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UNDERSTANDING SOME ESSENTIALS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND ITS GLOBAL STATUS FOR ENHANCED PRODUCTIVITY

Happy Dumbi Omeunogor and Faith Fatima Oshioke Oyukhire

Abstract

English, the most international of all languages, has three basic categories of use according to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973): it is used as a native language, a second language (L₂) and a foreign language. Besides many other functions, this language performs in Nigeria; it functions as a medium of instruction in schools. It is also taught as a subject in schools. Given the above status and significance of English language, it is disheartening to observe that many Nigerians do not have a grasp of it. This paper has therefore been tailored towards addressing some of the aspects of the language responsible for this sorry state in Nigeria. It X-Rays the Phonetics and Phonology of the language which are actually the starting points of any language. Some vital and corrective points are made about these subsections of the language. Then 'reading' and 'vocabulary development' which are necessary exercises towards having a grasp of the language are discussed. Lastly, this paper examines English as a global language, recommends that efforts should be made for Nigerians to acquire skills in it to enable them communicate in English effectively within and outside Nigeria. This paper concludes that possession of good knowledge of the phonetics and phonology of English and other necessary linguistic skills discussed are relevant for effective communication.

English, a member of the Germanic language group (See Umern-Okeke (2009) has been able to plant itself every where in the world as Uhumwangho (2000) notes. The language situation in Nigeria has also necessitated its becoming a national language. Since there is yet to be any policy statement by Nigeria declaring any indigenous language, a national language, it is not difficult to conclude as Jowitt (1991) did that: "English continues to perform many of the functions of a national language as well as those of an official language."

The sad point however is that a good number of Nigerians' spoken and written English leaves much to be desired. This sorry state manifests most in the area of phonetics and phonology. Students fail to understand that English can be become rewarding when its potential is discovered according to Guth as recalled by Uhumwangho (2000).

The Phonetics of English

Any effort towards speaking a language begins with the articulation of successive sounds arranged in groups delimited as words. Since the secrets of success in any language learning include imitation, this writer implores the English language learner to be conscious of the spoken English of the native speakers. This could be achieved through listening to programmes on BBC and VOA as well as other good models. The teacher should also be able to pronounce correctly if he is not a native speaker.

What is Phonetics? As Christophersen (1956) observed 'phonetics is the branch of knowledge that is concerned with speech sounds.' Other scholars have also shared their views of what phonetics is. According to Robins, quoted in Aghedo (2000) 'phonetics is the scientific study of speech'. Furthermore, phonetics can be regarded as the study and the description of pronunciation of speech sounds as recalls. From O' Connor's (1973) view point, 'phonetics is the study of sounds of spoken language.

From the above facts, one could conclude that phonetics primarily deals with the examination of the intrinsic properties of speech sounds as unique properties of human beings. These speech sounds as Lyons (1981) postulated can be described objectively from three main perspectives.

- (i) In terms of their manner of production by human speech organs
- (ii) In terms of the acoustic properties of the sound waves travelling between speaker and hearer and
- (iii) In terms of their physical effects upon the human ear and its associated mechanisms.”

Onose (2006) supports the above view when he suggests that three approaches to the study of phonetics are: “usually termed articulatory acoustic and auditory phonetics respectively.

The ambit of this paper neither falls within the detailed treatment of the above aspects of phonetics nor sound production process as well as the various speech organs. We will therefore proceed to English sounds.

English Sounds

Being able to articulate and write all English sounds correctly is a sine qua non if we are to be able to speak English language correctly. Put differently, mastering the correct pronunciations of all English sounds correctly is a necessary condition to be met if our spoken English is to be polished.

How Many Sounds Exist in English?

There is a controversy on the exact number of sounds in English language. Some scholars opine that 44 sounds are in the sound inventory of English while others believe that there are 49. Those that favour the former view believe that triphthongs (triple sounds) are not in English sound inventory. They canvass the view that there are 20 vowels and 24 consonants in English. Those who favour the latter view agree that triphthongs are part of English vowels. For them, there are 25 vowels and 24 consonants making a total of 49 sounds. According to Christophersen (1956), “strictly, English has no triphthongs but certain combinations of closing diphthongs and (ð).” Roach (2000) however implies that triphthongs are part of English vowels by stipulating that “the most complex English sounds of the vowel type are the triphthongs”. Besides Roach, some other scholars admit triphthongs as part of English language which is classified into vowels and constants.

English Vowels

They are the sounds articulated with a free flow of air from the lungs to the mouth. In other words, there is no obstruction to the phonation process when they are pronounced. They are further grouped as follows. Just one example of each group will be given because of the ambit this paper.

Pure Vowels

They are also called ‘monothongs’ and they are made up of single vowel qualities. They are 12 in number. An example of a pure vowel is [i] as pronounced in Beat (/bi:t/).

Diphthongs

They are also called ‘double sounds’. They are made up of two vowel qualities. In the course of their articulation, there is a movement technically called a ‘glide’ from one vowel quality to another. E.g [au] as pronounced in cow /kaʊ/.

Triphthongs

They are referred to as triple sounds. While pronouncing a triphthong, there is a glide from the first vowel quality to the second and then to the third the Triphthongs may be more unfamiliar to us than other types of vowels, we will therefore state their comprehensive list here. They are five.

- (i) [eɪə] as pronounced in player/pleɪə(r)/
- (ii) [aɪə] as pronounced in fire/faɪə(r)/
- (iii) [ɔɪə] as pronounced in loyal /lɔɪ ə/
- (iv) /əʊə/ as pronounced in lower/ləʊə(r)/
- (v) [aʊə] as pronounced in power/paʊə(r)/

English Consonants

These sounds are articulated with several degrees of impediments to the phonation process.

They are classified as follows:

Plosives or stops: E.g [p] and [b]

Fricatives: They are just two in number [dʒ] which is voiced and [tʃ] which is voiceless. E.g. [tʃ] as pronounced in 'church' /tʃ:ɪ/

Alveolar Lateral: An example of this is [l] e.g. [l] as pronounced in leg /leg/

Frictionless Continuants or Glides: They are vowel-like in nature since they lack friction. They are [j] [w] and [r] e.g. [w] as pronounced in wind/wind/

The Nasals: They are [m], [n] and [ŋ] e.g. [n] as pronounced in name/naɪm/

The entire groups of sounds in English have been X-rayed.

Speech sounds are studied on two theoretical levels, the level of phonetics and the level of phonology. All we have discussed above are at the level of phonetics. Let us now examine the level of phonology.

The Phonology of English Phonology is the study of the sound system of a particular language. Every language has its own set of sounds which are used to distinguish one word from the other. Phonology studies all aspects of the sound system as well as the finest phonetic detail. In this dimension we accept the views of Smith and Wilson (1979) Adetugbo (1993) and Roach (2000) that to study any language in relation to each speech sound as constituting a system, the knowledge of phonetic facts has to be acquired (See Uhumwangho (2000). The compelling goal of phonology as Hyman (1975) notes is 'to study the properties of the sound system which speakers must learn or internalize in order to use their language for the purpose of communication.

In phonology, the concept of the phoneme as the unit of description is primary. We agree with Lyons (1968) that "two or more phonetically different sounds in the same environment which have the effect of distinguishing words are recognized as different phonemes. The focus of this part of our study is 'suprasegmentals'. Let us then consider it in the next sub heading.

Suprasegmental Features

The features in question influence and modify segmental features, particularly, vowels. The term 'suprasegmental' refers to grammatical and phonological features that are larger than the segment. They are features super imposed on sound segments. 'Stress' and intonation are part of what constitute suprasegmental features.

Stress: Jones' (1950) definition of 'stress' as 'the degree of force with which a sound or syllable is uttered' as Uhumwangho, (2000) recalls remains the most functional. There are different degrees of stress, primary stress, secondary stress and unstressed. The most important degree which receives the broadest attention of linguists is the 'primary stress.' Teachers of English language to speakers of African languages should note that English is a stress-timed language. It is different from Yoruba, and Igbo that are tone languages (See Radford, Atkinson, Britain, Clahsen and Spencer (2002) and Emenanjo, (2006). Tone is the relative pitch at which a syllable is produced 'Stress' is different from tone because it (stress) involves length i.e. duration while tone involves pitch (See Salami, Osoba and Fakoya (2008). The placement of 'stress' within the word varies from language to language. Some languages have fixed stress. According to Crystal quoted in Salami, Osoba and Fakoya (2008) Welsh has the stressed syllable almost always as the penultimate in polysyllabic words. Other languages such as English have a moveable stress.

Types of Stress: Depending on whether 'stress' operates in words or other larger units, the following types of stress exist.

Words Stress: Also called 'lexical stress' this operates in different types of words according to the number of syllables in the words.

Monosyllabic Word (Monosyllabic): It is made up of one syllable. 'Stress' is not distributed here. It is normally stressed or unstressed in a sentence depending on the word group it belongs to and the type of stress being illustrated. An example of a monosyllabic word is 'no' /nəʊ/

Disyllabic Word (Disyllable): This has two syllables. A syllable is the smallest linguistic unit of rhythm (See Finch, (2000)). In a disyllabic word, the first syllable attracts the primary stress. Nevertheless, it goes to the second syllable if the first syllable is a prefix. E.g. TEACHER /tɪ:tʃə(r)/.

TABLE /teɪbl/ etc. 'Stress' also specifies the class a particular word belongs to. This is a grammatical function. Some words function as nouns in some contexts and as verbs or adjectives in other contexts. If such words are used as nouns, the initial syllables are stressed but the second syllable takes the stress if they are used as verbs or adjectives. E.g.

There was a PROtest /prɒtɪst/ Noun

They want to proTEST /prəʊ'test/ Verb

Blessing has a PREsent /preznt/ Noun

Jane wants to preSENT /pre'znt/a gift Verb.

Trisyllabic Word (Trisyllabic) and Polysyllabic Word (Polysyllable).

Trisyllabic has three syllables. E.g. Magician /mæ'dʒɪʃn/.

There are no rigid rules guiding the distribution of stress when using the above type of words. However, experience has shown that the following linguistic conventions are observed vis a vis the distribution of stress in them.

- (i) Placing the primary stress on the second syllable from the end of a word that terminates in /on/, /ian/, /ic/, and /ial/. E.g. Magician /mæ'dʒɪʃn/ probleMATIC /prɒblɪ'mætɪk/ etc.
- (ii) Placing the primary stress on the third syllable from the end of any word that terminates in /ate/ and /ity/. E.g.

ExcoMMunicate /stʊpɪdɪti/

Readers are advised to always consult the *Oxford Advanced Learner's English Dictionary* whenever they are at a loss concerning the distribution of stress in any word because the phonology of English is not exactly the same with its orthography. Moreover, the phonology of English is not phonetic, it is irregular.

Sentence Stress: Under this, all content words are stressed while all grammatical words are not stressed in order to achieve the typical accent of English. 'Accent' refers to distinctive pronunciation that could tell of a speaker's region or social class.

(i) NGOZI has WRITTEN to the MAN.

(ii) MARY has LEFT for LAGOS.

(iii) The MAN has been SCREENED.

Contrastive (Emphatic) Stress: This is carried out to stress a fact or emphasize a contrast. While applying this stress, ANY English word can be stressed. E.g

(i) I kept the money IN the purse. This means that I did not keep it in any other place.

(ii) The young SHALL grow. This means that they must grow. Nothing will stop their growth.

Intonation of English

As crystal (2008) notes 'intonation refers to the distinctive use of patterns of pitch or melody. From the above view, we can infer that intonation refers to the rise and fall in the pitch of the voice in spoken utterances. Pitch is technically defined as the frequency of vibrations of the vocal cords. The long utterance which could be at phrase, a clause or a sentence is the focus of operation for intonation.

Functions of Intonation: It has very significant functions in the phonological system of English language. Only the commonest functions will be outlined here because of the focus of this paper.

- (i) Intonation conveys the attitude of the speaker towards a listener or the subject of discussion. This is called attitudinal meaning in semantics. Such an attitudinal meaning could be excitement, surprise, annoyance, enthusiasm etc.
- (ii) Intonation determines whether a sentence is a statement, a request, a command, a polar question, a wh question etc. or not.

Types of Tune: The falling tune, also called tune 1 and the rising tune also called tune 2 feature in English. The falling tune is indicated with a falling arrow (↘) while the rising tune is indicated with a rising arrow (↗)

The Falling Tune: This is used in

- (i) Statements E.g Abuja is the capital of Nigeria ↘
- (ii) In command E.g come here. ↘
- (iii) In Wh questions, E.G Why did you do it? ↘

The Rising Tune: This used in:

- (i) Polar (Yes/No) questions. E.g Is this yours? ↗
- (ii) Requests: E.g Do sweep the floor. ↗
- (iii) Utterances containing elements of protests or surprise
- (a) Statement: That wasn't my contribution. ↗
- (b) Commands. E.g keep quiet. ↗

Wh Questions: Whose number was it? ↗

The above rules should not be applied too mechanically as they are not rigid. It is implied that meaning determines the intonation to be used, not the grammatical forms. Sometimes both tunes are used in a sentence. E.g.

I want a ↗ job, an ↗ office and a ↘ car.

Commonly Mispronounced Words

Students imitate their teachers in terms of all linguistic habits. Therefore, the spoken English of the English language teacher should be impeccable. He or she must possess some linguistic expertise and adequate proficiency in the use of language, otherwise he or she becomes a generator, a perpetrator and a disseminator of bad English (See Omodiagbe (1999), quoted in Akporherhe and Orife, (2009).

With the above view in mind, it is very disheartening that some of our teachers in other subject areas and REGRETTABLY some English language teachers cannot pronounce some English words correctly. Below are some examples of such commonly mispronounced words. Let us pronounce them together in order to learn their correct pronunciations.

Worm, Work, World, Worst, Worship, Whole, Wicked, Turn
Alibi, Christmas, Correct, Paper, Burn, Bursar, bus, Visitor
Architect, Furniture, Teacher, Dwarf, Women, Sir, Physical,
Chaos, Quay, Gesture, Price, Purpose, Leopard, Sine qua non,
Vice verse, penis, souvenir curfew etc.

Being able to pronounce English words correctly is a skill that must be attained by the language user if he or she is to be able to read any material aloud and be understood by the listener.

Since we have addressed the issue of correct pronunciation let us now give some attention to "reading" as a significant language skill.

Reading in English

This is a very important exercise hence Francis Bacon quoted in Odo (2009) stipulates that "Reading maketh a man". Reading is not only a complex process but also a meaningful interpretation of printed/written symbols. This is why it is regarded as a form of reasoning hence it is true that "understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in Mathematics (See Odo 2009)".

What actually is reading? Reading is the meaningful interpretation of written or printed words with the aid of the eyes and brain. Oba quoted in Oluikpe (1981) sees reading as "the passing of information from the writer to the reader who must learn to isolate concepts that are represented by black and white symbols.

Reading occurs at the level of symbols and the level of concepts. At the level of symbols the reader recognizes words, classifies and interpretes reader's brain certain shared experiences. The reader then follows the writer's line of thought recreating in his mind, the mental images transmitted by the writer.

Types of Reading There are different types of reading depending on the criteria for classification. These could be the manner of reading, purpose of reading or even the range of materials read. As Longe (1979) has noted, "Reading aloud and silent reading" exist).

Reading aloud is a daily activity which many people participate in. Students, teachers, newscasters etc. are involved. Reading aloud requires the reader to observe correctly all the mechanics of English so that he or she can communicate effectively with the listeners. The eyes moves faster than the voice during a reading aloud exercise.

Silent Reading The requirements of this type of reading are not uniform it varies according to the purpose of reading. This type of reading is used to scan materials to be studied, skim information, gain superficial information of a text as well as study a text. From the above uses of this type of reading, it can be inferred that, skimming, scanning, intensive reading and extensive reading are types of silent reading.

Bad Reading Habits to be Avoided

These habits make us slow readers. A slow reader is a bad reader, hence the habit is bad. An average reader should be able read more than 150 words in a minute. Any figure below that makes one a bad reader. According to Uhumweangho (2000) "head movement, vocalization, sub vocalization, pointing to words and regression are bad reading habits.

We should however note that "regression" is to be seen as a bad reading habit if it is not intentional because sometimes, a reader may regress intentionally to enhance his or her understanding of what is being read.

Good Reading Habits that can Help us to Achieve Optimum Reading Speed and Enhance Understanding

- (i) **Constant Practice** It is not possible to acquire complete reading skills within a short time. It is therefore good for us to time our selves often and read various texts in order to monitor and improve our speed.
- (ii) **Increasing the Eye Span** The eye span is the number of words a reader can grasp at once while reading. Good readers grasp three to five words or more in an eye span while bad readers often grasp words one by one while reading. Increasing the number of words in an eye span is encouraged.
- (iii) **Applying the appropriate reading speed** will make reading effective.
- (iv) **Avoiding all the bad reading habit** earlier stated will make reading effective.

Reading is often affected by many variables. Such variables include: the IQ the reader, his background, linguistic ability and intellectual training (See Unoh (1997) in Odo (2009). To Azikwe (1998), 'Reading is not just a skill which includes eye movement, speech, comprehension and vocabulary.' From the above view, it is clear that a rich vocabulary is essential for success to be achieved in reading. We will therefore examine it briefly.

(v) **Vocabulary of English**

Mowaria (2006) views vocabulary as words and their precise dictionary meanings. The precise dictionary meaning of a word is the literal meaning which is referred to as its denotation in Semantics. We can always talk of the active vocabulary and the passive vocabulary of a person. A person's active vocabulary refers to the words he or she knows and uses in daily speech while his or her passive vocabulary refers to the words that he or she knows but does not use in daily speech.

Possessing a rich vocabulary is very relevant for an overall success in English language since words are the 'tools' with which language is spoken and written.

While writing on vocabulary development, Abamba (2004) suggests that word formation processes such as: affixation, conversion, compounding, blending etc. are means of developing vocabulary.

Vocabulary can also be developed through the study of lexis. This includes synonyms, antonyms, homophones, homonyms, polysemy, hyponyms etc. An individual can enrich or develop his vocabulary by listening to models when they speak. This can be done through listening to radio programmes or news in BBC, VOA and CNN stations.

Furthermore, vocabulary can be enriched if novels or any texts written in faultless English are read. Another reliable method of developing the vocabulary is to look up always the meaning of any unfamiliar word in the text read.

From about 450 AD, English language has passed through different stages. For instance between 450 to 1100, it was called 'Old English', from 1100 to 1500 it developed into middle English, from 1500 till date it grew into modern English. In fact, it has developed from one stage to another and has attained the status of a global language. It is for this reason that we shall now examine it as a global language.

English and Globalization

According to Crystal (1997) quoted in Ogunsiyi (2003) and recalled by Omenogor (2009) "English has attained the status of a global language." English by the manner it is now used, is a world language. English, French, Russian etc. are among the dominant languages of the world today. As at the year 2006, it was reported that: "380 million people speak English as their primary language, and more than 250 million speak it as a second language (See Emenanjo (2006).

As far as human language is concerned both Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Globalization have enthroned English with its many varieties as the world's global language of widest communication. What is more? The PC business originated in America, the internet also originated there as Emenanjo (2006) observes. Many of the digital discourse like e-mail, video-mail, e-banking etc. across the internet were initially conducted in English language.

As early as 2001, English had been enthroned as the language of the internet and will remain disproportionately so... Over time, more people will learn English and this will solidify English as a global language (See Emenanjo (2006).

By 2005, 80% of electronically stored information in the world was in English, 66% of the world research scholars read English. English is dominant in Business and international diplomacy as the language used in 52% of all international transactions.

Conclusion

Good knowledge of Phonetics and Phonology is relevant for effective communication. Rich vocabulary and high intelligence quotient (IQ) are also relevant for effective reading. Furthermore, it is now understood that English language developed from old English to middle English from middle English to modern English and eventually emerged as a global language.

Recommendation

Since English has emerged as a global language, efforts should be made for Nigerians to acquire all the relevant skills in it to enable them communicate effectively in it within and outside Nigeria.

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