



Second Language Acquisition in a Multilingual Society: The Nigerian Experience

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ABSTRACT

Owing to the multiplicity of language and culture, the acquisition of a second language in Nigeria becomes very necessary. This is to address the issues of unity, education, commerce and politics. This paper assesses second language acquisition in a multilingual society such as Nigeria to determine the nature of its multilingualism. Using the foundations of English as a second language and the elements of multilingualism, the effects of these on the Nigerian users were examined in the areas of phonological transfers, syntactic transfers, lexical transfers, cultural transfers, and semantic implications. It was found that the learners of the target language (TL) go through various levels of interferences which help to shape and to create peculiar versions of the English they speak. It was recommended that the learner must first recognize the existence of the differences between L1 and L2, and secondly, attempts to avoid or minimize some of the occurrences.

Keywords: Language Acquisition, Multilingualism, Language Transfers, L1/L2 Interference.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

To address the needs of communication, the acquisition and use of a language is important, not because it can provide an avenue for self-expression, but because it can also generate and provide links to multiple ideas across multiple races and cultures. No individual and certainly no nation is an island. There are unseen chords that link individuals, groups and nations together, such that one cannot necessarily do without the other. Language is a universal human phenomenon, being that it exists in all human societies and all human beings acquire and use it in both speaking or writing except where the human being has physiological or systematic maladies.

The acquisition of a second language in a country like Nigeria is not only necessary but also very important. With multiple languages and multiple cultures, the need to co-exist, to understand one another, and to link the various cultures and peoples together can be made easier with a single language that would be acceptable and understood by all. In this paper, the issues of second language and the nature of multilingualism in Nigeria will be examined. The resultant factors of acquiring a second language in a multilingual-multicultural society are also highlighted.

1.1 ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

The concept "Second Language" comprises two sense. First, it is the language that one learns after a first language or one's mother tongue has been acquired. In this sense "Second Language" is defined in terms of the sequence of acquisition such that a polyglot might be said to have a first language, a second language, a third language, or even a fourth language and so on. (Azikiwe, 1998) describes second language learning as "the acquisition of a language once a first language has been learnt, say after the age of two" (p.19). Second, the term refers to a language of which the speakers are non-native but in which they conduct the majority of their daily social activities in a bilingual or multilingual manner. In this sense, (Eka, 2000) asserts that a "second language does not, technically speaking, refer to the serial number of languages a person has in his or her(sic) repertoire (p.11)". (Akindele and Adegbite, 1999) opine that a "second language may be or may not be the sequentially second of a bilingual person, it may be the fourth language of a bilingual individual, which however functions as a second language in a societal bilingualism (p.50)". Here the language performs other functions apart from being merely secondly or thirdly learnt. (Banjo, 1996) adapts the delineation of the characteristics of a second language by (Platt *et. al*, 1984) this way:

- It has become localized or nativized by adopting some language features of its own, such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structures, word expressions.
- It has developed in an area where a native variety of English was not the language spoken by most of the population.

- It has developed through the education system.
- It is used for a range of functions among those who speak or write it in the region which it is used (p.63).

These are the features of English in Nigeria. Jowitt (1991) says that “English in Nigeria performs many of the functions of a national language as well as those of an official language” ... (p.63). This is to say that English is the official language of Nigeria, because it is the language used in officialdom... (Jowitt 1991, p.21). Azikiwe (1998) adds that English is “our (Nigerian) second language because it has a social, political, economic, commercial, educational role to play in Nigeria, as well as in our individual lives as members of the society” (p.19).

It therefore means that English is not just a second language learnt after another had been acquired (mother tongue), but that it is functionally a language used to perform all national and even individual duties. With English being a second language, it implies that there is a first language. And in the Nigerian case, it is not just one, two or three “first” languages. There are several indigenous languages which are estimated to range “from 200 to over 400” (Jowitt, 1991, p.9). This makes Nigeria a multilingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural nation, a society “with many tongues” (Dadzie, 2004, p.1).

1.2 MULTILINGUALISM

According to (Dadzie, 2004), multilingualism is a situation where “people can have competence in more than two languages at various levels of competence... (p.1).” From this, it means that nations can also be said to be multilingual when more than two languages are used at various levels and for various purposes. The term “multilingualism” is closely tied to bilingualism in the sense that there is more than one language in use at a particular time. With this in mind, the terms bilingualism and multilingualism are used interchangeably in this paper to refer to the use of two or more languages, at the individual and societal levels. Nigeria being a nation with many languages and many cultures is therefore a multilingual and multicultural society.

There are three types of bilinguals: the coordinate bilingual, the compound bilingual and the subordinate bilingual. (Dadzie, 2004)

says that a coordinate bilingual is “one who acquires the two languages in such a way that their practices can be said to be equivalent to the native speaker... while the compound bilingual does not function as a native speaker of either of the languages, and the subordinate bilingual is one who is proficient in his first language and acquire the second for various reasons (p.142).

The subordinate bilingual is where Nigeria fits in. The speaker is proficient in his first language, but he acquires the second for various reasons. He speaks clearly in his native (mother tongue) or first language (L1) and uses the second languages (target language) or (L2) with an accent. This is because the structures of the first language have already been internalized and so acquiring the second poses some difficulties. As (Dadzie, 2004) puts it, “he will not be able to achieve a-one-to-one correspondence in meaning unless he makes a special effort to identify equivalents where they exist. Where they don’t, he resorts to transliteration...” (p.143). It is at this level that the issue of interference or transfer arises because the structures and patterns of L1 will interfere in the production of L2.

This is more evident in areas of Northern Nigeria, where Hausa, Arabic, and English languages are in competition. One may find a situation where substandard Hausa is used at home, standard Hausa used in public schools. Arabic used in the mosques and English used in public schools. The society here is said to be diglossic since roles are assigned languages.

2. THE IMPLICATION FOR THE LEARNERS OF A SECOND LANGUAGE

Various linguists (Jowitt, 1991; Goldstein, 1987; Yule, 1996; Odlin, 1989) have recognized that when languages come in contact, they begin to influence each other or one another. (Odlin,1989) refers to this influence as “language transfer”. (Odlin, 1989) quotes (Weinreich, 1968), who refers to it as “interference”. Whatever term they chose to use, the nature of interference remains the same in that it affects the speaker’s production of sounds (phonology), their choice of words (Lexis), arrangement of sentence elements (syntax), the construction of meanings (semantics) and their cultural peculiarities and world view.

These influences or transfers arise from the fact that there are differences in phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics and cultural patterns of languages, although some similarities do exist between and among languages.

With the multiple first languages and cultures in Nigeria, it is likely that one will find these influences resulting in different speech and written formations. The nature of the interference in Language one, say Hausa, will be different from Language two for instance, Efik, and so on. Therefore, different forms and manifestations of language interference are found in Nigeria. (Jowitt, 1989) attempts to capture this picture by christening the various forms as “Hausa English: (H.E) “Yoruba English” (Y.E), “Ibo English” (I.E), and I may add, “Efik English” (E.E) etc. A survey of the impact on phonology, semantics, syntax and lexis with particular reference to Efik language learners, and Nigerian English learners, (what Jowitt 1989, refers to as Popular Nigerian English P.N.E) is here examined.

3. PHONOLOGICAL TRANSFER

The phonemes (sound units) that occur in many Nigerian languages do not all occur in English and vice-versa. Where the phonemes co-occur, the acoustic and articulatory characteristics may be different. Writing on the varieties of English in the world, (Quirk and Greenbaum, 2000) note that regional variations seem to be realized predominantly in phonology. That is, we generally recognize a different dialect (of English) from a speaker’s pronunciation

before we notice that his vocabulary (or lexicon) is also distinctive. Efik language for instance, has 6 vowels and 15 consonant sounds. The six vowels are: /a, e, i, o, ɔ u/. It has no long vowels as may be found in the English vowels. The 15 consonant sounds which are made up of Five (5) plosives:

/kp/

/b/

/t/

/d/

/k/

Two (2) sibilants (fricatives);

/f/

/s/

Four (4) nasals:

/m/

/n/

/ŋ/

/nw/

Three (3) approximants:

/l/

/j/

/w/

One (1) trill:

/r/

English language on the other hand has 20 vowels (12 pure vowels and 8 diphthongs) and 24 consonants. The presence of some sounds found in English but absent in Efik language would cause interferences in the learners use of English. For instance, there is no voiced velar plosive /g/ in Efik for the pronunciation of words like “go”, “gum” “Ogoja” etc. Rather, what is found in Efik is the voiceless velar plosive /k/. The environment which the sounds occur in is the same, only the realization is different. And so, in the expression of /g/ sound, the Efik learner is likely to use /k/ sound; e.g. “I would like to *ko and *Ket the *kum”. The absence of the voiced and voiceless alveopalatal affricate /dʒ/, /tʃ/ also makes pronunciation of words like “Ogoja” or “church” a bit difficult to realise correctly.

e.g. I love *okoya town.

Here the voiced alveopalatal sound /dʒ/ is replaced with the alveolar glide /j/ which is found in the Efik sound inventory.

However, it is still early at this stage to determine why in one circumstance the /dz/ is realized as /j/ (as in Okoya), and then realized /dʒ/ in (yam) as (dʒam) in the next circumstance. Where would the learner get the phoneme /dʒ/ to pronounce the sound in “yam” which he could not pronounce in another circumstance. This may account for the issue of individual difference in sounds realization. As (Odlin, 1989) puts it “individuals differ in their perceptual activity, and it may be that only individuals with a unique phonetic sensitivity may be able to overcome most of the inhibiting influences of phonological patterns in the native language” (p.115).

It is also evident that the absence of the theta sound, or the voiceless dental fricative /θ/ in Efik language accounts for the pronunciation of words like “think” or “thin” as “tink” and “tin”. The absence of the voiced labiodental /v/ sound accounts for the pronunciation of “van” or “vampire” as “fan” or “fampire”, because there is the voiceless labio dental /f/ sound in Efik.

The Yoruba language has only seven (7) short vowels. /a, e, ɛ, i, o, ɔ, u/ and this according to (Olaoye, 2007) accounts for the difficulties the Yoruba learner has in distinguishing between:

Feel [fi:1] and fill [fi1]

Cord [kɔ:d] and cod [kɔd]

The sounds, according to (Olaoye, 2007), “are pronounced without any distinction of vowel length and quality”. On the other hand, the English sound inventory does not have the /kp/ sound which exists in Efik. /kp/, /gb/ sounds are also found in Yoruba and other Nigerian languages and not in English. It is possible that the native speaker of English would have difficulties pronouncing words like “Drogba”, “Agbola”, “Ekpenyong”, and so on.

4. SYNTACTIC TRANSFER

At the syntactic level, differences are also found in the arrangement of sentence elements in languages. The basic word order in English is subject (S), verb (V), and object (O). (Odlin, 1989) says that “other languages may have such word orders as S.O.V, V.O.S, V.S.O etc.” although many Nigerian languages, and indeed Efik, have the S.V.O. order, in some long sentences, the order may be different.

In Efik, it is common to find the placement of a determiner (qualifier) in some noun phrases coming after the noun unlike in English. For instance,

1. I love my house - English
2. Mama ufok mi - (I love house my)

The problem of dropping the article before nouns in a syntactic structure is another type of interference. In Efik language and other Nigerian languages, there are no indefinite articles to introduce nouns with consonant and vowel sounds, and so there is the tendency to speak without using articles.

e.g.

He died of stroke (a stroke)

He brought orange (an orange)

Reduplication process is also common. A reduplicative is the process of repeating a word in a sentence.

Examples below:

1. I like it well well

Mama eti eti (Efik)

2. My friend is living large large

Ufan mi odo uwem Ikpo Ikpo

3. It's raining small small

Edim ke dep ekpri ekpri

Code-switching and code-mixing is another form of syntactic interference. Dadzie (2004) says it's the use of “language interchangeably, sometimes moving from one to another and yet at others substituting words in one language for another in the same speech effort (p. 151)”. This happens in some cases where the speaker often lacks the English words to express his ideas adequately and so he resorts to mixing or switching altogether. It is believed that it is sometimes done (besides the obvious weakness in L2) to conceal information, to show closeness, or sometimes to indicate where a person comes from and also to attract sympathy, attention, etc. e.g. He brought okuk ikie etion yesterday (code-mixing). I have to go to Lagos today, bak nkeme ndi sop nyondi. (Code-switching).

5. LEXICAL TRANSFER

The use of reflexive pronouns in English is a common example of lexical interference.

e.g. I met Atim and we greeted ourselves (P.N.E)

Atim and I met, and we greeted each other. (S.B.E) In Efik, there is only one possessive case to represent those found in English, and this is “nyin”. This may include two, three, four persons etc.

The use of prepositions to express relationships in English poses some problems. In Efik there is the word “ke”, which is used to show relationship. It does not specify the exact object like what obtains in English. It is rather used in a general sense. And so, one finds sentences such as these being used by the learner;

1. They were on the queue earlier (... in the queue)

B. Ema eda ke idaha. (Efik)

2. I was in a bus (... on a bus)

B. Nkodu ke bus (Efik)

Nominalization process is another problem. This is a process where something is named by describing its function.

e.g. I have a watch night (P.N.E.)

I have a watchman (S.B.E)

I have a house help (P.N.E)

I have a maid (S.B.E)

Borrowing is an outcome in the acquisition of second language in a multilingual society. According to Udofot (1999), “the vocabulary of a language can be expanded indefinitely by borrowing from the vocabulary of other languages” (p. 104). In Nigeria, the various languages have loan words from English and vice-versa. Most of the things or names of things produced in Europe or America, have no equivalent words in Efik and other Nigerian languages. And so, there is the tendency to borrow from one another. For instance, there is no word for “window” in Efik, and so “window” is used even when speaking Efik.

The same applies to the English native speaker, especially when certain areas are concerned. Udofot (1999) says the “area where the loan words have become universal are the areas of food and clothing... (p. 119)” so one finds expressions like this;

I will like to eat afan (a delicacy in Efik) before wearing the white asoke (an attire in Yoruba).

There are no English words to describe or name the things in reference.

6. SEMANTIC INTERFERENCE

The world view of the first language usually crosses into the second language whenever the second language is in use. The language learner sees and feels things first in his or her native world view before he/she expresses same in the language he learns. The meanings of words like “brother”, “cousin” “uncle” and “aunty”, in most cases, contrast significantly with the English meanings. This is because Efik does not have single words for family relations, so “cousin” and “brother” are not necessarily used to mean blood relative, but could be any person who is an indigene of his state, local government or clan. “Uncle” or “aunty”, in most cases, is used to refer to all male or female adults.

In Efik, the word “nkopke” is used to represent the senses of hearing, of tasting and of smelling.

1. I cannot hear * the smell
2. I am unable to hear * the taste.

Dadzie (2004) gives an example of a Popular Nigerian English (P.N.E) expression as an example of a semantic transfer

“she was pregnant for him”

This type of expression is made with the Nigerian sensibilities injected into it because in the Nigerian context, it is the man that owns the child, not the woman. The woman only carries and bears the child for the man. But the native English Speaker would say;

“she was impregnated by the man”.

Both are seen as equal partners here. Each has a stake in the child.

7. CULTURAL TRANSFER

It is a well-known fact that language is part of culture and as cultures differ so do the languages. For instance, (Onike, 2009) says that “the system of greeting in Yoruba differs considerably from that of English, and a Yoruba-English bilingual transfers the system of greetings in Yoruba into English”. The Yoruba greetings are usually lengthy and tortuous. It may even require an act of prostrating if a younger person is greeting an adult. This form of respect and formality most times is transferred into the second language.

8. CONCLUSION

It is evident that the acquisition of a second language in a multilingual environment is not an easy task. The problems the learners encounter is challenging but surmountable. The first priority towards surmounting the challenges is to recognize the existence of the differences between and among the languages. The second is to know or identify the peculiar characteristics and their differences. Third, the learner must know that he/she cannot eliminate all the problems found, but that he/she can learn to avoid and minimize some occurrences, by learning to use the language fairly frequently. It is believed that with the right motivation, (both psychological and sociological), the learner may surmount some of the problems found in the second language learning or acquisition.

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