# ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA AND THE CASE OF INTERFERENCE ON LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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## Abstract

The paper examines the place of English language in Nigeria and the case of interference experienced by second language learners in Nigeria in learning English language. Particular instances of interference are considered from Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, and Challa (a language in Plateau State, Nigeria). The various challenges encountered in the acquisition of proficiency skills are examined at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels in this paper and the implication of such interferences for the learner are x-rayed as part of the conclusion of the paper.

**Keywords:** English Language in Nigeria, Interference, Language Learners, Proficiency Skills Acquisition.

## English as a Second Language

English in Nigeria is the language of commerce, law, politics, administration, education and culture at all levels above the local languages. An adequate knowledge of English is an indispensable requirement for anyone to rise above or to live in any wider context than the village. The English language acquired the status of second language in Nigeria after about a century of socio-political domination by Britain. In all that time, official Nigerian affairs were run in English. The period of colonial domination witnessed a change in the traditional socio-political system and a re-grouping in society. This change necessitated representative participation and inter-ethnic association at the center. Naturally, the English language assumed the role of a common language with the British supervising the process of change.

Rising waves of political consciousness in the country aroused an interest in people to have a say beyond the local level and that meant learning English to achieve that goal. On the attainment of independence in 1960, therefore the stage was set for the formal designation of the English language as the language of official business. It became Nigeria's second language (L2), that is, after the indigenous languages which are termed first language (L1).

Various sections of the Nigerian society use English for all kinds of communication purposes. It is interesting to note that in some homes today, particularly among the elite group, English has begun to assume an L1 status. Children are first taught to communicate in English and only after wards learn an indigenous language as L2 for the purpose of communicating with the uneducated members of the extended family and the society (Akare 1982) cited in Tope (101). Within the Nigerian ESL environment, varieties evolved over time and the issue of whether or not there is a Nigerian English has engaged the thought of a number of linguists and scholars. Even though the issue is not convulsively rested yet, features truly exist in the Nigerian usages at the phonological, lexical, syntactic and semantic levels which distinguish it from other national varieties like American English, British English and Indian English. Some of their features, however, are not common to all Nigerians. Any mention of ESL situation in Nigeria is, however, not complete without a mention of the multi-ethnic composition of the English language to thrive in.

## Language Policy and Second Language Learning

National language policies and second language learning are closely linked. In ESL, these policies often clearly spell out the statuses of the various languages in use within the nation's borders. Second language learning can either be enhanced or hampered by a language policy. In the case of Japan, for instance, in the last century or so, the status of English has changed from one of official second language taught and used in the schools and offices to one of foreign language no longer used for official purposes. This is the outcome of language policy that de-emphasized the use of English while instituting the Japanese language as a national and official language.

In Nigeria, the National Language Policy has changed a couple of times since independence in 1960 even though such changes do not seem to have had any remarkable effect on the status of English in the country. The federal government's sponsored Universal Primary Education programme gave birth to UPE language, twelve in all for which the government produced curriculum materials. Prior to them, although some indigenous languages were taught in schools, they did not carry the 'federal stamp' - the language policy also recognized nine indigenous languages in which radio programmes could be run. All that while, the use of English as medium of teaching in schools was the official policy even though in many rural areas, where there was linguistic homogeneity among pupils, a lot of teaching was being done in local language. In 1977, the language policy as it affected education was adjusted. By government directives, the first three years of primary education were to be conducted in the local

language of the school setting/ environment. However, not much was done to make this effective.

The Ife project, which took pupils through primary education using the Yoruba medium, while teaching English as a subject has a major research effort. But even this had a positive effect on English. The experimental group turned out better and more proficient users of English than those in the control group. This project has now become the spirit behind the current drive to effect the 1977 directives. Also, the 1979 constitution identified three major languages viz:  Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as national languages and these were to be used in the various houses of assembly and other official circles generally. This policy has also not reduced the status of English nor jolted it being learnt as a second language in the country. The addition of the phrase *'when practicable' to this policy* statement appears to have sealed its fate.

**The Status of English in Nigeria**
Nigeria is a multi-lingual state with five hundred and twenty one (521) indigenous languages. Nine of these indigenous languages are dead while we have two languages (French and English) which have no native speakers. However, we have five hundred and ten (510) living languages apart from the dead and the ones whose orthography have not been designed as well as French and English (Ethnoloque; World Language, 2009). English language co-exists with these indigenous languages in a number of situations; in other words, English language (a former colonial language) is being used to transact business in the Nigerian society alongside the indigenous languages.

In the words of Alabi (108):

> It is now an established fact that English which initially came to the Nigerian environment as a foreign language was later shaped and transformed by subsequent development into a second language with an official status.

English language serves different functions in Nigeria among which are:
  a.  It is the language of the media.
  b.   It is a subject /course in schools.
  c.  It is a tool for education.
  d.  It is the language of the politics.
  e.   English language is the lingua franca.

This shows that without the knowledge of the language, it is impossible to attain an appreciable social height in the country. English language also ascribes prestige to its speakers. Many who speak English in Nigeria speak only to communicate. There are people who have been left with the duty of speaking the standard version of the language. Some will say since English is not their mother tongue, they can speak the language in whatever way they like as long as they are understood it. The broadcasters, the language teachers and some others are those that people in Nigerian society look up to for standard version of English language but unfortunately, some of these people still goof and this affects communication in a negative way.

Alabi (80) again says, "It must be remarked that the variety of English that performs these tremendous functions in Nigeria is not the same as the native speakers in Britain or America". No matter how people tried to speak English language in Nigeria, it cannot be the same as the native speakers will speak it because 'the variety used in Nigeria has been indigenized to suit Nigerian environment', Alabi (91). In all, English language in Nigeria is a status symbol which built an heir of respectability to its speakers.

## Problems in the Acquisition of Proficiency Skills in English in Nigeria
### The Phonological Level
Perhaps, it is practicable that RP (Received Pronunciation) speech skills can be generally available to Nigerian learners of English as a second language. The phonological systems of the various indigenous languages are different from those of English and because English is learned as a second language, what simply takes place is an adaptation of indigenous phonological systems for English, speech sounds and patterns rather than an attempt to manage two phonological systems separately.

Differences between these phonological systems are at both segmental and supra-segmental levels. At the segmental level, most Nigerian languages have between five and ten vowels and have no diphthongs. These are therefore stretched to serve the purposes of the twenty two English vowels (12 monothongs, 8 diphthongs and two triphthongs). At the supra-segmental level, one can identify wrong pitch and intonation patterns. English stress-timing is dropped for syllable timing in Nigerian English. As a result, prosodic features like rhythmic prominence, primary stress, secondary stress, unclear stress, are nonexistent. Problems encountered on this level make it possible to identify sub-varieties/ dialects of the English language. For instance, the Challa speaker of English sounds differently from Hausa speaker. Generally, some of the common

errors include h-dropping, devoicing fricatives, non – differentiation in the length of vowels, absence of stress or its wrong placement. All these affect the intelligibility of English speech in Nigeria.

**The Lexical Level**
A language gives expression to its environment. It is a reflection of the total culture. The acquisition of the lexical proficiency therefore depends, to an extent, on the richness of the environment in terms of events, experiences and items which provide the vocabulary of a language. The implication of this is that, the more English- like an environment is, the richer the lexical repertoire available to learners of English as L2. Those words that express the sophistication of the English society may not be readily available to L2 learners. For instance, one observes that children in traditional homes play with traditional toys like small mud- huts, pots and others which express the local culture. In the homes of the elite sophisticated toys like tubes, military tanks, airplanes, helicopter, rockets, and so on provides the L2 learner in that setting with a vocabulary stock which reflects such exposure.

A deficiency in lexical repertoire has an effect on speech. The learner becomes very limited and predictable. Some learners are unable to determine the appropriateness of some words in their speech. This provides instances of understatements and exaggerations. The distinctions between word pairs like: killed, assassinated, think, feel; house and home may elude such a learner. As a result of the basic differences in culture between the English native environment and Nigeria, the English language is not able to totally give expressions to the Nigerian environment. Certain highly culture- bound experiences or roles are therefore expressed in the indigenous language with English structures. Examples of this include expression like the Oba of Lagos, Long Pan, Ngolong Ngas, Agbero bourgeoisie (for middlemen in the Nigerian economic system) and Ifa divination.

Sometimes too, some English words become semantically elastic and are stretched to mean more than they do within the native- speaker environment. The Nigerian learner of English acquires such words in spite of their implications for intelligibility. Terms and expression of kinship relationships provide examples for such extensions of meanings. For example; father, brother, sister, aunty/ uncle, are not restricted to the blood relations they denote. There are blood brothers, college brothers, clan brothers, state brothers etc. depending on the sphere and place of interaction. The native speaker of English must therefore understand the socio- cultural milieu of the

second language learner to comprehend the use and meaning of an English kinship term at any point.


**The Syntactic Level**

There is rarely any point of convergence between the syntactic structure of a number of indigenous Nigerian languages and the English language. This is evident at the morpho - phonemic level but at least in the general componential analysis of the sentence in terms of its subject predicate structure. However, there are some structural differences between the languages, and L2 learners of English exhibit features of L1 interference in L2 speech. There are problems of over generalization, and direct one- to- one translation from L1 to L2.

For example the popular Nigerian expression 'I'm coming' which is a direct translation of:

Mo nbo (Yoruba)

Ina zuwa (Hausa)

Anam a bia (Igbo)

Yin dush (Challa)

is used to mean 'just a minute' or 'I will be right back'.


Also, structures that contain a compound subject pose a problem of ordering. In the indigenous languages, the speaker or first person comes before the second or third person. The arrangement influences the English speech of most L2 learners albeit without marring their intended messages. For example:

"I and mercy ate the food".

Instead of the native speaker's

"Mercy and I ate the food".


In addition, interference from L1 structures is evident in the stretching of only one reflexive pronoun by learners to express the three types of reflexive actions for which English uses three separate reflexive pronouns.

I       They protect themselves
        (Everybody protects himself)
ii.     They protect each other
        (One protects the other and vice – versa)
iii.    They protect one another


(More than two people sharing mutual protection).

The Nigerian learner is most disposed quite to use (i) for all three actions.

Also, because most learners are exposed to textbook English, such variety distinctions as formal / informal, spoken / written, polite / familiar usages are

not often made. For example, in both formal circumstances, a Nigerian says, "I shall come". Whereas 'I'll come' appeals to native speakers in informal contexts and reserves the first structure for formal interaction. These flaws have to do with appropriateness rather than grammar. Consequently, one may find even university graduates whose speeches contain these improprieties. It therefore takes a higher level of competence to detect errors for inappropriateness than it takes to detect syntactic disharmony.

## The Semantic Level

Most second language learners of English in Nigeria begin by noting the total semantic implication of words, phrases, and sentence structures in the L2. For peculiar ESL circumstances, they modify this native-speaker usage. The degree of modification done to any meaning may reach points at which the native English speaker may be unable to comprehend the new semantic status in ESL. Nigerians' usage of English kinship terms readily lends weigh to this. At the emotive level, words like silly, liar, dubious, pleasant and a host of others do not draw the same reactions from native speakers as with Nigerian speakers. This is because meaning is highly culture-bound and remarkable differences exist between native English culture and the various Nigerian cultures.

## Interference

Interference has generally been accepted as a consequence of languages coming in contact. Trade and conquest are usually some of the ways through which language contact at group level may arise, apart from migration, religious conversations and travels. When languages come in contact the most obvious effect is interference. Interference itself is a situation where one language obstruct wholly or partially the learning of another. The purpose of this long essay is to demonstrate how interference works, its consequences (effects) and the implications of these consequences on the teaching and speaking of English as an official language in Nigeria.  Enighe (2005) cited in Enighe (166) has it that 'interference is a situation where a previously learned language affects the learning of a second or further language, interference is an intrusion in language acquisition.'

## Theories of Interference

The presence of interference is one of the factors which affects the quality of the final product, and which is subject to the level of experience. In other words, interference is, in a way, a universal phenomenon which very often occurs in student's translation and it therefore deserves more attention. Toury (224), moreover, states that interference seems to be more tolerated in translations

from a lightly prestigious culture. In his paper *"Researching lexical interference"*, Martin Thorovsky says: by linguistic interference, "I mean an unintentional transfer of some elements of the source language (SL) to the target language (TL)" (Thorovsky; 86). Thorovsky expresses that interferences are unintentional and thus unconscious tendencies which results in mistakes in translation and so to speaking of English language.

Malkiel (339) examines interference from a different perspective and she operates with this phenomenon in a different context. Besides L1 translations, her corpus contains also translations into the subject's second language. Translating, L1 into L2 can cause that the tendency to interference is stronger than under the more favorable conditions (as denoted by Toury (224), sometimes referred to as more natural direction of translation (translation into one's mother tongue, that is, L2 into L1 direction). Christopher Hopkinson confirms this claim and states that the issue of linguistic interference is a factor in any translation and when the translator is working from L1 into L2, interference from the L1 source text becomes a key element in the production of the L2 target text. (Hopkinson 13). Logically, it is likely that there will be more interference in translations into someone's second language; but, the strange and surprising thing is that interference occurs even in L1 translation. (As Brenda Malkiel conforms, "interference is not only a feature of L2 translation, but of L1 translation as well" (Malkiel 339).

In explaining Interference, it is good that we look into Peter Newmark`s interpretation of this concept in one of the elementary manual designed primarily for students of translation. Newmark says that "interference literal translation from SL or third language that does not give the right or required sense" (Newmark 283).  This definition is disputable because it differs from what we imagine under the concept of interference. In fact, reduces this phenomenon on the level of a word and considers the sense as the most important aspect. From his perspective, an expression whose meaning in the source text is understood correctly (and thus the "sense" is preserved in the target text) but whose formulation is unnatural and clumsy, is not considered as an interference.

In this paper, we study interference in a broader context. We do not limit only on the liquid level, but we examine even interference which occurs above the word level (syntactic interference, interference in typography, grammatical interference, etc.). According to Newmark's claim, interference means literal translation of a word and thus misunderstands the sense. This definition is too

concise and general; nevertheless, in his book *About Translation,* he already deals with this issue in more detail. He admits that interference occurs even above the level of words and, in a broader sense, it can affect proper names, punctuations, cultural element etc.

> In the narrow definition, interference takes place when apparently inappropriately, any feature of the source or a third language notable a syntactic structure, a lexical item, an idiom, a metaphor or word order is carried over or literally translated as the case may be into the target language (TL) text. (Newmark 78)

Moreover, in *About Translation,* Newmark mentions the fact that certain type of interference can have its virtues. According to him, it can sometimes be seen also as a positive aspect of a translation. In translation, there are various degrees of interference, and its appropriateness depends partly on the type of text that is translated, in a literary work both dialectal and cultural interference often enriches the translation (Newmark 78). In other words, the occurrence of interference is intentional and even desirable in some cases, and it does not always have to be an error.

Carol (27), in his paper on *Contrastive Analysis*, asserts that:

> Negative interference is more prominent in "productive process" that is the learner, in responding to the Target language, makes errors that consists of strong components of response to his mother tongue. This is because the tendency to respond in his L1 is so strong that it interferes with his response in the L2.

Carol stressed further that unguided initiative behavior of untutored response due to prior learning is given as an example of interference in learner's language and target language.

A relevant example in Challa L1 and English L2 is:

Challa                                               English
Ashen                                                Change.

The average Challa bilingual often finds himself in a multilingual society in which English is the official language. However, it is usually in that case that his acquisition of Challa as his L1 takes an early stage and is probably mastered much more thoroughly than his L2. Usually, people tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of their mother tongue and culture to the

second language and culture. In this situation, the semantic interpretation and its effect which form one language and another language are being emphasized as in relationship between the form of a sentence and its meaning. This is where Retroaction comes in. Retroaction is of potential interest to interference in relation to contrastive Analysis in two ways:

The first is to handle the effect of L2 upon the performance of L1. Second, it is concerned with forgetting to "oblivescence", and this explains why L1 is not usually forgotten when an L2 is learnt. It was Osgood (71) who assigned what is known as transfer values (+ or -) to each paradigm. +T meaning positive transfer or facilitation while –T is negative transfer or interference. The amount of +T or –T generated by each paradigm will depend on how similar Ss (stimulus) are with identity of Rs (responses), or how similar Rs are with identity of Ss. Where stimuli are functionally identical and responses are varied, negative transfer and retroactive interference are obtained, the magnitude of both decreasing as similarity between the responses increases.

Motage (20) states that Chomsky (1986) defined competence as the inborn ability of a speaker of a language in a homogenous community to produce and understand sentences heard of or not yet created. Such a speaker is the "ideal speaker or listener". The implication here is that members in heterogeneous linguistic settings are constantly making an effort to attain an ideal language; such efforts would be termed as performance according to Chomsky or ability to perform with acceptable sentences as opposed to ability to formalize grammatically accepted sentences. Therefore, interference according to Chomsky (292), is considered as limitation to linguistic competence because it tends to distort the order of usage.

On the whole, bilingual is well adapted to the structure of Challa .He speaks English to the best of his ability and if in the process he pronounces 'change' as 'ashen,' he is either not aware of it or does not understand why he does. This also applies to the situation where he pronounces 'cleft' as 'clept'. One may be tempted to hypothesize (on the basis of everyday observation of language behaviour) that causes of interference is when a person has a wide knowledge of L1 and insufficient (or imperfect) knowledge of L2. According to this line of thinking, an average Challa speaker is expected to have acquired significant knowledge (in terms of lexis, sound and grammar) of his language. On the other hand, he may only possess, skeletal knowledge with regards to which is English. In other words, he may suppose that a native speaker has both competence and

performance in his mother tongue (L1) while he has only superficial communicative competence in the L2.

According to Corder (258) "the breakdown of a mechanism gives insight into the nature of its normal functioning." We can use this technique to study the problem of the Challa bilingual as to differentiating ordinary lips or tongue mistakes, in other words wrong articulation, from interference of L1 on L2.He further expatiates that L1 speakers can correct their mistakes especially if their attention is drawn to such mistakes. In correcting this, they make more mistakes.  In everyday practice, interference is really something that can occur in any instance; it is very likely to occur when a speaker is tensed or is suffering from emotional stress.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the place of English language in Nigeria and how mother tongue has influenced the learning of English. The discussion featured Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and Challa languages. The paper further explored the challenges faced by the learners in the acquisition of proficiency skills at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels. In order to achieve the goal of the paper, English language was discussed as second language in Nigeria, the status of English in Nigeria, as well as the learning situation in Nigeria. Interference has implication on learning of English language among learners because it poses serious difficulty in the understanding of English language since English has a great difference in its phonology, lexis, semantics and structure from that of the mother tongue of the Nigerian learner of English. As a result of these differences, the attitude of the learners towards learning English is affected thereby yielding poor result in the learning of English.

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