

# LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OF NIGERIAN LEARNERS OF SPOKEN ENGLISH

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## **Abstract**

Many scholars have researched into problems associated with the teaching and learning of the English language, which is the official language in Nigeria, but not much has been done in the linguistic aspect of it as it relates to the spoken form of the Nigerians users of English. English being an official language of every Nigerian, but which is not naturally acquired, as it is learnt within the four walls of classroom, there is need for mutual intelligibility among its native speakers and Nigerian speakers. Thus, this paper tried to look at the linguistic problems of Nigerian learners of spoken English. It explicates and exemplifies the concept of spoken English, its phonetic and phonological problems as it relates to mother tongue interference, segmental and suprasegmental features, lexical and syntactic problems. It then concluded that some of the factors that constitute these problems are lack of correlation between the English spellings and pronunciation, its suprasegmental features which are absent in most Nigerian languages, mother tongue interference and syntactic problems.

It is a known fact that Nigerian English language learners are usually confronted with difficulty in learning English pronunciation, such as sounds, stress and intonation which are related to the phonetic and phonological level (Atoye, 1994, Akinjobi, 2004; Akindele & Adegbite, 2005; Awonusi, 2005; Akindele, 2010 and Aina, 2014). They also often find English word formation, sentence construction and expressions, most

especially, at the syntactic and morphological levels quite problematic. Moreover, learners encounter problems in the acquisition of vocabulary items and to convey meanings through and/or receive meanings of words, phrases, clauses, sentences/utterances, and discourse in relation to the semantic and pragmatic levels.

## **What is Spoken Language?**

In spoken language, sound conveys meaning, and meaning is manifested through sound. These symbols also known as sounds are used in spoken language and these symbols are not letters as we have in written language. It is letters used in written language that form words and words form phrases, clauses and sentences. Symbols used in spoken language consist of sounds produced with the aid of the speech organs, and each language contains a limited number of sounds which help to distinguish between one word and the other. It is these sounds that are joined together to produce meaningful utterances like words, phrases and sentences. For example, each of these three sounds, /p/ /s/ and /f/ is capable of changing the meaning of a word or an utterance, and helping to distinguish between one word and another as we have in **pin**, **sin** and **fin**. It is very unusual to have two languages having the same phonemic inventory as it differs from one language to the other. For instance, /v/ does not exist in Yoruba and /kp/ does not exist in English. Thus, each language has its own system of combining sounds, known as phonotactics. For example, English

has consonant clusters while there is an alternation of consonants and vowels in many Nigerian languages. It is this meaningful sound combination which the speaker produces that the listener receives, processes and comprehends during a conversation (Aina, 2014).

Spoken language, which is acquired naturally when dealing with a mother tongue, has to be learnt in the classroom as a second language. That is, one's mother tongue is not learnt to be spoken, it is naturally acquired. Thus, spoken language has primacy over the written language (Aina, 2014). Spoken language is often acquired in a first language or mother tongue context such as Britain, America and part of Canada and New Zealand whereas in places like Ghana and Nigeria, it is learnt in the classroom as a second language. It can then be said that spoken language is natural with the native speakers while it is artificial with those who acquire it in the classroom.

As second users of the language, learning occurs in the formal situation of a classroom, and the learner has hardly any access to the target language beyond the classroom door (Brown 2001). It is in this formal situation (classroom), he/she receives instruction and practises as regards the basic skills of the target language-listening, speaking, reading and writing. That is, whatever that is taught and learned, are linguistically related to and considered at different levels- phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and pragmatics. It should be noted that in the process of teaching and learning English in the classroom, Nigerian learners of English usually encounter various linguistic problems that evidently handicap and hamper their learning and eventually negatively affect their general proficiency as well.

However, in English, spelling cannot be used to predict the pronunciation of words as English letters used in written language are in different forms in speech. This therefore,

constitutes a challenge to second language users of English, among whom are Nigerian English language teachers and learners. The problems encountered by Nigerian learners of English can be classified and explicated thus:

### **Phonetic and Phonological Problems**

Since there is no consistency between the letters of the English and its pronunciation, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the graphemes (the letters of the alphabet) and the sounds actually produced and realized, at the phonetic and phonological level. Nigerian learners of English usually face difficulties in 'speech production', how to pronounce, which speech sound and how to pattern speech sounds to convey meaning in the native speaker's way. In speech perception, there is likely to be ambiguity while communicating with native speakers of English. It is commonly found in the elementary learners that there are always mispronunciations of words during the process of teaching and learning of pronunciations of words by looking at their spellings, and consequently learn many of them wrongly. For example, words such as tsetse fly, church, colonel, three, love, come, chores, gear, target, women, lamb, comb, lieutenant, calm, palm, Janet, pneumonia, psychology, Wednesday, etc. This mainly happens due to faults in teaching, indifference of the teacher to how the learner learns pronunciations of difficult words/expressions and the teacher's lack of training.

Another phonological aspect that constitutes problems for Nigerian learners of English is in the realization of monophthongs, diphthongs and some consonant sounds. The five long monophthongs / i: u: ɑ:ɜ: ɔ:/, the monophthongs /ʌ, ə/ and consonant sounds like /θ, tʃ, ð, v, ŋ/ of the English language are seriously problematic because these simple sounds are not available in the learners' mother tongues. Nigerian English language learners are

not accustomed to differentiating between short and long monophthongs, the consonant sounds and consonant clusters that are absent in the first language. This is one of the reasons that both teachers and learners do substitution in the realization of these sounds that are missing in their mother tongues.

Realization of the English diphthongs is also problematic to Nigerian learners of the English language due to mother tongue interference. The English language has eight diphthongs, each of which is a combination of two monophthongs, one gliding into the other and naturally longer than a pure vowel. As a result, the Nigerian English language learners pronounce only the one of the letters but not sounds, thus make it look like a monophthong. For instance, words like *tour*, *vowel*, *tower*, *hate*, etc are pronounced as /tʊ/, /vowel/, /towæ/. They mispronounce most of the English diphthongs and fail to give these sounds their due length. Most often, it is the first elements of the diphthongs that are articulated while they pay no attention to the second, thus, the English diphthongs cease to be gliding sounds in their pronunciation. For example, for English word like 'air', many realize it as /e/. This type of substitution of phonemes in the English language certainly results in huge confusion and unintelligibility.

#### **Consonant Clusters.**

Most Nigerian English language learners alternate between consonants and vowels in their word-formation as there are no consonant clusters in most Nigerian languages. For instance, Mgbemena (2011), while considering phonological features of English usage in Aba, reiterates the fact that in the spoken Nigerian English, says that there are vowel insertions between consonant clusters known as epenthesis. Examples of such are *hospital* articulated as /'hɒsɪpɪtʌl/, *table* as /teɪbʌl/, *clear* as /kɪliə/, *bread* as /buredi/, *bible* as /baɪbʌl/, *example* as

/eksæmpʌ/. It is not uncommon for most Nigerian learners to find the pronunciations of a number of English consonants difficult in both articulation and perception.

It is also common to find consonant deletion among Nigerian English language learners. For example, the /l/ sound in the words 'example', 'help', 'mental', *mobile*, then /n/ in *frown*, *brown*, *phone*, and so on.

It is also observed that the /k/ in the cluster /ks/ and /kt/ in the following is usually not correctly articulated: *economics*, *six*, *examination*, *fact*, exactly.

#### **Supra Segmental Features.**

Stress, rhythm and intonation are the suprasegmental features which are also known as prosodic features. These constitute articulatory problems among Nigerian learners. Stress and intonation are important elements of the pronunciation of English words and utterances. Cruttenden (2001) and Roach (2010) described stress as prominence in pronunciation which usually results from four factors: loudness, length, pitch and quality operating individually or in combination. English words in isolation or in connected speech receive stress that results in intonation. Intonation is used to carry information over and above that which is expressed by the words in the utterance. Hence, English is a stress-timed language possessing a speech rhythm in which the stressed syllables recur at equal intervals of time (Richards et al. 1985). On the contrary, Nigerian languages are syllable-timed thus having a speech rhythm in which all the syllables recur at equal intervals of time. This difference creates problems to the Nigerian English learners as it is almost every syllable that is stressed (Kujore, 1985 and Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

Kujore (1985) also opined that there is no clear distinction between nouns and verbs in the assignment of stress among Nigerian

English learners. English native speakers show that stress placement varies according to grammatical categories. For example, as nouns, the following words receive stress on the first syllable while the stress is on the second syllable when they are used as verbs: import, convict, export, contrast, insult, rebel, conduct, contract, produce, insult, and so on.

There are no changes in tune, in tempo and in voice quality unlike what obtains in RP. This is because of the equal attention that is paid to every syllable in the sentence. In addition, there are no accentual patterns that can differentiate content words from function words.

Kujore (1985) and Udofot (2004:99) stated that Nigerian English pronunciation is characterized by “delayed primary stress”. There are more accented syllables than expected in the SBE pronunciation. The notable stress patterns identified by Kujore (1985) are given below:

- (1) Preponderance of forward stress, for instance. “Petrol” and “Sa`lad”.

NE	RP
Pe`trol	`Petrol
Sa`lad	`Salad

- (a) Recurrence of forward stress in words that contain final syllable (n) and (i), for example:

NE	RP
Bulle`tin	`Bulletin
Car`ton`	Carton`

- (b) Shift of stress in words with /I/ in the final syllable

NE	RP
Bis`cuit`	Biscuit`
Ta`xi	`Taxi

Some suffixes have self-stressing property, for example *-ative*, *-atory*

NE	RP
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*Journal of Qualitative Education, Volume 11 No. 1 December, 2015: ISSN 0331-4790*

Indi`cative	In`dicative
Expla`natory	Ex`planatory

- (3) Recurrence of forward stress in compounds with final obstruents, for instance:

NE	RP
Fire`wood	`Firewood
Proof read	`Proof read

- (4) Recurrence of final stress in verb with final obstruents, such as:

NE	RP
Boy`cott	`Boy cott
To eli`cit	To e`licit

- (5) Tendency of *-able*, *-ible*, *ape*, *-al*, to carry stress forward to the syllables that precede them, for example,

NE	RP
Indo`mitable	In`domitable
E`ligible	`Eligible

- (6) Tendency of strong clusters to push stress forward to the preceding syllable, such as:

NE	RP
Fire`wood	`Firewood
Proof read	`Proof read

Akinjobi (2004:89) noted that there is a striking resemblance between the analysis of Kujore (1985) and Jowitt (1991) but pointed out that the latter says there is a tendency to shift the primary stress to the right in Nigerian English. Jowitt opines that the shifting of stress assignment is more systematic with verbs than with nouns and adjectives. There is the tendency to shift stress as far to the right as possible in compound words and complex noun phrases with pre-modification. This, according to him, applies to stress assignment at the sentence level. This is because it is not unusual to assign nuclear stress on an unsuitable word

in the sentence and that contrastive stress that is informational in SBE is not often used appropriately in Nigerian English.

Amayo (1981) described intonation as a major component that is generally more elusive than the segmental and one of the suprasegmental features that is more inherently difficult to learn for foreign learners. Intonation plays various functions such as attitudinal, grammatical, accentual, and discourse functions in the English language. These functions are realized by the application of the rising and falling of the tone accompanied by relatively greater degree of loudness and length which Nigerian English language learners do not correctly appropriate due to mother tongue interference. Atoye (2005) discovered from his research that the concept of intonation was well known to the subjects, but the attempt to teach them English intonation through its structural analysis appeared not to have been very successful.

### **Strong and Weak Forms**

Akinjobi (2004) also observed that there are no vowel weakening and unstressed syllable obscuration in educated Yoruba English. She added that the stress patterns of educated Yoruba English speakers are markedly different from that of Standard British English. For instance, grammatical or function words of the English language such as articles, pronouns, prepositions, auxiliaries, and conjunctions have strong and weak forms, which are usually unstressed in connected speech but are usually given the strong form by the Nigerian educated speakers of English. The Nigerian English language learners can hardly use them appropriately because they are not accustomed to the practice in their first language. For example, words like: area, above, Canada, and father are articulated without vowel weakening thus: /'eriə/ instead /eəriə/, /æbauv/ for əbauv, /kænədə/ for /kænədə/ /fədə/ instead of /fæðə/ respectively.

### **Syntactic Problems**

The L1 influences the L2 in terms of word order, use of pronoun, determiners, tense and mood. The learners thereby combine the grammatical rules of the two languages when speaking. For instance, there is the use of adjectives as verbs such as 'don't jealous her' instead of 'don't be jealous of her', 'Henry seniors her in the office' instead of 'Henry is a senior officer'.

There is also tendency to have literal translations which may not always help convey or receive the intended information to native speakers of English. For example, Nigerian English language learners wrongly use prepositions as a result of mother tongue interference. Instances of these are 'Don't shout on me' instead of 'Don't shout at me', 'Reverse back', 'I'm coming instead of 'I'll soon be back'.

The pronoun system constitutes a problem to Nigerian English language learners. In English, there are 'he' and 'she' for gender system but these are absent in most Nigerian languages. Hence, most learners find it difficult to distinguish between 'he' and 'she' because these languages do not differentiate between feminine and masculine. There is also wrong use of plurality of the English third person singular pronouns. Yoruba English language learners encounter a dilemma while trying to show politeness. They therefore pluralize these pronouns while addressing an elderly person as it is done in their L1. For example, it is not uncommon for a Nigerian learner to say 'They came here yesterday' while making a reference to an elderly person instead of 'She came here yesterday'.

### **Conclusions**

It could then be concluded from the above explication, and exemplification that the Nigerian English language learners do encounter phonetic, phonological, and syntactic problems due to the differences between the

mother tongue and the target language. Some of the factors that constitute these problems are lack of correlation between the English spellings and pronunciation, suprasegmental features which are absent in most Nigerian languages, mother tongue interference and syntactic problems.

### **Recommendations**

There are various measures that could be taken so as to address and lessen linguistic problems of Nigerian learners of spoken English. Having known that the main cause of these problems is the differences between the mother tongue and the English language, it is essential that teachers should identify learners' needs. These needs are to be considered during lesson preparation while teaching strategies should explicitly incorporate these linguistic problems. It is very important to ensure that competent and well qualified teachers teach learners of spoken English. This is essential because one cannot give what he or she does not have. Thus, teachers should have thorough knowledge of the linguistic elements and a solid command of all the skills of the target language. Both teachers and learners should ensure they are exposed to the native speakers of the language who are easily available online. Books and CD-ROMs that contain different segments to be learnt should accompany each lesson.

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