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The Impact of Mother Tongue Interference on the Academic Performance of Students: A Study of English Language Usage in NACEST.

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ABSTRACT

Language encompasses the communication system employed by specific communities or nations for communication; it comprises spoken and written symbols, grammar, vocabulary, and guidelines for organizing and expressing concepts. Through language individuals are empowered to convey ideas, emotions, and information, which fosters interaction and comprehension among individuals. Nigeria is multilingual nation that uses English language as its main medium of intra and international communication faces the challenge of mother tongue interference, especially in the use of English as a medium for academic instruction. This paper gives an overview of mother tongue interference and its effect on the academic performance of students, it highlights the different aspects of mother tongue interference, it also critically evaluates the impact of mother tongue interference on listening, reading, writing and speaking which are basic language skills and how these challenges affect the entire comprehension rate of students. The paper discusses the different ways the impact of mother tongue interference can be mitigated in tertiary institutions of learning with a view to improving the teaching and learning experience.

Keywords: Mother tongue interference, Academic performance, English language usage, NACEST students

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INTRODUCTION

Language is as old as man, it is the fulcrum on which human society thrives, as it plays a prominent role in shaping culture and fostering effective communication and interaction among individuals and nations. Language encompasses the communication system employed by specific communities or nations for communication; it comprises spoken and written symbols, grammar, vocabulary, and guidelines for organizing and expressing concepts. Through language individuals are empowered to convey ideas, emotions, and information, which fosters interaction and comprehension among individuals. The first language that an individual is exposed to, and masters in life is called the mother tongue or L1. According to Rahman et al, L1 refers to the language that is revealed to children from birth until the end of the critical period before puberty. The position the L1 holds in the life of humans is exceptional, as it is the language that humans learn most of the primary and central concepts in life. This language affects the user's ability to learn a second language; this is known as mother tongue interference.

Mother tongue interference also known as language transfer refers to a situation where an individual's first language (L1) interferes with, or exerts a strong influence on the individual's ability to learn and effectively use a second language because elements of the speaker's mother tongue (L1) are transferred into the second language (L2) which affects the speaker's ability to learn and competence in the second language. Mother tongue interference is a common phenomenon in language learning and understanding and can manifest in accent, pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure, understanding its different forms can assist educators in addressing these challenges by developing targeted strategies that will help students improve their pronunciation skills.

Nigeria, a heterogeneous entity with a multiplicity of languages and dialects faces the problem of mother tongue interference, the English language thrust on the nation by the colonial masters largely for administrative convenience has now become the main medium of communication within the country and internationally. However, most Nigerians are bi-lingual, that is, they have their mother tongue and the acquired language which is English, which to a large extent affects communication because the linguistic pattern of the mother tongue (L1) is unwittingly transferred unto the English language causing interference which prevents mutual understandability and international intelligibility. In Nigeria, English is the medium of instruction from the primary to the tertiary institutions of learning. In Nigeria, the position and importance of English language in education can be seen in the fact that English la language is a core subject at primary and secondary schools. In tertiary institutions of learning the general studies courses, Use of English and Communication in English are mandatory across all departments, in polytechnics in particular, the NBTE curriculum has been designed with prominence given to English courses across the departments, underscoring the importance of English language in Nigeria,

Types of Mother Tongue Interference

Phonological Interference

Phonological interference involves the mispronunciation of sounds in the target language due to the learner's native language's sound system. Sounds and phonetic patterns from a student's native language can be carried over when speaking English, causing mispronunciation of certain words or sounds. For example, in some Nigerian languages the

sounds, /r/ and /l/ are used interchangeably without distinguishing between both sounds, this is often carried into the English language resulting in poor pronunciation that blurs meaning. Breeding may be pronounced as bleeding, completely changing the intended meaning, then some English sounds might not exist in certain Nigerian languages, making it difficult to pronounce.

Grammatical Interference

Grammatical interference occurs when grammatical structures or vocabulary from the mother tongue are inappropriately transferred into the target language which often results in errors in word order, awkward phrasing, sentence structure, or the use of articles and verb tenses.

Lexical Interference

This happens when the learner uses vocabulary from his/her native language, either directly translating words or phrases or using words with incorrect meanings in the target language. This also includes difficulties in understanding the fine nuances of word usage and meanings in the target language. For example, the Tiv sentence, msoo nenge Miss Orduen means I want to see Miss Orduen, but a learner can translate it directly as, I want look Miss Orduen which does not accurately convey the intended meaning.

Semantic Interference

This is interference at the level of meaning; this happens when learners misunderstand the meaning of words or phrases in the target language due to the influence of their native language which can lead to misinterpretations and incorrect usage.

Orthographic Interference

Orthographic interference affects spelling and writing systems. It may involve using the spelling patterns of the native language when writing in the target language, or misinterpreting the target language's writing system. For example, the Tiv speaker may spell the English word father, fada transferring the Tiv spelling into English.

Cultural Interference

Cultural interference can affect communication by impacting the understanding of cultural norms and social cues related to language use, leading to potential misunderstandings or inappropriate behaviour.

Mother tongue interference is a common linguistic phenomenon in Nigeria because of the multilingual nature of the Nigerian State. Some linguists have conservatively placed the number of languages in Nigeria at 350, while others believe that Nigeria has about 500 independent languages and dialects. Because of this English has assumed the status of official language in Nigeria, it is the bridge that connects the different ethnicities that make up the nation Nigeria, and a crucial medium of instruction at all levels of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria. However, because of the heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, students are exposed to a rich linguistic diversity from childhood which in turn affects their ability to learn English and use it competently because the linguistic patterns of the native language are often transferred into the English language. The effect of the mother tongue is more often felt prominently in accent, pronunciation, grammar and sentence structure. This succinctly captured by Hansel (2017) acknowledges that the distinct phonological structures

of the native language can affect how children articulate English speech sounds, which often results in mispronunciation and difficulties being understood. Mother tongue interference can negatively impact students' ability to learn, comprehend and communicate effectively and also affects a student's overall performance since English is the main medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. Although, some research has been carried out on the effects of interference on English language, most of the research done in this area singled out one or two languages as a case study. However, this research looks at the impact of mother tongue interference on polytechnic students from varied linguistic background, who are collectively instructed using English language as the primary medium. The research also focuses on to mitigate the impact of mother tongue interference, and how students can be helped to communicate and use English effectively, which will in turn enhance the student's overall academic performance. This will be realised through the creation of a control group for the study, using selected students and lecturers from Nigerian Army College of Environmental Science and Technology (NACEST) Makurdi.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mother tongue interference is a common phenomenon in Nigeria; mother tongue interference impacts different aspects of English language learning and use. According to Fadzilah (2018) mother tongue interference causes non-native speakers to make mistakes in language basics, including speaking and degrades non-native speakers' speech. Loewen and Sato (2019) aver that second language learners tend to copy their native language. Adewale and Yusuf (2020) assessed the impact of Yoruba language on students' English performance in Polytechnics in Nigeria with a focus on Institution in the South Western part of Nigeria, they concluded that the tonal nature of Yoruba language seriously impacted students' usage of English language, causing students to mispronounce English words which affects the student's comprehension rate and ultimately leads to poor academic outcomes. Mitigating the impact of mother tongue interference on English among Nigerian students is a need that cannot be over emphasized, considering the pivotal role of English language in Nigeria. Hadayat and Clarita (2020) found that English is the most spoken language in many countries. For Singh and Maniam (2018), technology and communication depend on English. Listening, reading, speaking and writing are interconnected. Effective communication boosts students' confidence. Still highlighting of effective communication, Tarvin (2014) posits that the ability to use language ore communicate in a manner that is culturally appropriate, make meanings and accomplish social task with efficacy and fluency is the hallmark of communicative competence. This research tows Tarvin's line of thought as it considers communicative competence a speaker's ability to use a language within the ambit of the rules governing the use of the language. This is where the challenge lies, the L1 of the student affects the L2 (English language) which is the language of communication and learning, thus affecting the learner's competence and intelligibility. Scholars have presented from varying perspectives the roles language, English language in particular in this context, plays in national development. Sutton (1991) avers that, language can be used in many ways; one of them is in specific purpose areas such as social or cultural communications, government decisions, political debates, and the media which could foster national development. English language serves the aforementioned specific purposes in Nigeria. The National Policy on Education (4^{th} ed,2004) underscores the importance of language in national development when it states, "Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interactions and national cohesion, and preserving cultures."

Language is but a garment of thought which should be jogging along with it, hand in hand.

(Sapir qt) here Sapir basically acknowledges that, language is the vehicle through which human thought is conveyed. Towing the same line of thought, Cruttenden (2001) comments on the relationship between language and thought, gives physiological linkage of thought (brain) and speech mechanism. He further asserts that, thoughts or ideas are formulated at the linguistic level. That is to say, language plays a fundamental role in the articulation of thoughts. National development usually come about through thoughts from great thinkers. These ideas are then captured by language, be it spoken, written or signed. The implementation of these great ideas is also achieved through language. Thus, where there is no language there can be no thought. and no development.

Oyelaran (qt in Emenanjo) Asserts that," development in human affairs implies the continuous promotion of the well-being and security of persons … Development also encompasses making available useable natural resources, promoting economic resources, enriching and strengthening cultural resources and promoting social interaction and national cohesion." All these aspects of development hinged on human and national development all depend on language. The people think in, speak in, listen to attentively and read in understandably.

Some notable Africans have been uncomfortable with the expanding use of the English language at the expense of indigenous languages. NgugiWaThiong'o (1986, cited by Jenkins 2009) claims that English came and forced itself upon a nation (Kenya) … He describes educational dictators which force English upon children by punishing any child caught speaking in a foreign tongue. Chinua Achebe (1975, cited by Jenkins 2009) on the other hand has a positive view of English language. He opines that, English gave Africa a sense of unity. He further argued that English is a worldwide language and believes he should not deny a language he has been given. Schneider (2011) also acknowledges the global nature of the English language, asserting that English in Nigeria is a means of ethnic neutrality as its usage means not one ethnic group has been favoured over the other. He also sees the use of English as a uniting factor among different communities, which can bring many benefits, principal among which, is national development. This is especially important in a country like Nigeria with its diverse composition.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The interlanguage theory is the framework on which this study is anchored. The theory pioneered by Larry Selinker in 1972 posits that second language learners create a unique, evolving linguistic system that incorporates elements from both their native language (L1) and the target language (L2) thus creating a unique, dynamic and systematic language intermediate between their native language (L1) and the target language (L2). This system inevitably influences both languages which ultimately leads to errors at various levels because the learner uses knowledge or patterns from the mother tongue (L1) to understand the new language which ultimately leads to a phenomena like transfers. Key facets of the interlanguage theory include, dynamic systems, systematicity, fossilization, error analysis etc. This theory is highly relevant to this study as it provides a basis for understanding how mother tongue impacts on the learner's ability to acquire and effectively use a second language, in this instance, English language, particularly within the educational setting.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed primary and secondary sources to generate data. For the first phase of the study, one hundred and twenty (120) students from different linguistic backgrounds were selected across all the levels (ND-HND) as participants for the study. To get a well- rounded perspective ten (10) lecturers who take classes at the various levels were also selected as participants in the study.

Table 1: A Breakdown of the Participants in the Study

Distribution of Participants	Number of Lecturers 10	Total Number of Students 120	NDI 42	NDII 36	HNDI 22	HNDII 20
Sex	Males: 5 Females: 5	Males: 53 Females: 67	Males: 17 Females: 25	Males: 16 Females: 20	Males: 10 Females: 12	Males: 10 Females: 10
Linguistic Background	Varied linguistic background	Varied linguistic background				
Number of languages spoken by individual participant.	Bilingual: 8 Multilingual: 2		Bilingual: 37 Trilingual : 5	Bilingual: 30 Multilingual : 6	Bilingual: 19 Multilingual : 1	Bilingual : 20

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 120 students (68 females and 52 males) and ten lecturers (5 males and 5 females) were selected for the first phase of the study. During the personal interviews and interactions, it was discovered that all the students from the different levels, ND-HND had challenges to learning that could be linked to mother tongue interference. Both students and lecturers acknowledge that the transfer of the linguistic pattern of the native language unto the English is more prominently observed in sentence structure, pronunciation and spellings, which poses a serious challenge to the student's communicative competence, writing skills, reading skills, and the overall performance of the student. The NDI students (especially those who had their primary and secondary education in the rural areas) had more learning challenges that could be traced to mother tongue interference than students from urban areas. This resulted primarily from the students' poor basic foundation in English language and a poor grasp of the mechanics of English language usage and inability to understand the lecturer's usage of English language, especially, the lecturer's pronunciation and tonal inflection. The NDI students also complained of being self-conscious and sometimes embarrassed in class which prevents them from contributing actively and intelligibly in class discussions. Furthermore, the varied linguistic background from which the participants were drawn highlighted the fact that the impact of interference is not uniform. Students experienced challenges to varying degrees depending on their background. Among the ten lecturers who participated in the

study, only two (both handle general studies English) have seriously paid attention to the challenges to mutual intelligibility posed by mother tongue interference, although they had at times noticed that their students were lost during lectures.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the negative impact of mother tongue interference or language transfer on the academic performance of students cannot be overemphasized. This study revealed that the mother tongue, which is the student's first language (L1) significantly affects the performance of students whose medium of instruction/learning is English language. Both students and lecturers acknowledge that the transfer of the linguistic pattern of the native language unto the English is more prominently observed in sentence structure, pronunciation and spellings, which affects to a very large extent the student's communicative competence, writing skills, reading skills, and the overall performance of the student. Furthermore, the varied linguistic background from which the participants were drawn highlighted the fact that the impact of interference is not uniform. The individual's linguistic background and immediate environment are key players in determining the level at which interference affects the individual. Considering the impact of mother tongue interference on the student's ability to grasp and internalize learning, lecturers should routinely attend workshops and conferences on bilingual teaching methods, which will help hone their skills as lecturers and also mitigate the impact of mother tongue interference. Additionally, lecturers who handle General Studies courses should make their classes more interactive and incorporate more speaking opportunities, which is a great way to help students their improve their knowledge and command of the English language.

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