented chaos in the teaching/learning of the English language as a second language”. Harmer (1985) in support of Oji, explains; “we get unsuccessful learning where there is wide spread of deviation from standard”.

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To be categorical, there is no sin committed in having the Nigeria brand of English for the purpose of inter and intra ethnic social being. But a good user of language is the one who is able to vary his/her use of language. An informal communication should be done in the language that suits it for the sake of mutual intelligibility. When it comes to formal/academic communication, both internal and international, standards should be adhered to, except in the case of literary device, and the user should be able to identify this as a literary construct. Hence English is the language of instruction, publication, media, and language of international affairs, the success in Nigerian educational industry which makes us to be known among other nations of the world depends on our proficiency in the language, English.

Causes of Lexical Interference
Lexical interference as a knell to effective communication in English in a second language situation in Nigeria emanates from:

i. Adoption of Peer Group, Family/Teacher’s Communication Form. The candidate’s environment matters a lot in his language construct. Many candidates try to imitate the ways their friends, family and teachers speak. A child grows up to know an interesting story or film as being referred to as a sweet story/film Which other way should the child be expected to describe a story/film that he/she appreciated to be superb when the English teacher at school describes such story/film as” sweet”?

ii. Poor Reading Culture
Most learners do not read literature texts to improve their efficiency in the use of English language. Some manage to glance through the prescribed literature text, while some avoid it at all cost. In this situation, interference is bound to occur. The candidate who reads this extract, form “Things fall Apart” about Unoka “…and they swore never to lend him any more money because he never paid back. But Unoka was such a man that he always succeeded in borrowing more…” would be able to differentiate lend from borrow. Developing good reading culture helps in creating high language development.

iii. Trans-literation of the Mother Tongue
Difficult challenge is fixed when candidates do not observe dissimilarities between the structure of their mother tongue and the second language. This brings negative interference. When a candidate that is discussing on the word defeat, uses throw because it is the direct translation of the word used to express the act of winning in a wrestling match in the candidates mother tongue (Igbo) or when the same candidate instead of using the word perceive to express the sensitivity of the nose over situation of air around him uses the word hear(hear smell) thus indicates a proactive inhibition where the mother tongue acquired at the beginning inhibits the acquisition of the new target language which is the second language (English language and its structure), while the appropriate language should be to perceive smell.

Approaches to Remediate Lexical Interference

It is the duty of the teacher to remediate these inadequacies found in candidates. This is only done through new approach to the teacher’s methodology. The teacher should be mindful of the lexical items that interfere in the matrix of the other language (L1 or L2) and try to source for materials where the lexical items are used either as transliteration in order to create effect or as an error. When the lexical items are presented before the class, the teacher will then make the students know why it is used in that form and at the same time, teach the appropriate way of using what has been used informally in formal English language situation.
The teacher being mindful of the lexical items that students and other users of English language use wrongly, can deliberately present points to be discussed in the class where he knows that it is compulsory that certain lexical items must be used for example;

i. Discuss the pleasant and unpleasant nature of a public toilet you have visited.

ii. Why there is no proper provision of infrastructure in your state in spite of huge allocation from the federal government.

iii. Give reason why a European in Nigeria cannot communicate with his gardener who is an Igbo.

iv. Why you enjoy watching certain films?

To handle this remedial teaching effectively, the teacher must adopt what Nwazuoke (1978) calls “SITUATIONAL APPROACH” which holds that nothing should be done out of context. It is only when the students come across a case of vernacular expression or transliteration in any work or in their discussions that the teacher uses the opportunity to explain that the writer used the expression to create effect in his work and warn against the use of such when standard English is demanded such as academic work. In other situation, the student is allowed to use language and there the real situation is known and corrected.

In case of the examples of points for discussion stated above, the teacher is assured that in discussing problem number(i)

The candidate must bring in the lexical item smell and in the situation where the candidate uses the wrong verb, hear (hear smell), the teacher will them cut in to correct the vernacular expression and put the class through by making them to know that the appropriate words are perceive smell. The same in number(ii), the candidate is expected to use the expression, embezzle money. When the candidate uses eat instead of embezzle, know that interference has manifested and the teacher has the duty to correct the error of interference by letting the students know the appropriate lexica item to use.

As has been pointed out above, any candidate discussing point number (iii) must surely make use of the word understand while trying to explain the reason for the break the in communication between the two individuals. Where the candidate says, it is because gardener does not hear English instead of understand English or that the European in Nigeria does not hear Igbo instead of understand. As hearing is a passive way of perceiving sounds without the idea of decoding the meaning or being able to make use of it, understanding is an ability of make meaning out of what you see or hear and also be able to make judgment over it. In this context, the appropriate lexical item here is understand, and not hear. The teacher can equally buttress this with appropriate sentences using understand and hear.

The next demands your judgment over films you have watched. The teacher tries to probe into the student’s appropriacy in the use of vocabulary. Where the student makes use of sweet in relaying his appreciation of a film watched, the teacher will then step in to make correction. Here the teacher should explain when sweet is appropriate and when interesting is appropriate.

The teacher should aim at the permanent removal of “common error” as they occur in every discussion or class work. The teacher should not say that the lexem or vocabulary occurred during mathematics class or is a scientific term not English, and fail to correct it. This is one of the reasons why some students, especially those in social sciences, develop nonchalant attitude towards English. They believe that since their courses or their dream courses are not linguistic-oriented, they should ignore the ethics of grammar in their communication (Adakonye and Danjum, 2009).

Contrastive Analysis

Conor, (1996) asserted that contrastive analysis is the systemic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities. Therefore, the difficulty in mastering
certain structure in a second language (L2) depended on the difference between the learner’s mother tongue (L1) and the target language. In view of the above, a good teacher studies areas of contrast between the learner’s mother tongue and the target language to identify the area that may pose difficulty in learning the target language.

Conclusion

The millennium educational development that is envisioned by the federal government will remain a mirage if the teaching and learning of English as a second language are not properly emphasized on. Re-engineering education in all its ramifications, without good foundation in the language of communication, amounts to labouring in vain. Afolayan (1984) posited that; “for a development-oriented education to take place in Nigeria, there should be the assignment of a new developmental-oriented role of English language within the educational programme of the nation”. The mastery of any language starts from the mastery of the lexical items. Each language has its own specific lexical composition, and whenever the rule governing the componential structure of the language is violated, the learner will never be right in his performance.

For the plan to re-engineer education for employment and self-productivity in Nigeria to be effective, it is imperative for both the English language teachers and ESL learners to gear their efforts towards the acquisition of the English language that will expedite successful transfer of knowledge universally and in all its ramifications. (Adakonye and Danjuma, 2009). Since it has been discovered that lexical interference is one of the main thorny areas in the mastery of English as a second language by Nigerian learners, it is imperative that the teachers lay solid foundation for the learners by starting their teaching to the learners using situational approach by engaging the learners in oral and written activities which unveil their linguistic competence. The teachers in non-linguistic areas of specialization should bear in mind that good knowledge of the language of instruction facilitates good understanding of all subjects, questions and the expression of oneself in writing or speaking. The good idea in communication is also transmitted into our performances in our jobs and in being in network with the outside world.

References


