

Nigerian Languages as Sources of Linguistic Interference to the Teaching and Learning of French Language in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: A Bane for Socio-Economic Empowerment.

Oko, F.I.^{1*}, Ogbonnaya, P.O² and Nkama, A.E.³

^{1*}Department of Languages, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Ebonyi State.

²Department of Languages, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Ebonyi State.

³Department of Languages, Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Ebonyi State.

Abstract

In this paper, we have drawn the attention of French language teachers and learners in Nigerian tertiary institutions to the fact that the learning of French by students in our tertiary institutions can be interfered with other languages acquired by the learners beside their mother-tongue and English language. Using the descriptive and error analysis theory, the paper presented a brief explanation of the notion of linguistic interference. It also presented a few representative cases of interference with French, and we have attempted to show that ignoring such linguistic interference is bound to impede effective teaching and learning of French. This paper has also shown that most students in our tertiary institutions speak other Nigerian languages in addition to their mother-tongue, and that French is thus susceptible to interference from those languages. In order to solve the problems posed by these linguistic interferences, we have suggested in this paper that teachers/lecturers of French language should painstakingly find out the languages spoken by their students, analyze the structure of such languages and thus ensure a more meaningful learning of French in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

Keywords: Linguistic Interference, Mother-Tongue, French Language, Target Language

Date of Submission: 18-01-2023

Date of Acceptance: 03-02-2023

I. Introduction

The Notion of Linguistic Interference

The notion of linguistic interference (L.I) is now a classic among second and foreign language learners and teachers because no foreign language learner enters the language classroom one day and come out the next day as a near-native speaker. There is a painstaking developmental process which normally covers a long period of time. During this process, the learner may write or speak the language in a manner that is considered 'unacceptable' by the native speakers of the language. As time goes on, and as the learner gradually gain mastering of the foreign language, these errors gradually reduce until the learner acquires near-native speaker perfection (Adewole and Makinde, 2017:1). The errors identified from when the learner start learning the foreign language till when he gets proficiency can be termed linguistic interference. Wilkins (1972) and Okafor (1982) explained that linguistic interference is the interference of present learning by past learning. It is a phenomenon of transfer. In the specific situation of learning of a foreign language, transfer occurs when the learner or user of a new language (designated as "target language"-T.L) rightly or wrongly establishes an analogy between an aspect of the target language and an aspect of an earlier acquired language (known as the "source language"). The learner thus sees the target language and source language elements as being structurally similar and proceeds to produce or receive the target language element in the same manner as he does the source language element, thereby transferring his source language patterns to his practice of the target language.

When there are similarities between the target language and the source language elements, making the analogy justify, it will tend to enhance or facilitate the correct production or reception of the target language element. This aspect is referred to as "positive transfer" as it enhances the learning or practice of new languages. But when the target language and source language elements are structurally dissimilar, making the analogy erroneous and unjustified, it will result in a faulty production or reception of the target language element, and thus may impede or interfere with the learning or correct practice of the target language. This is "negative transfer", which is also known as "interference" (Edung, 1992; Adewole and Makinde, 2017).

Therefore, linguistic interference refers to the production or reception of an element in a new language one is learning, wrongfully using the structural model of an element in a language one has already acquired or learnt (Edung, 1992). In other words, the structure of the source language is erroneously used in the learning or practice of the target language. It must be noted that linguistic interference is one of the consequences of bilingualism or contact with several languages. W.F.Mackey (1962) defines linguistic interference as transfer of the elements of a language when someone's speaks or writes another language. This transfer can occur in all the aspect of the language such as phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, syntax and semantic. Furthermore, (Adewole and Makinde, 2017), corroborated this assertion when he avers that:

Such inter-lingual transfer is demonstrated in the types of errors committed by learner's at either a phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexical or semantic level with the learner transferring such elements from the source language into the target language (Adewole and Makinde, 2017:8).

Weinreich in his detailed description of linguistic interference observed that:

The term interference implies the re-arrangement of patterns that results from the introduction of elements into the more highly structured domains of language, such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax and some areas of the vocabulary (Weinreich, 1966:1).

This transfer of elements from the source language to the target language occurs among the learners of French language in Nigeria's higher institutions because the learner has not yet master the target language. The linguistic interference can be manifested in the accent or pronunciation of words in the target language, in the translation etc. Einnar Haugen rightly posits that:

In practice, interference takes many forms described in literature as "foreign accent", "language misture", unidiomatic expressions", "loanwords", "semantic borrowing", and the like (Haugen, 1956:12).

II. Mother-Tongue and Other Nigerian Languages as Sources of Linguistic Interference

It has been generally established that Nigeria is a splurlingual country with over 400 distinct dialects spoken across the length and breadth of the country (Kwofie, 1989:20). Thus, this research work is in the domain of language acquisition and more particularly foreign language learning taking into account the concept of the development of inter-language during the learning of a foreign language. Consequently, a Nigerian French language learner already knows and understand a linguistics system probably his mother-tongue or another source language earlier learnt. Nigerian students can in principle posses multiple linguistic systems which invariably interfere and impede his learning of French language. Teachers of French language cannot be strangers to the impediments posed by linguistic interference in the teaching and learning of French language. The training of the Nigerian French language teachers has make them believe that the French of the Nigerian learner can only be interfered with by the learner's mother-tongue and by English language. Most literatures on linguistic interference and the teaching and learning of French language are only focused, albeit erroneously on mother-tongues as well as on English as the only sources of impediments.

The limited scope of literature on linguistic interference to only mother-tongues and English has made some teachers of French language to lose sight of the interference implications for the learning and teaching of French, a fact which we nevertheless witness daily in our society-that a number of our French language learners speak more than one Nigerian language before beginning to learn French (Edung, 1992:35). This neglect, both by the teachers and in the literatures, of the other languages spoken by the learner beside his mother-tongue and English elucidates the inability and difficulties of the teachers of French to recognize and, solve the problems and impediments arising from the interference of these languages with French. This paper observe a number of learners' difficulties which are indeed cases of interference from these other languages, but unfortunately, the teacher could not recognize as such nor solve. We posit that it is only when the French language teacher understands the causes and reasons for the errors made by the learner that he or she can effectively teach the students to avoid such errors or remedy their linguistics inadequacies. Once the French language teacher takes into account these errors from the learners, the learning of French will be more productive. Two instances shall be examined in this paper to show how such interference can impede effective teaching and learning of French language.

During a listening comprehension lesson in one of the French classes, a student made the sentence thus:

Uchenna il est dans sa chambre
(*Uchenna he is in his room*)
Uchenna is in his room.

The teacher was angry with the student for wrongfully using the personal pronoun "il" after repeated correction. He was quick to attribute this recurrence of the error to the student's sheer inability to completely automatize the subject/verb structure, (*Uchenna est*), and concluded that the student was not serious with his studies. Reminded of other causes of a leaner' inability to automatize foreign language structure, the teacher ruled out the possibility of interference from Igbo which is the student's mother-tongue and from English,

because he could not see any structure in these languages that could stimulate the structure in the student's erroneous sentence in French. On whether the mistake was caused by interference of some other language spoken by the student, the teacher agreed that it was possible, but was candid to admit that he did not ever think of these possibility while considering the student's error and difficulties, nor did he know if the particular student in question spoke other language apart from Igbo and English. When the student was interviewed about his place of birth and other places she has lived, the latter revealed that she was born and bred in the Yoruba speaking region of Nigeria. That she grew up in Akure and has lived all her adolescent life there with her parents. She further revealed that she is very fluent both in writing and oral in Yoruba language. Consequently, the reason for making the repeated erroneous sentence in French language became obvious thus:

Uchenna il est dans sa chambre

May have been produced using the Yoruba language sentence structure:

Uchenna o wa ninu iyara re

Uchenna he is in his room

In most Yoruba sentence structure, the use of subject pronoun in addition to the subject noun it refers to is very common. It must be noted that in this case, the teacher did not readily think that other languages besides English and the learner's mother-tongue can easily interfered in the learning of French and pose a big difficulties in how the learner of French language construct his sentence structure. Teachers of French language must strive to find out which other languages are spoken by their students so as to minimize linguistic interferences from such languages.

In second case, the error was the grammatical structure of the French sentence below in which a student repeated made in a composition exercise:

Il grand

He is big

The error here consists of the omission of the auxillary verb "etre" (to be) which would make the sentence to read thus:

Il est grand

He is big.

On enquiring about the background of the student, it was discovered that the student had been living in Lagos until recently and he speaks Yoruba fluently. Thus, the student's French and above error occurred because of the influenced of the Yoruba language. This is the trend in the learning of French language that most teachers have failed to take cognizance of. The faulty French sentence of the student was very possibly constructed on the pattern of the Yoruba sentence:

O ga

He tall

This structure does not have a verb between the subject and the object/attribute.

From the above cases, a Nigerian learner's French can suffer interference from any other language the learner has acquired beside his mother-tongue and English and most teachers of French are oblivious of this fact when considering the difficulties faced by students in the learning of French. This can be attributed to the fact that the teachers/lecturers do not know enough of any of these Nigerian languages that may be involved in the interference to be able to find out exactly where and how they may interfere with French.

Suffice to note that the two cases reported above is just a part of the general problem of linguistic interference from other languages to the learning of French language. The teacher/lecturer cannot solve the learner's difficulties arising from the type of interference presented by the two cases, because, the teacher cannot recognize these difficulties for what they really are. Consequently, the teacher attributes these difficulties to the wrong reasons-student's peculiar or personal learning problems, over generalizations of rules or structures, and he inevitably tackles these difficulties from the wrong perspectives. The resultant effect is that these impediments cannot be solved, hence their recurrence. To this extent, since these problems have persisted and become perennial, it can be legitimate to say that the teaching of French language in our tertiary institutions has not been effective. One fundamental question to ask at this juncture is what the teacher/lecturer can do in order to recognize these impediments for what they really are, and what strategies should he used to properly solve them.

III. Ways to Effectively Tackle These Difficulties by the Teacher/Lecturer

Having established from the two cases above that teacher/lecturer cannot recognize the student's difficulties or errors as a result of interference from other languages spoken by these students besides their mother-tongue and English, this paper seek ways to effectively tackle these lacunas. In order to solve this problem, two points should be of relevance: the point that the lecturers do not know the languages spoken by their students, and the point that they do not know the structures of these languages and other Nigerian

languages than theirs, to be able to make a dissimilarity of these languages with French for possible solutions into the students' difficulties.

As regards the first point, the lecturer can easily identify the mother-tongue of the majority of his students through their names, location of the school and admission records. However, it will be extremely difficult to identify other Nigerian languages spoken by them using the afore mentioned parameters because the student's names, location of school and admission records cannot give such insight into other languages spoken by the student. The teacher may therefore have to interact with the student on a one-to-one interview to get this vital information. It is imperative that the teacher takes extra steps to know which languages are spoken by his students (Edung, 1992:38). Teachers should take time out to sensitize their learners to these possible errors and provide strategies for helping learners to cope with potentially difficult-to-master elements that are due mainly to other Nigerian languages interference.

These extra steps are necessary in a multi-lingual country as Nigeria because as established earlier effective learning and teaching of French language can be impeded if the lecturer is ignorant of other languages spoken by his students. As Edung, 1992 rightly posited that:

It is important that the teacher tries to first of all establish what may be called by analogy the "linguistic case theory" of his pupils, like the medical practitioner establishes the medical case history of his patients, before he embarks on any serious treatment. The teacher should try to determine the linguistic background of his pupils before he begins serious business in terms of teaching (Edung, 1992:38).

Having known the languages spoken by his students, the lecturer has to know the structure of these languages so as to be able to identify the area of structural differences between these languages and French, which, according to the principles of linguistic interference and of contrastive analysis are the causes of the interference (Wilkins, 1972:197-198). This is the point which hindered the recognition of interference by the lecturers in the above cases.

The lecturer has to study these languages in order to know their structures. The problem face by lecturers is that there are many languages that he can practically study and make use of within the short period he spends with his students. There lies an enormous problem for the lecturer. This paper recommends that lecturer of French language in Nigeria should generally interests himself in the structure of Nigerian languages. There have been many researches and scholarly publications on comparative and descriptive studies of Nigerian languages and French (Edung, 1992:38). So the lecturer of French in Nigeria should as a matter of necessity avail himself with these scholarly publications in order to know the structures and function of as many of the indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria as possible. The lecturer is duty bound to continue and improve on his competence. In a relax and hobby-like manner, the lecturer can study the structures and functions of these languages. And over a period of time, the lecturer will definitely acquire more knowledge that will eventually help to solve linguistic impediments that would otherwise be frustrating both for the students and for him. This measure is quite practical and offers the lecturer an opportunity to learn other languages informally. This measure, as far as the solution of the problems of interference of the various indigenous languages with French is concerned, has its value in the fact that it ensures a progressive efficiency of the lecturer on the job, as he can do the job better with time. Also, since these errors seem to occur on a large scale, it is suggested that provision is made for such errors in developing course content and also in course delivery.

Once the lecturer of French language in Nigeria knows the languages spoken by the learner and has the knowledge of the structure and functioning of these languages, he can contrast each of these languages with French in the course of his study of the learner's difficulties. He can prognostically try to predict the difficulties of the learner. So doing, he can easily recognize such difficulties when they actually occur. But he can also carry out the contrast diagnostically to find possible explanations to actual errors. In that case, if the error or difficulty was actually a case of interference from the language contrasted with French, then the contrastive analysis can yield information as to how to solve it, or help the teacher to expose the source of the problem and put the learner on the right path (Wilkins, 1972:205).

IV. CONCLUSION

Linguistic interference is a normal part of French language learning. It should not be seen as a source of frustration for the lecturer but rather a window through which the lecturer can observe the gaps that need to be filled. Unfortunately, errors in a French language classroom especially in our socio-cultural context are frowned upon and sanctioned without taking into consideration the fact that it is a natural process of the language learning process and that the errors made by students could actually guide the teacher to prepare students to adequately cope with their difficulties.

Therefore, this paper had advocated that whenever French is interfered with by some other languages spoken by the Nigerian learner besides his mother-tongue and English, it is important that such interferences be recognized and be treated accordingly to ensure an effective teaching and learning of French language in Nigeria. Generally speaking, it is important for effective foreign language teaching that learner's problems be

recognized for what they really are and treated as such. This paper has been concerned with just that, as it touches on the difficulties arising from interference with French by other languages spoken by Nigerian learners in addition to their mother-tongue and English, as most Nigerian lecturers of French seem to have overlooked these languages as sources of problems.

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Oko, F.I, et. al. "Nigerian Languages as Sources of Linguistic Interference To The Teaching And Learning Of French Language In Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: A Bane For Socio-Economic Empowerment." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 28(2), 2023, pp. 01-05.