

Linguistic Relativism in Second Language Learning: Implications for L2 Learners Proficiency

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Abstract

The possibility of L1 performing one's thought pattern creates a problem for the L2 learners of English Language. This study therefore investigated the implication of Linguistic relativism in second language learners' proficiency. The population of the study were students from Emmanuel College and Comprehensive Secondary Schools in Owerri Municipal Council. The instrument used in the investigation was written essays and the theoretical frameworks that guided the research were linguistic relativism and interlanguage. The findings revealed that linguistic relativism has negative effects in the learning of a second language.

Introduction

Proficiency in L2 has not been an easy task because of lots of constraints coming from the consequences of language contact (Adedimeji, 2013). English which primarily is the L2 of most people in Nigeria is the medium of acquiring knowledge in secondary school subjects (Muhammad, 1998:131). The Nigerian child therefore is expected to attain a certain level of competence in the language so as to fare well in other subjects and examinations, spoken or written, national or international. However, his performance in English may be boosted or vitiated by his level of competence in his native language (L1). It is quite appreciated that most ideas get conventionalized in L1 before the mastering of the L2. In other words, the L2 learners' conceptualization of previously conceptualized ideas in L2 poses a problem where there is difference. Problems arise as regards the successful handling of two or more languages in spoken or written discourse. One of such problems stems from the idea that thought is shaped by language.

This is associated mostly with the writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). Whorf, impressed by linguistic diversity proposed that the categories and distinctions of each language enshrine a way of perceiving, analyzing and acting in the world in so far as languages differ, their speakers too should differ in how they perceive and act in objectively similar situations.

This Whorfian view goes a long way to confirm the reasons for some of the errors (with regards to constrictive analyses) of the L2 learners. In recent years, research on linguistic relatively has given much evidence on the effects of language on thought. This work reviews several lines of evidence regarding the implication of language on people's representations of substances, objects, relationships and many others, with much emphasis on Igbo-English bilinguals and regards their L2 learning.

Statement of the problem

Languages appear to influence many aspects of human cognition. The possibility of Li performing one's thought pattern creates a problem for the L2 learners of English language. This study investigates the implication of linguistic relativism in second language learners' proficiency.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to establish the relationship between language, thought and its relationship with language learning. It specifically goes to look at the following:

- vi. To find out if language shapes thought
- vii. To find out if that in any way affects second language learning in terms of proficiency.
- viii. To proffer solutions to the implications on the L2 learners.

Significance of the Study

The high rate of failure and students' poor performance in various examinations at the senior secondary school level has assumed such a proportion that it is now a syndrome in the case of mass failure as it is commonly alluded to in literature. Most of the examinations on English conducted at the senior secondary school level test the students' productive and receptive skills. However, the ability to express oneself in good English goes a long way in enhancing one's excellent performance in the examination since their long essays and letter writing carries high marks.

It stands to reason therefore that the reason for mass failure in English cannot be divorced from the students' inability to express themselves in good written English (in the pattern and structure of the language owners). It is also necessary to find out if it is what is responsible for the students' inability to express themselves.

It is anticipated that the finding of this study will:

- i. Help learners of L2 attain proficiency in their spoken and written English
- ii. Help teachers of English language plan their lessons on the language teaching.
- iii. Help future researchers on the implication of language relativism on L2 learners.

Research Questions

Pursuant to the purpose of this study, the following questions have been posed as a guide:

- i. To what extent does language shape thought?
- ii. In what way(s) does this affect cognition in the second language?
- iii. To what extent does conceptualization of ideas in one's L1 affect the way one writes?
- iv. How frequently do learners transfer ideas from their L1 to their L2.

Literature Review

According to the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis quoted in Hudson (2003: 96), we cut nature up and organize it into concepts and ascribe significances as we do largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

Hudson summarizing Whorf says that this hypothesis is talking about how our thinking is affected by the grammar of our language, and that grammar involves conceptual distinctions that are very general and used very frequently. Going by this explanation, it then means that we do not only apply these distinctions when putting thoughts into words, but also our thoughts affect the way in which we understand our experiences at all times, whether or not we are using language. For example, the

distinction between singular and plural nouns. Given the fact that grammar is the only thing that influences our thinking and the shape of ideas. This could explain why most learners of English over-generalize in the cases of singular and plural nouns. For the fact that the use of other words to indicate plural nouns has been conceptualized or better still, internalized, it becomes difficult to know when and when not to use the plural markers in different nouns. For example:

Igbo	English
Umu Nwoke	Men
Umu Okorobia	boys
Ngwa ulo	furniture (both plural and singular)

You can see that there is a great shift from what is obtained in Igbo language and that of English. Pluralisation in Igbo language is more consistent than that of English. It then becomes difficult for the learner to re-internalize the concept and concretize it in one's word usage.

According to Romaine in Holmes (2013) "No particular language has a privileged view of the world as it really is. The world is not simply the way it is, but what we make of it through language. The domains of experience which are important to cultures get grammaticalized into categories such as tense, aspect and gender encode aspects of reality differently in different languages. For instance, our conception of time is fundamentally different from that of western cultures. Whorf drew an inference of this fact from the verb tense system of the Indo European language, which differs from that of Hopi. This he illustrates with, in the conjugating Hopi verb which required an analysis of events in terms of dynamic motion, expressed by aspect markers, rather than by tense making their distribution in time.

This instance could be stretched to other linguistic features in the area of semantics. The Igbo do not make distinction between 'sick' and ill just like Holmes' use of the Tahitians who don't make a distinction between 'sadness' and 'sickness' and use the same word for both. But in the real sense, this accurately represents the belief and the conceptualization of the word. To the western culture this is odd.

Considering a written essay, it is not in all cases that we can substitute ill for sick, whereas for an Igbo learner 'I could be substituted for 'sick' in all cases. This of course attracts a minus for the writer if you are the examiner, because inappropriate use of words are usually marked wrong.

Although some linguists have rejected linguistics relativism with some reasons, it remains a reality that it is with difficulty that we are only able to have a conscious, reflection of word meanings whose grammatical systems are available to us (Saeed).

In terms of colour, the Igbo bilingual find it difficult to give adequate description to all kinds of colour because there are few such descriptive words which are numerous in English. Assuming it is a conversation which involves the identification of something around by such colours, description wouldn't be vivid enough to serve the purpose of identification to the English speaker. This can also account for their poor performance in writing.

Linguistics relativism has been identified as one of the factors responsible for the errors in students' writings. It is one of the causes of the emergence of substandard forms of English usage in Nigeria. The differences in the conception of grammar and words sometimes lead to fossilization. Fossilization is a situation in which learning and further improvement cease either because the learner feels frustrated or because he/she perceives no further need for such improvement. This accounts for the factor of faulty analogy.

In this paper according to Okoro (2010), faulty analogy is defined as the conscious or unconscious ascription to a lexical, syntactic phonological and semantic item, a linguistic characteristic that is present in another similar or related item on the logical but faulty assumption that the two items can be treated the same way on the basis of the perceived similarity.

This reasoning is logical enough and therefore has its appeal to the logically ordered human mind. But what chides the L2 learner is that the English language is not as logically ordered as their minds project it to be. An obvious illustration of this is Oshima and Hogue (1983) who says that “One of the most difficult and confusing aspects of the English language is its spelling system.”

Examples:

<u>S</u> hoe	Nat <u>i</u> on
Miss <u>i</u> on	Man <u>s</u> ion
T <u>o</u> ugh	O <u>u</u> t

Other instances are;

Verb	Noun
Lead	Lead
Gossip	Gossip

Effects of L₁ on the Essays of Bilingual Nigerian Students

Some Nigerian students have shown the influence of their mother-tongues on their written and even spoken English. In the written aspect, some students unconsciously make use of some items in their native languages such as *joo*, in Yoruba, *biko* etc. in Igbo

which all mean please in English. Some have shown errors in the use of tense and agreement in English which is quite different from what is obtainable in the native languages. However, the continued prevalence of errors in tense concord and even spelling can be attributed to transfer of linguistic items from mother tongue to English, though some could be as a matter of fact the way the students have been taught. Olusoji (2013) examined this phenomenon of the effects of bilingualism on the essays of Yoruba bilingual students.

Taking his data from the essays of 200 ND 1 students of the school of Business Studies of the Federal Polytechnic, Ado Ekiti, he undertook his analysis based on the errors in the morphology and syntax of the essays. He came up with the conclusion that there are areas of difference between Yoruba and English which have been sources of confusion to the Yoruba bilinguals.

Methodology

This section explains the methodology employed in this study. The study presupposes the influence of the native language on the written English of Nigerian learners of English who have had Igbo or any other Nigerian language as a first language. Much has been debated and written on error analysis and the negative perception of the errors as a hindrance to competence in language learning. However, this study takes insight from the theory of linguistic relativism where incompetence is to some point seen as the effect of language on people's linguistic representation of ideas which differ from one language to the other.

Research Design

The study is based on descriptive research design. Nworgu (2015) defines descriptive research design as a study that attempts to study a population by investigating the subset in order to generalize the outcome on the whole population. This design was

applied in this study to collect data from 100 secondary school students. The study seeks to establish the effect of linguistic relativism on the L2 learners English. In doing that, the students wrote essays which form the data for this study.

Population of Study

The population of the study comprised of 200 students in the two schools in Owerri Municipal. The population of the present study is the entire SS1 students in the selected schools.

Sampling Procedure

Cluster sampling procedure was used in this study. This is because our target population of bilingual secondary school students have already been grouped into clusters in different schools and different classes. Thus the researcher only chose a particular cluster of class, SS 1.

In Emmanuel College fifty students were used. Among the fifty students, 30 were female while 20 were male. 40 were Igbo speakers, 5 were Efik, 3 Hausa and 2 Yoruba.

Research instrument for data collection:

In this , only two instruments we're employed to elicit information from the participants. The instruments were structured questionnaire and composition. The students' productive language skill was assessed principally through an essay test while the students' bilingual profile and other personal data were assessed using a structured questionnaire.

This can be represented in the table below:

School	Male			Total	Female			Total	Grand Total
	Igbo	Hausa	Yoruba		Igbo	Hausa	Yoruba		
Emmanuel College	15	2	3	20	25	-	5	30	50
Comprehensive Secondary School Douglas	20	1	4	25	23	2	-	25	50

Method of data Collection

The researchers administered the instruments at different times that were suitable for each institution. The questionnaire was administered by the researchers themselves to ascertain the bilingual profile and other personal information from the participants. The class teachers assisted the researchers in the administration of the writing composition test. At the end of the writing of the composition, 100 students handed in their scripts. These were used for the data analysis.

Data Analysis

The data are written essays of 50 students from Emmanuel College and 50 students from Comprehensive Secondary School. The data collected from the marked composition scripts were collated and analyzed using special package for social sciences (SPSS) version 21. Data elicited were tabulated and descriptively analyzed.

Discussion of Findings

This section analyzes the sentences considered erroneous in the written essays of the students. The analysis makes use of linguistic relativism and partly interlanguage theories. 12 sentences were identified and used in this analysis.

Data Presentation

1. Unfortunately, Ngozi and Uche loosed contact
2. Leave me alone joor
3. So his mother asked him why is he crying
4. He decided to sleep on his bed.
5. She agreeded
6. He wants to speak to him lonely.
7. He considered him a gossiper.
8. John have a friend called Eze.
9. My mummy who is my mummy's sister came to our house.
10. We had only two furnitures in the house.
11. I carry espose into the hall that day.
12. I and John followed him to his house.

Data presentation and Analysis

The 12 erroneous sentences were analyzed and classified under the following:

1. Native language transfer.
2. Overgeneralization.

Sentence 1	1. The student over-generalized the use of past tense marker 'ed'. He ought to have used 'lost'
Sentence 2	2. Native language transfer 'joor'
Sentence 3	3. Native language transfer; 'it should be 'His mother asked him why he was crying'
Sentence 4	4. Language cultural influence transfer. It should be 'sleep in bed'
Sentence 5	5. Overgeneralization. It ought to be 'agreed'
Sentence 6	6. Native language transfer, it should be 'alone'
Sentence 7	7. Overgeneralization, 'gossip'
Sentence 8	8. Wrong tense from native transfer. 'has'
Sentence 9	9. Semantic meaning extension from language cultural transfer ' aunt'
Sentence 10	10. Overgeneralization, 'furniture' has no 's' plural marker.
Sentence 11	11. Missuse of words because of native language transfer, ' examination malpractice'
Sentence 12	12. Native language transfer, 'John and I'

Discussion of the Findings

The twelve sentences analyzed showed that the different errors had to do with language differences or overgeneralization which is an offshoot of the absence of linguistic items in L1.

It is correct to assume that whatever the L2 learners of English have to write are affected by the already learnt linguistic units. His or her thought pattern is organized mentally in his or her L1 before putting it in writing in L2. Every pitfall is harmonized with the L1. That tells you why you can identify the tribe of most Nigerians when they speak and sometimes when they write.

Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

The effect of thought pattern in language learning in two secondary schools in Owerri Municipal.

Research Findings

The researcher's finding was based on twelve erroneous sentences that were identified in the essays. These sentences were scrutinized using linguistic relativism theory. Some of the principles of interlanguage theory were used. The principles were

- e) Native language transfer
- f) Overgeneralization of target language rules.

Native language transfer appeared 8 times and it is the highest score while overgeneralization appeared 4 times . Thus the researcher made the following conclusions and findings;

- a. Linguistic relativism has negative effects in the learning of a second language.
- b. The L1 of the learner has much influence on the cognition of the L2.
- c. Bilingualism may start with seeming negative effects in the learning of the second language.

Recommendation

It is recommended that much better teaching and learning strategies be fashioned out by specialists in education to help the Igbo bilingual students in the learning of English. This will help preserve and maintain our native language and also improve the learning of the English language.

Conclusion

This study has examined the effect of linguistic relativism on the L2 learners of English. Twelve (12) erroneous sentences were analyzed and they showed that the first language knowledge of an L2 learner is usually transferred to his/her L2.

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