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LEVELS OF LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE: PHENOMENON IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Learners of English as a second language in Nigeria experience some difficulties, learning English as L_2. The difficulties are caused by linguistic interference, resulting from the negative impact of one language on another. Interference covers all linguistic levels of the language being studied: phonological, grammatical (syntactic and morphological) as well as lexical and semantic (Lexico-semantic). To mitigate the influence of interference in the acquisition of English as a second language as explained by scholars, the English teacher needs to be conscious of the interference phenomenon and pays attention to the differences in phonological, grammatical and Lexico-Semantic systems of learners' first language (L_1) and the second language (L_2) which can cause interference, in order to enhance second language learner's achievement and competence in English as second language. This paper therefore, examines linguistic interference phenomenon, levels of operation of linguistic interference and discusses the implications of linguistic interference for second language pedagogy. Recommendations that can enhance second language learners' proficiency in English language are offered.

Keywords: Linguistic interference, Learning, Interference, Phonology and Grammar

Introduction

A number of scholars in the field of language study have pointed out that learners in a second language situation are faced with the interference phenomenon. They contend that linguistic features of learners' mother tongue (First Language/L_1) keep intruding into or interfering with those of English in the process of learning English as a second language (L_2). The acquisition of a second language is characterized by one problem or the other in a bilingual setting. This, according to Dairo (2006) is because the rules of the mother tongue(s) are intentionally transferred into the second language, the target language. As languages come into contact when they are used side by side by a bilingual, the two languages exert some influence on each other as the features of one are carried on or transferred to the other. Linguistic interference phenomenon is therefore used interchangeably with "Feature Transfer" (Lado, 1957).

According to Adetugbo (1984), linguistic interference phenomenon refers to those instances of deviation from the norms of either language which occur in the speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with more than one language i.e. as a result of language contact. Oti-Owom (2021) corroborates Weinreich (2010) and submits that when speakers who have acquired the speech habits of one language want to learn another language, there is the tendency for the speech habits of their first language to interfere in their efforts at learning and using the second language. This is linguistic interference phenomenon. With regards to this type of contact situation Adetugbo (1984) suggests that the differences and similarities between languages in contact must be exclusively stated for every domain: phonic grammatical and Lexical as a prerequisite to an analysis of interference.

Weinreich (2010) posits that in the characterization of English in Nigeria interference is the significant factor. He defines linguistic interference as instances of deviation from the norms of a language occasional by contact with another language. Linguistic interference therefore, is language transfer; the application of linguistic features from one language to another by a bilingual or multilingual speaker. The interference phenomenon can be classified or typologized into various levels. Linguistic interference theory has as its appendages, contrastive analysis and error analysis. These two theories, Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis are concerned with pedagogical matters affecting language teaching and language learning with designing syllabuses and language teaching courses. The two sub-theories of linguistic interference investigate the extent and nature of the differences between learners'

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native language and the target language and the errors which learners actually make, and assess their native gravity to provide feedback for the refinement of teaching materials.

Literature Review

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis of Language

Contrastive Analysis as a psycho-pedagogical linguistic theory originated as an offshoot of the views that acquiring a second language includes acquiring a new set of habits; that language is a verbal behaviour; that learner's errors are as a result of transfers or intrusions. This theory belongs to audio-lingual tradition. It was developed in the 1950's and 1960's as an application of structural linguistics to language teaching and learning. Its founding father is C.C tries, a structural linguist with Robert Lado (1957) his student.

The emphasis of Contrastive Analysis is on the contrast or difference between the learner's mother tongue (MT) and the language to be learnt or target language (TL). Linguists could therefore provide structural description of languages and these descriptions could be compared and contrasted. Whenever the structures of the mother tongue (MT) and target language (TL) differ there would be problems in learning and difficulty in performance and that the greater the differences were the greater the difficulties would be. Thus, Contrastive Analysis is an investigation into or a comparison of the linguistic systems of two languages, their sound and grammatical systems with a view to identifying the dissimilarities or differences between the two languages so that errors or deviations can be predicted in the target language (Afolayan 1971; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014; Awodele, 1999 and Igboanusi, 2000).

Contrastive Analysis theory sets out to predict where errors are likely to occur and to indicate likely problem areas on which teaching/learning should be focused. Its hypothesis holds that if trouble spots in the target language could be anticipated, errors might be prevented or at least held to a minimum. In this way, the formation of bad habits could be avoided. The theory is based on the following assumptions: The difficulties in learning a new language are caused by interference from the first language. These difficulties can be predicted by Contrastive Analysis to reduce the effects of interference. The current emphasis of Contrastive Analysis, according to Oti-Owom (2021) is on communicative language teaching; its actual value lies in the realization that in learning and using a second language, learner is confronted with interference from the native language.

Banjo (1983) gives the function of contrastive analysis more emphatically thus:

> *The aim of contrastive analysis as the name implies, is to find out in a systematic way, points of similarity and differences between the two languages to be brought into contact in the learner. Such a grammar (theory) may be predictive to the extent that it attempts to predict all theoretically possible learning difficulties or it may be used purely as a diagnostic device in conjunction with an error analysis (p. 20).*

The concern of CA, therefore is communicative competence or better still, communicative language teaching.

This is the second current linguistic and pedagogical theory. The use of Error Analysis comes from a rationalist's theory of language learning and S.P Corder is one of its proponents. According to the proponents of this theory, errors are regarded as part of the learning process. The second language learner uses errors to test hypothesis about the language, thereby learning from them. A theory of second language acquisition according to Afolayan (1971) is thus a theory of errors or linguistic distortions. Scholars such as Corder (1967: 162-169) and Lengo (1990) see errors as an indication of the learners' stages of their target language development; level of mastery of the language; the study of errors is for diagnostic and prognostic reasons.

Error Analysis involves collection of errors, studying them, classifying them into various ways and suggesting possible causes. It is carried out to find out how a learner learns a language, the extent of learners' competence in using the language and to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid in teaching or in preparation of teaching materials. The theory essentially makes it possible to find out strategies employed by learner's learning another language. According to Banjo (1983), interlanguage is traditionally referred to as error analysis and the aim of error analysis is to throw light on the learner's interlanguage or the approximative system

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which underlies his performance in the second language. Thus, error analysis is capable of obtaining information about learner's difficulties as well as reasons for such in his language skills.

Domains and Levels of Linguistic Interference

Past studies on the contact of English and Nigerian Languages (e.g Tiffen 1974, Amayo, 1992 and Igboanusi 1995, 2000) have identified interference at three levels; the level of sound otherwise known as phonological interference, the level of grammar and the level of lexis. Some linguistic scholars also classify linguistic interference at phonological, grammatical: syntactic and morphological, lexical/semantic and pragmatic levels. Within the context of the paper interference phenomenon is discussed at three levels: phonological, grammatical and lexico-semantic.

Phonological Interference at the phonological level linguistic interference operates on both segmental and suprasegmental aspects. Awodele (2010) describes this interference as communication obstacles related to pronunciation and sound perception problems in non-native language usage. This includes pronunciation errors (mis-pronunciation) at the segmental and suprasegmental levels. According to him there are certain phonemes of English which are not in the phonemic inventories of speakers of English as a second language; such speakers approximate or substitute the English phonemes, with the phonemes available in their own languages; difficulties in pronouncing diphthongs as they drop the secondary element; some problematic consonant sounds, consonant clusters; difficulty in stress placement on appropriate syllables and manipulation of intonation patterns.

Adetugbo (1984) identifies problems of second language learners of English as differentiation of phonemes such as in the vowel sounds of the pairs of words such as "Sit" and "Seat", 'Hat' and 'Hart', 'Pot' and 'Port' which are not differentiated in Nigerian English; phoneme substitution as the vowels of the words "Earth", 'Cup' and 'Sure' are absent from the phonological inventories of Efik, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and some Nigerian languages. According to him, speakers of English in Nigeria belonging to such language groups substitute for these vowels those vowels of their native language that, in their perceptions, are close to these English vowels. As Oti-Owom (2021) points out each language has a different set of phonemes, differing stress and intonation system. English as a second language learner, according to him transfers the sounds of his own language (or their nearest equivalents) and the stress and intonation system of the language which he is learning. In other words, phonological features of learners Mother Tongue (L_1) keep intruding into or interfering with those of English in the process of learning English as a second language.

As pointed out by Amayo (1986), the problems that Nigerians have with spoken English stem from the fact that English is a second language in the country. The average Nigerian has internalized the linguistic features of his Mother Tongue before beginning to learn English and even after acquiring a reasonable mastery of English, he still continues to operate side by side in the two languages. Soneye et al., (2015) asserts that in the second language learning process learners tend to transfer the features of their various Mother Tongues into English as distinct from native speaker's variety. According to him, differences in the syllable structures of Nigerian languages as compared to English are responsible for some noticeable deviations in the speech performance of most Nigerian learners in general.

Christison and Murray (2021) identifies students problem areas in spoken English. Second language learners have problems with some sounds which occur in the English language but do not occur in their own mother tongue; stress and intonation patterns also constitute areas of difficulty for the students since neither stress nor intonation pattern exists in their Nigerian languages. According to Macauley stress is more overtly problematic because this has a bearing on word meaning and comprehension. She adds that second language learners constantly place stress on the wrong syllables and quite often, words are produced following a specific Nigerian language stress less pattern with variations, reflecting the linguistic origin of the speaker. Consequently, students have difficulty making utterances for easy flow of communication because they lack the ability to construct the required sentences quickly. All the identified problems stem from lack of immersion in the second language.

Christison and Murray (2021) also observed that the English phonemes especially those that are not part of the learner's native language, stress and intonation patterns are difficult for speakers of a particular Nigerian language; errors of rhythm, such as the tendency to stress every syllable in a sentence is common to most Nigerian speakers

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of English because their Moher Tongues are syllable-timed. Other English as a second language scholars such as Ayodele (1985), Azikiwe (1990), Awodele (1998, 2000, 2007) also contend that Nigerian speakers of English usually experience difficulties in acquiring the proper speech rhythm of English, in distinguishing between stressed and unstressed syllables and in perceiving many of the vowel and consonant contrasts. Second language learners of English in Nigeria are deficient in stress and intonation that since stress and intonation aid intelligibility more than ordinary accuracy of pronunciation of words does most Nigerians have the intelligibility of their spoken English defeated by wrong stress and incorrect intonation.

Interference Phenomenon at the Level of Grammar

Grammatical interference operates at the syntactic and morphological levels. It refers to communication difficulties arising from misapplication of language rules and unconventional grammatical structures. Grammatical interference appears inform of faulty sentence structures and misapplication of the rules of correct language use, poor spelling (in written English) and misuse of punctuation marks (Awodele, 2010:4) for instance, there are certain non-count nouns that are often pluralized. Such nouns are information, news, advice, furniture, equipment grouse and others. All these do not attract plural markers when they are quantified but plural markers are often added by speakers of English as L_2. Other problem areas include over-generalization of rules where some irregular verbs like split, cast, broadcast and others are at times given past tense markers; insensitivity to appropriate use of the rules of concord, collocation errors especially with reference to some correlatives that go together; using grammar rules from the native language – the use of L_1 structure in target language (English) especially English noun phrase and literal translation (Awodele, 2010).

Lexico- Semantic Interference involves the wrong use of words and constructions with unfamiliar meaning. Lexico-Semantic interference can be reviewed with a focus on such concepts like kinship, colour and weather. In English there are kinship words like father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, grandson and others. The distinction is based on sex. In Yoruba and Igbo, apart from father and mother the others are not distinguished according to sex. In addition, while the English operates the nuclear family system the Yoruba or Igbo operate the extended system. The result is that distinctions can be made between a brother, uncle, aunt, nephew and niece in English, they are your brothers and sisters in Yoruba or Igbo (Igboanusi, 1995, 2000; Awodele 2010). English also differentiates many colours but Yoruba or Igbo does not. According to Oti-Owom (2021), English has basically eight colour terms; White, black, red, yellow, green, orange, blue and violet. Yoruba or Igbo has only three colours; black, white and red. In Yoruba or Igbo context objects are viewed in terms of their whiteness, redness or darkness. This is lexico-semantic interference, anything added to the information signal but not intended by the information source and therefore causing distortion. The various levels of linguistic interference as examined have implications for acquisition of English as a second language and second language teaching and learning.

Implications of Linguistic Interference Phenomenon for Second Language Pedagogy

Linguistic Interference phenomenon has implications for second language acquisition and pedagogy. First, the English language teacher needs to be conscious of the instances of deviation from the norms of a language, which occur in the speech of second language learners as a result of their familiarity with more than one language; the diversities in the phonological, grammatical, lexical and semantic systems of any two languages as no two languages have exactly the same linguistic systems. Teachers of English as L_2 need to utilize the following strategies in the teaching and learning process for each linguistic level as outlined below:

Phonological Level: Segmental and Suprasegmental Features: At the segmental level, linguistic interference manifests prominently in learners' difficulty distinguishing English phonemes that do not exist in their first language. Nigerian ESL learners often confuse certain consonant and vowel sounds because the phonemic inventories of their indigenous languages differ from that of English (Adetugbo, 1984; Awodele, 1999). One effective instructional approach is the use of minimal pairs embedded in meaningful and contextually relevant sentences. When learners listen to and practise contrasts such as *chair–share*, *van–fan*, or *tank–thank*, they become more sensitive to phonemic distinctions that are crucial for intelligibility. This strategy aligns with contrastive analysis, which emphasises explicit attention to areas where the first and second languages differ (Lado, 1957). The same approach applies to vowel sounds, particularly the contrast between short and long vowels, which poses persistent challenges for Nigerian learners of English. Pairs such as *pack–park*, *pull–pool*, and *pot–port* illustrate

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how vowel length and quality can change meaning. Through repeated listening and guided practice, learners gradually approximate standard English vowel production. Tape-recorded materials, including dialogues, stories, and short conversations, further enhance learners' auditory discrimination skills. Exposure to well-modelled speech helps learners internalise correct pronunciation patterns and reduces negative transfer from the mother tongue (Weinreich, 2010). In addition, sustained listening to educational programmes delivered by proficient or accredited users of English on radio, television, and digital platforms such as YouTube provides learners with authentic input. Such exposure supports the development of accurate consonant articulation, vowel quality, and consonant clustering, which are often weakened by first-language interference (Oti-Owom, 2021).

Suprasegmental Features: Interference at the suprasegmental level affects learners' control of stress, rhythm, and intonation, which are essential for effective communication. Nigerian ESL learners frequently transfer the prosodic patterns of their first language into English, resulting in unnatural stress placement and inappropriate intonation contours (Adetugbo, 1984). To address this challenge, teachers can employ tape-recorded dialogues, stories, and conversations to train learners' listening comprehension and sensitivity to speech melody. Such materials enable learners to perceive how meaning is shaped beyond individual sounds. Similarly, activities such as impromptu speeches, storytelling, debates, symposia, and reading competitions encourage learners to practise spoken English in communicative contexts. These activities foster fluency and help learners gradually overcome mother-tongue interference in speech rhythm and intonation (Awodele, 1999). Teachers may further strengthen suprasegmental awareness by asking learners to identify the intonation patterns used in specific utterances. Language games, poems, rhymes, dialogues, and drama activities also provide engaging opportunities for correcting pronunciation errors while reinforcing listening comprehension and oral production (Lado, 1957).

Grammatical Interference: Grammatical interference occurs when learners apply the structural rules of their first language to English, leading to persistent errors in syntax and morphology. In a second-language context such as Nigeria, learners often perceive English grammar as artificial because it differs significantly from indigenous language structures (Adetugbo, 1984; Weinreich, 2010). To mitigate this problem, learners should be encouraged to engage frequently with English grammar so that they gradually begin to "think" in the second language and accept its grammatical patterns as natural. The use of instructional media is particularly valuable in addressing grammatical interference. Instructional television, videos, computer-based learning, and digital platforms such as blogs, wikis, Google Docs, and YouTube can make grammar instruction more interactive and context-driven. These tools provide learners with repeated exposure to grammatical forms in authentic use, thereby reducing reliance on first-language structures (Awodele, 1999).

Lexico-Semantic Interference: Lexico-semantic interference arises when learners transfer meanings and usage patterns from their first language into English, often resulting in inappropriate word choices. Learners should also be encouraged to rely on syntactic, semantic, and morphological clues when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. This strategy promotes deeper lexical processing and reduces dependence on direct translation from the mother tongue. The use of visual aids such as flash cards, picture cards, photographs, and real objects further supports vocabulary development by linking words directly to meaning. These techniques help learners build accurate mental representations of English lexical items and minimise semantic transfer errors (Adetugbo, 1984).

Conclusion

Linguistic interference remains a major challenge in the acquisition of English as a second language in Nigeria, affecting learners at the phonological, grammatical, and lexico-semantic levels. As established by earlier scholars, interference results largely from the structural differences between the learners' first language and English (Lado, 1957; Weinreich, 2010). Addressing this phenomenon requires deliberate pedagogical strategies that emphasise contrast, contextualised practice, and sustained exposure to appropriate language models. When teachers consciously integrate these strategies into classroom practice, learners' communicative competence in English can be significantly enhanced.

Suggestions

The following recommendations are considered necessary to enhance how second language learners' proficiency in English language are offered;

1. English language teachers should consistently apply contrastive teaching strategies that explicitly highlight differences between learners' first language and English, particularly in pronunciation and grammar.

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2. Schools should provide access to audio-visual and digital instructional resources to support the teaching of segmental, suprasegmental, and grammatical features of English.
3. Learners should be encouraged to engage in extensive reading and listening activities to reinforce grammatical structures and lexico-semantic accuracy in authentic contexts.
4. Teacher training programmes should prioritise practical methodologies for addressing linguistic interference, with emphasis on pronunciation, contextual grammar teaching, and vocabulary development.

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