

NIGERIAN ENGLISH: A MAJOR CAUSE OF COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRIES

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Abstract

English is a major language spoken in Nigeria. It is being taught in Nigerian schools, from the nursery schools to the higher institutions. Being Nigeria's second and official language, as well as the lingua franca, the English language has received great prominence within the country and has been accorded a prestigious position. Despite this, most Nigerians find it difficult to interact with the native speakers of the English language when they migrate to native English speaking countries. This problem brings about the inability of some of these migrants to secure good jobs on time and make honest livings in those countries. To ascertain the major cause of this communication barrier, the researcher reviewed the experiences of fourteen individuals – seven native speakers of English, who had encounters with Nigerians, and seven Nigerian migrants to native English speaking countries. These experiences were relayed to the researcher through electronic social media and online training classes. The researcher discovered that the major cause of their communication barrier is the Nigerian English, which is commonly spoken and taught in Nigerian schools. Based on Communication Accommodation Theory and Behavioural Theory of Language Learning, the researcher recommended, among others, that Nigerians should be made to undergo intensive trainings on the variety of the English language spoken in the country they wish to migrate to before they are granted visa.

Keywords: Migration, varieties of the English language, Nigerian English, communication barrier

Introduction

People move or change their place of habitation for several reasons. The movement may be to avoid natural disasters, to find a better source of income, to find a more secured and peaceful environment, to find a more religious tolerant community, or even to enjoy a good weather. In Nigeria, cases of migration are recorded in great numbers. Nigerians migrate both within and outside the country. They can be found in English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. Nigerians usually migrate in order to find

better sources of income, better education, good healthcare and good infrastructural facilities.

A lot of Nigerians residing in other countries are successful because of their diligence, hard-work and intelligence. In order to be duly successful and accepted into the host community, they (the Nigerian migrants) have to mingle and communicate with the natives so as to gain employment, set up businesses and have access to vital services. For a successful communication to take place a common language has to be developed between these migrants and the natives. In most cases, the migrants are expected to speak the language of the host community. This is the case of Nigerians in native English speaking countries.

In Nigeria, English is used as a second language. The language has been in the country since the coming of the colonialists. English has taken a prestigious and dominant position above the five hundred, or more, Nigerian indigenous languages. In other words, Nigerians strive to learn and use the English language often, even more than they use their native languages.

Despite the fact that majority of the Nigerians learnt and speak English, they still encounter challenges interacting with the native speakers of the English language. This issue poses a great problem for Nigerians that migrate to English speaking countries. Owing to this language challenge, some Nigerian international students encounter difficulties with their studies. Cases of Nigerian migrants who were unable to secure employment, gain social acceptability and harassed by law agents, have also been reported.

This paper will attempt to address the problem of language barrier encountered by Nigerians that travel to native English speaking countries. It will specifically look into the reasons Nigerians and native speakers of English encounter difficulties while interacting with one another. Based on the research findings, the researcher will proffer solutions that might reduce or totally eradicate the problem.

The Concept of Language Variation

Language variation, as used here, is not looking into different languages of the world, but rather looks at the different variations that exist within a language. Every human language has several varieties within it. Agreeing with this, Wardhaugh (2010) states, "when we look closely at any language, we discover time and time again that there is considerable internal variation and that speakers make constant use of the many different possibilities offered to them." He further states that variation is "an inherent characteristic

of all languages at all times." As Uwadiegwu (2017) rightly puts it, "language refuses to be steady," meaning that language varies at different contexts.

Holmes (2013) also agrees with the above assertion because she states that in every community "there is a range of varieties from which people select according to the context in which they are communicating." This is to say that variations in a language is not only seen in multilingual communities, where different languages exist and are used, but also in monolingual communities, where varieties "take the form of different styles and dialects," (Holmes, 2013).

What makes a language variety different from the others is the "linguistic items that it includes," (Hudson, 2001). Oha (2010) sees a variety of a language as "a form that differs from other forms of the language systematically and coherently." The difference could be in the form of pronunciation, the vocabulary and the grammar. The differences could also be as a result of geographical location, age, gender, ethnicity, social status and so on (Holmes, 2013; Oha, 2010; Wardhaugh and Fuller, 2015; Anagbogu, Mbah & Eme, 2010).

According to Holmes (2013), language can be used to "signal" membership of particular groups and "to construct different aspects" of social identity. Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015) hold that identity is not a "fixed" attribute of a person or group but is rather a "dynamically constructed" aspect, which "emerges through discourse and social behaviour." When we talk of discourse, we talk of language in use. Language is also a social behaviour because it is a habit learnt in a society.

According to Oha (2010) and Anagbogu et al (2010), regional variation of a language can give a lot of information about the place the speaker is from. Oha (2010) is of the opinion that the most noticeable feature of regional varieties is the accent. Holmes (2013) agrees with this when she states that "when you answer the telephone, you can often make some pretty accurate guesses about the various characteristics of the speaker." She further states that "it may also be possible to make a reasonable guess about the person's socio-economic and educational background" through his language.

It is necessary for someone to be proficient in the language variety used in a particular community if the person has interest in visiting or residing there. This is because the language of a speaker tells much about him - whether he is a member of the community or not. Of course, the ignorance of a community's language variety could lead to social exclusion. As Holmes

(2013) states, a speaker should choose the right variety of language “according to where and to whom” he is addressing. Only if the speaker knows what the society sees as the right variety will he be able perform such a feat. In summary, addressees and context affect our choice of language.

Nigerian English: An Overview

The English language is believed to have come into Nigeria with the British colonialists. When the colonialists left the country, they left a very crucial legacy behind - the English language. Gradually, this language seeped into the Nigerian society and it is today the “linking language, the language of the judiciary, of administration, of education, of mass media, and trade and commerce,” (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999). The prestigious position given to English in Nigeria owes a lot to the multilingual nature of the country, where this language is the only one that links all the other languages in existence. In Nigeria, English has become an elitist language, (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999).

It has, however, come to the notice of many that the variety of English spoken in Nigeria is not the same as that which was left behind by the British. Igboanusi (2001) states that it is “a fact that English has been nativized in Nigeria so that today we are talking of Nigerian English (NE) rather than English in Nigeria.” Akindele and Adegbite (1999) believe that because of the “encouragement given to the learners and users of the language in the non-native situation,” the desire to develop the Nigerian English (NE henceforth) became necessary. They (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999) further state that NE is named so and made a variety of English because it has “some peculiar features which cannot be totally seen as the native English features.” The English spoken in Nigeria, according to Akindele and Adegbite (1999), is a blend of the language “imposed” by the colonialists and the native culture of the country. According to them, the variety developed from this blend is “not wholly native English type and not totally Nigerian. It is a blend of the two situations.” Igboanusi (2001) holds that NE is characterised by nativization, continuing influence of biblical language and the influence of Americanism.

Major Features of Nigerian English

Jowitt (1991) states that it is believed by many that the quality of English spoken and written by Nigerians, living in Nigeria, is deteriorating. This assertion came up as a result of the distinct features of NE, which differentiates it from the Received Pronunciation (RP) English, the variety also known as the Queen’s English. As a result of its distinct features, NE is considered internationally unintelligible (Jowitt, 1991).

Ogbolugo (2005) holds that in NE phonology, the phonemes of the RP English, which are forty-four (44) in number, are reduced because the English phonemes that do not occur in Nigerian indigenous languages are removed and replaced with those that exist in the mother tongue. In other words, phoneme substitution occurs in NE. Ogbolugo (2005) also posits that NE stress patterns are different from that of RP English. In addition to these, Jowitt (1991) notes that NE does not follow the intonation patterns of RP English. According to him, NE “seems to regard every utterance as having an inherent and fixed intonation pattern, which for statements has a final falling tone and for questions a final rising tone, and tends not to vary this pattern for contrastive purposes such as the context of utterance might require.” This neglect of the correct use of intonation, according to him, could result to communication not being “as informative as it might be.” Wrong use of intonation can also pass on a wrong message and create a wrong reaction or response from the listener.

Another feature of NE is its vocabulary. Ogbolugo (2005) believes that at the level of lexis, NE can “maximally be appropriated into the mainstream of English.” Terms such as ‘oga’, ‘four-one-nine’, ‘auntie’, ‘suya’ and so on are all features of NE vocabulary, which are now treated as English terms. Jowitt (1991) posits that NE vocabulary is greatly made of local coinages that conform to Standard English (SE) morphological principles, extended or restricted meaning of existing SE words or expressions, words and expressions derived from pidgin, loan-words from the mother tongues, slang and so on. Of course, most of these words and expressions will be unintelligible to the users of other varieties of English unless they have been exposed to NE.

NE is considered to violate the rules of English at the syntactic level (Ogbolugo, 2005). This is as a result of much deviation in NE as regards the use of parts of speech. These deviations are considered erroneous. Jowitt, (1991) states that NE performs a lot of word class shift. By so doing, it assigns wrong roles to words in a sentence. A good example is assigning the roles of verbs to these prepositions - ‘on’ (On the light), and ‘off’ (Off the light).

Theoretical Framework

The Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) and the Behavioural Theory of Learning were adopted for this study.

CAT was developed by Howard Giles. The theory tends to emphasize on the adjustments that people make during communication. According to Giles and Ogay (2007), people make adjustments during communication so as “to

create, maintain or decrease social distance during interaction.” Put differently, this theory holds that individuals adjust their languages during interactions so as to control differences with the addressees. This theory postulates that individuals can use communication strategies to create social inclusiveness or differentiation. These strategies are convergence and divergence. Convergence is employed during communication to reduce social differences. This is done by a speaker tending to modify his language to resemble more closely that of the addressee. Divergence on the other hand contradicts the adaptation process because it is employed when the speaker wishes to increase the social difference existing between him and the addressee.

Usually, people accommodate their speech while interacting with a person of higher social status. The social implication of this is that the speaker wishes to be accepted into the social circle of the addressee. Nigerian immigrants need to adjust their language when they travel to other countries so that they will be fully accepted into the society.

The Behavioural Theory, also known as Behaviourism, is a theory of learning which holds that every form of learning occurs through conditioning. This conditioning comes as a result of the response of the learner to external stimuli from his environment. This theory also holds that learning can take place as a result of the experiences the learner had in his environment. To connect this to language learning, language is a social behaviour which can only be learnt in a society. The stimuli-response hypothesis can be drawn up when a language learner needs something and has to respond by using language to make a request. This will condition the learner to make correct use of the language or he will be neglected. However, for the language learner to be able to make use of the language, he needs to be exposed to it by placing him in an environment where he will interact with others.

The Behaviourist also believes that learning can be encouraged through rewards and punishments. This is to say that the ability to use a language properly will be rewarded while the reverse will result to punishment. For example, when a language learner, who needs something, makes a request using the wrong language or language variety, he will be punished with a negative response.

Based on Behavioural Theory, if Nigerians are exposed to the right variety of language being used in their prospective destination, they will be compelled to learn and use it so they don't face the punishment that comes from their ignorance.

Nigerian English: A Cause of Communication Barrier to Nigerian Immigrants in English Speaking Countries

To ascertain the effects that NE has on Nigerian immigrants to English speaking countries, twenty-five (25) persons were approached for the study but only fourteen (14) of them responded. The data collection method used was interview, which was carried out through message chats on the following social media: WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn and Quora, and online English training classes: *Understanding How Language Works* in FutureLearn and *Teaching Pronunciation Differently* in Schology. The respondents were asked open ended questions concerning their experiences with the NE and the variety of English spoken in the country of visit. The respondents were selected based on their place of residence, profession, level of education and contacts with the language varieties. Seven (7) respondents are non-Nigerian native speakers of English who had come in contact with NE; one (1) is a Nigerian migrant still residing in the United Kingdom (UK); one (1) respondent is a Nigerian Canadian immigrant; three (3) are Nigerians who had returned to Nigeria after going for further studies and special trainings in different native English speaking countries; and two (2) are Nigerian lecturers who had been to native English speaking countries for conferences, courses and workshops. The questions asked were open-ended and structured to include:

- a. the ability of the Nigerian speaker of NE to understand native variety of English;
- b. ability of the native speaker of English to understand NE;
- c. how the gap in communication was bridged;
- d. differences in the native Englishes they encountered;
- e. duration of time before intelligibility.

Since some of the respondents were promised anonymity, all respondents will be identified as Respondent 1, Respondent 2 ...Respondent 17. Excerpts from their responses will be given below. These excerpts will be discussed later in this section

The Ability of Nigerian Speakers of NE to Understand Native Variety of English

Respondent 1

"It took me a short while to tune in my ears and really understand. Some of them are really having accents, they draw out their words and speak fast ... not at all like those you hear on TV."

Respondent 2

“Nope, I had to make them repeat themselves and this time slower... their pronunciation were not clear enough ... the issue is it depends on the accent of the person... It took us, the trainees, time to understand their major style of speaking... I understand American slang and normal English ... British mostly used tone that sounds like they are singing or reciting a poem”

Respondent 10

“When I got to Coventry, I was lost. I couldn’t pick a word they were saying to me. Worst thing was that my lectures were just flying over my head. I didn’t have problem understanding American English but writing it is not easy. British English is not easy for me to understand but I found it easier writing British English because we use the same spelling and all”

Respondent 14

“No, they don’t”

The Ability of Native Speakers of English to Understand NE

Respondent 1

“I noticed it takes them a longer time to understand us especially when we speak quickly, or worse try to speak (a very strange phonetics) like them ... people you interact with always get used to you soon and understand all you say.”

Respondent 2

“They find it easier to understand us because we tend to speak slower and gradually in order not to make grammatical errors thereby posing our country to be inferior when it comes to speaking English”

Respondent 3

“When I went for a conference in US I noticed that I was not the only foreign participant. The Indians were much and they spoke their Indian English with its heavy accent. But after my own presentation I noticed most of the audience looked puzzled. In fact, someone had to tell me they couldn’t understand anything I said. I felt so embarrassed that I almost cried.”

Respondent 4

“I once met a Nigerian who speaks English in a way we term heavily accented. His grammar was very good, even better than most of us the

native speakers. But he found it difficult getting a job because most interviews are first done on telephones.”

Respondent 5

“I thought I was good in English until I came to Nigeria for an assignment and met something totally different. I floated for some months but when I finally grabbed their English, I fell in love with it. I think Buckingham will have to excuse Nigerian English.”

Respondent 6

“I stayed in Scotland for two years and couldn’t land a job, not even to sell tickets in train stations. The usual thing there was to place a call first to fix an interview. Funny thing is I always get a negative response. It’s as if once they hear my voice they get put off.”

Respondent 7

“I have had some Nigerian immigrants as my students. They mostly enroll not to learn the language but to learn how to speak the language.”

Respondent 8

“The major problem of my African students is their accent. ... but nobody speaks without an accent. What we do is help them acquire their desired accent”

Respondent 9

“I have a few friends who can understand me and me, them. I don’t try to lose my Nigerian accent but only ensure that I speak clearly.

Respondent 10

“Initially they didn’t understand me. They said I pronounced words wrongly...so I had to work on my pronunciation and enunciation.

Respondent 12

“My work is more on teaching the refugees so I can’t really tell if I have met a Nigerian. But all Africans I’ve met have heavy accents... I think the major problems Africans have is their teaching method. They still teach pronunciation using listen and repeat. This will not help because the students do not understand what happens in the mouth of the native speaker”

Respondent 13

“If you mean English spoken in Nigeria with a Nigerian accent, most British people would be able to understand it reasonably well. Some Nigerians can have a heavy accent that might present some difficulty for someone unfamiliar; but English is English.”

3.1.3 How the Gap in Communication was Bridged

Respondent 1

“You make conscious efforts to change your pitch a little and speak more slowly and clearly.”

Respondent 3

“What I have learnt to do is to tell the natives “Oh in Nigeria, we say it like this or we call it that”

Respondent 11

“I try to speak slowly, picking my words and saying it clearly. It is not easy if you are the type that speaks very fast. But you learn with time.”

Time Duration before Intelligibility

Respondent 2

“It didn’t take me long, unlike some of my colleagues that had to stay up to 3 months to pick up the language. Some of us can’t still get it...it took me like 2 weeks of close interaction with them to get it.”

Respondent 10

“I can’t really say. I know it was more than a semester.”

Findings and Discussion

It is clear from the data collected that NE is different from other varieties of English spoken in other countries, especially in native English speaking countries. Even though NE is still a variety of English, the native speakers have difficulties understanding it because it has distinct features. Nigerians in turn have been exposed to NE all their lives and encountering other varieties of English poses a communication challenge to them.

The data collected also exposed the strategies Nigerians adopted to accommodate their communication difficulties. Among these strategies was the act of paying more attention to lexis and syntax and less to stress, intonation and rhythm patterns of the English language. The Nigerian migrants are only concerned with saying their words clearly and making grammatically accepted sentences. However, they failed to understand that the absence or wrong application of stress and intonation in a speech could lead to misunderstanding of the message, break to the communication

process, or wrong feedback. This could be one of the reasons native speakers of English and Nigerian migrants have challenges understanding the English spoken by the either group.

The responses gathered from the respondents equally gave an insight into the negative experiences had by Nigerian migrants. Their inability to interact freely with the natives has led some to suffer inferiority complex. Cases of unemployment, poor academic performance and social exclusion were also reported. Some Nigerians, who could afford to, had to go out of their way to enroll for accent reduction and acquisition trainings, which added to their cost of living.

Conclusion and Recommendation

NE is a variety of English that reflects Nigeria's rich cultural heritage. It is no longer the English kept by the British colonialists when they left after Nigeria's independence in 1960. The English brought by the colonialists has been greatly modified so that it became indigenised and could proudly be called NE. Therefore, Nigeria will not throw away her language, nor borrow other people's language in order to satisfy a handful of individuals.

However, Nigerians need to move around the world for different purposes such as business, education, research, employment and so on. They need to interact with the people they meet there. To ensure that the problem of communication in native English speaking countries are reduced or eradicated, the followings are recommended:

1. Nigerians applying for resident visa should be made to engage in a minimum of three months intensive coaching on the language variety of their desired destination.
2. Nigerian embassies all over the world should make the learning and speaking of NE as a prerequisite for obtaining Nigerian visa, especially for immigrants who will have cause to interact with the natives. This will help to project the NE and make it internationally intelligible.
3. English scholars should endeavour to develop the NE by developing its orthography, syntax, lexis and phonology. They should also compile and publish a dictionary of NE.
4. Nigerian English teachers should be encouraged to embark on constant trainings on teaching English as a second language.

5. Different native English speaking countries should be encouraged to establish accent reduction and acquisition schools here in Nigeria so that Nigerian citizens wishing to travel to any of these countries will have access to their language variety coaches.

This study has exposed the fact that varieties of a language exist. These varieties could be the result of geographical location, age, gender and so on. Based on that, it has long been acknowledged that the English language spoken in Nigeria is no longer that variety left behind by the colonialists when they left Nigeria in 1960, but a variety that has been modified to reflect the Nigerian society. This means that Nigerians migrating to native English speaking countries will face communication challenges, which can be prevented if they (the migrants) were exposed and taught the variety spoken in their host community before the migration process.

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