

The Influence of First Language on the Use of English among First Year Students of Akwa Ibom State University, Obio Akpa Campus, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This work investigated the influence of the First Language on “Use of English” among First Year Students of Performing Arts Department of Akwa Ibom State University. The aim was to evaluate its implications on the socio-personal development of the students. It was based on the students’ poor performance and the researcher’s resolve to find out how the various factors including the backgrounds from where these students come have contributed to their performance in the said course. To this end, scores were obtained in English Language from the students’ WASSCE/NECO entry qualification files in addition to their response on the scheduled interview. The findings indicated no marked differences across the department in terms of structural facilities, teaching and learning atmosphere and or problems. It was revealed that the type of backgrounds students are exposed to during their primary and secondary school years had influence on their performance in The Use of English course and therefore the performances of students in the “Use of English” course had inextricable affinity with the influence of the first language L1 on the second language L2.

Keywords: *family, first language, mother tongue, school, Use of English*

INTRODUCTION

In some parts of the world, different Englishes are spoken by different people. In Britain for instance, there are many dialects of English language used in different areas. This is also the case when American and British English languages are compared and contrasted. According to Tomlinson and Ellis (1980) cited in Edem (2015a, p.3):

In every part of the world where English Language is spoken, there is a distinction as a result of the influence of the linguistic and socio-cultural background of the inhabitants and the way of life prevalent in the area.

In Nigeria, for instance, there is Nigerian English variety seriously influenced by over 513 languages from the various ethnic nationalities that have come together like a jigsaw puzzle for the emergence of what is today referred to as Nigeria (Edem 2015b, 2019, Edem and Ekpenyong 2021, Enang and Edem 2022). Therefore, the Nigerian English is a nativized product of the socio-cultural milieu of the country. Again, English language in Nigeria is used as a second language (L2) because it not one of the background languages of the people (Edem 2018, Eka 2000).

Among other functional loads that English carries are the means of communication between speakers of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds, business transactions, keeping of administrative and official records of government, medium of instruction in our educational activities etc. Unlike native speakers environment where children are often exposed to the language before they actually learn it and use it at school, children in Nigeria, irrespective of which nation-state they come from will not only be taught English in the class room, but will also 'pick it up' as an optional compulsory course, a pass of which makes such a student a celebrity. Attah (1990) justifies the explication above when he states that:

This may be an understatement when taken into consideration the fact that English language is an important repository of the skills and competences envisaged under the new policy. Moreover, since academic and vocational courses are expected to be transmitted by words of mouth with English language as the medium of instruction, proficiency in spoken English is necessary for both the teacher and the

Jordan (1983) observed that the general nature of the secondary school syllabus that prepares a student for the university is such a detailed springboard that should make it easy than any structural syllabus to give more emphasis on the communicative properties of the language for the students not to have any challenge in his English language use, especially, at the university.

Edem (2015a, 2016b) shares same views with Jordan (1983), when he observes that secondary schools in Nigeria are seen as the stepping stones to tertiary institutions and to obtain jobs in the offices, therefore, students at this level of academic attainment should be competent in their use of English when given the right background. But the contrary is the case in Nigeria, as could be seen from the students' incompetence in the use of English course. That is why investigation has to be carried out into the various areas that could

yield useful data about the nature of the influence of mother tongue and other factors that constitute impediments to excellent performance in the use of English of first year students who are the subjects of this research undertaking.

Problem of Poor Performance in Use of English

The fact that this research is carried out, using the first year students of Akwa Ibom State University as a case study must not be viewed with some attachment of negative feelings with the conclusion that this phenomenon is characteristic of the targeted population for this work. Rather, it should be seen as a mere drop of a randomly sampled group selected for the study of a problem that is gradually gaining a global attention, so that generalization would be enhanced from the known to the unknown.

Over the years scholars such as (Eka 2000, Edem 2015a, 2016b, 2019 and Enang, Eshiet and Udoka 2013) observed with dismay how appalling the abysmal poor performance of secondary school students in English language has become. An educated Nigerian, like any other educated foreign language learner, can be said to speak at least two languages: he acquires the first language (mother tongue) while at home and learns English language mostly at school. He applies both the mother tongue (L1) and the English language in various situations. He may use either of the two within the house, while outside and or at his place of work. He chooses to use English at formal situations because other Nigerians or non-Nigerians who do not speak his mother tongue may be present. English thus, becomes a vital tool to communication in Nigeria in view of the multi-lingual posture of the country (Enang 2009, Edem 2020 and Enang and Edem 2022).

This observation agrees with Bangbose's (1970) assertion that: "of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonialism probably, none is more important than the English language" (Edem 2016a). English is taught and learned as a second language in Nigeria. The constant use of the English language in the day to day activities prompts the learner/users to strive to use it like the native speaker.

There is a consensus that there is no significant improvement in the competence and performance ability of some Nigerians educated in the language (Edem 2016a, 2018). Even with a credit pass in English in the school certificate examination, students' performances in spoken and written English during their first year to their final year as undergraduates are generally far below expectation.

Given the fact that the SS3 students and the first year undergraduates are drawn from primary and post-primary institutions across the nation, their performance in the Use of English course could be seen as a national problem which requires a national solution.

The researcher has interacted with some educated Nigerians whose use of English falls below the class they claim to belong.

Again, as an examiner/marker of WAEC and NECO, the researcher had access to students and have discovered that they have difficulties in the construction of sentences, clauses, group and word formation which could be analysed at the level of syntax. This and other problems have stirred up this study so as to highlight educated Nigerians' inadequacies in grammar and use same to proffer solutions as contribution towards equipping and helping teachers and students of English with facts for the analyses on English sentences (Edem 2016b, 2020).

The theoretical frameworks of this work are Maslow's (1954) Theory of Needs, Bloom's (1976) Theory of School Learning, Murray's (1938) and Hull's (1961) Theories of Motivation and Halliday's (1961) Systemic Grammar Model which makes it possible to: select and analyse sentences and clauses of educated Nigerians from the corpus of data and discuss them, select and analyse the group and word structures and account for the possible differences and influences.

Maslow's Theory of Needs

According to Maslow (1954) cited in Edem (2019), each child has to grow up and in its growing period has its needs. Maslow states that if these needs are met, the child may not grow up to be a full-fledged human being. He divides the needs into two categories: primary needs which include water, food, shelter and clothing while the secondary needs comprise love, justice, and unity, self-esteem quest for acquisition, exposition and self-actualization. Maslow argues that when all these needs are satisfied the individual will be able to grow up well and actualized.

It is Maslow's contention that social environment has much to do with the child's development. According to him, environment is rooted in two factors- observation (what you see) and the use of the brain. The brain records the experiences of a child in the environment. Learning, according to Maslow, results from the characteristics of the learner and the forces in the environment the learner finds himself. He goes on to say that readiness on the part of the child depends on the preparedness for learning, while preparedness in turn depends on the extent to which he has access to equipment meant for use in the task of learning. From the foregoing explications, it would be reasonable to say that a child may be a disadvantaged learner because of reasons which include a child learning in a different language (English) in school and different language (vernacular) at home. Again, a child would be disadvantaged because if his readiness to learn is only in

school while such readiness is markedly at home and vice versa. In such a situation, there is no continuity of learning or transfer of learning (Enang and Edem 2022).

Bloom's Theory of School Learning

Another theory employed to explain the phenomena with which this work is concerned is Bloom's (1976) theory of school learning which holds that the variations in the cognitive entry behaviours and affective characteristics and the quality of instruction determine the level and kind of achievement, the rate of learning and the affective characteristics of the learner. Bloom asserts that the history of the learner is at the core of school learning and that the modifications are possible in the pre-requisite learning and motivation for learning in the quality of learning or both.

Murray and Hull's Motivation theories

In Murray's (1938) theory of motivation cited in Edem (2022), his concept of need was postulated in order to be able to explain human behaviour. It is his opinion that need is a construct which stands for the force in the brain region, a force which organizes perception, apperception, intellection, conation and action in such a way as to effect a change in a certain direction of an existing and unsatisfying situation. It is Murray's contention that an unsatisfied need would ginger the individual into working hard in order to meet such a need. He further breaks down needs into Viscerogenic and Psychogenic which run in the platform with Maslow's as a drive reduction theory of reinforcement (Edem 2023).

Hull argues that drives and needs treated as a unit is a situation which requires action on the part of the organism as a pre-requisite to optimum probability of survival of either the individual or the species. Uzoeshi (1994) agrees with Hull asserting that the theory on hand provides the background to how a teacher can motivate learners (students). The source reasons that each learner needs motivation in order to achieve his best and to discover his true self or talent. Uzoeshi contends that "just as fuel energizes the car into action, or (increases or raises the flame of fire), so also should a teacher energize students into academic productivity". The source maintains that teachers have it as a duty to propel, energize, ginger, stimulate and sustain students' interest towards learning.

The source further suggests that a teacher can realize the suggestions above by:

- (i) Knowledge of subject matter
- (ii) presentation of subject matter
- (iii) use of reinforcement
- (iv) goal setting.

Systemic/Features of the Grammar Model

From the view point of the features of this model, systemic grammar has four theoretical categories of unit, structure, class and system which are used to account for the fundamental grammatical patterns of any human language. While unit and class apply to both surface and deep planes of grammar, structure operates only in the surface grammar, while system operates only in the deep grammar.

It is a generative non-transformational grammar that operates at surface and deep planes. At the surface plane, the grammar deals with how any given system is ultimately realized in grammatical structure and their elements. At the deep plane, it accounts for semantic imports which are organized into networks, with the entry conditions into any given network explicitly. Classes are defined by their role in structure. For instance, 'nominal group' is defined in its role as subject and complement of a clause. There are differences in 'delicacy' of items of analysis. Some items or elements are more delicate than others (Osasinwo 1999, Edem 2015a, 2015b 2016a).

On the Background are influences such as mother tongue, family and school:

A. The Influence of the Mother Tongue

A speaker of English language as a native of the immediate environment acquires English naturally as a young native speaker. This, the child does because the language happens to be the language of the immediate community; its parents use it, its peer members use it and its elders use it as their normal means of communication even with him and with other members. Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987), Edem (2015a, 2016a), and Enang and Edem (2022) in different studies, agree with the above explication and further stress that "where English is not the mother tongue, children (students) may have difficulties in trying to master English as a new language as a subject in school", but the researcher of this work have seen that these views are too restricted in the sense that they merely point out advantages a first language learner (L1) enjoys against a learner of the same language as a second language (L2) and conversely, an L1 speaker over a second language (L2) speaker. Hamp-Lyons and Heasley have ignored the existence of language among some students who can display mastery of the second language with less stress. This is applicable in the Nigerian context and even in Akwa Ibom State University. Edem (2023), Edem and Ekpenyong (2021) and Rutherford (1987) cited in Onyemauwa (1997) explain that:

Children (students) may learn through their maternal language and later learn a second language through bilingualism. Children may learn the second language (L2) which in Nigeria is English through their parents at home. This, they can do by the way and manner they learn the first language (L1).

This argument establishes a link between the first language (MT) and the second language (English) in this context. The implication here is that there is the influence of the background language (MT) on the child's second language (Edem 2015a, 2015b, 2016b and Edem and Ekpenyong 2021).

B. The Influence of the Family Background

Poor physical home conditions are associated with falling levels of performance or achievement. Sonerthurst (1975), Meers (1976), Adedapo (1992), Edem (2015a) and Enang and Edem (2022) observe that poor housing, overcrowding and even lack of good bathroom facilities affect the behaviour of children (students). According to them, home has a great effect on the future of a child. Home is seen as the foundation of a child and that if such foundation (home) is bad; a child from such a home is bound to encounter some difficulties throughout his life. The type of family a child is borne into and brought up from determines the future of that child. It is their contention that children that come from homes where there are little or no encouragement for their education (Use of English language) usually perform poorly in reading and vocabulary. The availability of reading materials and an enriched home environment are vital for the development of the child. They also maintain that books at home and parents' encouragement of their children improve the children's academic performance.

Based on these views, the following conclusions may be drawn. In the first place, parents of low social status speak the language of the immediate environment L1. In Nigeria for instance and in Akwa Ibom State in particular, this may be vernacular or alternatively, Pidgin English. Secondly, parents of high social status speak exclusively in refined language, like Standard English language in this context (Edem, 2022). However, these findings should not be generalized. The summation of these views is from the base of this study.

C. The Influence of the School Background

The international principle of nationality agrees that a child must always take his schooling in the language of the country of its admission (Mayor and Pugh, 1987) with the

USA school system as a case study. This policy is also perennial in Nigeria because Nigeria's Educational Policy does not mind the multi-lingual posture of the country.

A look at the three major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba explain this point. A research carried out by Anyanwu (1988) has shown that Hausa is spoken in three discrete States of the federation; Kano, Zamfara and Sokoto, and has a very high degree of usage in all the other northern States. Igbo is spoken in five discrete States; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, and enjoys a degree of usage in Rivers, Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Benue States. Yoruba is spoken in six discrete States; Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Ogun, Osun, and Oyo and has a degree of usage in Edo, Kwara, Kogi and Niger States. English language is the only single language that is used in Nigeria from the Creek Town of Calabar to the Goronyo areas of Sokoto in the desert. It is pertinent to point out here that whether by error of omission or commission, Metchalf's notion is in effect in Nigeria today. This is because English language has pushed aside other Nigerian languages to become Nigeria's *lingua Franca* and the medium of instructions in secondary and tertiary institutions (Edem 2019, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to examine the background influence of the first language on the performance rating of the first year students in Use of English course of Akwa Ibom State University using students of Performing Arts Department as a case study. In order to investigate and proffer solution to this problem, the students' scores in English language in the SSCE/NECO were obtained and used as index of their entry qualification performance in English language. A questionnaire was also administered to give supportive information to whatever data gathered from the students' result in English language. It was revealed among other things that Mother tongue, academic qualification of parents and their attitude towards the use of English, socioeconomic status of parents, the language of the immediate environment and socio-cultural differences tend to affect the overall performances of the first year students of Akwa Ibom State University in particular and a very high percentage Nigerian students in a second language situation as a whole.

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