CHALLENGES AND TECHNIQUES IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION IN JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The teaching of pronunciation in Junior Secondary School in Nigeria has not received the attention it deserves. This is due to a number of factors ranging from inexperienced teachers to adoption of inappropriate techniques as well as unavailability of education media such as audio-visual materials. This situation is compounded by the simultaneous co-existence of native-speaker and non-native speaker varieties of English which has made the choice of a model to teach a difficulty. However, in the context of English as an international language (EIL), the teacher has to tackle the challenge of paying attention to those features that will enable the learners to achieve both national acceptability and international intelligibility to enable them participate effectively in wider communication. To achieve this objective, the teacher needs to adopt certain techniques and approaches. This paper discusses the challenges facing the teaching of English pronunciation and the techniques to be adopted for the amelioration of the situation at the Junior secondary school level in Nigeria.

Keywords: Pronunciation, Junior Secondary School, teaching of English

INTRODUCTION

Teaching is an educational behaviour which varies from individual behaviour in terms of experiences and levels of education. It is a pedagogical process which involves bringing desirable changes in an individual. A teacher not only imparts knowledge but also inculcates habits, instructs in skills and competences, and develops capacities or awakens interest in the learners. Seen from this perspective, the teacher of English language particularly in a second language (L2) situation is faced with the task of imparting a new set of linguistic habits into the speakers who already have acquired a set of such habits in their mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1). When one is born, one naturally acquires the language of one's environment as one's MT or L1. So, the organs of speech are conditioned for the pronunciation of sounds of that language (Adeyanju & Egwuogu 2003, p.8). Therefore for him to speak a new language, he must learn that language in, most often, a formal setting. That becomes his L2. For him to acquire proficiency in the L2 and be able to communicate in it effectively, he must be conversant with all the aspects of the language. That implies that he must be taught both the written and the spoken forms of the language.

In Nigeria, English is an L2. Proficiency in it is acquired through formal education in which the learners are supposed to be taught all the aspects in equal status but in the teaching of English in Junior Secondary Schools in Nigeria, the practice is to pay more attention to the written aspect at the expense of the spoken aspect. English pronunciation teaching has not always been popular with English language teachers particularly at the lower level of education. If the essence of language teaching is to achieve effective communication nationally and internationally, then English language teaching in Nigeria should be taken holistically. This means the teaching of all the basic language skills of which pronunciation is one. The major function of language is communication. Human beings communicate

their thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideas etc by means of language either in writing or speech. Speech consists of sounds produced in systematically structured strings (Egwuogu, 2008, p.8). Every language has its own sound system but many share similarities with other languages. In the teaching of English as an L2, the differences and similarities between the sound systems of English and that of MT should be pointed out. For example, English has twenty vowel sounds which comprise twelve pure vowels and eight diphthongs whereas Nigerian languages have between five and ten vowels without diphthongs. There is a difference between the English sounds /æ/ or / a: /, /3:/, and /ɔ:/ and the Nigerian language sounds /a/, /e/ and /ɔ/ respectively. Speakers of English in Nigeria substitute the English sounds for the indigenous languages sounds. This often impedes intelligibility.

Ogunsiji (2004, p.21) has opined that language teaching is not a fragmentary process. The four basic language skills must be taught in any language education. The four basic language skills are

listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and speaking are the aural- oral aspect while reading and writing are the written aspect. Listening and speaking skills are primary and natural thus in an L1 situation, every normal child acquires them naturally without passing through formal education. But, in an L2 situation, he has to be taught formally to learn the rules guiding usages in that language before he can speak it effectively. Phonologically, he has to learn the structure of the sounds, how they are combined, articulated and produced.

Speaking is a way of encoding information orally before transmitting such information to the listener.(Akinjobi, 2004, p.59). Before a listener can receive such information and interpret it meaningfully, he must also be knowledgeable in the sounds of the language in which the information is coded. For meaningful communication therefore, both the speaker (encoder) and the listener (decoder) or the sender and receiver of the message must share the knowledge of the pronunciation of sounds, formation of words, construction of sentences as well as the interpretation of meaning in that language. This is the reason it is advocated that in ESL situation, the teacher should primarily pay particular attention to teaching the core language features that will enhance national acceptability and international intelligibility such that the learners will understand and be understood by even the native speakers of the target language (TL). This entails making decision on what areas of pronunciation to pay attention to in the teaching-learning event. In teaching pronunciation therefore, the individual sound segments, the prosodic features as well as emergent issues in pronunciation in relation to EIL should be taught.

As the world is significantly changing in all spheres- political, economic, socio-cultural, international relations etc (Jenkins, 2000), English as an international language (EIL) is cutting across almost every country of the world either as inner circle users, outer circle users or expanding circle users, (Kachru). It has become the language of wider communication. The implication of this is the emergence and development of non-speaker varieties which have in turn brought new challenges that necessitate a refocusing of the teaching of English pronunciation to include those features that distinguish native-speaker(ns) from non- native speaker (nns) varieties.

Nigeria is a multilingual country with over 450 indigenous languages (Jowitt, 1990). These languages serve as L1 to their speakers who must have internalized the sounds and how they are produced. So their organs of speech have been conditioned for the production of the sounds of these languages whose phonological systems differ from that of any other language that may serve as an L2 to them. Therefore, learning an L2 will entail acquiring a new set of linguistic habits. Though English shares some similarities in some respects with some Nigerian languages, its phonological system differs quite considerably from those of the indigenous Nigerian languages. With this situation, speaking English

intelligibly and proficiently becomes a problem as there is the tendency to transfer the sounds of MT into English even when they are dissimilar. Corroborating this, Omoniyi (2009, p.107) writes:

> *"it is impracticable that RP 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 learnt 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".*

Therefore, a student who aspires to speak English proficiently at an acceptable and intelligible level must be taught how to pronounce the sounds accurately. This is the task facing the teacher of English. But how many of them can really pronounce the English sounds well enough to the level of international intelligibility since they themselves were not introduced to the sounds of English enough before fossilisation of wrong pronunciations?

Bright & McGregor (1982) have pointed out that the primary level of education is the best level in which speech can be taught. This is because the pupils have not really formed their language habits completely and can still accommodate the manipulation of their organs of speech for the production of sounds in L2 situation. However, the teaching of pronunciation even at this level is not effective.

Challenges Facing the Teaching of Pronunciation in Nigerian Junior Secondary School (JSS)

With the co-existence of national varieties of English, Cruttenden (2001) as reported in Moedjito (2008:131) has noted that a major challenge facing the teacher of English pronunciation is the difficulty of deciding which variety to teach and the particular areas to pay more attention to. He suggested that attention should be paid to consonant inventory with the provisos such as substitution of /ɵ / and /ð/and rhotic 'r', additional phonetic information as in aspiration of word-initial voiceless stops /p/, /t/, /k/, shortening of vowel sounds before fortis consonants and lengthening of same before lenis consonants, consonant clusters, placement of stress and intonation patterns. These are the major areas in which errors of pronunciation impede intelligibility. The problems confronting the teaching of pronunciation include lack of trained personnel, choice of an acceptable model, lack of modern educational media such as digital language laboratories and audio-visual materials, inadequate personnel to man the few available ones, lack of constant electricity supply, lack of standard textbooks on oral English, inadequate time allocation to the teaching of pronunciation, inability to distinguish between the sounds of the national varieties of English in Nigeria, lack of internet facilities in schools, ICT illiteracy and so on.

Most teachers of English at the JSS level are not knowledgeable in English pronunciation. They can neither identify the sounds nor pronounce them correctly. Their pronunciation which is heavily influenced by their MTs has been fossilized. They also lack competence in the intonation and stress patterns of English which they substitute with the tonal feature of indigenous languages.

English as an international language has many varieties, both native-speaker and non-native-speaker varieties. Native-speaker varieties include British English, American English, Canadian English etc, while non-native-speaker varieties include Indian English, Singaporean English, and Nigerian English etc. All these serve as national varieties and within each national variety, there are also sub varieties among which is a standard variety. For example, by geographical classification, Nigerian English has Yoruba English, Igbo English (Engligbo), Hausa English as varieties. It also has sub-varieties i – iv, according to Banjo's (1996) classification by linguistic parameter which centres on closeness of appropriation to MT. The teacher is therefore faced with the problem of which model of pronunciation

to teach. Is it British English (BrE) Received pronunciation (RP), American English (AmE) pronunciation, Nigerian English (NE) pronunciation or all? Because of the inability of the teachers to identify and distinguish these varieties and their differences, they teach the symbols of one variety but pronounce a different variety. Most English teachers who teach BrE sounds pronounce with Nigerian MT accent and this is what the learners imitate. Unfortunately, Nigerian accent is not quite intelligible internationally. For example, 'I want to live and I want to leave will sound alike in Nigerian English. There is the need to strike a balance in the choice of a model to teach so in so much as it is not possible for an L2 learner to acquire native-like competence, he should have inculcated in him, a phonological proficiency that will enable him to achieve national acceptability and international intelligibility.

Again, most schools do not have language laboratories and audio-visual materials such as televisions, radios, tape recorders, CDs, earphones, microphones, cubicle mirror etc which should serve as part of the instructional materials to concretize learning; and the few that are available even at the tertiary level where the teachers are trained are either sub-standard or obsolete and there are no trained technicians to properly operate and maintain them. It is the responsibility of the government and the authorities of the school to ensure that the facilities are provided and properly managed for maximum utilisation. There is also the need to have separate pronunciation texts as we have on grammar, essay writing and other aspects of English rather than having pronunciation as a negligible part of an English textbook.. Pronunciation texts give references and guides for accuracy. Authors of English textbooks have long neglected the writing and production of texts on pronunciation because attention is not paid to this important aspect in the teaching and learning of English in the country. Though this is a technical aspect which most teachers try to avoid, those who can write texts in this area feel their efforts will not be adequately rewarded.

Furthermore, most schools do not have internet facilities to aid the teaching of pronunciation. With internet facility, the teacher can easily log on to a pronouncing dictionary online to listen to the accurate pronunciation of a particular word or the appropriate reading of expressions. This facility can also be accessed through handsets that have the facility. Unfortunately, most teachers of English pronunciation are not ICT literate and adequate time is not allocated to the teaching of pronunciation. In addition, teachers are impatient to drill the learners adequately on each sound especially those that are not available in the local languages. What then are the approaches to be adopted for the effective teaching of pronunciation in JSS.

Techniques for Effective Teaching of Pronunciation in JSS Classes

According to Moedjito (2008, p.130), 'it is accepted as axiomatic by language teachers that good pronunciation is a necessity for the mastery of a language'. The first thing the teacher needs to do to improve the teaching of pronunciation is to identify the objectives of his teaching. These include:

accurate pronunciation, correct intonation, good phrasing and fluency. intelligible communication of meaning, communicative competence. According to Ogunsiji (2004, p.26), in teaching pronunciation, the learners 'should be made familiar with the sound patterns of the language in order to reduce the occurrences of MT interference'. The emphasis should be on maintenance of proper pronunciation of English sounds by the learner so as to be able to communicate meaning intelligibly. For example, there is a difference in the pronunciation of /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ as in 'watch' and 'wash'. But there is no difference in the pronunciation of the sounds by some Nigerians such that 'watching television' and 'washing television' sound alike. The teacher should identify the errors made by the learners such as wrong vowel substitution, non differentiation of length, h-dropping, yod-dropping, devoicing fricatives, absence or wrong placement of stress etc. This entails distinguishing between mother tongue and L2 sounds by identifying their similarities and differences in all phonological respects. In other words,

both segmental and supra-segmental phonology should be emphasized. It should be noted that while most Nigerian and indeed African languages are tonal, English is stress-timed. Both stress and intonation affect meaning and provide the melody of English speech. Learners should be made aware of all these so as to imbibe in them the proper speech habits. This calls for the adoption of different techniques. Depending on the number of learners in class, the techniques can be combined or used in isolation. These techniques some of which have been discussed by Egwuogu (2004) include oral drills and repetitions, modelling, pronunciation games, debates and impromptu speeches, role-playing /dramatization, simulation, panel discussions, use of actual and concrete objects, recitation and story-telling, excursions, questioning and turn-taking, reading aloud, matching sounds to form words and identifying the missing sounds, free or guided conversation, and group activity.

Oral Drills can be done in different ways. For example, minimal pairs of words that contrast in only one segment of sound can be used to drill the learners. In this case, the teacher pronounces the sounds and describes briefly how to produce them. He then writes words containing the sounds and pronounces them for the learners to repeat after him. It is very important that the teacher pronounces correctly because whatever he says is what the learners will imitate. After all, it is said that the secret of language learning is imitation. The teacher can also make the learners to carry out the drills boys versus girls, row by row, half-class versus half-class, in groups of twos, fours etc. A good language laboratory should have the facility to select the desired group at the control unit without disturbing the other students. The control unit should also have the facility for drilling individual students who need special attention one on one. The drills should cover both vowels and consonants and should concentrate more on those sounds that seem difficult. Oral drills can also be done using nursery rhymes, individual sentences, jingles and tongue twisters e.g.

- She had heard the news.

- It hurt her heart.

- Mother Mary murdered mad mourners in the mud.

- He shut the hut and shot the short man

Modelling is related to oral drill because it involves the imitation of good models . It is a method that makes teaching to go through demonstrated examples. The model is required to be well grounded in what he is modelling. The class pays attention and imitates her. Modelling can be done live using real people or with a recorded material or better still, an audio-visual material containing graphic presentations.

Simulation is a way of providing the learners the opportunity to participate in significant aspects of social and economic life through indoor class games patterned after real life situations. It provides practice in group co-operation and fosters interpersonal relationships.

In **panel discussion**, learners are chosen to feature in a programme as discussants. The topic for discussion should be interesting and within the level of experience of the learners. Topics like 'the duties of children in the family, the duties of fathers or mothers at home, why children should go to school, my favourite television programme etc are suitable at the JSS level. Apart from improving their speech, this method also enables them to develop their sense of reasoning and thinking faculty.

Use of real objects e.g.dress, book, school bag etc provides real experiences that are concrete for the learners to talk about. The teacher should make the materials available and provide the cue. He then allows the learners to speak about the objects. He jots down wrong pronunciations, wrong stress,

intonation, phrasing etc and corrects them later. Some teachers use this technique wrongly by interrupting the learners when they are speaking. This disturbs concentration and flow of speech.

In the **use of Games, t**he learners get involved in games that involve competition and observance of rules. The game must have the objective of improving reading and pronunciation. e.g. the teacher may ask the learners to write a word and identify the component sounds. He may also remove a sound segment and ask them to replace it. Again some sounds can be written for them to match into words. Apart from enhancing pronunciation, this method also provides opportunity for vocabulary development. Added to this is the game in which a learner gives a sound based on the state of the glottis or word containing a particular sound and another provides its equivalent e.g /ʃ/ or sheep and another gives /tʃ/ or cheap.

Debates and impromptu speeches function as a very good method of teaching pronunciation in schools. This method helps learners to acquire speed and fluency as well as confidence in speech. The teacher provides topics or asks learners to suggest topics of interest to them e.g. boys are more intelligent than girls, mothers are better than fathers etc. They debate on the topics while the teacher listens and makes corrections of all aspects. In the same way, for impromptu speeches, topics that are within the experiences of the learners are written and rolled into balls; they pick and speak. Again, the teacher listens and notes mistakes which he corrects afterwards. He may use the opportunity to drill the whole class on the identified sound.

Recitation and story-telling require that the teacher gives written passages to learners to memorize and recite in class. Gradually and unconsciously, they internalize the structures both phonological and grammatical. This method also helps them to achieve fluency. In story-telling, the teacher can call on any member of the class to tell any interesting story he knows or gives a topic of the story e.g. how I spent the last Christmas holiday, my birthday party etc.

Learners can also go on excursion to visit places of interest and be made to talk about their observations about the place. This gives them the opportunity for free expression. The places may include television and radio houses, manufacturing companies specially those that produce items of interest to the learners.

In addition to this, the teacher can adopt the questioning and turn-taking technique in which he can ask the learners questions that demand sentence- type answers. The learner will be forced to express himself in his own words. All the learners may also be required to take turns in answering the question. This ensures that everybody participates in the exercise .Again this approach gives them the opportunity to express themselves freely. However, they may be guided by the teacher who directs the flow of the answer which may of course be conversational.

Reading aloud is a technique used at the primary level of education but since observations have shown that most students at the JSS level especially at the rural areas cannot read, this method is still relevant to them**.** Short passages are given to the students to read aloud in class. This helps them to acquire the habit of correct pronunciation, phrasing, accurate stress and intonation pattern. However it has been criticised as ineffective due to improper use by teachers. According to Bright & McGregor (1982) reading aloud in which the teacher listens and corrects mistakes by interrupting intermittently has among others the disadvantage of embarrassing the student and disrupting fluency. It is the submission of this paper that this method can be effectively used if the teacher allows the learner to complete the reading task before making his corrections which he must have jotted down while the reading is going on .

Finally, group activity such as projects can be given to the learners to execute. They perform this task together amidst talking and charting. The project could be on moulding with mud, making toys or objects from papers and scraps. After the exercise, a learner may be called upon to present what they have done to the class. Again, this promotes pronunciation, fluency, phrasing and confidence. As communicative competence is the goal of language teaching, the teacher can take the learners around the school compound to make their observations and express their views.

CONCLUSION

The teaching of English pronunciation has not been given the proper attention it deserves. If the essence of language teaching is the acquisition of communicative competence, both the oral and written forms of the TL should be emphasized. Learners should be taught to pronounce the sounds accurately and to speak with the correct accent to, at least, meet the intelligibility of English as an international language.

The teaching of English pronunciation is faced with a lot of challenges ranging from inadequate knowledge of the varieties of English in the country to the confusion of which model to teach. Again most teachers of pronunciation are not computer literate and cannot make use of internet facilities. This is in addition to unavailability of education media and pronunciation textbooks among others. Nevertheless, the teacher can adopt some innovative approaches as discussed in this paper.   To make this possible, teachers of ESL should be trained to be knowledgeable not only in the pronunciation of the individual sounds of the language but also in the stress and intonation patterns. They are expected to adopt the techniques of teaching either individually or in combined form as most of them are learner- centred. However, there is need to discover the methods that appeal to individual learners and to concentrate on that particular method for the learners. Teachers should also improve themselves through conferences and workshops and in teaching; they should pay more attention to areas of difficulty of learners.

The teaching of pronunciation at the JSS level should be intense since the learners at this level can still easily accommodate a different set of linguistic habits outside their MT without many risks of negative transfers. This is so because whatever wrong habits they formed in primary school is not yet fossilised.

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