INTERFERENCE OF FIRST LANGUAGE ON IGBOPHONE STUDENTS OF RUSSIAN LANGUAGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LAGOS

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Abstract
The Russian Unit of the Department of European languages, University of Lagos admits student from all parts of Nigeria with different language and linguistic background, particularly, Yoruba, Esako, Hausa, Ibibio and Igbo. It is observed that there has always been a sor of interference of first languages among these students on the study of Russian. The need to ascertain and critically analyse the major areas of these interference necessitated this study, using Igbo speaking students as a case study. A particular case of the Igbophone students is the pronunciation of conjugated verbs of second person singular of Russian language. The difficulty in pronouncing these verbs in the conjugated forms is traced to the existence of Igbo sound [ʃ] –s and [tʃ] –ch, which though sound similar, are different and sound differently.
Some fifteen students of Igbophone at different levels of their studies of Russian language were brought together and their ability to pronounce some conjugated verbs of second person singular was carried out. Each produced different sound which we subjected to different vocalic and consonantal analysis. We intend to share our experience in this presentation.

Key words: Igbophone, Multi-culture, Languages, Igbo and Russian.

Introduction

The issue of language interference is an age long problem in language study and experts in applied linguistics have proposed and adopted theories to it with the aim of identifying the problems inherent in the study. Applied linguistics is the branch of linguistics which concerned with practical applications of language studies, with particular emphasis on the communicative function of language, and including such professional practices as lexicology, terminology, general or technical translation, language feeling (general or specialized language, mother tongue or second language), writing interpretation, and electronic processing of language.

Many prominent language scholars have given different definitions to language interference. Weinreich(1953.p.127) sees language transfer (also known as L1 interference, linguistic interference, and crosslinguistic influence) refers to speakers or writers applying knowledge from one language to another language. Jaris & Pavlenko,

Scott & Aneta (2008,p.89) define language transfer as the transfer of linguistic features between languages in the speech repertoire of a bilingual or multilingual individual, whether from first to second, second to first or many other relationships. Another viewpoint is that of Berthold, Mangubhai and Batoroweics (1997.p.138) which says that interference may be viewed as the transference of elements of one language to another at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical and orthographical. Ellis (1997.p.51) refers to interference as 'transfer', which he says is 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2. He argues that transfer is governed by learner's perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. Berthold et al (1997.p.106) define phonological interference as items including foreign accent such as stress, rhyme, intonation and speech sounds from the first language influencing the second.

The definition of Berthold among others falls within the purview of our research, which is based on the theory of contrastive analysis (the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities).

Language interference is most often discussed as a source of errors known as negative transfer which occurs when speakers and writers transfer items and structures that are not the same in both languages. Brasford, Brown and Cocking (2000.p.217) argues that 'all new learning involves transfer based on previous learning'. This could also explain why initial learning of L1 will impact the learning of L2.

Russian Language at the University of Lagos

The University of Lagos is one of the universities in Nigeria where Russian language is taught as a full discipline. Russian as a sub-discipline was introduced into the Department of European Languages, University of Lagos in 1970, and in 1983, it became a degree awarding course (Ade-Ojo, 2006.p.2). Today, the University has been able to produce a good number of Russian experts at the level of Bachelors degrees who are gainfully employed in different fields of human endeavor. The language is also studied at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the University of Ibadan and at a time, at the University of Ife (presently Obafemi Awolowo University).

Students of Russian language are admitted into the University of Lagos every academic year and in the recent time, the number of candidates seeking admission into the Department is on the increase. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic country with estimated 394 languages (Hansford et al (1976.p.169), and students who attend the University cut across all the ethnic groups and languages. Incidentally, admission requirements for students seeking admission to study Russian in the University of Lagos include knowledge and a pass at credit level or above in any of the Nigerian languages. Although it is not disputable that the three major languages in Nigeria are Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, the actual number of languages spoken in Nigeria has elicited many postulations and individuals claims. Hansford et al. (1976) and Crozier and Blench (1992.p.86) estimated the number of Nigerian languages to be about 394. Emenanjo (2003.p.103) argues that it may never be possible to say with any degree of certainty how many Nigerian languages there are in a complex multilingual, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural polity such as

Nigeria. He goes further to question, "is it the number 250 (Coleman 1958); 150 (Tiffen 1968); 394 (Hansford et al. 1976); 374 (Otite 1990), 400 (Bamgbose 1992); 400-500 (Gital 1998)".

The Problem

After a long period of teaching Russian language in the University of Lagos, the author of this piece observed high level of interference of first language on the students studying the language, especially students with Igbo language as first and background language. A particular case of Igbophone students is the pronunciation of conjugated Russian verbs of second person singular.

Methodology

Fifteen, Igbophone students of the Russian unit of the Department of European Languages at different stages of their studies were subjected to intensive observation. Five students were randomly selected from 200, 300 and 400 levels for the study. A selected Russian verbs were conjugated in the second person singular and the students were repeatedly asked to correctly produce their sounds after severally listening to them using electronic gadgets. The conjugated verbs include: хотеть, писать, говорить, молчать, любить, искать, занимать, сказать, and платить.

Verbs	2nd Person Singular
Хотеть (to want)	Хочешь
Писать (to write)	Пишешь
Говорить (to speak)	Говоришь
Молчать (to keep silent)	Молчишь
Любить (to love)	Любишь
Искать (to look for)	Ищешь
Занимать (to engage in)	Занимаешь
Сказать (to say)	Скажешь
Платить (to pay)	Платишь
Читать (to read)	Читаешь

Apart from oral examination, questionnaires tagged "Areas of Interference of Igbophone in Effectively Pronouncing Conjugated Russian Verbs in their Second Person Singular" were administered on the fifteen students. The questionnaires were attempt to establish the existence of interference and ascertain the point at which the two sounds of –s and –ch in Igbo language confuse and interfere in correctly pronouncing the conjugated verbs. They also sort the views of the students on the possibility of addressing the problem through intensive phonetic classes and the use of audio – visual aids in laboratories.

Result

On practical examination, it was observed that all the fifteen students had various degree of interference in pronouncing the conjugated verbs. The level of interference, however,

varied with the leaning stage of the students. It was observed that interference was higher with 200 and 300 level students while the 400 level students had less difficulty. Among the 400 level students also, there was significant difference in their level of difficulties. Those that had their immersion programme in Russia had less difficulties than their colleagues who did not have the opportunity to travel to Russia for the programme. Further efforts to ascertain the reason for the difference showed that those that travelled to Russia were thoroughly drilled, using audio-visual equipment in well equipped and functional laboratories. It was also found out that they had more hours of phonetics in Russia than in Nigeria.

In response to the questionnaire, 86% of them admitted that interference of Igbophone exists and it constitutes a major obstacle in pronouncing the selected conjugated Russian verbs, especially at the early stage of their studies. 14% of them could not establish a link between problem of Igbophone in the difficulty of pronouncing the verbs correctly. On the question of whether there is any impact on the usage of audio-visual aids on the problem, 60% of them were emphatic on the affirmative while 40% believed that the interference would naturally disappears as the study progresses. All of the fifteen students however agreed that the use of audio-visual teaching aids in sacrosanct in teaching and learning the language.

The difficulty in pronouncing these verbs in their conjugated from is traced to the existence of Igbo sound -s [ʃ] and -ch [tʃ] which though almost sound similar are actually different and sound differently. And words in Igbo that have the two sounds either at the beginning of the word or at the end are abound and frequently used in the language. Example of such words are:

Chineke   -   God
cheta   -   remember
site   -   from
sorom   -   follow me
sie   -   cook
saa   -   wash
chita   -   bring
oche   -   chair
sheti   -   shirt
cho   -   be silent

Recommendation
The study agrees that the use of teaching aids especially the audio-visual is essential in controlling interference of Igbophone in mastering pronunciation of some conjugated Russian verb. In view of this, we strongly recommend that more phonetics classes be organized for all the Russian students and effective use of the language laboratory be maintained. Where the laboratory is not functional, efforts should also be made to fix it.

Periodic checks should also be done to check the progress of the students in curbing interference.

 We also recommend that the teaching of phonetics to students starts as soon as they start the course in the first year. They also should be exposed to the use of audio-visual aids at that early stage. Students should be encouraged to be speaking the language very often among themselves and with their lecturers. This helps in establishing mistakes and effecting corrections.

Conclusion

It is unequivocally established that there is interference of Igbo in correct pronunciation of some Russian verbs in their conjugated second person singular in particular. It is also possible that interference of other first languages exists in the study of Russian language. Our attention however, was focused on Igbo language and Russian. The uniqueness of the study is that it was able to establish a problem and proffered possible solution. In as much as 100% of the students did not believe that the problem of the study could be checked only by intensive drilling using audio – visual aids in good laboratories, they agreed that it is inevitable to use teaching aids in mastering correct pronunciation of the conjugated verbs.

The innovation of this study is that it has opened the way for further research into other areas of interference in the study of Russian language using any of the Nigerian languages as a case study.

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