

Production and Perception Problems of English Dental Fricatives by Yoruba Speakers of English as a Second Language

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Abstract—Pronunciation is one aspect of language that cannot be easily mastered by a second language user, especially after the age of puberty. This paper discusses the difficulties involved in adult learners of a second language. The emphasis is on Yoruba learners of English as second language, with particular reference to the production of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/, which are non-existent in Yoruba language phonology. It is opined that only young children who are ten years or under can truly master the intricacies of a second language, including its phonology. This study, used an unobtrusive observation method as a classroom teacher, complemented by an empirical study. The researcher watched and listened several times to adult student-teachers in their speech behavior. This led to the design of a special passage given to the teacher-trainees by the researcher and was analyzed through frequency counts, to confirm the unobtrusive observations. It was discovered that although there may be production problem on the part of Yoruba speakers of English as a second language, there seems to be no perception problem as mutual intelligibility is still attained, notwithstanding the mispronunciation of these sounds. The study's conclusion is that with the widespread of English globally, variations, especially in pronunciation, are bound to occur, and as long as such variations do not border on unintelligibility, either locally or internationally, they remain part of world's Englishes.

Index Terms—production problem, perception problem, English dental fricatives, Yoruba speakers of English, second language

I. INTRODUCTION/RESEARCH ISSUE

The place of English as a global language is not in dispute. The number of people, spread across the different continents, that uses the language for one purpose or the other, attests to the fact that English is, indeed, a global language. Chinese is said to have a higher number of speakers. The staggering number of Chinese speakers is as a result of China's population, and not necessarily a consequence of the spread of the language across the globe. English, on its part, has been successfully exported round the world to the extent that, through language contact, according to Sinclair (1988), the native speakers no longer have control over it.

In Nigeria, English came in the 18th century with the slave trade. It came then as a foreign language (EFL) as it was and still not indigenous to the Nigerian linguistic environment. Folorunso (2004) conceives a foreign language in relative terms, as a means of communication which is external to the cultural and political homogeneity of the language community. With the colonization of Nigeria by British imperialists, English, being the official language, as well as the language of instruction in western education, grew in leaps and bounds in the country. Today, the language has since changed status from a foreign language that it was at its advent, to a second language that it is now.

A useful distinction is made between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as a second language (ESL), and this is useful for our present purpose. Okedara, (1983) posits that a language is foreign when it is restricted to the classroom as a mere school subject to be taught just as any other school subject. Ogunsiyi, (2004) argues that when, however, a language is not only taught in the classroom as a school subject, but has its use extended to other domains and used extensively, in addition to the mother tongues, it has attained the status of a second language. In addition to the above, Ayodele, (2004) says a foreign language is distinguished from a second language by the higher priority of use which the latter enjoys and that it is acquired, almost as a matter of course as development is being experienced in the mother tongue. This has been the situation of the English language in Nigeria. With the colonization of Nigeria by British imperialists, English became the official language. Today, the language has also become a second language because its use extends to other domains and it is used extensively in addition to the various mother tongues. In Nigeria today, English is not just a subject taught in Nigerian schools, right from the kindergarten: it has also found usage in other areas outside the classroom, where it is used as a medium of instruction. It is also the language of government, commerce, judiciary and bilateral relations. Besides, Fakuade (2004) describes English as the language of social integration among the over two hundred and fifty ethnic nationalities that make up the country and that it is acquired by its users almost as matter of course as they are developing with the mother tongue.

In spite of the varied domains of English use and the manner of acquisition, second language English users in world second largest ESL country still find the articulation of dental fricatives almost impossible to accomplish. This is particularly about Yoruba speakers of English as a second language. As a teacher of English to second language English users at tertiary teacher training institution level, the problem under study always gives a cause for concern because the trainees are supposed to go out and teach at other levels of Nigeria's educational system. If as teachers they cannot correctly articulate these sounds, it then means they may not be able to make their students pronounce these sounds well even when the students are still within the critical age of language learning, because the teachers are not good models. This study was actually motivated by the failure of the persistent efforts of the researcher as a teacher of a course in Spoken English to make adult Yoruba learners of English as a second language produce these sounds correctly.

A. Sociolinguistic/Demographic Background

The Yoruba, the subjects of this study, are a race among the over 250 ethnic nationalities in Nigeria and they number several millions. They are located primarily in the Southwest Nigeria and scattered mainly in six states: Ekiti, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo. The Yoruba language is also a major language spoken in the North Central States of Kwara and Kogi and parts of South East Edo State. Speakers are also scattered thinly across the country as traders, immigrants and civil servants, especially in the Federal Civil Service. Biobaku (1987) confirms that sizeable speakers are found in some parts of Delta state which was also part of the former Western Region, while Fafowora (2007) says the language is also spoken in parts of Benin Republic (Sabe and Ketu) and Togo.

The Yoruba language, according to Encarta Premium Suite (2006), belongs to the Niger-Congo family, found in substantial parts of "sub-Saharan Africa and includes such widely-spoken West African languages as Yoruba and Fulfulde, as well as the Bantu languages of eastern and southern Africa, which includes Swahili and Zulu". There are variants of the Yoruba language depending on the environment, but the variants notwithstanding, there is mutual intelligibility in whatever linguistic domain the language is used.

B. The Problem and Theoretical Background

Linguists have recognized the attendant problem of learning a second language after first acquiring one. Lamendella (1977) says this problem seems to be more acute in the case of adult learners who have passed a critical stage or 'sensitive' period of foreign language acquisition. Lennon (1993) confirms the general belief that only young children can learn to speak a foreign language without any trace of accent at all. O'Connor (1980) also affirms that a child of ten years or under is capable of learning any language, irrespective of the background, if the child is brought up surrounded by that language. This is because the habits of a first language have not become so ingrained that they become difficult to erase. As Rider & McCretton, (1991) in Jakobovits (1968) affirms, this is not unconnected with a psycholinguistic theory of language learning "which emphasizes the developmental nature of the language acquisition process and attributes to the child the specific innate competencies which guide his discovery of the rules of the natural language to which he is exposed" (p.72). Rider and McCretton opine that Jakobovits' theory finds a basis in Chomsky's Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which is a reference to a child's innate capability to derive meaning from the language of his immediate environment and to also construct internal grammar from this.

While it is easy for a young child to learn all the intricacies of a second language, the same cannot be said of adults. The case is even more problematical when it comes to speech. Both young children and adults can learn other aspects of language fairly well. According to Lennon (1993), there are no biological age constraints to the acquisition or learning of vocabulary as new words, and expressions can be acquired or learnt and can be integrated into the already internally stored semantic systems irrespective of the language.

From the foregoing, there is no barrier to the acquisition of new vocabulary and other grammatical structures even in foreign language learning. The same may not be guaranteed in the phonology of a second language especially for an adult learner of a second language. It has been confirmed, by Lennon (1993), that phonology is the strongest evidence that age is a constraint to foreign language learning. This is evident in studies on immigrants to the USA which indicates age of arrival rather than years of residence in the US as a determinant of the extent the speaker would acquire near-native pronunciation.

In this study, the problem of production/perception of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ is examined. These fricatives pose a problem to Yoruba speakers of English as a second language. This may not be unconnected with the non-existence of these sounds in the Yoruba language phonetic alphabets. Wachuku (2004) in a research into Igbo (another major indigenous language in Nigeria) confirms that Igbo also does not have these dental fricatives, thus Igbo users of English as second language, in Nigeria, also have this problem. The effect of this production problem impinges negatively on native speakers' perception of the sounds. This is, however, not the case with fellow Yoruba or Igbo speakers of second language English as they have the same production and perception potentialities.

What this translates to is that while there may be production problem for Yoruba speakers of English as second language, there may be no perception problem. This much is expressed by Awonusi (2007) as regards production and perception problems in English pronunciation by second language English learners and users. He says production deals with sound articulation and perception with discrimination or listening. This is illustrated with the '*fis*' phenomenon by Berko & Brown (1960) in phonology acquisition with a little kid, who was asked to pronounce fish which he pronounced (fis) several times. Trying to imitate the child, the frustrated teacher pronounced 'fish' as *fis* but the kid

retorted, 'No, it is *fis*, not *fis*'. This is evidence that although the child may have production problem, there is no perception problem. The above illustrates the same production versus perception problem of dental fricatives / θ / and / δ / by Yoruba speakers of English as a second language.

C. Justification for the Study

Akeredolu-Ale (2005) has observed that the spoken English of Nigerians is appalling and Ofulue (2007) says correct pronunciation skills are essential for intelligibility, in a second language context. The urge for this study was borne out of the researcher's concern for the consistent failure of second language English teacher-trainees to master these dental fricative sounds, considering the fact that, in the absence of native speakers, they are supposed to be models. Akeredolu-Ale (2005) also identifies these sounds as among those that "many Nigerians have great difficulties with...both when listening and particularly so, when speaking" (p. 51). She goes further to say "...the pronunciation of / θ / and / δ / as [t] and [d], though common, carries a heavy stigma because of its suggestion of Pidgin" (p.54). This is also without prejudice to the assumption that since speech is natural and does not require as much effort as we put into reading and writing, attention need not be accorded it, but the importance of speech cannot be over-emphasized, according to Ballard (2007), bearing in mind that "it provides us with a versatile and instant means of communication... [and] because human language materializes first and foremost as speech" (p. 219/210).

II. PROCEDURE

The unobtrusive observation method as a classroom teacher was complemented by an empirical study. The researcher, a teacher in a College of Education as at the time of the research, watched and listened several times to adult student-teachers in their speech behavior. This led to the design of a special text (see appendix), by the researcher, to confirm the unobtrusive observations. The text was actually set as part of a final examination on a course in Spoken English.

One hundred and one (101) adult student-teachers (teacher-trainees) on a sandwich degree program were given a specially prepared passage that contains the consonant sounds under study, as a practical oral test on a course in Spoken English. None of the words was highlighted so as not to give undue importance to any, but the researcher knew what he was looking for. The copy with him had those ones highlighted. This was done for two different sets for two consecutive years. The 2004 sandwich year comprised 47 students, while the 2005 sandwich year comprised 54 students. There are 32 words in the given text that contain the sounds under study, but only 6, scattered all over the text, were specially focused. The criterion used to select the words out of the many that contain the sounds under study was to select those words that can be contrasted with other words in the text. To that extent the following words were selected:

three [θ ri:] contrasted with tree [tri:]
 faith [fei θ] contrasted with fate [feit]
 theme [θ i:m] contrasted with team [ti:m]
 then [δ en] contrasted with den [den]
 lather [la: δ δ] contrasted with ladder [læd δ]
 weather [we δ δ] contrasted with welder [weld δ]

To recognize the perception problem, students in pairs were listened to read the prepared text containing the specific words the researcher was on the lookout for. One read, while the other one listened as the researcher watched. It was obvious, although it was difficult to measure, that there was no perception problem on the part of the listening respondent.

III. RESULT

The findings of the experiment for the different sandwich years using frequency counts and percentages are shown below.

2004 Sandwich Year (47 n)

	Wrongly Pronounced	Rightly Pronounced	Total
three [θ ri:]	39 (82.98)*	8 (17.02)	47 (100)
faith [fei θ]	41 (87.23)	6 (12.77)	47 (100)
theme [θ i:m]	38 (80.85)	9 (19.15)	47 (100)
then [δ en]	44 (93.62)	3 (6.38)	47 (100)
lather [la: δ δ]	43 (91.49)	4 (8.51)	47 (100)
weather [we δ δ]	43 (91.49)	4 (8.51)	47 (100)

2005 Sandwich Year (54 n)

	Wrongly Pronounced	Rightly Pronounced	Total
three [θ ri:]	47 (87.04)	7 (12.96)	54 (100)
faith [fei θ]	43 (76.63)	11 (20.37)	54 (100)
theme [θ i:m]	49 (90.74)	5 (9.26)	54 (100)
then [δ en]	42 (77.78)	12 (22.22)	54 (100)
lather [la: δ δ]	39 (72.22)	15 (27.78)	54 (100)
weather [we δ δ]	43 (76.63)	11 (20.37)	54 (100)

*Percentage in brackets.

Summary (2004 and 2005 Sandwich Years=101 n)

	Wrongly Pronounced	Rightly Pronounced	Total
three [θ i:]	86 (85.15)	15 (14.85)	101 (100)
faith [feɪθ]	84 (83.17)	17 (16.83)	101 (100)
theme [θ i:m]	87 (86.14)	14 (13.86)	101 (100)
then [ðen]	86 (85.15)	15 (14.85)	101 (100)
lather [la:ðɔ]	82 (81.20)	19 (18.81)	101 (100)
weather [weðɔ]	86 (85.15)	15 (14.85)	101 (100)

The following table shows what obtains in the production/perception of the dental fricatives by this category of speakers of English as a second language.

	as in	produced as	perceived as	as in
/θ/	three[θ ri:]	tree[tri:]	three[θ ri:]	The match started at tree (three) O'clock.
	faith[feɪθ]	fate[feit]	faith[feɪθ]	Their coach, however, advised them to put their fate (faith) in God
	theme[θ i:m]	team[ti:m]	theme[θ i:m]	The team (theme) of his address was 'where there is will, there is away'.
/ð/	as in	produced as	perceived as	as in
	then[ðen]	den[den]	then[ðen]	He directed his little boy to use a ladder to bring down the jerseys and den (then) iron them.
	lather[la:ðɔ]	ladder[lædɔ]	lather[lædɔ]	The washerman had a little difficulty getting the jerseys clean as the soap used did not ladder (lather).
	weather[weðɔ]	welder[weldɔ]	weather[weðɔ]	The welder (weather) was cloudy and the opponent put up a valiant fight.

From the empirical and the observations made, over the years, production problem was obvious, but there was no perception problem, as there was proper perception by all the respondents. Therefore, what Yoruba speakers of English as a second language have is not perception but production problem of English dental fricatives. From the sentences in the fifth column of the tables, intelligibility was not hindered notwithstanding the wrong production of the dental fricatives.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

The Yoruba phonetic alphabets do not contain the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ and so cannot be acquired at infancy. At maturation, trying to learn them becomes difficult as there are immediate alternatives to these sounds in the Yoruba language. Some of the consequences of bilingualism or language contact therefore come into play and these are: interference, simplification and substitution at phonological level. What the Yoruba speaker of English does is to simplify these sounds by substituting the non-existing sounds with the closest in his language. Thus, he:

- substitutes /θ/ with /t/ which exists in both languages and
- substitutes /ð/ with /d/ which exists in both languages.

Since these substitutes have close resemblances, especially with their places of articulation very close to each other such as /θ/- dental and /t/- alveolar and /ð/- dental and /d/- alveolar, substitution becomes easy and this engenders mutual intelligibility, thus making it easier for Yoruba speakers of English as second language to achieve some level of intelligibility which Tiffen (1974), cited by Awonusi (2007) has been put at 64%. This common substitution strategy, according to Akeredolu-Ale (2005) is said to carry a stigma because of its suggestion of Pidgin.

The production problem of dental fricatives does not result into problem of perception by either second language English users or native speakers when they listen. Even when there seems to be an obvious case of wrong articulation, the linguistic environment of the mispronounced sound gives adequate context cue to the intended meaning. To this category of non-native speakers, either the correct pronunciation or the wrong one is perceived correctly, especially when heard in the right linguistic environment. Although such mispronunciation may sometimes affect international intelligibility; this problem can be solved by the context of usage and what Banjo (1996) calls international interaction.

The implications of the production problem of dental fricatives by Yoruba speakers of English may be said to be inconsequential as it may not seriously affect mutual intelligibility among other users of English as the linguistic environment will provide enough clues for comprehension when there is wrong production so that there is no breakdown in communication. That notwithstanding, Akeredolu-Ale (2005) has noted that "there is need for direct teaching, and ...it cannot be completely assumed that learners automatically pick up an acceptable pronunciation" (p.52). The concern of this researcher is who will teach the younger ones, if teacher trainees who are supposed to be models are not getting it right?

Overcoming production problem of dental fricatives by Yoruba speakers of English as second language

The problem of production and perception of these sounds can be solved in a number of ways, instead of the substitution strategy with its stigma. One of the ways of overcoming the problem is training and practice in oral item discrimination and aural perception, with emphasis on the manner and place of articulation. The position of the tongue in the production of these sounds should be emphasized and properly complemented by drills involving these sounds in

contrast with their close substitutes to avoid this problem of production, thus helping in mastering the correct pronunciation of these sounds. This is the view of Olaniyi (2011), in a study of cogno-variability of spoken Nigerian English, where he comes to the conclusion that “education, training and exposure correlate markedly with the Nigerian English speakers’ level of approximation to RP” (p.58)

V. CONCLUSION

The primacy of speech in human communication points to the priority of speech over any other form of communication. Be that as it may, it behooves speakers of any language, either in first or second language situation to pay necessary attention to articulation of sounds to ensure that communication is not impaired in any way. This paper discussed the Yoruba speakers of English as a second language to see their production and perception of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. It was discovered that because of the similarities between these sounds and consonant sounds that exist in both English and Yoruba, especially in their places of articulation that are close and the environment of the sounds, mutual intelligibility is not hindered even when there is mispronunciation. This, however, does not suggest that adequate measures should not be taken to address this problem, which can be done through direct teaching in oral item discrimination and training in aural perception.

This study also revealed that variations, especially in pronunciation, are bound to exist as a result of language contact. These variations, however, may not impinge negatively on mutual intelligibility. We also learnt from this study that contact with local languages may simplify pronunciation in English and still guarantee some measure of international intelligibility so that it may not matter much if it is found somehow different from the standard. Awonusi (2004) says this is acceptable, as there seems to be a relative unanimity among linguists that the concept of “a monolithic form of English” (p.204) no longer exists as the language is now colored by the nuances of host communities where it has been exported and subsequently domesticated. The simplification and substitution methods resulting from interference, one of the consequences of language contact is part of the domestication of the English language to confirm the fact among linguists that English is no longer a homogenous linguistic identity of any group. For example, Kachru (1982), cited in Awonusi (2007) has observed a high degree of mutual intelligibility between RP and many of the non-native, non-RP accents or the institutionalized non-native Englishes. Further, Awonusi (2007) says “statistics have shown that Ghanaian English had 71.5% intelligibility (Brown, 1968), Nigerian English 64% (Tiffen, 1964), Jordanian English is internationally acceptable (Elalani, 1968)”. Trudgill & Hannah (1982) agree that if the contact with local languages makes pronunciation in English easier and without being wrongly perceived, and some measure of international intelligibility is guaranteed, it may not matter much, therefore, if it is found to be at variance with the standard or somehow difficult or different from the standard by native speakers. Ayodele (2004) believes this is part of language phenomenon that as a language spreads; it is modified in some minute ways because of peculiar concepts by the new users. Besides, Millar (2007) says “every language that is spoken continues to change, not just century by century, but day by day” (p.14) and we believe such changes in English become part of the world’s Englishes.

APPENDIX

A facsimile of the administered text for ENG 204: Spoken English (2004&2005 Sandwich Academic Years)

The team played on a dirty pitch. The match started at three O’clock as fans stood under the trees that fenced the pitch. They had their jerseys seriously soiled and so had to be washed instantly. The launderer had a little difficulty getting the jerseys clean as the soap used did not lather. He put out the jerseys in the sun to dry and went to relax waiting for them to dry. He later directed his little boy to use a ladder to bring down the jerseys and then iron them. A new fate awaited the players when play resumed. It was like going to the lion’s den. Their coach, however, encouraged them to put their faith in God, think positively and trust their ability. The weather was cloudy and the opponents put up a valiant fight. At the end of the match, the coach addressed them. The theme of the address was “where there is a will, there is a way”. A welder was later called in to carry out repairs on some damaged iron bars.

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