

Teaching speaking skills among second language learners

By

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Some learning difficulties in the spoken English of Nigerian students

Teaching and learning a foreign language like English mostly involves teaching and learning the major- language skills like speaking, writing, reading and listening. It is the opinion of linguists, however, that speech is the primary substance of all human languages. In other words, the spoken form of any human language is basic, while the written form is derived from the spoken form. For example, the fact that many African languages are yet to be written does not in any way stop them from performing their basic communicative functions in their various speech communities.

Effective communication, therefore, depends on one's ability to express oneself in speech clearly, accurately and fluently. Although thoughts could be expressed in writing, it is only through speech that one's thoughts would be put across accurately and effectively to one's audience without any form of ambiguity. This is because in some cases, it might be difficult for a reader to guess and interpret exactly what the writer has in mind. Therefore, a good spoken form of any language is a virtue in communication. On this note, Abbot (1981:87) remarks that

... Just as the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so the proof of language-learning lies in the learner's ability to perform, communicate in the foreign language.

In other words, the level of actual performance of an English language learner,

most especially in the spoken form, tells much about his/her ability in the use of English in various sociolinguistic contexts, such as debates, symposia, seminars, meetings, lectures, tutorials, conferences, etc. The type of pronunciation, enunciation, stress placement, intonation and a host of other idiosyncratic features of a speech will determine the level of competence of the speaker in the use of English.

In line with the new Nigerian Policy on Education, the introduction of spoken English into the Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSSC) syllabus by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), for the assessment of the overall performance of students in English language, makes it incumbent on teachers of English as a foreign language to focus attention on the

learning problems of their students.

Furthermore, in order to avoid deviation from the accepted standard form of English, in both teaching and learning, Tiffen (1969:8) states that the fact that English is needed for communication at both national and international levels has important implications for teaching. If the speaker is to understand and be understood, he must keep within the generally accepted norms of English, from the point of view of pronunciation, and grammatical variations must be ruled out. Even if we attempted to do so, we should not succeed.

The problems of many Nigerian students in spoken English could be traced to many different sources, such as personal and physical impediment of speech, interlingual and intralingual

sources, and a host of other environmental problems.

Common sources of difficulties in oral English

A contrastive analysis of the mother tongue of the learners and the target language (English) will enable the teacher and learners alike to describe and provide possible solutions to the problems of the learners in spoken English.

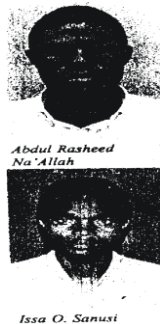
The effect of mother tongue

We must emphasise that speaking skill is better taught in the appropriate social contexts. In other words, our teaching methods must be pragmatic. Since the students are learning in a second language situation, we cannot play down the role of the mother tongue in the articulation of English sounds. It is because of this fact that a substantial proportion of our lessons on oral English must be devoted to the correct pronunciation of English sounds, words and sentences.

Considering the effect of mother tongue on the spoken English of many Nigerians learning English as a second language, Bamgbose (1971:42) observes that

The greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by

Nigerians is the sound systems of the vernacular languages. Most of the phonetic characteristics in the English of Nigerians can, of course, be traced to the transfer of



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Features from their first language. Many people claim that (they can tell what part of the country a Nigerian belongs to from the way he speaks English.

Phonological contrasts between the types of pho-

nemes in the target language (English) and those of the mother tongue of the learner always lead to phonological interlingual errors in performance. For example, a contrastive analysis of the English consonant and vowel charts with those of Yoruba reveals a lot of learning problems for Yoruba native speakers learning English as a second language. Similar phonological problems are faced by many native speakers of other Nigerian languages.

Other sources of difficulties

We shall also look at stress, rhythm, and intonation in English, as well as speakers' comportment, and some areas where the target language (English) itself constitutes a learning problem, that is, an intralingua Problem. We shall also look at different speaking situations where learners could be encouraged to acquire proper speaking habits, we shall also emphasise teaching delivery and presentation, clarity, voice modulation, self-confidence, explicitness and correct contextual application.

We shall, therefore, adopt a task-based approach, so that like Rosen and Rosen ('see Anderson *et al.* (1984:64)), we shall be able "to exert the greatest pressure on them to use their latent

resources, to provide those experiences which urge them towards the widest range of language. We share the belief that the task-based approach will, as Anderson *et al.* (1984:49) also emphasise, allow the teacher to offer to learners more opportunities to attempt similar tasks on different detailed contents, in this case, the students will be able to put what (they have learnt at the first attempt into practice.

Therefore, we suggest some tasks which may be adopted by English-speaking skills teachers. Each of these tasks depends on a particular speaking skill. Teachers are free to improve on our suggestions for their own application.

Practical session

The phoneme

The phoneme is the minimal unit of sound in a given language. Consonants and vowels constitute the major speech sounds of any language. Each language has its own peculiar inventory of sounds; certain sounds or phonemes, however, are found universally in all human languages, while others are restricted to some languages.

Task 1

Topic: articulating English vowels.

Aim: it is intended that students acquire the correct articulation of English vowels and recognise areas of similarity and differences between the English vowels and the vowels available in their indigenous languages.

Teaching aids: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba vowel charts, tape-recorded vowel sounds.

Presentation: the teacher pronounces each English vowel and invites the learners to imitate. The learners are later made to identify areas of similarity and differences between the English vowels and those of their mother tongues (Yoruba, etc). They may also listen to tape-recorded English vowel sounds (eg. Gimson).

Conclusion: the task may be repeated.

Task 2

Topic: articulating English consonants.

Aim: to acquire the correct pronunciation of English consonants and to be able to recognise areas of similarity and differences between English consonants and Yoruba consonants.

Teaching aids: English and Yoruba consonant charts, tape-recorded consonant sounds, etc.

Presentation: the teacher pronounces each English consonant and invites the learners to imitate. The

learners are later made to identify areas of similarity and differences between English consonants and those of Yoruba. Recorded English consonant sounds could also be used.

Conclusion; the task may be repeated.

Stress placement

Task 3

Topic: English; a stress-timed language.

Aim: it is intended that learners understand the importance of stress and rhythm in English. They will be made to understand that just as the Yoruba language would be meaningless without tone, so English is meaningless without stress. Therefore, we shall identify areas of common problems in stress placement, i.e. words and sentences.

Teaching aids: tapes containing English speech where correct stress (RP) excellently observed; charts containing words and sentences with appropriate stress placement

Presentation: many English words, the meaning of which is affected by change in stress placement, will be presented. For example, impress (verb), 'impress (noun); import (verb), 'import (noun); com'fort (verb), 'comfort (noun); export (verb), 'export (noun).

Conclusion: the task may be repeated. A game will be introduced whereby each student will be asked to speak while others listen and take note of misplaced stresses. The best students will be announced and rewarded. This may also be on a group basis.

Description

Task 4

Topic: a diagram/drawing.

Aim: the intention here is to assist the learners in giving clear and painstakingly thorough descriptions of objects, thus acquiring the necessary information-transferring skills.

Teaching aids: drawings of various objects.

Presentation: the teacher will divide the children into groups and distribute drawings among them, perhaps three drawings per group. A child from each group will come forward and instruct the other members of the group as to how to draw the object. Different students come forward

for different drawings. One student may give instructions to the whole class. The teacher will then determine what information has been omitted. The students will later assess themselves.

Conclusion: the task may be repeated.

3.4 Story-telling

Task 5

Topic: telling a story.

Aim: to expose students to various narrative skills, such as clarity, explicitness, demonstration, voice modulation and vivid presentation of ideas.

Teaching aids: costumes of various kinds.

Presentation: the various children-narrators assume the role of father, mother, village elder, etc and narrate stories. They must change their voices to suit the role being played in the narrative.

Conclusion: the children will appraise the narrative and identify specific features of the presentation.

Conclusion

It is our conviction that the task-based approach, which we have suggested in this paper, will be adopted by teachers of English as a second language for the teaching of English-speaking skills. It is very appropriate in a second language situation like ours.

We believe that is not only the correct articulation of English sounds, words and sentences that is important, but also how these words and sentences are used effectively in day-to-day social contexts. Other tasks such as arguing a point (debate), giving an eye-witness account, describing

how a piece of equipment works (see Anderson *et al* (1984:53) should be introduced from time to time, so as to teach speaking skills pragmatically. The teacher should always consider the speakers' clarity, comportment, self-confidence, pronunciation and explicitness. Every mistake should be pointed out to the speakers and to the other class members after each performance. This is one of the qualities of the task-based approach, which we must always explore, so as to help learners to improve with every attempt.

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Teaching aids required

1. English and Yoruba consonant charts.
2. English and Yoruba vowel charts.
3. Charts containing words, with stress placements well identified or marked.
4. Costumes like iro and Buba, Aghada, etc.

Romanian course

As a result of a seminar at the University of Bucharest on the teaching of 'terminology, organised by Infotem, Vienna, in June, it is intended to set up a terminology course for students of translation and interpreting at the Institute for Translation and Interpreting at the University.

LISA interchange format

The Localisation industry Standards Association (LISA) has announced its own terminology interchange format, which will allow companies-to exchange terminology databases between various hardware and software platforms.

LISA, which brings together some of the leading information technology companies with bases in Europe and some of their translation suppliers, were advised by Professor Alan Melby, of Brigham Young University, Utah, USA, a pioneer of interchange Formats, in their new venture. The LISA format is compatible with existing standards such as SGML, ISO 6397i 139, and the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI).

"Companies are beginning to realise how strategically important multilingual documentation and product localisation is becoming", said LISA director Michael Anobile, in describing the new format. "Terminology is one of the major issues in product documentation. LISA companies understand that there will be a replication of costs and a loss of time if they don't work together to define standard terminology bases in whatever field they or their customers are active".

The companies making up the LISA management board are Apple, Alpnet, Berlitz, DEC, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, ICL, INK, Lotus, Mendez, Microsoft, NCR, Oracle, Rank Xerox, Sequent and Softrans.

Their representatives have been meeting regularly since November 1990 to discuss issues of translation, localisation and multiple language document production. Because of growing interest in their activities, LISA is to introduce a category of associate membership open to ;)H interested parties. The cost is \$800 a year.

LISA

Further information:

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