

The Negative Attitude of Banning Indigenous Nigerian Languages from English Language Classroom: A Linguistic Misconception

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Abstract

Application of linguistic science to second language teaching and learning has provided enough evidence to show that second language learners do rely on their mother tongue (L1) as the basis upon which hypotheses are formulated to determine how the target language (L2) operates. Therefore, any attempt to discourage or prevent the use of (L1) in a second language learning environment will not only go against the natural learning process, but will constitute a major hinderance in second language teaching and learning. Many parents, teachers, school proprietors, and other major stakeholders in the educational system in Nigeria have the erroneous belief that there cannot be effective teaching and learning of English language where learners have access to their mother tongue. Consequently, the use of (L1) is prohibited within the school premises. To enforce the prohibition order, different inscriptions warning school pupils to avoid the use of (L1), or advising them to always speak in English, could be seen on the walls of the classrooms, in some of the schools selected for this study. Some of the inscriptions read: 'Vernacular speaking is prohibited', 'Always speak in English', 'Discuss in English', etc. (see the appendix)¹. Effort is made in this report to examine the linguistic and pedagogical implications of the parents' over-concern and erroneous belief that the use of mother tongue would have negative effects on the learning of English as a second language. Notwithstanding the negative attitudes towards the use of L1, the paper emphasizes the significant importance of (L1) in L2 acquisition, and considers L1 as a catalyst for intellectual development. CA is assumed as the theoretical framework for our discussion in this paper.

Keywords: Mother tongue, negative attitudes, English language, linguistic misconception, Contrastive Analysis

INTRODUCTION

The significance of mother tongue or first language cannot be over-emphasized in the process of knowledge acquisition. Therefore, the idea of prohibiting the use of L1 in the school system could be considered as a kind of 'linguistic ignorance' about the role of L1 in second language learning and knowledge acquisition.

According to Awoniyi (1982, p.139),

Research in Africa and elsewhere has provided overwhelming evidence of the significance of L1 and its impact on L2 learning. For example, in a study carried out in South Africa, a bilingual country, it was found that the L1 can be neglected only with adverse consequences. In Zaïre, a study showed that most children never understood French well at the end of primary education, perhaps because of the policy of 'straight for French'.

He made the claims that, generally speaking, the use of L1 as a medium of teaching contributed to early comprehension and quick adjustment of children to the formal school system. In other words, children tend to learn more rapidly in their native language. Early childhood education specialists have observed that the ability to use the mother tongue enhances a child's overall academic development. This is because such native intelligence connects him to his culture and gives him better cognitive development. For example, Olapade (2009, p.4) makes the following assertion:

When a person uses his/her mother tongue, it is found that complex ideas might just be easier to grasp and that the level of understanding of the same idea in a second language is generally lower or at best can be at par with that of mother tongue.

On this note, Sanusi (2015, p.27) expresses the view that, "imposing a second language like English on a child, right from the cradle, is like suppressing the thinking ability of the child, and indirectly killing his native intelligence". According to him, it is the uniqueness of L1 in knowledge acquisition that made advanced industrialized nations like Japan, China, Russia, Korea, etc. insist on the use of L1 in their educational systems for the purposes of intellectual and industrial development.

Based on the tenets of CA, it is understood that second language learners use their knowledge of L1 to spot the differences between L1 and L2. Therefore, any attempt to ban the use of L1 in an L2 classroom would serve as an impediment in second language learning. This is because it is in the L1 of a second language learner that his repositories of the traditional wisdom and knowledge reside.

DEFINING LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

Language attitude is a socio- linguistic terminology that refers to the feelings that people have about their own language or the language(s) of other people. Such attitudes may be positive, negative or indifferent. Homes (2013, p.410) makes the following remarks about language attitudes:

People generally do not hold opinions about languages in a vacuum. They develop attitudes towards languages which indicate their views about those who speak the languages, and the contexts and functions with which they are associated.

For example, as we have it in Nigeria, many people value English language, not only because it is the official language of the country, but because of its status in the society, its prestige as a language of administration, trade, commerce, education, etc. It was on this note that Adegbiya (1997, p.223) describes English not only as an official language, but a powerful tool in the society. According to him, "...it is the predominant language of power, of rising high, of making it, of achievement, of officialdom, of official administration, of the judiciary, of the mass media, and most importantly, of education". All this attracts positive attitude towards English language in Nigeria. Thus, the willingness to impose its learning on the school pupils at the expense of their native languages. On the other hand, many people have negative attitudes towards the indigenous Nigerian languages because such local native languages are stigmatized and referred to as 'vernacular' a derogatory terminology. They consider such languages as being inferior to English. Reporting such negative attitudes on the parts of both the government and some individuals in Nigeria, Bamigbose (2000, p.2), as quoted in Owolabi (2006, p.17), makes the following remarks:

Apart from lack of political will by those in authority, perhaps the most important factor impeding the increased use of African languages is lack of interest by the elites. They are the ones who are quick to point out that African languages are not yet developed to be used in certain domains.

Be that as it may, linguists are of the opinion that no language is superior to another, rather, it is the extra-linguistic factors like political power enjoyed by the speakers, the numerical strength of the speakers, historical background of the speakers, etc. that determine the ultimate destiny of a particular language (Sanusi, 2017, p.9). According to Crystal (2006, p.256), "Knowing about attitudes is an important aspect of evaluating the likely success of a language teaching programme or a piece of LANGUAGE PLANNING." In other words, linguists can use their knowledge of the language attitudes in a given speech community to make some linguistically significant generalizations about the prospects or otherwise of a given language in that speech community. There is no doubt that the dominance of English language has brought about many negative attitudes towards the indigenous Nigerian languages. It was on this note that Owolabi (2006, p.19-20) makes the following submission:

It should be emphasized that until all forms of negative attitudes are corrected and positive attitudes developed towards our indigenous languages, the more than 80% of Nigerians, would not only remain uninformed about the various programmes of their governments at all levels, which have implications for their well-being but would also be disallowed from participating meaningfully in such programmes, and in the process of national development for that matter.

THE PEDAGOGICAL VALUE OF USING L1 AS A PLATFORM FOR L2 ACQUISITION

The use of L1 is crucial to every child because it is the medium of expression that connects him to his culture and enhances better cognitive development. It also aids the L2 learning process. As quoted in Lado (1957, p.1), Charles C. Fries, (an American structuralist) who happened to be the first linguist to apply the principles of linguistics science to the teaching of English, made the following remarks:

The most effective materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner at all levels of language analysis.

In other words, the major assumption of CA is that no two natural languages have exactly the same structure at all levels of linguistic analysis. And the major aim of the theory is to compare and contrast the structures of the native language of the learners with those of the target language, with the hope of identifying the areas of structural similarities and differences between the two languages. Following Wilkins (1972, p.197), it is assumed that:

Whenever the structure of the foreign language differs from that of the mother-tongue, we can expect both difficulty in learning and error in performance. Where the structures of the two languages are the same, no difficulty is anticipated. Simple exposure to the language will be enough. Teaching will be directed at those points where there are structural differences.

Having studied the structure of the two languages (i.e, L1 and L2), CA predicts some likely areas of learning difficulties that could lead to errors in performance. Awareness of such areas of difficulty provide the required linguistic input that can assist the language teacher in preparing relevant language teaching materials, that can overcome some perceived learning difficulties. Earlier research findings in second language teaching and learning have shown that interference from L1 of learners is one of the major sources of error in second language acquisition; and successful teaching of L2 cannot take place without an awareness of the structure of L1 of the learners (Lado 1957, Bamgbose 1971, Sanusi 1988, etc.). In other words, English language teachers should not only have an adequate knowledge of the structure of L1 of the learners, but should also be able to familiarize the L2 learners with the similarities and differences between their L1 and L2 through pattern practice, in order to minimize or overcome cases of negative transfer from L1 to L2.

However, despite the relevance and applicability of CA as a theory of language teaching and learning, there are some reservations about the theory. With the advent of Error Analysis (EA) as an offshoot of CA, proponents of E.A. (like Corder 1973) are of the view that there is no need to predict learners' error in performance as proposed by CA. For example, while discussing the weaknesses of CA, Faerch, et al. (1984, p.270) make the following observation:

In the first place, many predictions about ease and difficulty in foreign language learning, based on a contrastive analysis of learner's L1 and L2, were not confirmed by analysis of the errors of foreign language learners in speech and writing. There was no simple one-to-one correlation between difference and learning difficulty. Areas which were assumed to be difficult sometimes turned out not to lead to errors, and vice versa.

Other critics of CA are of the opinion that apart from interference from L1, errors in second language learning may have physiological and psychological origins. For example, lack of attention caused by some extra linguistic factors like inattentiveness or tiredness. They therefore made the claim that such causes of errors should be clearly differentiated from interference from L1 of the learners.

However, notwithstanding the above mentioned weaknesses of CA over the years, the theory has remained a valid and relevant methodological tool for second language teaching and learning.

SUMMARY

In this paper, effort has been made to present an observer's report on the linguistic misconception and the negative attitudes towards indigenous Nigerian languages, within the school system, and show how preference is given to English as foreign language.

Because of the prominent and dominant role of English, as an official language in Nigeria, parents, teachers, proprietors of private schools, etc. tend to look down upon the indigenous Nigeria language, and consider such native languages as irrelevant in the schemes of education and nation-building. However, from linguistic perspective, it is argued in this paper that the reverse is the case. Given the examples of many industrialized nations like China, Japan, Russia, Korea, etc. that have made use of their indigenous languages for the purpose of development; we consider indigenous Nigerian languages as the true veritable tools that can bring about both intellectual and national development. Thus, we advocate for a change of attitudes towards the use of indigenous Nigerian languages within and outside the school system.

CONCLUSION

By a simple analogy, the major stakeholders in the Nigeria Educational system consider indigenous languages as 'weeds' contending with the intending plant (i.e English). Generally speaking, language is human, and it permeates one's culture, behaviour and thought. Therefore, the child's mother tongue is a biological property with which the child is endowed. To de-possess such a child of his mother tongue, is to reduce his human status in the society.

Contrary to the negative attitude towards the use of indigenous Nigerian languages, and the erroneous belief that if English language learners have access to their mother tongues, it would hinder their performance in English; many research findings in second language teaching and learning have shown that rather than serving as a cog in the wheel of progress, L1 enhances and facilitates L2 acquisition. The mother tongue of a

learner is considered as a 'model language' that strengthens retention and consequently facilitates comprehension in L2 acquisition. As observed in this report, the parents' over-concern about learners' proficiency in English language as well as the negative attitudes towards the use of native languages, has negative impact on the native intelligence of the second language learners. Consequently, the negative attitudes affect the development of many indigenous Nigerian languages.

It is the opinion of this writer that the dominance of English as an official language in Nigeria should not in any way prevent the use and development of many indigenous Nigerian languages. It is recommended that the National Policy on Education (NPE), that stipulates that children be taught in their mother tongue during their beginner years in the primary school, be properly and effectively implemented by every state government in Nigeria.

Endnote

¹ What obtains in all the secondary school selected for this study within the Ilorin metropolis, in terms of negative attitudes towards L1, is a reflection of the common practice in some of the secondary schools in Nigeria; except in the northern part of the country where Hausa native speakers have some degree of loyalty for their language.

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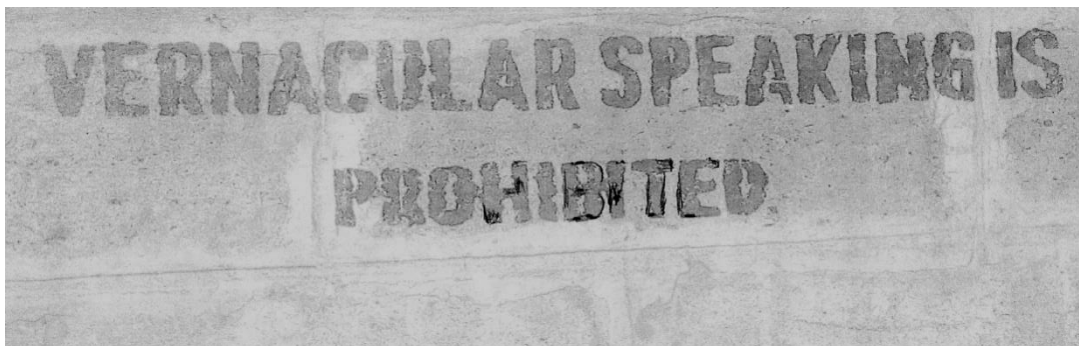
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APPENDIX

Types of Inscriptions from the Selected Secondary Schools, in Ilorin, Prohibiting the Use of Indigenous Nigerian Languages.

As part of the measures taken to prevent the use of indigenous Nigerian languages within the school premises, in some of the secondary schools selected for this study, the inscriptions on the walls of the school classrooms are shown in figures 1-6 below.

Fig. 1



Source: Government Day Secondary School, Karuma, Ilorin, Nigeria

Fig. 2



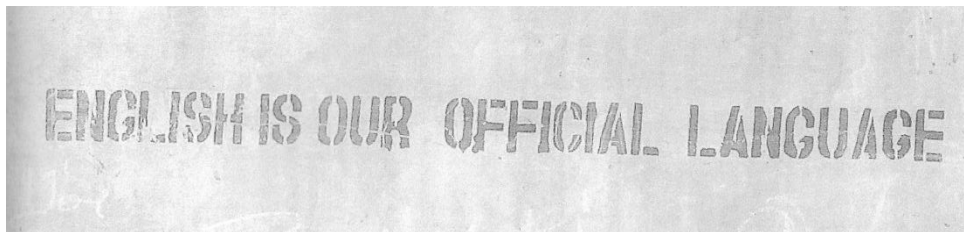
Source: Government High School, Ilorin, Nigeria

Fig. 3



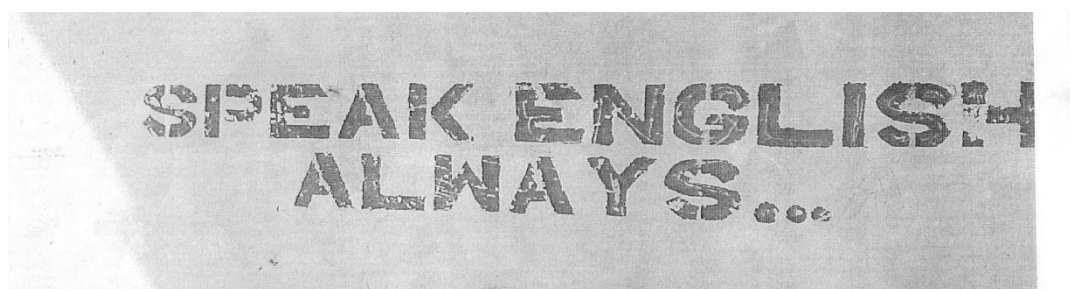
Source: Government Secondary School, Ilorin, Nigeria

Fig. 4



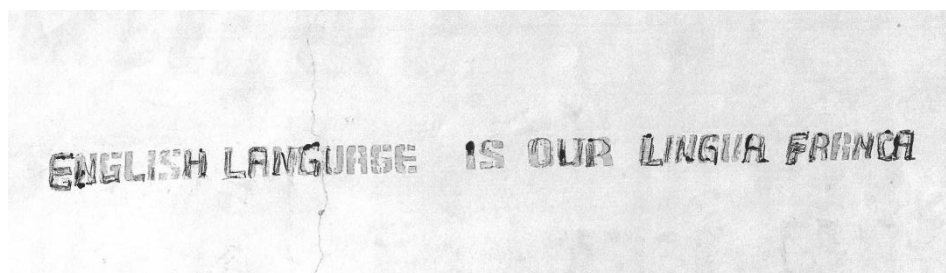
Source: Government Day Secondary School, Ojagbooro, Ilorin, Nigeria

Fig. 5



Source: Baboko Community Secondary School, Ilorin, Nigeria

Fig. 6



Source: Government High School, Ilorin, Nigeria