

ELT IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES FROM NIGERIAN PIDGIN ENGLISH

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Abstract

While teaching English in Africa we came across a few challenges. Popular use of pidgin and mother tongue accent by our students were common phenomena. The ESL learners used a kind of English which had cultural and semantic connotations. We also observed that the use of pidgin gave them a lot of fluency in communication. To teach Standard English vocabulary and its usage required special efforts on the part of ESL teachers. As the number of ESL learners now runs in to millions, Nigerian English is gaining ground, and some expressions from pidgin are becoming acceptable even among the educated section of Nigerian society. Like Indian variety of English, Nigerian English is being recognized by scholars of repute as a competitor with of Standard English. This paper aims at examining the scope and content of non-standard words and phrases commonly used by Nigerian speakers. Interference made by mother tongue is not in the scope of this paper. We have chosen Nigeria as the area of our study because it is an African country with the largest number of English learners (ESL) in which Mother Tongue (MT) and Nigerian Pidgin (NP) make ESL instructor's job difficult, as the Nigerian English has given entry to several pidgin words, phrases, and usages.

Key words: Mother Tongue, Target Language, Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin English, interference

Introduction

English arrived in Africa with the visits of English sailors, missionaries, traders and colonizers. Nineteenth century was the most favourable period for the growth and development of English in Africa.

Christian missions in no small measure contributed to popularizing the use of English. British Standard English (BSE) has been the Target Language (TL) of all the varieties of English in Africa. English has had both the horizontal as well as the vertical spread. Its geographical spread and the incidence of New English among educational and occupational groups within each country respectively make an interesting study in the field of ELT. The African continent has 54 countries, and over 2000 languages are spoken by the people of this huge continent. Nigeria is the most populous African country, with a population of over 211 million (UN Report 2021).

The Anglophone African countries include Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya, etc. English is a second language in most of the Anglophone countries and the use of the phrase “New English” refers, however, to an established variety of English. With the independence of many African countries, a new wave of emotional love and pride has led to the introduction of Mother Tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary level. Some of these countries might move from ESL status countries to EFL status in a few decades. In Asia, the case of India is a recent example. MT is regaining and reclaiming its rightful place in many Asian countries today (Gokak 1964). Gokak further concludes that it would be no exaggeration to say that it was in the English classroom that the Indian literary renaissance was born. A similar change in the sociolinguistic map of Africa is inevitable. Nigerian classroom encounters make very apt scenario to learn about the changing trends in Africa. The focus of this paper is on Nigeria because Nigeria has the largest number of ESL learners from primary to the higher education, and Nigerian writers are pioneers in heralding a sort of literary renaissance in Africa.

Nigerian English

Nigeria is emerging as one of the biggest Anglophone countries in the world. Interestingly enough, the status and functions of Nigerian English are very similar to the position of English in India. The four functions of the English in India identified by Sridhar in a chapter titled “Indian English” published in the *Handbook of Asian Englishes* (2020) can be easily identified in the Nigerian linguistic situation. Besides these four

factors, English also faces a formidable challenge of ‘multilingualism’ in Nigeria, which is very much the same as in India.

Building upon the typology presented in Kachru, the major functions of English in India may be presented in terms of the following expanded typology:

1. Instrumental: as medium of learning and teaching, information gathering and dissemination, including translation into and from Indian languages;
2. Regulative: as medium of administration and law;
3. Interpersonal: as a link or contact language for regional, national, and international communication and mobility;
4. Imaginative: for expression in creative literature and media. (qtd. by Sridhar in Kachru 1982: 215-216)

Imaginative function (expression in creative literature) is the most powerful function of English. Nigerian writers are leading Africa in imaginative writings. Names of Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa and Zaynab Alkali are well-known all over the world, while several young writers from Nigeria are being recognized globally. One of the most prominent young authors is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an award-winning Nigerian female novelist, short story writer, and non-fiction writer.

From a Dialect to a Standard Variety of English

Nigerian English is in the process of standardization (Odumuh 1987). There is an urgent need to study the distinctive features of its phonology syntax, semantics and grammatical deviations. Some notable studies have been carried out on the Nigerian variety of English (Jowitt 1991; Adekunle 1974). In recent times, a number of scholars have supported the notion that Nigerian English is comparable in status to native varieties such as, American, British, West Indian, or Canadian. According to Odumuh, “Nigerian English is gradually being accorded its rightful status as a legitimate dialect of ‘World Standard English’, whose emergence and stabilization is attributable to several factors: historical, educational, linguistic and sociological, etc.” (1987)

This development is inevitable because of a sociolinguistic truism that “when a language is imported and used as a second language far from its native home, there are bound to be deviations from the norm”. In the opinion of scholars (Adekunle 1974), these deviations become acceptable with the passage of time and their regular use. They become markers of the distinctive features of the non-native variety of English. In the Nigerian context, popular Nigerian English as an inter-language has been functioning as a catalyst in the process of standardization of the Nigerian variety of English. The phonology, syntax, lexis and style of the Nigerian variety of English are being identified by researchers. However, it cannot be denied that the ethnic linguistic features of MT or LI persist in abundance. One can still recognize Yoruba English, Igbo English, and Hausa English, etc. It is hoped that in a few decades, these differences might disappear and give rise to a Standard English as the Target Language.

One of the major tasks for the English teacher at the secondary and tertiary levels is to discourage the use of Pidgin in the English class. The fact is that it is a huge challenge for the English teacher. It is because teachers who teach social sciences and even science subjects continue to allow the use of pidgin. This practice is very common in Nigeria’s primary and secondary schools, and it is not possible for the English teacher to advise them to avoid the use of pidgin. One of the challenging issues is ‘appropriateness’ in Nigerian English. Adetugbo (1975) draws our attention to the use of inappropriate words by students and even teachers in Nigerian classrooms. It is interesting to note that Nigerian newspapers, magazines and even electronic media use Nigerian popular pidgin. Even very eminent novelists and short story writers avail of popular pidgin words and phrases to add an element of realism to their characters. But when Nigerian pidgin enters Nigerian English, it proves to be a huge obstacle in the teaching of the British Standard English, particularly for expatriate teachers. It even slows down the process of the development of a standard Nigerian English.

Origin and Usage of Pidgin

The term pidgin was first recorded in English in 1807, as English was adopted as the business/trade language of Canton (China). It originated as the Chinese mispronunciation of the English word 'business'. Its use spread to other parts of the world as the European trade contact with other parts of the world increased. There are accounts of pidgin being first spoken in colonial Nigeria, before being adopted by other African countries in Central Africa, and along the West African coast. Today, pidgin is widely spoken in Ghana, Benin, Equatorial Guinea, and Cameroon. There are differences because English is mixed with several indigenous languages. In Nigeria, pidgin is very much like a lingua franca. Although Nigerian pidgin can be heard all over the country, it has not been granted any official status by the administration of the country. It is debatable whether Nigerian pidgin deserves a legal status, as a medium of communication. The hold of the British Standard English (BSE) and government's policy is too strong to permit the use of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) in any formal setting. But the entry of 29 Nigerian pidgin words in Oxford English Dictionary's 2020 edition (OED) has greatly emboldened the supporters of Nigerian Pidgin English. Several decades ago, Chinua Achebe had declared, "The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use" (*Morning Yet on Creation Day* 1976). Even Nobel laureate in literature, Wole Soyinka has used some of the Nigerian pidgin words in his writings. OED's inclusion of the NP words and phrases in 2020 edition started a war of words in academic circles. Most of these are loan words or coinages from Nigerian social life and local culture. Most of these coinages are from Yoruba, Hausa, or Ibo languages. ESL teachers cannot refuse their use by their ESL learners, even though they have been against the use of MT and NPE.

NPE as Lingua Franca

Nigerian Pidgin English is often called Naija. In fact, it is an English based creole language spoken as a lingua franca across Nigeria. It is commonly referred to as "Pidgin" or broken (pronounced

“Brokun”). It can be spoken as a pidgin, a creole, slang or decreolized acrolect by different speakers, who may switch between these forms depending on the social setting. A common orthography has been developed for Pidgin which has been gaining significant popularity in giving the language a harmonized writing system. However, it has not received any official recognition from academic institution or universities.

Variations of what this paper refers to as “Nigerian Pidgin English” is also spoken across West and Central Africa, in countries such as Benin, Ghana, and Cameroon. As an example, the English phrase, “How are you?” would be “How you dey?” in Pidgin. It is believed that from 40 to 60 million people speak Pidgin English in Nigeria. NPE is most widely spoken in the oil-rich Niger Delta, where most of its population speaks it as their first language. NP is also used throughout Nigeria as a lingua franca because it breaks the communication barrier between over 250 ethnic groups living in Nigeria. In 2011, Google launched a search interface in Pidgin English entitled, “Effects of Nigerian Pidgin English.” and in 2017 BBC started services in Pidgin English. This shows that PE is gaining popularity in electronic media but some educated parents do not approve of the use of PE in or around their house. They either use standard Nigerian English or their mother tongue.

Varieties of Nigerian Pidgin English

It would be wrong to assume that there is uniformity in the vocabulary of Pidgin throughout Nigeria. Speakers of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa sometimes use different Pidgin words. Expatriate teachers have to pay special attention to regional Pidgin vocabulary, if they move from one region to another to teach ESL. For example, Yoruba’s use SEFI and EBI to begin and end conversation. “You are coming, right?” becomes, “Sebi, you dey come.” Igbos use Nna at the beginning of some sentences to show camaraderie. “Man, that test was very hard” becomes, “Nna mein that test hard no be small.” “You people are crazy.” becomes,

“You dey mad.” A Hausa speaker of NPE would say, “Wallahi-tallahi, mastah! Me no fit drive”, which means, “By God, master! I’m not in a condition to drive.”

Nigerian Pidgin English also varies from place to place. Dialects of NPE include, Warri, Sapele, Umuahia, Benin city, Port Harcourt, and Lagos (in Lagos, one may even notice Onitsha and Ajeduale types). A study of NPE reveals the fact that Nigeria has an interesting sociolinguistic profile. Intra-sentential Code-mixing is a very notable phenomenon even in Nigerian variety of English. Broader paradigm would require research in to the phonology, morpho-syntax, and lexico-semantics of Nigerian English and its dialects. For the last few decades, Nigerian variety of English is getting wider recognition by researchers. It is being used in academic circles too but NPE is yet to get international recognition as a language in its own right, although BBC and OED are trying to appreciate its role as a lingua franca in West Africa and Central Africa.

Following are words and phrases from NP which were included in OED in 2020 (<https://www.oed.com/discover/nigerian-english-in-the-oed?tl=true>):

1. Buka (n) - refers to road-side restaurant or street stall that sells local food at low prices
2. Buketeria is also made from buka. (It is coined from cafeteria)
3. Mama put (n) - means a woman who runs a buka and she can make the kind of food indicated by the customer (A character included in Wole Soyinka’s works.)
4. Danfo (n) - yellow mini-buses whizzing on the busy streets of Lagos
5. Okada (n) - a potentially dangerous motorcycle taxi in Nigerian cities
6. Guber (adj.) - a candidate running for the post of governor of any state
7. Agric (adj. & N) - improved and genetically modified livestock, chicken, etc.
8. Barbing salon (n) - means a barber’s shop
9. Chop (v) - to eat food

10. Chop-chop (n) - bribery or corruption in public life
11. To eat money (v) - be in money, become rich.
12. Konk (v) - to knock on the head using the knuckles
13. Ember months (n) - Months from Sep. to Dec. as months of intense/heightened activity
14. Flag-off (n) - to launch or begin something
15. To flag-off in flag (v)
16. Gist- (n) - an idle chat or gossip or rumour
17. Gist- (v) - to gossip
18. Kannywood (n) - Hausa-language film industry based in Kano (it's a play on Hollywood)
19. K-leg (n) - used figuratively in the meaning of a flaw, problem or setback
20. Next tomorrow (n & adv.) - day after tomorrow
21. Non-indigene (adj. & n) - a stranger to local population
22. To put to bed - it means a woman has given birth to a child
23. Qualitative (adj.) - excellent or of high quality
24. To rub minds (together) (v) - to consider a matter jointly or to consult to work together
25. Sef (adv.) - used for emphasis after a sentence or a rhetorical question (used by Adichie 2013)
26. Send-forth (n) - to state, describe or start something
27. Severally- (adv.) - happening many times
28. Tokunbo (adj.) - yellow buses plying in and going round Lagos' busy roads
29. Zone (v), zoning (n) - divide or separate

Some more examples of Nigerian Pidgin English usage in Nigerian print media and fiction:

1. **Bush Fire** (in the Harmattan, "Like a _____): "The recent open debate on the IMF, which for more than two months raged like a **bush fire** across the land, opened up the possibilities of how society could judge the intention of its government." (*The Nigerian Standard*, 17 Dec. 1985)

2. **Chop:** As a verb, with the meaning ‘consume’, it belongs to Pidgin but is common in NgE, and is regarded as slang; it is unlikely to be found in serious speech or writing.
3. “He has **chopped** all the money”, is a popular and laughter-evoking way of referring to a case of embezzlement.
4. As a noun, ‘Chop’ is the Pidgin word for food and is often used in NPE with ‘money’ in a compound noun, e.g., **Chop** money.
5. **Dash:** A Pidgin word meaning, ‘give’ as a verb or ‘something given’ as a noun, but widely used in spoken Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE). It is found in the speech like narration of Odili in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*.
6. **Customer:** In NPE ‘Customer’ can denote either the buyer or the seller in a market transaction. In SBE ‘Customer’ denotes only the buyer, and is one-word lexeme denoting the seller.
7. **Borrow:** A well-known NPE (V_1, V_2) extension is the use of **borrow** to cover the meaning of ‘lend’, e.g. “I want you to borrow me 5 Naira.” It can be accounted for in terms of MT models, since English ‘borrow’, something from someone, has no literal equivalents in **MT**, and must be interpreted as lend someone something before a close equivalent can be found. In fact, there are hundreds of such expressions used in Nigeria.

ESL Teaching Strategies in Africa: Changing Trends

In African colonies of Britain, the makers of educational policies considered the adoption and use of vernaculars as a sheer waste of time and energy. Rev. M. Sunter, His Majesty’s Inspector of Schools and spokesman for the British government’s educational policy declared during colonial rule: “Use of vernaculars would be of no practical use to civilization. English should be the language of commerce and vehicle of education.” (Fajana 1972) This attitude continued until Nigeria achieved independence from the British in 1960. As the use of MT and NPE was absolutely forbidden by ESL instructors, policy-makers, and administrators, Direct Method was considered the best method for teaching from primary level to higher education. Students were punished officially for using vernacular in school premises. With the changing

trends after 1960 ESL teachers started adopting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, and in the early part of the 21st century, the Eclectic Approach has found great favour, even with the expatriate teachers of ESL.

Some ESL teachers have developed their own teaching methodology. Thinking out of the box is an essential factor in the African context. It is because local culture and the usage of popular pidgin make communication difficult, particularly when the instructor is not a Nigerian. The problem becomes more complex with regard to pronunciation and the use of pidgin by the ESL learners. With the inclusion of Nigerian pidgin words and usage by prestigious lexicographers, ESL teachers have become more flexible in their attitude toward the use of pidgin in the ESL classroom. This is a significant change. With the support extended by Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and a few prominent creative writers, a movement appears to be gaining momentum in favour of a respectable place to NP. But it is also true that there is a strong academic group supporting the use of the British Standard English (BSE) as the Target Language for the ESL learners.

Conclusion

A number of linguists and research have expressed the view that there is great dearth of research in the area of Nigerian English and its usage. Similarly, NPE is also being marginalized in academic research. Jowitt (1991 & 2019) took notice of this. Kachru (1986) had researched in this domain and found that Nigerian English, like the Indian variety, is gaining ground as a variety among the non-native varieties called, New Englishes. Expatriate teachers face a dilemma when they come across rampant use of pidgin by the ESL learners. However, with time they begin to understand that NPE has gained ground as a lingua franca among their ESL learners. In a survey of attitudes towards the use of NPE at home, educated Nigerian parents did not approve its use. In ESL classrooms teachers do not take kindly to the use of NPE (Khan 2021). The challenge to communication in intelligible English poses a problem for teachers who advocate the use of BSE. Nigerian attitude to the use of English would be clear from the following statement of

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, an acclaimed Nigerian writer: “My English is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British, American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English” (qtd. by Salazar). This statement makes it clear that Nigerian usage of English and use of pidgin are deeply rooted in Nigerian culture. Even some eminent Nigerian creative writers approve the use of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) in their works. In such a situation, ESL teachers have to be very practical in their approach. Even if they may be supporters of BSE, they must remember that they cannot go too far in their advocacy of the British Standard English.

Note:

A substantial data used in this research is from our teaching experience at Niger State College of Education, Minna; Advanced Teachers’ College, Kano; and Mizan-Tepi University, Ethiopia. NPE is spoken by some students but most of them use NgE for communication in the ESL classroom. Students in ABU Zaria, Bayero University and other Nigerian universities make use of the Nigerian variety of English although they may appreciate the Standard British English. Significant markers can be observed in the pronunciation of spoken English but ESL learners at the college level use fairly good written English. In a few cases deviation from BSE can be easily noticed. These deviations are the product of the influence of MT, Nigerian cultural experience and popular usage.

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