

Contrastive Analysis of the English and the Igbo Verbal Systems

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Abstract

Language is properly used when a speaker is able to make accessible to his audience meaningful information on a subject of discourse. To enhance the effectiveness of language, we employ and deploy words and symbols in a manner that is capable of rendering our mental and material constructs intelligible to our audience. In some cases, there are communication breakdown syndromes among language users. Such syndromes are known to occur because of a noted inverse relationship between the intended and the interpreted meanings of words and symbols in use. This experience is very common with second language (L2) learners. With the English language as the medium of communication commonly in use inside (and even outside) the country, it becomes necessary for the serious-minded teacher (who is result-oriented) to devise strategies for discovering and anticipating modes of errors in L2 learning as well as adequate measures for countering such errors.

Introduction

Following Carl (1980), there is always a problem of interference in the effort to learn a second language. This phenomenon has never been ruled out with regard to the learning of English as a second language by Igbo-speaking people. Every language has its peculiar features that make it different from other language(s). These peculiar features of individual languages constitute problems to the learners of the new language, but the problems can be predicted by a comparison of the two languages.

Language analysts, especially the contrastive analysts, are primarily concerned with issues related to bilingualism. They do this for a systematic comparison of specific linguistic features of two or more languages. Going further, they remark that the specific fundamental objectives of contrastive

analysis (CA) stand out traditionally as follows:

- (a) highlighting the differences and similarities between/among languages
- (b) advancing reasons and predicting problems potential in L2 learning
- (c) developing/sourcing materials that facilitate language learning.

The overall reason for all this is not farfetched; L2 learning (it has been noted) is often fraught with interference, which arises from knowledge of the L1. Though a contrastive analysis of language is not a panacea for discerning, defining and resolving linguistic errors of communication problems, it is agreeably one way forward. This is because it has proved valuable in locating areas of inter-language interference (Anasiudu,1983).

Contrastive Analysis (CA) has grown to become a major pre-occupation of linguists in general and applied linguists in particular. Some linguists and applied linguists have such serious concern for CA that some people think that applied linguistics is simply all about CA. CA, however, concerns itself with the comparative study of languages in the hope that the results will prove significant and valuable for language teaching. Lado (1957) provided the stimulus for this activity-CA. If a CA of the target language and the mother-tongue is carried out, the differences between the languages can be discovered, and it becomes possible to predict the difficulties which the learner will have. This, in turn, determines what the learner has to learn and what the teacher has to teach. The results of the CA are, therefore, built into language teaching materials.

The essence of this work, which is based on the contrastive analysis of the English and Igbo verbs, is to predict the likely errors of the Igbo-speaking learners of the English language. In addition to the prediction, it also aims at providing the linguistic input to the English language teaching materials. A significant feature of this study rests in the fact the data from it will provide a stock of information to guide our educational policy makers and language curriculum developers in the important task of bestowing on the society: functional education system. This study which is limited in scope to the Enugu State of Nigeria addresses itself to issues related to the English language and Igbo language verbal systems, with emphasis on the transitive and intransitive verbs.

The following questions have been formulated to guide the study:

1. In what ways are the English and Igbo verbal systems related?
2. In what ways does the knowledge of Igbo language interfere with the process of acquisition of English as a second language?
3. What measures should be adopted in the efforts to counter the difficulties facing the Igbo-speaking learners of the English Language?

According to Lado (1957), proficiency in L2 learning is differently marked in different people because of certain variables. These variables fundamentally rest on the degree of obvious similarities and differences which exist between the mother tongue and the target language. Instances can be seen in these sentences:

She is drinking water.
O na- anu mmiri.

In the examples above, there is a great similarity between the verbal structure of the English and Igbo languages in the sense that the verb features as transitive. In other words, it needs an object to have a complete meaning. However, in a case of some structural difference(s), the L2 learner is likely to make the wrong construction. An instance is seen in these sentences:

Nodu ana
Sit down (Be seated).

Whereas the RP translation is "Be seated", the Igbo-speaking learners of English have transferred their knowledge of the Igbo verbal structure to that of English; hence the translation- "sit down", which is more or less Nigerian English. Lado, therefore, judges the similarities and differences to be much related and quite impacting. For him, the more related the elements of the L1 to the L2, the shorter the period and the faster the progress to be made by the average L2 learner and vice versa.

Fries (1945) had taken a similar position on the issue of influence of L2

learning after acquiring a first language(L1). However, they share a common position but for different reasons. Lado predicates his view on the factor of relatedness in elements of both L1 and L2. Fries, in his own research, predicates his view on what he describes as pre-existing habits in the L2learner, which arise from the acquisition of the L1. To Fries, therefore, the problems which one may encounter in L2 learning do not come as a result of differences between L1 and L2 elements, but as a result of habits the L2 learner formed (consciously or unconsciously) in the process of acquiring the L1.

These sentences offer an instance:

We will do it.
Anyiga-eme ya.

Whereas “We will do it” is the RP translation, the Igbo-speaking learner who has the habit of clumsy structuring would have it as:

Anyi na-aga ime ya (We are going to do it).

Strictly speaking, this translation implies movement to some other location before it can be done, whereas “We will do it” is just affirmative, and does not connote any other action.

Sometimes (If not always), these habits that are picked up along with the L1precipitate what Okoro (1991) describes as unconscious “Blind spots” in the learner. The blind spots, behaving apparently like indestructible crusts, prevent the learner from positively responding to those features of the L2 that seem not to compare with (or non-existent in)his native language.

This view of Okoro has received further support in the study of Anyadiegwu (1992). The latter carried out a contrastive analysis in affixation of English verbs. Her findings compelled a judgment that the L2 learner has an uphill task to contend with. This is because of the language habit he has developed against the background of his native language acquisition. For instance, in the sentence, “She sings”, the strict translation is “O na-agu”(intransitive),but the Igbo-speaking learner would translate it as:

O na-agu egwu (transitive).
She sings song.

Drawing support from Fries, Anyadiegwu asserts that the L2 learner, no doubt (and almost in undiluted form) transfers the forms and meanings of the native language to the foreign language and culture in both production (when speaking) and action (when writing). This goes to confirm Adimuo's (1987) position that a habit once formed in language acquisition stands out as one of the most difficult things to drop. In the same vein, Archibald (1959) opines that interference from the L1 is clearly a major source of difficulty in L2 learning.

Table 1: Mean of Respondents on the Relatedness of the English and Igbo Verbal Systems

	Item Summary	Mean	Decision
1.	Mastery of the L1 verbal system affects learning of L2 verbal system	3.08	Accept
2.	L1 acquisition generally influences L2 learning	3.06	Accept
3.	With features of L1 and L2 related, progress in L2 learning is rapid	3.35	Accept
4.	Students with Igbo Language as L1 encounter more of syntactic problem in studying English	3.13	Accept
	Grand Mean score	3.15	

From the table of data above, the indication is that with every item attaining the minimum acceptance criterion level of 2.50, the respondents seem all agreed that some form of relationship exists between L1 learning and L2 learning. They are particularly saying, in effect, that in one way or the other, L2 learning is influenced by the learner's knowledge of L1.

Egbe (1979) contrasted the sound system and syllable structure of the Received Pronunciation (RP) with those of some Nigerian languages. He

identified areas, especially in the prosodic features, where the local language influences the RP. He, therefore, concludes that Nigerians have their English influenced by their tone. An instance of this, he pointed out is the stress made in almost every syllable in an English word. This conclusion by Egbe (1979) was further echoed by Jibril and Nsofor (1979; 1985), who, in the course of tracing certain phonemic problems to specific local languages also observed that the accents noticeable in the pronunciations of speakers are invariably enough guide to determining their ethnic origins. According to him, there is a sharp divergence in the production of certain consonantal and vocalic phonemes between the southern and the northern Nigerian accents. This is quite true and seems largely to re-stress the findings of Boadi and Cool (1969) finding in his study of the phonological, grammatical and semantic systems of the Efik with those of the English language. Like Adimuo (1987), who contrasted the phonology of Adazi Nnukwu dialect of the Igbo language and that of English, Boadi also found out that mastering the differences and similarities in both L1 and L2 is a key to attaining a high degree of proficiency in the form. To them, one would be said to have truly learned the L2 if one has mastered the differences between the L1 and the L2.

Table 2: Mean of Respondents on the Interference of the Knowledge of Igbo Language with the Learning of English Language

S/NO	Item Summary	X scores	Decision
5.	Transfer of learning is a common phenomenon in language learning	3.16	Accept
6.	Mastery of L1 and L2 naturally checks interference	2.76	Accept
7.	The phenomenon of interference is applicable to every language	3.35	Accept
8.	Interference is an inherent factor in the learner	3.45	Accept

A critical study of Table 2 above reveals that every one of the items met the acceptance criterion mean of 2.50 and above.

However, the highest recommendation went for item 8 with a mean of 3.45 while the lowest recommendation went for item 6 with a mean of 2.76.

One way out of this problem, most agree, is that being convinced of its existence, one should situate the causes in their proper perspectives. In this regard, Morrow in Lado and James identifies the following: socio-cultural factors, maturational processes as well as fatigue, anxiety and memory lapse, among others. These are the limiting factors which cut across language systems. A cursory glance may not be enough to reveal the enormity of problems posed by these in L2 learning. Their influence is rather more obvious and somewhat overwhelming to the anticipating active L2 learner. Even to the L2 learner, who is already sensitised to their existence, surmounting them is not very easy. Most researchers and writers on countering the difficulties seem to agree on a common approach to this matter. Lado (1957) and Adimuo (1987), just to mention a few, have expressed a commonality of views in this regard. To them, language teachers and language curriculum developers (besides language analysts) have a strategic role to play. The result-oriented teacher owes himself the duty to be acquainted with moments, modes and intensities of such interferences before a formal encounter with the students. Armed with such acquaintance, he can, in conjunction with curriculum developers, find out devices/strategies for at least, toning down the effects.

Adimuo (1987) specifically pointed out that the knowledge of these limiting conditions and their ramifications will help the teacher in his practical day-to-day classroom encounters. Knowing the parts which pose difficulty to the students, he can advise himself on how to draw up his scheme of work, select the text-books and efficient teaching aids; finally, he adopts the pre-formal contact sensitisation of the students in this regard. When this is done, all look forward to the issues to be raised, the problems incidental to them and the solutions that would be proffered.

Table 3: Mean of Respondents on Measures to be Adopted in Countering the Difficulties Encountered by the Igbo-Speaking Learners of the English Language

Item	Item Summary	X scores	Decision
9.	Language analysts must do something to check interference	2.77	Accept
10.	Socio-cultural features, maturational processes, fatigue, anxiety and memory lapse enhance interference	3.85	Accept
11.	Language teachers and Language Accept curriculum planners must be involved in solving language learning problems	3.80	
12.	Language teachers and Language curriculum planners should have the language learning problems be well defined	3.55	Accept
13.	Language teachers should identify the aspects of language that pose a problem to students	3.92	Accept
14.	Language teachers should employ the use of the materials and teaching aids which will help eliminate the problems	3.97	Accept

A study of Table 3 above readily reveals that with all the items meeting and exceeding significantly the acceptance criterion mean of 2.50 and above on the four-point rating scale, the respondents are unanimous in their views that certain measures should be considered in any organised, honest effort to counter the difficulties facing the Igbo-speaking learners of the English language. The measures to be considered include, among others: language teachers should strive and identify the aspects of the language that pose problem to students, language teachers and language curriculum

planners/developers must come together in effort to solve the problem; also, language teachers must employ tested and certified materials and methods that will help to ultimately eliminate the problems.

Conclusion

This work has not been presented as an all-encompassing one on the contrastive analysis of the English and Igbo Language verbal systems. It rather serves as an improvement on the few previous works as well as a guide to future ones. In a sense, this work reminds linguists in general and language curriculum planners and developers in particular that much attention is needed in the field of contrastive analysis. It should neither be seen as a work for grammarians nor an endeavor to be embarked upon by applied linguists alone; it rather calls for harmonious joint efforts of all involved in the teaching/learning field.

Based on the findings of the study, language teachers are better guided in their effort to select appropriate instructional materials while preparing their lessons. Furthermore, by diligently carrying out the suggestions, the learning of English language by Igbo speakers becomes enlivened and undertaken with enthusiasm. There will also be improvement of the student's performance in L2 acquisition as a result of the implementation of the suggestions by the teachers.

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