

CRITICAL ISSUES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING OF THE ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION FOR FUNCTIONAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Speech is a natural medium by which every human being shows that he understands his environment. This is why speaking skill is seen as the major objective of language. Oracy is very important because it makes communication easy and should be stressed in order to achieve an effective and functional education. One's life is dominated by a continuous flow of words which are combined to form sentences for better understanding. This paper sees pronunciation as the most veritable instrument that fosters comprehension of any communication and effective learning. Since language is a carrier of culture, speech which is an aspect of a language spoken form should be distinct and coherent in order to yield maximum result. Speech is a linguistic expression that develops naturally from childhood and has to be guarded with care to avoid inconsistency and misunderstanding. To avoid pronunciation error which may lead to complexity in communication, the paper points out some issues and challenges in pronunciation and suggests some steps which foster the teaching and learning of pronunciation for functional education.

Introduction

We live in a world where human beings make use of words which are arranged orderly with syntactical rules to convey meaning. Fromkin, v. and Rodman, R. (1978: 10) rightly observed that life of a normal human being is dominated by a continuous flow of words by language. Language which is a vital instrument in communication is used to express our love, hate, anger, happiness etc. Every human language uses sounds produced with human speech organs as their basic raw material. Language which is a carrier of culture cannot be functional and effective if there is inconsistency in the

pronunciation of the English speech sounds. Nigeria is a multilingual nation with none of the indigenous language adequate to serve the language needs of the various groups that compose it. English has been chosen as the language of the education among other roles. Therefore, to achieve a qualitative and functional education, the pronunciation of the speech sounds of the target language should be learned and mastered to avoid inconsistency. Without doubt, inability to make the articulatory difference in the pronunciation of the vowels and consonants can result in a break down in communication between a speaker and his listener.

The English Language which occupies a very crucial and fundamental position in the Nigeria society has two major forms. They are, the spoken form and the written form. The written form of any language is always derived from the spoken form. Being an important legacy from the British administration, the English Language as a discipline assumes a position of *primus inter pares* among the diverse ethnic languages in Nigeria. "The English language has enjoyed an unchallenged position in Nigeria educational system" (Mgbodile, 1999: 40).

Similarly, the English language is indispensable for effective communication in our society; this is why it should be taught well by teachers. It is one thing to speak the language and it is another thing to speak it well. In the views of Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009: 88)

English bestows some status on those who speak it fluently. Education in Nigeria is considered synonymous with a good command of the language and it is no longer viewed as a temporary borrowed language, but has rather become an accepted linguistic property for majority of Nigerians.

The English Language is now at the centre of Nigeria development because its efficiency and effectiveness is the cornerstone to functional education in the Nigeria setting. In the actual sense, Nigeria educational system cannot be qualitative and functional if the speaking skill is relegated to the background because “in the classroom practice, speech therefore has come to be regarded as the foundation of language work” (Ubahakwe, 1979:260).

Thus, because of this importance of spoken language in the society, it is pertinent therefore for the spoken form of the English language to come first and receive greater attention. In other words, oracy that is competence in the listening and speaking skill is more prime: It must come first to avoid confusion. An English teacher who wants to achieve maximum effect in pronunciation for functional and qualitative education should make sure that he stresses and emphasizes primacy of oracy in language learning and teaching.

Differences Between Spoken and Written Language

The English Language is broadly divided into two forms namely: the spoken and the written. Spoken language is a kind of symbol. It is also called code which consists of sounds that represent reality, concrete objects, ideas and actions. The written language is a static chain of symbols with little punctuation marks to indicate pauses and questions. The reader is free to interpret these symbols the way he likes, sometimes contrary to what the writer intended. The spoken language only is considered as the object of study because it is believed that it is sufficient for communication.

Writing and speech are regarded as “alternative equal systems of linguistic expression ... speech uses ‘phonic substances,’ typically in the form of air pressure movement, writing uses graphic substances typically in the form of marks on a surface (Crystal 1987: 179). Again, one can consider a written work as being permanent or static. This will enable a learner to read and study the material at his convenient time unlike a spoken language that can easily be forgotten few minutes after the speech.

Written language according to Crystal (1987:179) displays several unique features such as punctuation, capitalization, spatial organization, colour, and other graphic effects”. Such features are not fully manifested like the prosodies. Question marks occur in spoken English with the use of a rising intonation. There is a special value or importance placed on a written language because its permanence provides a lasting standard for the societal values. “Written formulations, such as contracts, are usually required to make agreements legally binding (Crystal, 1997:386)”. Unlike the written form, an oral agreement may be denied because it is as good as no agreement at all. A spoken language is peculiar to pronunciation as well as a written one. When the English sounds are written down, a careful identification of those sounds as well as the correct pronunciation will be done in order to foster the teaching and learning of English language.

Problems of Teaching and Learning of English Pronunciation

For the teaching and learning of English to be functional and self reliant, the teacher of the language has to re-emphasize the issues and challenges in English pronunciation which is the bane of oral English. Pronunciation class cannot be

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functional and effective if the teacher neglects the teaching of the segmental features which is made up of the vowels and the consonants. There are forty-four speech sounds in English language comprising twenty vowels and twenty –four consonants. A consonant is that speech sound that has a partial or total obstruction during its pronunciation while the vowel sounds are the speech sound that are produced without any form of obstruction in the vocal tract. Wrong manipulation and pronunciation of the segmental features might hamper effective communication which is the main purpose of learning the foreign language (L₂).

It is obvious that a second language learner is bound to have some difficulties while trying to keep to the pronunciation rules of the target language (L₂). Abbot (1981: 39) asserted that “when we speak, the listener hears a smooth continuity of combined sounds and not individual sounds in isolation”. English is foreign in Nigeria situation and because of that; it presents a lot of problems in acquisition especially in pronunciation.

One of the most important contributions of linguistics to language teaching and learning is the study of interference.

Weinreich (1975:95) defined interference as “those instances of deviation in the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language” Interference is an outcome of language contact which occurs when two or more languages are used alternatively by the same person. It is also one of the problems of teaching and learning of pronunciation. Every language is structured in a peculiar way which is different from others.

That is probably why the relationship between the English language and many Nigeria languages is marked with radical structural differences. These structural differences give rise to what is technical referred to as inter-Lingual problems (Onuigbo and Eyisi 2009: 87 – 88).

For the teacher or the course designer to appreciate these problems, better pedagogical or teaching strategies or devices should be use in teaching and learning of the English pronunciation. Since the mother tongue is already rooted in the child, there is need to compare and contrast the structural systems of the mother tongue and the target language.

It is necessary here to point out that ones speech reveals his identity and inconsistency in speech mars ones dignity and personality. Pronunciation has to be taught well, Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009:88) are of the opinion that among the linguistic problems of learning a target language, “Phonology seems to be the most troublesome”. A close comparison of the English language and our native language (Igbo) will reveal that some phonemes of English do not exist in Igbo. Close observation of the vowels and consonants also reveal that there are some speech sounds which constitute serious problems for effective teaching and learning of English pronunciation in Nigeria.

These vowels / æ/, /ʌ/ and /ə/ are not in many Nigerian languages. The consonants /ʒ:/, /θ/ and /ð/ also pose a lot of problems during pronunciation teaching and learning. The phonological interference shows that the second language learner is influenced primarily by the sound system of his native language. He is bound to transfer the phonological features of his native language to the target language both when he is listening and when he is speaking.

The learner mispronounces the voiced and voiceless dental fricatives and arrives at /oda/ instead of /ʌðəʃ/ and leda/ for /leðəʃ/. The Yorubas substitute “st” for ‘s’ eg sheering instead of steering. An Hausa man will pronounce PRP as FRF. Azikiwe (1998:128) emphasizes on this by saying that “correct pronunciation of the consonants in

the foreign language due to interference by the mother tongue should be given adequate attention by the teachers if the learners are to be able to make intelligible utterance”.

There is also the problem of initial orthographic ‘h’ in English. A wrong pronunciation of it results in a wrong selection of the indefinite article ‘a’ or ‘an’. As a result of this, the learner arrives at a phrase like ‘a heir’ and ‘an high land, and the Yoruba omission of ‘h’ pronouncing ‘and’ instead of hand. Elaborating on the problems posed by the interference of the mother tongue, Walch (1966: 85) noted that “most of the lexical and grammatical errors in students writing can be traced ultimately to wrong operations on the phonological level”. This contention is buttressed by high occurrence of interference noticed in vowels and consonants. For instance, the English language has a regular occurrence of consonant clusters $C^{0-3} V C^{0-4}$ or CCC V CCCC. The Igbo language has no cluster and the learner tries to insert a vowel in between the clusters in order to produce it. There is a problem of structural interference that also causes a problem in the pronunciation of a foreign language. Wilkins (1972:19) opined that.

“Whenever the structure of the foreign language differs from that of the mother tongue, we can expect both difficulty in learning and error in performance”.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Pronunciation problems are very common among the second language learners. Mispronunciation of English words by the learner has to be treated with uttermost attention. There are a lot of inconsistencies between letters and their sounds. The knowledge of speech sounds of the target language should be taught right from the lower primary to inculcate the right pronunciation to the learner early enough. Remember that John Powell once said; any knowledge that does not change the quality of life is sterile and of questionable value” (Omachonu 2001:130).

Therefore, the learners should be encouraged by their teachers to pronounce words fluently. There are words in which a letter represents no sound or as is commonly used is silent, like lamb, debt, plumber, comb etc. In all these examples, the letter “b” is silent. The teacher should drill this into the learner and mention to them that “spelling is a wrong guide to English pronunciation” (Anene 1997: 45). The curriculum planners should allocate adequate time for the teaching and learning of phonics in nursery and primary schools. To achieve a good result, learners should be given the awareness of the importance of speaking intelligibly and one practical way to develop it is by constant practice not only at school but also outside MacCarthy (1969:107) encouraged the language teachers that:-

It will be obvious that a fundamental element in the situation is time in which to take the work. If pronunciation is to be taught, time must be found for it. And to neglect the manner of speaking a language, its pronunciation, that is – can only produce a lop-sided course of language study – as lop-sided as if one was to neglect its spelling or its grammar.

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