

Nigerian English and the Dilemma of Standard English Language Learners

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Abstract. This paper reports on the dilemma learners face when learning English as a second language. Specifically the paper focuses on Nigerian English language learners considering various varieties of English use in Nigerian. The main objective of the paper is to examine the variety of language learners in institutional settings often encountered in the process of learning English as a second language. Employing a qualitative approach and a desk-based method of data collection, the paper found out that there are mainly three varieties of English in Nigeria viz: typical Nigerian English, Pidgin English and Broken English. The study concludes that more attention should be given to Standard English language in the instructional settings so that students should not be left in the dark.

Keywords: Nigerian English, Standard English, English Language learners.

1. Introduction

The importance of communication to man is incalculable, especially when daily human interaction is considered. Long before the postmodernist, the value of language began, the primacy of language in human history has never

been in doubt. In political and social policy, language functions as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication with the use of communications, although it has always possessed an added cultural importance as a tool of the dominant ideology. That is to learn a language is not only reaching out to others but to maintain a variety of the social bond, a shared sense of values and communal awareness. Linguists of all persuasions seem to agree that a language should be viewed as a system; a set of elements, each of which has a capacity of contributing to the workings of the whole (Beau Grande & Dressier 1992). Language is a powerful tool of control used by the colonial powers. Language forms a large part of the culture of people—it is through their language that they express their folk tales, myths, proverbs and history (Picador et al., 1988.) Language also covers a more potent and characteristic of human behaviour. It consists of a comprehensive and overlapping set of “sub-languages,” both ethnically and geographically defined territory known as dialects—some are in some cases defined by shared settings known to be registered while others are linked to profession, class or educational level or a combination of these elements. The language includes a wide range of variation from a variety of human

activities in a system of interacting with somebody, society, or culture. It also plays a crucial role in the social, political and economic life support of the people in a given geographic entity. In spite of all perceived roles of languages to humankind, an all-embracing interpretation of it continues to elude us due to the complexity of its structure and the functions it performs. A useful definition of communication should include the feeling that language has been widely studied and acclaimed as the most valuable human institution and is indispensable in all spheres of life (Crystal, 1987).

Language roles paralleled along the embodiment of culture lead to the depth of a person's reflection—beyond the practical necessities of life to such aspects as the search for knowledge, education and collaboration among multi-ethnic societies, In such a way, it revealed how English language continues to operate signs and elaborate functions in almost all facets of Nigeria's life. Particularly unique position where range of and vital in the use of English are exceptionally experienced in Nigeria is in the domains of politics, education, legal matters, mass media, art and leisure, all of which are typically carried out through the medium of English. The same is true to everyday publications, as well as other various quests for national unity.

2. Statement of Problem

The Use of English language in Nigeria as a language of instruction is taking different dimensions. There are different varieties of English spoken or used in Nigeria, namely Pidgin English, Broken English, creole and the Nigerian English. Because these varieties of English have penetrated almost all sectors of Nigerian institutions education sector inclusive, students are sometimes left in dilemma as to which variety of English can be used in the learning environment. This is true because some teachers are not at all versed enough in the standard variety of English language, the so-called inner cycle that learners need to be taught with.

3. Objectives of the study

This study examines the variety of language learners in institutional settings often encounter in the process of learning of English as a second language. It aims to achieve these specific objectives:

1. To find out the nature of Nigerian variety of English language
2. To identify the interference level of Nigerian varieties of English language in instructional settings in Nigerian schools.
3. To identify the dilemma learners often faced in the process of learning English as a second language.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Introduction

This section discusses recent studies on the perception of the term Standard English and other varieties of Nigerian English.

4.2 The Spread of English Language

The global spread of the English language led to the position that is now true: that there is no exclusive rights in the use of English since the language no longer belongs numerically to speakers of English as a mother tongue. The effective possession of any language in effect rests with the people who use it. However multilingual they are, the major advances in sociolinguistic research over the past half century indicate clearly that languages are shaped by their use. And for English, the users number up to seven hundred million, living in every continent of which less than half are native speakers. Statistically, native speakers are in a minority, and thus in practice for language change, for language maintenance, and for the ideologies and beliefs associated with the language in so far as non-native speakers use the language for a wide range of public and personal needs (Bmmfit 2001).

4.3 The Notion of Standardization

Given that the term 'standard' with reference to English is a label which does not appear until the nineteenth century, is it permissible to speak of 'non-standard' before this time? This would appear justified because authors writing on

matters of language and concerned with condemning usage which they saw as socially unacceptable use labels such as ‘vulgar, ignorant, inaccurate, barbarous, uneducated, shameful, disgraceful’ (Hickey 2010). The forms of English which prescriptivists such as Thomas Sheridan and John Walker criticised are what would be termed ‘non-standard’ today. The concept of ‘non-standard’ usage already existed in the eighteenth century, even though this precise label was not employed. Usage which was censured in previous centuries was usually connected with choices which speakers could make (Hickey 2010). This view of a standard as a national variety led later to the empowerment of Standard English as the language of government and state and hence superior in status to all other varieties with which it might be contrasted (McCull Millar 2005). There is a curious paradox here: the ‘national’ variety was promoted as a form of English for the whole nation, but in essence it corresponded to the speech of a small and privileged section of the population (Claridge & KytO 2010). Self-appointed authorities’ Standard English has always had its guardians and often these are self-appointed authorities who pronounce on ‘correctness’ without necessarily having external legitimacy to do so.

4.4 Nigerian English

Before the entrenchment of the British colonial administration in Nigeria, there had been contacts between Nigeria and European countries. Such contacts brought along with them some form of English to Nigerians. Future developments were to strengthen the position of the language in the country. In projecting the paths of the development of Nigerian English, Bamgbose (1995) identifies three major strands which coincide with specific periods in the history of the country. These strands areas are Contact English (CE), Victorian English (VE) and School English (SE). Two major variants, Nigerian Pidgin (NP) and Broken English developed from the Contact English (Bamgbose 1995). Nigerian English has been cited several times. Adegunle and Adegbija cited in (Ogunleke 2008) opine that there is no gain saying that English has become a Nigerian language. The language has become an

invaluable legacy of the British which has provided Nigerians with yet another means of expressing their culture. It is noticed that there emerged the Nigerian English from the British English. This means that the variety of English used in Nigeria is regarded as a dialect of the British English. Nigeria, before and after its colonization has indigenous languages spoken in its states. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the three major languages. Every Nigerian has a mother tongue so as to understand one another apart from the trade language of the Portuguese, a koine had to be introduced. Koine here means an official language. The English language was chosen as the koine (Bolade, 2011). Nigeria has many indigenous languages, and English as used in Nigeria today is an official language. Also it is a language in contact with the various indigenous Nigerian language and cultures used to express Nigerian socio-cultural, political and religious situations which differ from those of Britain. There are bound to be differences because according to Quirk and Greenbaum cited in (Osuji 2010) “geographical dispersion of language is a classical case for variation”. According to Worsefall (2010), Nigerian English is a variety of English spoken in Nigeria but according to Nwachukwu (2007), Nigerian English is a collection of various grammatical structures common to Nigerian usage, having varying pronunciation peculiarities as well as socially constrained usage of some lexical. Naturally Nigerian English has developed from the Standard British English, which was used by the colonial masters. In spite of the long period of relationship between American English and the Nigeria English corpus has not become a major area of research. English is neither the mother-tongue nor the first language of any of the over four hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria. Like the name ‘Nigeria’ the English language is a borrowed gown and one of the inheritances of our colonial experience. The language is indigenous to Britain, but it is today the language most spoken world-wide. In addition to being the lingua franca of Britain, it is the recognized language of the United States of American, a greater part of Canada, and the whole of Australia and New Zealand. It is also widely spoken in South Africa and it is also a language of Government, Law, Commerce,

Education and International Communication for most of the former British Empire, including such faraway places as Hong Kong, most of Africa South of the Sahara (including Nigeria) and even the Caribbean.

5. Methodology

This study employs qualitative research design. Specifically it adopts desk-based method of data collection where materials were searched in broad and in-depth levels. To capture the latest thinking and most rigorous empirical evidence, the study applied a multi-pronged search strategy, involving searching a wide range of citation and journal indexes, online research and evaluation repositories, resource centres, and other search engines.

6. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings and discussion of the study. The research questions guiding the study are restated below in order to have a clear picture of the findings.

- (i) What is the nature of Nigerian variety of English?
- (ii) What is the interference level of other varieties of English language in the Nigerian instructional setting?
- (iii) What dilemma do the English language learners face in the process of learning English as a second language?

To begin with the first research question:

- i. What is the nature of Nigerian variety of English?

The expressions below describe the typical Nigeria informal settings. The expressions are presented expressions. Expressions found in both formal and side by side with Standard English

| Nigerian English | | Standard English |
|--|---|--------------------------------------|
| Here are a few expressions commonly used: | | |
| a. Sam is my senior brother. | ➔ | Sam is my elder brother. |
| b. I shall branch to the market. | ➔ | I shall go to the market. |
| c. The woman has taken in again. | ➔ | The woman is pregnant again. |
| d. Those two women hate themselves. | ➔ | Those two women hate each other |
| e. The boy is moving with my sister. | ➔ | The boy is friendly with my sister |
| f. Can you drop me at the school? | ➔ | Can you give me a lift to the school |
| g. Go slow | ➔ | Traffic Jam |

Onwukwe, (2012).

Akere in (Ajani 2007) asserts that Nigerian English is the concurrently developing varieties that may rightly be understood as dialects, which have resulted from the interplay of English and the vernacular languages spoken in Nigeria.

Examples:

- (i) I have ‘eguisi’ soup.(Igbo English)
- (ii) Bring the ‘eba’.(Igbo English)
- (iii) Do you have ‘tuwo’? (Housa English) (iv)! need ‘amala’.(Yoruba English)

Onwukwe, (2012).

Extracts of Contact English were collected from Antera Duke’s records of events in Calabar between 1785 and 1788, as well as those of the records attributed to the King of Opubu in 1824. While Antera Duke’s records were in Broken English those of the King of Opubu were in Nigeria Pidgin. The difference between the two is that Broken English is less popular and less grammatical than the Pidgin (Ogbulogo, 2005). Excerpts below:

Variety of Nigerian Pidgin English

* “Soon after I see one my men was Liv with him to canow Corn

Up and tell Enyong peoples tak my canow way for Landing so I Run and Go Down for Landing Ifind no canow

(Soon after I saw one of my men who was left at the Canoe from the landing. So I run down to the landing and I find no canoe...) “Farde (1956).

Variety of Nigerian Broken English

“Suppose my fader, or my fader fader come up from ground and peak me why English man do dat, I no sabby tell why

(Suppose my father or my grandfather were to come back from the grave and ask me why the Englishman did that, wouldn't he able to say why”Mabeni (1971).

The expressions above clearly show that there are indisputable varieties of Nigerian English which could be used in various situations.

ii. What is the interference level of other varieties of English language in the Nigerian instructional setting?

Nigerian varieties of English have penetrated several aspects of life. This will lead to the domestication of the so-called Standard English; English English or the RP. This domestication will lead to interference at various levels either formal or informal because even the highly educated members of the Nigerian society often resort to Nigerian varieties of English language in certain situations which to some scholars think as nothing wrong. The development of regional or local varieties of any language resulting from its domestication in non-native environments has been found to be a socio-linguistic reality, an observation which has been made, and in the case of English, defended by such ethnographers and language scholars as Brumfit (2001), Mckay (2002), Trudgill and Hannah (2002). Walsh (1967) states that The varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English. Bokamba recognizes the existence of a Nigerian English and refers to it as a variety of what he calls “West African Vernacular English” (WAVE). Similarly, (Ajani 2007) sees Nigerian English as part of the continuum of

“West African English”. Ajani (2005) spoke of the emergence of a” Standard Nigerian English”. Odumuh (1987) recognized Nigerian English as one of the New Englishes and had this to say: “our position is that there exists at the moment a single super ordinate variety of Standard English in Nigeria which can be regarded as “Nigerian English”. These assertions clearly vindicates that interference cannot be avoided in the Nigerian formal and informal settings.

iii. What dilemma do the English language learners face in the process of learning English as a second language?

Owing to possible differences that are found between Standard English and Nigerian varieties of English which are often applicable in instructional settings, there is the possibility that learners will be left in dilemma. Learners' difficulty in comprehending any of the Nigerian variety of English language may give an indication of the likely difficulties in second language learning, but it is certainly not the only indicator. Learning style, and the level of proficiency of the teachers and the learners are always crucial to learning (Crombie, 1995). Given the fact that second language is often the weaker language of most learners, it follows that they do not possess the required level of proficiency and in a situation where by any variety of Nigerian English is offered to them, they will be certainly left in dilemma and especially to go for the easiest. So in order to avoid this dilemma, there is supposed to be a clear Cut provision on when and where to use Nigerian Varieties of English language as well as the standard variety of English.

7. Conclusion

This paper is on the dilemma that learners in the Nigerian setting may possibly face in their effort to learn English language as second language. The paper identified the varieties of English language present in both Nigerian formal and informal settings namely Typical Nigerian expressions, Pidgin English and broken English. These forms of English are very possible to be found in Nigerian instructional settings because even the learned are not free from using all or one of these varieties of Nigerian English. Employing desk-based method of data

collection, the findings from this study suggest that, in order to avoid these dilemmas, concerted effort should be made to ensure that in the instructional settings learners of English as a second language should be purely taught in the pure Standard English because it is the only acceptable form of English.

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