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Mother Tongue Interference on the Spoken English of Berom Speaking Students in Plateau State Polytechnic

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ABSTRACT: Though many researchers have stressed that the knowledge of one's mother tongue has a great influence on the spoken proficiency of a second language learner (L2), it has been acknowledged that the L2 learner is often challenged with the sounds that are alien to those in his mother tongue. As English and Berom are phonologically different languages (Berom has 25 consonants and 7 vowels while English has 24 consonants and 20 vowels), the alien sounds trouble Berom speakers of English.This study investigates the influence of mother tongue interference on the pronunciation of English sounds among Berom language speakers in Plateau State Polytechnic, Barkin ladi, Nigeria. The study compares the segmental phonemes of English and Berom languages and shows how the differences cause problem in the spoken English of the Berom students.The studyalso attempts to identify the sounds of English which are the most affected by the sounds of Berom, and, suggested activities that will help reduce this influence.

Key words: Berom Language, English sounds, Mother Tongue Interference

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I. INTRODUCTION

Spoken language is an attribute which is only ascribed to human beings (Banjo, 1985). It consists of meaningful sounds which are produced with the aid of three different regions of the body: Head, which performs the function of articulation; Neck, which performs the function of phonation and the Chest: which performs the respiratory function. Every language has its peculiar sound system which is used to generate words, phrases and sentences. Apart from mastering an individual's language sound system, one is also required to master the sound system of other languages to effect wider communication.

In spite of the numerous years that the English language has been accepted as the language for instruction at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels in the Nigerian education system, scholars have disputed that the mastery of the English language has still remained a problem to most Nigerian students (Gaksu, Marcus & Pam, 2017; Abdullah & Phoon 2010; Dustan 1969 & Ling-yan 2010). Nigerian learners of the English language, particularly from tertiary institutions, have difficulty using correct sounds in the oral aspect of the language. Gaksu, Marcus & Pam (2017) argue that the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba native speaking students in Plateau State Polytechnic, Barkin Ladi, have difficulty in the production of certain English sounds that are absent in the three Nigerian major languages. It has also been argued that Hausa speakers of English insert a vowel sound within a consonant cluster (Dustan, 1969), while the Igbo and Yoruba speakers substitute English consonant sounds that are absent in Igbo language (Gaksu et al, 2017). Marcus (2002) also found out that the pronunciation of English sounds by Berom students in St. Joseph's College, Vom, is perceived with a great influence of Mother Tongue (further referred to as MT) interference.

It is worth noting that these previous studies examined various aspects of MT interference by focusing on the spoken English of students of tertiary and secondary institutions in Nigeria; Plateau State Polytechnic and St. Joseph's College in particular; but none focused on the spoken English of Berom language speaking students of Plateau State Polytechnic. Though Gaksu, Marcus & Pam (2017), focused on Plateau State Polytechnic but their language of study was not Berom.

This research studies the interference of Mother Tongue on the spoken English of Berom students in Plateau State Polytechnic, Barkin ladi. Based on this objective, the following research questions were formulated:

1) What sounds of Berom language interfere with those of English?
2) What are the reasons for the interference?
3) How can the level of interference be mitigated?

II. REVIEW

Mother Tongue Interference

In second language learning and acquisition, studies have revealed that the mother tongue has been identified as a point of interference with linguistic features of one language upon another. Quark (1972), affirms this by stating that when two languages co-exist in one society there is bound to be inference of one into another.Crystal (1992), defined the concept "inference" as the introduction of errors into one language. He went further to state that interference typically, occurs while people are learning a foreign language and further asserts that the major problem faced is the difference in the language sound system which may result to difficulty in perception and production of foreign sounds. The assumption here is that points of difference will be areas of potential difficulty in the learning of a foreign language. Jones (1969) identified four kinds of difficulties that are faced on the on-set by second language learners in pronunciation: phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical. Of these levels, the phonological level of interference is the basis of other levels and has been given more impetus in research by scholars. Hence, Ladefoged (1982), laments that the interference of indigenous phonological structure is such that the efficacy of spoken English as a means of communication is fast being lost and if such divergences are not restrained, communication will be easily maintained in the written language.

An overview of the Berom Language

Although the history of the Berom people is still not very comprehensive, Pwajok (1991) posits that the Berom migrated from Egypt after an invasion and settled around Lake Chad before they arrived Nigeria and Plateau state. The meaning of the word Berom has always been linked with the name of the Berom mystical ancestors and the word designates the language and the ethnic group of the people. Gwom (1992) confirmed that the word Berom means *the sent away*. It is presumed that the founding fathers, who were either called *worom* or *orom* (a singular form of the speaker), migrated a very long time ago from old Gobir Empire of Sokoto state to Plateau State and settled in Kabong and Riyom villages where history has confirmed that their earliest men supposedly lived. Sansi (1980) also asserted that the tribe and speakers were called *Shosho* which was a nick name derived from *Sho* their conventional word for salutation. The Berom people have been described as a small but politically prominent people who live in central Nigeria (Gwom, 1992). Predominantly, the speakers are located in the core Jos Plateau and down the low plains of Kaduna State. With a population of over 500,000 speakers, the Berom language is spoken in parts of Plateau and Kaduna States (Gwom, 1992). Berom is the largest single ethnic group in Plateau state and it is significantly represented in Jos North, and constitutes the majority in Jos South, Barkin Ladi and Riyom Local Government Arears of Plateau State. Gwom (1992) distinguishes seven (7) intelligible dialects in Berom language; which are spoken in the eleven districts of Berom. These districts are: Bachi, Du, Fan, Foron, Gashish, Gyel, Heipan, Kuru, Ropp, Riyom and Vwang.

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants of the Study

The participants in this study are 90 Berom male and female students studying at Plateau State Polytechnic. Their ages range from twenty to twenty five. English is their foreign language while their first language is Berom. Their English proficiency level is intermediate and above as it is compulsory for students to have a minimum of credit to be able to enroll at the Polytechnic. All the 90 participants were randomly selected from the six Schools the entire Polytechnic programmes are classified under. Fifteen (15) participants were selected from each of the six Schools and all the participants cut across the various levels of National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes in the institution. The distribution of the selection of the participants is shown below:

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC OF PARTICIPANTS

General Studies		Administration & Business Studies		Engineering		Science & Technology		Environmental Studies		Technical Education	
M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
7	8	7	8	7	8	7	8	7	8	7	8
15		15		15		15		15		15	

Source of Data

This research shall rely on oral interview as the method for data collection. Oral interview involves the use of sounds which are best understood when pronounced. Thismethod involves the active participation of the researcher and the respondents. The data collection instruments used in this study was a pronunciation reading test. All the participants were requested to read a passage comprising of two paragraphs. The participants' reading were recorded and sounds which have not been appropriately pronounced were noted and carefully transcribed. Related literature from the library and relevant articles both published and unpublished were also

used to collect data for this research. More so, as a native speaker of Berom, the researcher also relied on hispersonal knowledge and intuition in the language to generate data.

IV. RESULTS

After all the relevant sounds were recorded and retrieved from the disk, the Daniel Jones' Pronunciation Dictionary (1984) was used to determine the accuracy of the pronunciation as presented below.

TABLE 2 RESPONDENTS' PRONUNCIATION OF THE ENGLISH CONSONANTS SOUNDS

Target Sound	Word	Standard Pronunciation	Respondents' pronunciation	Percentage of correct pronunciation
/p/	Cap	/kæp/	/kæp/	100
/b/	Cab	/kæb/	/kæp/	40
/t/	water	/wɔ:tə/	/wɔ:tə/	100
/d/	warder	/wɔ:də/	/wɔ:də/	100
/k/	crew	/Kru:/	/kru:/	100
/g/	grew	/gru:/	/gru:/	100
/f/	belief	/bili :f/	/bili :f/	100
/v/	believe	/bili :v/	/bili :f/	40
/θ/	thought	/θɔ:t/	/tɔ:t/	20
/ð/	That	/ðət/	/dət/	20
/s/	niece	/ni:s/	/ni:s/	100
/z/	knees	/ni:z/	/ni:s/	40
/ʧ/	choke	/ʧəuk/	/ʧəuk/	100
/dʒ/	Joke	/dʒəuk/	/dʒəuk/	100
/ʃ/	pressure	/preʃə/	/preʃə/	100
/ʒ/	pleasure	/pleʒə/	/pleʃə/	20
/m/	some	/s^m/	/s^m/	100
/n/	Son	/s^n/	/s^n/	100
/r/	praise	/preiz/	/preiz/	100
/l/	plays	/pleiz/	/pleiz/	100
/h/	heart	/ha:t/	/ha:t/	100
/w/	wait	/weit/	/weit/	100
/ŋ/	long	/lɔŋ/	/lɔŋ/	100
/j/	new	/nju:/	/nju:/	100

In the Table 2, the pronunciation of six (6) consonant sounds: /b/, /v/, /z/, /θ/, /ð/ and/ʒ/; by the Berom respondents has been indicated to have variables at certain positions they occupy in a word.In the pronunciation of the sounds /b/, /v/ and /z/ in the final position of the words 'cab', 'belief' and 'knees' 60% of the respondents replaced the sounds with their voiceless pairs: /p/, /f/ and /s/. This replacement clearly reveals a case of devoicing of the sounds when they appear at word endings. For example, the sound /b/ in the word 'cab' was replaced with /p/ at word final and the word was pronounced as /kæp/.

The Table further reveals that 80% of the respondents substituted the sounds /θ/, /ð/ and/ʒ/ with /t/, /d/ and /ʃ/. The substitution probably is because the sounds are absent in the phonology of Berom. In the pronunciation of the word 'thought', for example, the sound /θ/ was replaced with /t/ and the word was perceived as /tɔ:t/.

The phonological variables in the pronunciation of the six (6) consonant sounds described above can be attributed to interference of the Berom sound system. The Berom phonemes /b/, /v/ and /z/, as argued in Marcus (2012), do not occupy final position in words, as such, in their production, they were replaced with their voiceless pairs. The sounds /ɵ/, /ð/, and /ʒ/ are also not found in the phonetic inventory of Berom. Consequently, they were replaced with the sounds /d/, /t/ and /ʃ/ because of their proximity in similar phonetic features.

TABLE 3 RESPONDENTS' PRONUNCIATION OF THE ENGLISH VOWEL SOUNDS

Target Sound	Word	Standard Pronunciation	Respondents Pronunciation	Percentage of Correct Pronunciation
/i:/	Seek	/si:k/	/sik/	30
/i/	Sick	/sik/	/sik/	100
/a:/	March	/ma:tʃ/	/matʃ/	30
/æ/	Match	/mætʃ/	/matʃ/	20

/ɔ:/	Port	/pɔ:t/	/pɔt/	30
/ɔ/	Pot	/pɔt/	/pɔt/	100
/u/	Full	/ful/	/ful	100
/u:/	Fool	/fu:l/	/ful/	30
/ʌ/	Such	/sʌʧ/	/sɔʧ/	20
/ə:/	search	/sə:tʃ/	/satʃ/	20
/ei/	Late	/leit/	/leit/	100
/ai/	Light	/lait/	/lait/	100
/iə/	Hear	/hiə/	/hia/	20
/ɛə/	Hair	/hɛə/	/hia/	20
/au/	Bow	/bau/	/bau/	100
/əu/	Bow	/bəu/	/bau/	20
/ɔi/	Joy	/dʒɔi/	/dʒɔi/	100
/e/	Cell	/sel/	/sel/	100
/ə/	admires	/ədmaiəz/	/admaiaz/	20
/uə/	Poor	/puə/	/pua/	20

Table 3 has shown the pronunciation of twelve (12) vowel sounds by the Berom respondents to be accompanied with some strain.In the pronunciation of the English long vowels /i:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/ , and /u:/, 80% of the respondents produced the sounds as short vowels. Thus, the sounds were perceived to be produced as /i/, /a/, /ɔ/ and /u/. For example, in the pronunciation of the sound /i:/ in 'seek', the long vowel was shortened to /i/ and the word was pronounced as /sik/.

The unstressed schwa sound/ə/ in the sound /ə:/, and in the diphthongs /əu/, /iə/, /eə/ and /uə/ was replaced and produced as the stressed sound /a/ by 80% of the respondents. For example, the word 'hear' was perceived as /hia/. Thus, the diphthongs were produced as independent sounds (monopthongs) and the final unstressed schwa is stressed and produced as the sound /a/.Also, the sounds /ʌ/ and /æ/ were replaced with /ɔ/ and /a/. For example, the word 'such' was produced as /sɔtʃ/ while 'search' was pronounced as /satʃ/.

V. DISCUSSION

The first research question in this study was: What sounds of Berom language interfere with those of English?

The result presented in Tables 1 and 2 above indicate that the pronunciation of six (6) consonant sounds: /b/, /v/, /z/, /θ/, /ð/ and/ʒ/; and twelve vowel sounds: /i:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/ , /u:/, /əu/, /iə/, /eə/, /uə/, /ə/, /ə:/, /ʌ/ and /æ/ by the selected Berom respondents interferes with those of English.

Consequently, the study has found that in the production of eighteen (18) English sounds, there was an interference of Mother Tongue. This finding confirms with Crystal's assertion that when we speak a foreign language we tend to attempt to do so using the familiar sounds and sound patterns of our mother tongue (Crystal, 1992).

The second research question in this study was: What are the reasons for the interference?

Among the eighteen (18) English sounds in which we have identified some difficulties in their pronunciation, only three sounds /b/, /v/ and /z/ are common to English and Berom sound systems. This means that the pronunciation of fifteen (15) sounds, that are absent in Berom, is accompanied with some phonological problems.

The third research question in the study was: How can the level of interference be mitigated?

The Berom speaking students should be exposed to intensive pronunciation training as practice makes perfect. They must learn to recognize the various speech sounds that occur in the language and their acoustic qualities. Luo (2014), proposes the use of a tongue twister for pronunciation training and recommends easy twisters like "a bitter biting bittern", "a lusty lady", "a flea and a fly", "a big black bug", "do tongue twisters twist your tongue?" etc.

Secondly, the English language teachers in the Polytechnic should implore the use of learning strategies like self-help learning, self-directed learning or autonomous learning (Hedge, 2002).

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, a number of major findings about Mother Tongue interference on the pronunciation of English sounds by the Berom speaking students of Plateau State Polytechnic, emerged from this study. Firstly, there is a devoicing of the sounds /b/, /v/, /z/ when they occupy the final position in a word and the shortening of the long vowels /i:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/. Also. The study has shown that the Berom students substitute the English sounds /θ/, /ð/, /ʒ/, /æ/, /^/, /ə/, /ə:/ with sounds which have their close phonetic features in Berom and replace the final segment of the following centering diphthongs /iə/, /ɛə/, /uə/ with the sound /a/.

It is clear from the above statements presented in this paper that the Beromstudents should give more importance to study the phonetics of English in order to overcome theinfluence of mother tongue. It is necessaryfor them to memorize the symbols of the English sounds properly and to apply them in speech

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