Full Length Research Paper

An appraisal of spoken English Language in Nigeria

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A general observation in the Nigerian classrooms today is that spoken language has not been accorded the recognition it rightly deserves. This is not surprising for approaches to language teaching in these areas have not been reviewed to reflect the revolutionary trend of communicative language teaching pedagogy. To underscore this, a study was carried out among two Nigerian speakers of English who were admitted to study at the University of Leeds using three monologic tasks. The study showed that features often found in spoken language like paratactic phrases, pausing, incomplete sentences, false starts, formulaic chunks were not fully exploited. The study therefore canvassed that teachers should teach these specific linguistic features which distinctly characterize spoken language using tasks that can enhance production and boost confidence in the focal participants and increased their ability to use language in real situation

Key words: Nigeria, appraisal, spoken, English language.

INTRODUCTION

Spoken language has not been accorded the recognition it rightly deserves in ESL classrooms (Bygate, 2001) and Nigeria classrooms are no exception. This is not surprising for as Bygate points out, approaches to language teaching in these areas have not been reviewed to reflect the revolutionary trend of communicative language teaching pedagogy. Information processing is intricately complex (Bell, 2003). De Bot's (1992) model of speaking in a bilingual situation is an essay to depict what happens in speech of L2. It basically draws on Levelt’s (1989) model of language production in a monolingual setting. Cognitive processing, Levelt (1989) says, occurs in three areas, to wit: the conceptualizer, the formulator, and the articulator. The conceptualizer, divided into macroplanning and microplanning stages, is the engine room of communication. In other words, when the ‘addressor’ is thinking about his intents and goals, s/he is as yet, has no idea of language to use, but when s/he goes into the ‘store’ ready to retrieve information to realize his intent and goals, only then is the language made available to the addressor. This is what he sends to the formulator as ‘pre-verbal message’. In the formulator, the ‘preverbal message’ metamorphosed into speech plan through the choice of correct lexical words bound by linguistic rules by the addressor. The articulator translates speech into reality. And while processing is on going the speech comprehension system provides a check on the output to see if there is any modification to be made.

It is therefore obvious from this model that information processing is complex. That is not all. The demands that the language placed on users are enormous (Gardner, 2001). According to Gardner (2001), ‘they [users] need to acquire language content, skills, develop some degree of automaticity and fluency with their handling of the language; and ultimately, develop some degree of willingness to use the language outside of the classroom’. These are no small set of requirements.

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Background to the context

The importance of English in Nigerian society cannot be overemphasized. In fact, the mastery of the English language holds high hopes for the individual learner in Nigeria. It could guarantee social, economic and political advantages (Adegbite, 2005). Also, proficiency in English language could brighten an individual’s chances of gaining admission for higher studies and promotion to positions of responsibility (Eka, 1995). In addition to the already existing multiplicity of languages, the English language is used for conducting official business. It also enjoys dominance in international communications (Ogunsiji, 2001). Olasehinde (1994), views English as the window of the world to Nigeria, making it possible for the nation to have free exchange of information with international community. To further underscore the importance of English, Lawal, (1989) asserts that were English to be outlawed for 5 min, life would grind to a halt.

The problems of many Nigerian students in spoken English could be traced to many different sources, such as personal and physical impediment of speech, interlingual and intralingual sources, and a host of other environmental problems. First, it is instructive to note that Nigerian languages are very active in and outside the classrooms. Nigerian learners’ use their native languages when dealing with people who speak their languages in schools and even in government offices. This is not surprising because many of them are already used to their mother tongue for the purpose of communication. The result of this is that these learners do not see why they have to learn English at school (Oyinloye, 2002).

Besides, learners’ competence in their L1 means that some particular English sounds would be difficult for them to identify and articulate. Bamgbose (1971) observes that the greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerians is the sound systems of the vernacular languages. For example the Yorubas realise /l/ with /v/; Hausas /p/ with /t/; and the Igbo /t/ with /th/ (Dunstan, 1967). It is therefore not difficult to see why spoken language with its attendant problems of ‘undiminished sound energy at word boundaries’ and ‘co-articulation’ (Anderson, 1995) are demanding for learners’ in this context to grapple with.

The teachers’ attitudes too have not helped matters when it comes to oral work in English. Teachers who were not good at teaching such aspects of the language often avoid, skip or brush over them to the detriment of the learners. Yet another possible hindrance is the emphasis placed on written examination in Nigeria. Many inspectors of education would only see the teacher as having done anything in an English class only when there is visible evidence of written work.

In Nigerian language classrooms today too, studying speaking is found difficult in that the skill of teaching speaking cannot be strictly detached from other ongoing activities. And more often than not, teaching speaking overlaps, especially, writing. Research studies by linguists and discourse analysts reveal that there are specific linguistic features which distinctly characterize spoken and written language (Brown, 1994b; Burns, 2001; McCarthy and Carter, 1995). Brown (1994b), especially, provides simple uncluttered summary of the distinctions between spoken language and written language using the criteria of production time, into national properties, complexity, density, permanence and function.

Dialogues often used with learners in Nigerian language classrooms have also been noted to invariably concentrate on structures (Ogunsiji, 2001). In Nigeria for instance, many of the English textbooks reveal that the authors do not show much concern for oral work in English as they do for written work. The result of this is that teachers start building up vocabulary stock instead of teaching the pupils speech production.

Still there are other reasons for this state of the affairs. In Nigeria, it is noteworthy that, at school, many Nigerian students feel rather timid to speak English to teachers and peers for fear of being mocked should they commit errors of grammar or pronunciation. The teacher is always at the ready to correct learners whenever they make mistakes and quite often in a non-tactful manner. The learners’ ‘language ego’ (Brown, 1994a) as it is, is what is being bruised. This is a development which Lynch (1996) describes as ‘imposing emotional burden on the learner’. And when this happens learners will switch off, for few things are more inhibiting than been constantly corrected.

This, therefore, is the social milieu in which learners in Nigeria are expected to speak the language correctly and appropriately. It is indeed a daunting task.

The problem

In this context, the pedagogy of speaking can be looked at from two perspectives. Oderinde (1979) in Oyinloye (2002) identifies the aims as: (1) The ability to understand without difficulty spoken English which satisfies the requirements of national and international intelligibility; (2) The ability to express oneself clearly in flexible conversation the features of which are nationally and internationally acceptable. The study, therefore, is an attempt to examine samples of spoken text of the selected participants with a view to finding out whether features often found in spoken language like paratactic phrases, pausing, incomplete sentences, false starts, formulaic chunks are fully exploited and satisfies the requirements of national and international intelligibility.

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this task were two Nigerian speakers of
English studying at the University of Leeds. They had just been admitted to study various courses at the undergraduate level after finishing their Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) exams in some Nigerian public schools. The choice of these students was because it was reasoned that the students would have been studying English language for at least twelve years through their Primary, Junior Secondary School (JSS) and Senior Secondary School (SSS) education; and they would have gained enough experience in learning English. Of the two, one is a male herein called participant A; and the other a female; participant B.

Skehan (1996) identified three performance variables or pedagogic goals that would impact on a task: fluency, accuracy and complexity. Ellis (2003) points out that any of the three pedagogic goals can be appraised individually or collectively; however, the tasks used in this study was aimed at measuring fluency in the participants because. A pertinent question at this stage would be why fluency? Richards and Rogers (2001) aptly sum up the author’s conviction in that ‘our attitude to language and the way it is taught reflects cultural biases and beliefs about how we should communicate…educate each other’.

It is instructive to note that there are many perspectives on fluency in the literature (Fillmore, 1979; Riggenbac, 2000). However, what is unvaried in these perspectives is the ‘temporal feature’ of fluency (Bell, 2003). Koponen and Riggenbach (2000) define fluency as ‘rapid smooth, accurate, lucid and efficient translation of thought or communicative intention into language under the temporal constraints of on-line’; while Fillmore (1979)’s view on fluency has to do with ‘one who can utilize language effectively in different situations’. To measure fluency in Nigerian learners using Koponen and Riggenbach, (2000)’s dimension would not be appropriate because the requirement will be a bit daunting for the students; rather Fillmore (1979)’s view of a fluent speaker is better suited to the Nigerian context for now with Koponen and Riggenbach’s level of fluency being the ultimate target.

**Instrument**

In order to assess participants’ fluency in English language, a monologic task in which participants recall personal experience was given: participants were asked to describe a point in their childhood when life seemed to change. This kind of task, it has been argued, gives access to easily retrievable information and ultimately enhanced fluency.

**Procedure**

1. Participants were asked to think about the set task for 10 min
2. According to Mehnert (1998), when participants are given planning time, it promotes fluency, complex sentence structure. This is done to reduce pressure on the participants.
3. Time limits of 5 min were given for production.
4. Participants’ speeches were recorded individually in their shared accommodation at the University of Leeds. The audio recording was transcribed. Occasional speech errors made by participants were not corrected; instead, they were transcribed as they had actually occurred.
5. Evaluation of the tasks was carried out on the focal participants

**The task and the criteria used**

Two criteria were considered for the task given in this study: motivation and the naturalness of the task. Motivation is particularly important in the author’s context because studies (Bello, 2010; Ogar, 2007) into the poor performance of students in English language have been anchored on lack of motivation of the tasks given to students in the classroom. The other criterion considered is the ‘naturalness of the task’ which Guariento & Morley (2001, p.350) admit must be utilized in order not to make learners become ‘frustrated, confused and more importantly demotivated’.

**DISCUSSION OF THE PARTICIPANTS’ PERFORMANCE DURING THE SPEAKING PROCESS**

Going by Brown’s (1977) observation that fluent speakers’ adeptness lies in the fact that they keep going even when few words are said; it is safe to conclude that participants A and B are both fluent in their performance. Participant B particularly produced more fluent performance because she had few examples of pauses and hesitations, when compared to participant A.

Learners in L2 employ strategies and these two speakers are no exception. Two problems readily account for the use of strategies in speaking; these according to Bygate et al. (2001) are apprehension of the intended message and the possible ways of rendering it. Hedge (2000) equally observes that it is an indication that there is a ‘gap’ which needs to be attended to by the teacher.

It is noteworthy that the participants’ performance exhibits instances of reformulations/false starts, repetitions, hesitations marked by fillers and pauses. Particularly, hesitations and pauses were used to fill the vacuum while they grope around for lexical resources to discuss the topic. This is a clear indication that information processing is daunting and intricately complex and that it does not really matter whether participants were giving time to plan or not (Forster and Skehan,
Implication of the task for the teaching of spoken English in Nigerian classrooms

The strength of the task lies in the fact that it motivates the participants to speak. Apart from that the task could be used to expose students to various narrative skills, such as clarity, explicitness, demonstration, voice modulation and vivid presentation of ideas. The task is also able to attend to the three components of this type of narration: beginning, middle and the end. This inherent structure of the task can be used to teach frame. Its weakness however lies in the fact that it cannot be used to teach negotiation skills (turn taking, opening and closing gambits) which deals strictly with on-line processing usually found in conversational type of speech.

The task draws on the past experience of the speaker. This task takes the form of a story and as a story often involves a sequential treatment of plot interspersed with flashback, the student attention may be drawn to the markers of temporal shifts, the use of direct and indirect speech to report events, 3rd person pronouns to introduce participants, and the 1st person pronoun 'I' used by the narrator subject.

Learners’ attention can be drawn to the features of spoken language such as reformulations, false starts, repetitions, hesitations marked by fillers and pauses which would show them the difference between spoken and written texts. Students’ awareness of exclamatory expressions like: Wow!, Okay, Yeah!, Yes!, Great!, Alright!, which showed that a message was comprehended would also be of help to them in spoken texts.

An evaluation of the language used in the task showed that the participants made use of communicative strategies. Communicative strategies are usually employed by students when there is a ‘gap’ in their speech and they are indications that there is a need to be attended to by the teacher. It was also noticed that focal participants sometimes switched from the conventional past tense to the present tense. The form of the verb ‘be’ is the worst offender. The observation as gleaned from this task is very useful in that it will help the teacher plan on how best to drive forward learners’ linguistic competence (Anderson et al., 2004).

When teachers facilitate opportunities of using the language through various classroom activities, learners should seize the opportunities provided for communication. Such opportunities will result in their heightened motivation and awareness of the intricacies of language use.

For oracy to thrive in the classrooms teachers need to encourage risk taking in the classroom and utilize communicative activities such as the one provided by this task to assist learners in feeling less anxious and lower their inhibitions.

Teaching methods in contexts such as Nigeria must be pragmatic. In this wise the writer advocates that teachers of English as a second language adopt task-based approach for the teaching of English-speaking skills. It is very appropriate in a second language situation like ours, as it will,

...exert the greatest pressure on them [students]to use their latent resources, to provide those experiences which urge them towards the widest range of language’ (Anderson et al., 1984)

Other tasks such as arguing a point (debate), giving an eye-witness account, describing how a piece of equipment works (Anderson et al., 1984) should be introduced from time to time, so as to teach speaking skills pragmatically.

Conclusion

Research has consistently shown that learners cannot attain high level competence in the use of the target language if production is not encouraged. Brown (1977) observes that the intense use to which spoken English is put today necessitates this. The corollary of the revelation that spoken language has distinctive features made it necessary to rethink on how language can be taught in the classrooms. The ‘idealistic view’ that when speaking is taught, the learner would literally ‘pick up the’ communicative language ability by simply learning pronunciation is no longer tenable. If we are hoping to make our learners communicate competently in English in Nigeria, then it seems fair to assume that speaking skills will play a part in the overall competence.

REFERENCES

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Appendix 1

Transcription of part of the recorded participants’ speech.

NB: (+ indicates a slight pause and ++, +++ show longer ones. The use of ellipsis here does not constitute part of the utterance).

Participant A

Pauses/fillers

‘Err it all started er + when I was in er my HSC ++ that is the senior five and senior six+ life +++ Now what happened is that when I was in senior five I was staying with brother ++ who is relatively+ well off…..’

‘So at the end of 1990 ++that is at around er November my brother left me in town we were staying in a town in Nigeria called Jinja I was studying in a school called the ++ St James Secondary School and what happened is that my brother left there and went to the village left me in town and when he reach there he fell sick++’

‘…Christmas reached ++I ++ had a very lonely time + that I had never experience in my life…’

Reformulation/false starts:

‘So what happened is that I started moving in town to look for some work to do at least to have a living Now ++at least I was - er I didn’t know it was lack++ I got - er some ++ Asian business man + he allowed me to keep on ferrying things to the shop…’

Repetition of phrases or frames

‘…so what happened is that I started moving in town …’

‘so …my brother left me in town we were staying in a town in Nigeria called Jinja I was studying in a school called the++ St James Secondary School and what happened is that my brother left there …’

‘Now to go back to school again now I started again now getting some conflict with the teacher why are you overdodging class?’

Achievement strategies

‘I have to budget my time :for I have to make plans

‘…I started moving in town to look for some work to do at least to have a living…’ for make a living.

‘…why are you overdodging class’: for playing truancy.

‘…I had started joining bad characters…’ bad gang maybe.

‘…this boy is a gone case…’ for his case was hopeless

‘…he allowed me to keep on ferrying things to the shop: For possibly carrying something

Participant B

Pauses/ fillers

‘Ok+ m’m this all happened about +++ er some 22 years ago+++ when one evening my father showed up ++ in front of my little room + where I used to live in a government secondary school +which I attended + in one of the villages in my country ++ and er ++he told me that there was somebody++ who wanted to marry me I – I first looked at…’

Repetition

‘Then he he said ok ok he’s he’s not going to talk about it’
‘Papa said no + you just come + come’

Achievement strategies

‘I thought fast’ -----for possibly played a fast one on.

‘…my father cornered me into the room’ for possibly steered me into the room.

‘I had suspected that that would happen + so I + er er braved it and told him’ ----- for possibly summed up courage.

‘I already had to budget into the future for it’ for plan maybe.

Reformulation/false start

‘But my life really changed + That’s why I think that it was something that happened+ that changed my life because I started taking responsibility for myself++ to the extent that any little money I had I already had to budget into the future for it+ knowing that I need - because I knew- I was not- I didn’t know when I was going to get any Francs again + and that really changed my life.’