

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MALAPROPISM/THE INTERFERENCE OF MOTHER-TONGUE AMONG THE IGBO SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE: MUSIC AS A MEDIUM IN ENHANCING POSITIVE TRANSFER OF LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interference of mother-tongue in the pronunciations of some similar English words by some Igbo speakers of English, which Linguists refer to as 'Malapropism'. This is very common among the Igbo indigenes from communities in Aguata, Orumba North and South and Alo in Idemili North of Anambra State, Nigeria. The findings revealed that Igbo Language (L1) interferes with the target communities' spoken English (L2). They substitute the letter L with the letter R and vice versa in words where the letters exist leading to despicable and humiliating comments from their audience. This in addition makes it difficult to decipher what they intend to pass across. The paper also looked at music as an effective medium in enhancing the positive transfer of learning to check this offensive and dehumanizing error. The theoretical framework of this study is based on Edward Thorndike's 'Theory of identical elements', while the research methods employed to elicit the information was survey design including a reading task and creativity.

Keywords: Linguistics, Malapropism, Interference, Language 1 (L1), Language 2 (L2), Transfer of Learning

Introduction

The Igbo belong to the South East geographical zone of Nigeria. The Igbo tribe comprises Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo and Ebony States of Nigeria. They are the Igbo speaking states with dialectical differences from one community to the other. To confirm this assertion, Aja, (2016), states that "the Igbo language is spoken by a group of people from Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states and also some parts of Delta and Rivers States of the Federal Republic of Nigeria" (p. 496).

The English language was inherited by Nigerians from their English Colonial Masters. Despite the age-long use of the English language in Nigeria, the Igbo language has in no small measure affected and still affects their oral English, especially in the pronunciations of words with letters 'L' and 'R'. They use these letters interchangeably resulting in wrong pronunciations and alterations in meanings of words associated with the said letters. Such words include 'Road' pronounced, 'Load.' 'Bread' pronounced 'bled'. Odlin (1989) adds, that, 'second language learners and speakers of languages make errors in their language usage, which are evident in speech production, and writing' (p.21).

Languages 1 and 2 (L1 and L 2).

In this study, L1 is regarded as the Igbo language (the inherited / first language) while L2 is the English language (the second/ foreign language). Corder in Mehandran (2010) explains that “when a second language learner is under pressure, the learner borrows or substitutes words from his/her L1 to fill the gap in L2 because to him/her, communication is the learner's primary concern rather than obedience to the rules of the grammar” (p 26). This is exactly the case with the identified Igbo speakers of English in their substitution of the letter 'L with letter R' and vice versa.

Theoretical Framework

Edward Thorndike's Theory of identical elements was used as the framework for this study. According to Thorndike in Alao and Adeniyi (2009), “the theory of identical elements states that it is possible to transfer prior skills and knowledge to recent ones because both experiences are identical (share things in common)” (p. 49). Judging from what has so far been discussed in this paper, it becomes glaring that this theory applies to the substitution of letters L and R in spoken English as observed in Orumba and Aguata Igbo indigenes. This is because both letters are identical in sound e.g. Breast pronounced as 'blest'. It is indeed a tough task to differentiate between identical twins. Even their siblings mistake them for each other.

Oloma in the Igbo language means 'orange'. The target communities refer to it as orange because of the L in oloma, their inherited language (L1). In the same vein, breast (?!) is pronounced as 'blest', rope (elili) is pronounced as 'lope' while prayer (ekpele) is pronounced as 'player'.

Their prior knowledge of the Igbo language (L1) affects their spoken English (L2) which is the crux of the matter. It is worthy of note that each set of words has identical elements but are different concepts, just like identical twins look alike but are two different individuals.

Interference

Interference is the effect prior knowledge has on present knowledge. Lado (1957) asserts that “interference is concerned with the effect which L1 of language learners exerts on the target language which they attempted to acquire. According to Alao and Adeniyi (2009): There are two types of interferences namely:

- (a) Retroactive inhibition: When a person has just acquired a piece of information, the tendency is that the earlier acquired information becomes increasingly difficult to be remembered or even get lost.
- (b) Proactive Inhibition: This is the inability of the individual to remember the present but remembering the previous as a result of interference of the first experience (P. 44).

Jenkins (2009) in line with Lado affirms that "the effect of interference on pronunciation is usually more noticeable and should be given proper attention in classroom pedagogy (p. 18). It is on this premise that the researcher attempted the composition of a song meant to combat this trend in classroom pedagogy as well as in Sunday school lessons. In this study, the researchers' interest is on proactive inhibition where previous knowledge (L1) inhibits the learning of English (L2), as in the case of using letters 'L and R' interchangeably e.g. 'Lord pronounced as 'Rod'. These are two different words with different meanings.

Transfer of learning

In the teaching and learning process, the teacher is expected to set- induce the students by connecting the previous knowledge to the present knowledge. The link between the two helps the learner to develop new skills and knowledge. This is regarded as a transfer of knowledge.

Oladele (1998) states: Transfer of learning is the effect prior learning has on the present. Learning is meaningful when past learning smoothens the progress of something else. For example, if a learned experience refuses to aid the new learning, the goal of the training has ceased to be accomplished (p. 48). This is the case with some Igbo speakers of English where L1 has a negative effect on the study of L2. L1 implies an inherited language or mother-tongue while L2 is the second official/foreign language. Aja (2016) informs that, “transfer of learning is a psychological term used to describe a situation where one learned system influences the learning of a subsequent system (P. 499) Charhman in Alao and Ayodele (2009) Opine that:

Human learning is normally affected by past experience. For instance, the teacher who has taught the students some skills in Mathematics would believe that such skills would be transferred to related subjects like Physics or Accounting (p. 63).

Transfer of learning can be positive or negative. Alao and Adeniyi (2009) state thus:

- (a) Positive transfer is a situation where a previously learned fact aids the understanding of a new task.
- (b) Negative transfer is the type of learning in which prior experience impacts negatively on the new one (p. 48)

In our study, the effect of L1 (Igbo language) on L2 (English language) constituted a negative transfer of learning. This is because previous knowledge of letters 'L' and 'R' in Igbo language inhibits the pronunciation of the words with these two letters in L2 and this is actually the problem of this study. According to Keys (2002), “transfer of learning can be positive or negative, that is, previously learned language can facilitate (positive transfer) or inhibit (negative transfer) the learning of subsequent languages (p. 42).

The Effect of the Substitution of 'L' with 'R'

It has been observed that Orumba/Aguata speakers of the English language substitute 'L' with 'R' in their spoken English and vice versa as shown in the table below. Each set of words below has two different concepts but are pronounced alike as a result of L1 interference with L2. An Orumba/ Aguata speaker of the English language can say:

Sentence 1: Jesus is Rod. Meaning: Jesus is an iron tool called a rod.

Intended sentence: Jesus is Lord (i.e. our Saviour). Here letter 'R' is used instead of the letter 'L' and this has invariably changed the meaning of the sentence.

Sentence 2: I am a lady – meaning: I am a female adult.

Intended sentence: I am ready, which is a state of being prepared for something.

Sentence 3: I have the light to do it.

Meaning: I have the energy from the sun, electric power or lamp etc, to see things and execute a project.

Intended sentence: I have the right to do it

Meaning: I have the authority to execute a project

Sentence 4: I want to buy blade.

Meaning: I want to buy the flat part of a knife or blade (short form for razor blade) i.e. an instrument used for shaving.

Intended sentence: I want to buy bread

Meaning: I want to buy a loaf (baked food made of flour)

Sentence 5: As an adult, you don't need fresh

Meaning: As an adult, you don't need anything unpreserved (but frozen or dried foods)

Intended sentence: As an adult, you don't need flesh.

Meaning: An adult does not require the soft part of meat between the skin and the bone but requires the skin, bone or the inner parts by implication. Sentence 6: There was a flood in Lagos yesterday

Meaning: A large amount of water covered the dry land in Lagos yesterday

Intended sentence: There was fraud in Lagos yesterday

Meaning: People were involved in the crime of making money illegally in Lagos yesterday.

Methodology

1. Interview

The researchers interviewed some Anambra State indigenes who confirmed that the wrong pronunciation of L and R in English is a fact. The interviewees were DrMrs Linda Nkamigbo (a Linguist from Anambra State, and a Linguistic lecturer in UNIZIK, Awka), Professor Agatha Onwuekwe, of the Music Department, UNIZIK, Awka, who is from Aguata in Anambra State, MrsAzukaChukwuma from Onitsha, Anambra State, Miss Bibian Nwamuo from Oko, in Orumba, Anambra State and Mrs Rose Ekehalu from Aguata also in Anambra State. All the interviewees confirmed that the substitution of L with R in spoken English and vice versa is more prevalent among the Orumba, Aguata and Alo indigenes of Anambra State.

2. Reading Task

The researchers travelled to Umunze in Orumba Local Government Area and visited their main market. 60 people they approached in the market (both traders and buyers) served as the population of the study. They trimmed the number down to 20 participants picking only the indigenes of AguataAlo and Orumba, the target communities who served as the sample. To the 20 participants, they engaged them in a reading task in the English language focusing on letters L and R as shown below:

Reading Task (For 20 Orumba, Alo and Aguata Indigenes)

My landlord is a lazy man. He has a radio which he listens to all the time. He is the leader of his home, yet he does not provide for his family. He can neither read nor write, no wonder he is a University Law student dropout. All he does every morning is, arrange his room, he takes his breakfast and leaves. This is a big problem. He greets everybody he meets on the road. When he comes back and you query him, he hits your head with his ruler. He is Mr Right who does not take correction.

Data

Below is the data derived from the reading task in the pronunciations of letters L and R.

Number of participants: 20

Focus: letters L and R

S/N	WORDS	WRONG PRONUNCIATIONS	NUMBER OF WRONG PRONUNCIATIONS	%	NUMBER OF RIGHT PRONUNCIATIONS	%
1	LandLord	Rand Rod	10	50	10	50
2	Lazy	Razy	10	50	10	50
3	Radio	Ladio	20	100	0	0
4	Road	Load	18	90	2	10
5	Leader	Reader	19	95	1	5
6	Read	Lead	17	85	3	15
7	Write	Light	20	100	0	0
8	Arrange	Allange	17	85	3	15
9	Room	Loom	20	100	0	0
10	Breakfast	Blake fast	19	95	1	5
11	Query	Quely	18	90	2	10
12	Ruler	Lula	20	100	0	0
13	Problem	Ploblem	19	95	1	5
14	Right	Light	19	95	1	5
15	Correction	Collection	20	100	0	0
16	Family	Famiry	20	100	0	0
17	Law	Raw	18	90	2	10
18	Drop out	Dlop out	17	85	3	15
19	Listen	Risten	16	80	4	20

Analysis of Data

It can be deduced from the data above that majority of the indigenes of Orumba, Alo and Aguata in Anambra State, Nigeria failed in the pronunciations of words containing L and R. For instance 18 out of the 20 participants pronounced Road as Load, 20(all) pronounced Radio as Ladio, and 17 pronounced Arrange as Allange, 20 (all) pronounced Room as Loom. Few of these participants pronounced the words correctly as shown in the data e.g. 7 of them got the pronunciation of Lazy. 2 of them got the pronunciation of Road. None could pronounce Radio, Room, Ruler and Correction correctly. The data shows that this problem of malapropism needs to be addressed without delay to avoid its continued spread in the affected communities and beyond.

Music as a Precursor/ Cue- Dependence in Promoting Positive Transfer of Learning from L1 to L2

Alao and Adeniyi (2009) state thus:

It is believed that what students see, touch, feel or manipulate will be better remembered than one they are not familiar with. Hence, for a meaningful transfer of learning to take place, the teacher should incorporate exercises that task the various senses of the learner in the learning process (p. 40)

A cue helps in the retention and remembering of learned ideas. Alao and Adeniyi (2009), reveal

that: “To remember a learned idea, an individual needs some cues that will aid it. An individual needs related ideas such as a sentence, a mental picture or mnemonics to remember a fact. Without this, the possibility for a piece of information to go into extinction is there” (p.45).

Music is a powerful cue-dependence that aids learning. In this study, the researchers composed a song meant to be an incorporated exercise to ensure that the various senses of the learners in the learning process are tasked. These include senses of hearing, feeling and touch. This is aimed at correcting the wrong pronunciation of R and L. This song is expected to be rendered with demonstrations/actions for the words that are verbs while the words that are nouns could be expressed through the pictures of the words for assimilation and retrieval to take place effortlessly. For instance, 'Road' can be demonstrated with the picture of a road while 'Run' can be demonstrated with an action of running etc in the song. Alao and Adeniyi (2009) further explain that “when the learners are allowed to take an active part in the teaching-learning activities, they will be able to repeat the task at another time” (p. 46).

It is worthy of note that the 'L' and 'R' song is expected to be performed repeatedly by the learners to enable them to repeat the task at another time to use Alao and Adeniyi's words. This is exactly the reason behind the researchers' plan of burning the song repeatedly on the DVD to fill all available spaces to enable the students to practise alongside this medium as it plays to get used to the right pronunciations. Many parents buy educational DVDs for their children to practise with at home. The demonstration is an active teaching/learning method. Singing songs related to the content of a lesson is a sure way of enhancing a permanent change in the behaviour of the learners who are actually learning.

As the teacher and students add demonstrations to the rendition of the song in connection with the pronunciations of the letter 'R' and 'L', the evidence of learning is obvious in the process. The attention span of children is quite limited but through singing and demonstrations, their attention span is elongated. This is also referred to as a play-way method of teaching.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As we have observed through this study, the effect of mother tongue has in no small measure affected the learning of oral English among the Orumba, Ajo and Aguata Igbo speaking communities in Anambra State. They pronounce letters L and R interchangeably and this results in very offensive spoken English. The researchers through interviews of some Anambra State indigenes and some who are from the affected backgrounds confirmed it. As a result, the researchers engaged the indigenes of the affected communities in a short reading task. The result showed that the majority of the indigenes of the target communities faltered in their readings by substituting the letter L with the letter R and vice versa. Researcher 1 came up with the L R song with the aim of correcting this error and the researchers intend to produce DVD copies in the nearest future for individuals that cannot sight read music scores. This paper suggests that teachers in Orumba and Aguata communities should pay more attention to letters L and R while teaching students from these backgrounds to enable them to pronounce words associated with them correctly. They should also pick copies of the L and R song DVDs to get acquainted with the correct pronunciations and be able to teach the same to children.

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