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FOR LEARNING AND CULTURE

TEACHING ENGLISH PROSODIC FEATURES TO NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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Abstract

This study makes a case for the effective teaching of English prosodic features in Nigerian Secondary Schools and suggests ways by which the teaching can be carried out. It notes the importance of English prosody in promoting effective oral communication in the language and observes that this importance is not now usually well reflected in the teaching of English pronunciation to Nigerian learners. It thus believes that if the problems of teaching the prosodic features are identified and tackled, a better atmosphere will be created for the proper learning and use of English prosody in spoken English in Nigeria.

Introduction

English prosody is easily one of the most neglected components in the teaching of English in Nigeria. In the teaching of oral English, much more attention is paid to sound segments than the prosodic features, in spite of the fact that the latter form the core of the speech features of a language, as Amayo (1986: 317) rightly points when he says that:

> "the suprasegmental features in English phonetics almost exclusively give the language its characteristic accent".

Since the correct use of accent is vital for the intelligibility of spoken English, it becomes very important for a speaker of the language to master its accent properly. One needs to learn to speak well in order to be properly heard. Since it is well-known that English prosody remains one of the most problematic areas of English usage for Nigerian speakers, it is necessary to emphasize the teaching of its main features in schools, especially in primary and secondary schools when pupils can benefit more from the learning. It is also important that trainee teachers in the Colleges of Education and Universities in the country should be well equipped in this respect academically and professionally to enable them to perform their work efficiently as future teachers in primary and secondary schools.

English Prosodic Features As Problems for Nigerian Learners

The pronunciation problems of Nigerian speakers of English and their causes have been reliably documented (cf. Afolayan, 1968; Smith, 1969 and Atoye, 1980). Among the problems discussed, three major ones pertain to the prosody of English, viz:

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(a) Inability to produce words with their correct stress patterns;
(b) Non-adherence to the conventions of sentence stress; and
(c) Failure to match attitudes and grammar (or meanings) with appropriate intonational patterns in speech.

The reasons for the problems highlighted above are numerous, ranging from linguistic to pedagogical causes. Among the linguistic problems is the nature and complexity of English phonological features which Roach (1983) pinpoints in his statement that the English word has a fixed stress pattern which is unpredictable. He also states some rules (ibid. pp. 76-85), which he admits have exceptions but are applied intuitively by native speakers. Another linguistic problem is that of mother tongue influence on second language learning. This also has already been demonstrated by Weinrich (forthcoming) who observes on p.12 of the manuscript that:

"the most serious problem to be overcome by Nigerian speakers of English is to reduce the unstressed syllables in an utterance so as to give appropriate prominence to the stressed syllables".

The problem above can be attributed to the transfer of the feature of evenness in pitch from mother tongue tonal language into English as are observed in, for example:

,rea'lise	(Nig. E)		'realise	(Br.E)
,digni'fy	(˙)		'dignify	(˙)
cha'racter	(˙)		'character	(˙)

The pedagogical problems of learning English prosody properly are very many, but we shall mention three major ones that are relevant to the discussion in this paper. What comes to mind first is the flexibility of English pronunciation standards all over the world, even among standard dialects of the language. The pronunciation in Nigeria even shows a pronounced form of diversity because of the conglomeration of accents of English in the country which are heavily influenced by the mother tongues of speakers of different ethnic groups. These accents are identified with different ethnic groups in the country, such as Yoruba English, Igbo English, Hausa English, and so on; and it is difficult to represent any of these as Nigerian English.

Closely related to the problem above is the lack of consensus among Nigerian schools as regards the choice of R.P. or a Nigerian pronunciation (N.P.) standard as the target in teaching English pronunciation in Nigerian schools. Arguments have been provided on both sides in support of or against either target (cf. Afolayan, 1968; Adetugbo, 1984 and Atoye, 1988). We, however, share the opinion of Atoye (1988) that R.P. should be retained for the time being as the target model of teaching English pronunciation in Nigeria mainly because of its international acceptability and the availability of teaching materials in it. One major factor militating against the choice of N.P. is the non-availability of materials in it, since the features of the standard are yet to be specified.[1] We also believe that the teaching of pronunciation features should be based on a suitable target which is available for application and reference - in this case R.P.

Another problem of learning English prosody is that of unsystematic teaching of phonetics in the English curriculum of primary and secondary educational institutions. Prosodic features are seldom taught, however rudimentary this may be, to pupils in primary and secondary schools, despite the fact that pupils who learn a second language at this level find it easier to form better language habits in it than adults (cf. Adetugbo, 1969: 61). This problem seems to be compounded by the shortage of qualified teachers to teach the features in schools. Even in the higher institutions in the country which are responsible for training teachers for the lower institutions, adequate facilities and training programmes are not provided for the trainee teachers to prepare them well for their future tasks. Language laboratories in most of the institutions are ill-equipped with recording apparatus and other essential materials, to the extent that pronunciation lesson are little different from normal lectures in other subjects.

Finally, there is the problem of educational planning. This problem is observed in the treatment of oral English as an optional subject in the secondary school curriculum; this does not provide strong motivation for pupils to learn the language properly; even those pupils who attend the lessons are no more motivated than those who do not, since they are not obliged to pass the examination in it in their final year examination.

From the above discussion, it is clear that appropriate suggestions may be helpful on the proper ways to teach and improve the teaching of prosodic features of English in Nigerian schools. In the rest of this work, we shall thus suggest what features of English prosody to teach to secondary schools pupils and how to teach them effectively.

Teaching English Prosody to Nigerian Secondary School Pupils

Teaching the prosodic features of English to Nigerian learners is a complex process in which all the participants - learners, policy-makers, curriculum planners, executors and evaluators need to play vital roles (See the wider sense of 'teaching' explained by Afolayan (1985: 5). But in a limited study of this kind it will be most practicable to narrow down the coverage of the term to learner/instructor in the secondary school classroom. The focus of this study, which is the presentation of English prosody to pupils, is mainly an aspect of curriculum implementation, although it has far-reaching consequences for other aspects of the teaching programme as well.

The classroom environment has been selected for the present discussion because it offers the right atmosphere for teaching features of spoken English through both direct and indirect participation of learners. Also, it is at this stage that pupils can understand the visual symbols that may be used from time to time to supplement the means of teaching pronunciation via the oral medium. The prosodic features to be taught are: (a) word stress; (b) sentence stress; and (c) international patterns. A few useful hints on methodology which teachers may require in their presentations are also presented.

1. **The Teaching of English Word Stress**

There are three major ways in which word stress can be presented to learners:

(a) exposure of pupils to appropriate live and prerecorded texts in English;

(b)   teaching pupils rules of word stress; and
(c)   demonstration via the visual medium.

Pupils may be exposed to two kinds of live texts in classroom teaching. The first kind of live texts emanates from the teacher himself. Unknowingly, the speech habits of the English teacher (and other teachers too) may have a lot of influence on the pupils through his communication inside and outside the classroom. This puts pressure on the teacher to make some personal effort to improve his own spoken English (based on the R.P. model). Second, the tape-recorder offers by far the most adequate and interesting means of presenting live texts to pupils. However, where a school can afford it, as in the model schools, audio-visual aids and television sets will serve better. Meanwhile, a teacher can record live conversations and news broadcasts in Standard English from the radio and television and give pupils the chance to listen to them. This will expose the pupils to many words in English with their correct stress placement. The teacher may also use pre-recorded texts to teach pupils if he has a particular word or group of words in mind to teach. Some cassettes are also specially made for teaching English pronunciation like those which accompany Gimson's (1975) *A Practical Course of English Pronunciation*.

The second method of presenting English word stress to learners is via the teaching of rules pertaining to the placement of word stress. Productive rules for English word stress can be found in a lot of textbooks on English phonetics (cf. Chomsky and Halle, 1968; Ladefoged, 1975; Gimson, 1980 and Roach, 1983); but those rules which apply generally to particular groups of words without exceptions can most usefully be taught to the pupils. A few of these are listed below as follows:

(a)   a mono-syllabic word <u>in isolation</u> always carries a primary stress, e.g. 'man, 'he, 'dance, 'and, 'from, etc.
(b)   a bi-syllabic word in isolation carries a primary stress on either the initial syllable, e.g. 'baby, 'Mary, or on the final syllable, e.g. ma'ture, be'fore, su'pport, etc.
(c)   a tri-syllabic word in isolation always carries a primary stress, and weak stresses on the remaining two syllables, e.g. 'telephone, 'character, spe'cific, er'ratic, etc;
(d)   a polysyllabic word with five or more syllables always carries one primary, one secondary and several weak stresses, e.g., manifes'tation, im,possi'bility, etc.
(e)   phonemic stress may make a grammatical distinction between English words, e.g. 'permit (noun)/ per'mit (verb) and 'project (noun) / pro'ject (verb).

Whereas rules 'a - e' above are basic, rule 'f' below can be kept for a more advanced lesson.

(f)   a compound word is distinguished from a phrase because the former has a single stress on the first element, while the latter has stress on each element in the phrase, e.g.:
    (i)   'walkout (compound nominal word) - a strike
           'walk 'out (verb+adverb phrase) - to leave suddenly
    (ii)   'blackboard (compound nominal word) - a board for writing
           'black 'board (adjective+noun phrase - a board that is black

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    (iii) 'English teacher (noun+noun compound) - a teacher who teaches English
           'English 'teacher (adjective+noun phrase) - a teacher who is English

Apart from the general rules stated above, a teacher may seize the opportunity of the occurrence of a word to teach other words in the same class; compare:

'diplomat	dip'lomacy	diplo'matic
'photograph	pho'tography	photo'graphic
'monotone	mo'notony	mono'tonic

- Ladefoged, 1975: 99

2.   The Teaching of Stress in Connected Speech

Sentence stress, or stress in connected speech, can be presented to learners in the three ways suggested above. Furthermore, the exposure of pupils to live and pre-recorded texts can also follow the procedure recommended in that section. In fact, it has been suggested (cf. Ayodele, *et al*. 1987) that the same statements can be used to teach both word and sentence stress, and even the intonational patterns of English. The teaching of sentence stress should consider the basic information given below.

2.1.   Normal Stress

Stress does not function in connected speech as it does in isolated English words; thus pupils should be made to realise that not all monosyllabic words that carry stress in isolation carry it in connected speech. In unemphatic connected speech, lexical items, which are primarily responsible for meaning (nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) usually carry stress while grammatical items whose major concern is correctness (i.e. articles, pronouns, operators, prepositions and conjunctions - cf. Gimson, 1975: 42) do not carry stress. Consider:

Example 1
The 'young 'man 'gave her a 'chair to 'sit on and she 'sat on it.

In the above sentence, while the items 'man', 'gave', 'chair', 'sit', and 'sat' carry stress, the items 'the', 'her', 'to', 'on', 'and', 'she' and 'it' do not carry stress; the pronunciation of some of the latter items in the sentence can be shown thus (the symbol '/ /' or 'schwa' indicates weak stress):

the	-	/ðə/
them	-	/ðəm/
to	-	/tə/
on	-	/ən/
and	-	/ən(d)/

English is a stress-timed language, which means that in connected speech the stressed syllables occur at approximately regular intervals in time. Stressed syllabus are more prominent, and are perceived as louder and longer than unstressed

by the stressed syllables: the more unstressed syllables there are in an utterance, the shorter the syllables are pronounced. Consider:

Example 2

(a) The 'man has ar'rived.

(b) The 'manager has ar'rived.

Each of the items 'man' and 'manager' has one stressed syllable, thus the items are produced in an equal length of time in their respective utterances, regardless of their sizes. A corollary of the regular beat created by English stressed syllables is that a teacher can sound a regular beat with his finger, a stick or anything and fit the stresses exactly onto that beat. This exercise is very useful for teachers in making frequent demonstrations of this fundamental feature of English stress.

2.2. Emphatic Stress

Although the lexical items in an English sentence carry stress, prominence is usually on the last lexical item of a tone group in unmarked speech. But for special emphasis strong stress may occur on any word(s) in the utterance, including words that are not normally stressed; for example:

Example 3

(a) He will 'come here to'day. (Unmarked, normal focus on to'day, i.e. not any other day).

(b) 'He will 'come here to'day. (Marked, emphasis on 'He', i.e. not anyone else).

(c) He 'will 'come here to'day. (Marked, emphasis on 'will', i.e. he has no alternative).

(d) He will come 'here to'day. (Marked, emphasis on 'here', i.e. not any other place).

Note that the stress on other syllables in a sentence is generally reduced to focus on the emphasized word.

Individual sentences may be used to teach sentence stress (cf. Ogundipe and Tregido 1972); but it is equally possible to teach stress via oral reading of passages in the visual medium. Banjo and O'Connell (1971), for example, use some longer passages in their book to illustrate the representation and teaching of stress in larger units than the sentence. However, such exercises can be made more relevant for pupils' use and practice if they are accompanied by cassette recordings based on the passages (cf. Ayodele, et al. 1987). Gimson's (1975) book and cassettes thus provide useful materials in this respect. If this is not possible, passages may be chosen from texts the students are studying in literature classes in the same term.

3. The Teaching of English Intonational Patterns

The best way to teach English intonational patterns to pupils is to expose them to live or pre-recorded spoken texts, as in 1 and 2 above. The pupils are made to listen to the texts and repeat the pronunciation of the content they have heard. This exposure is further accompanied by explanations of the features of intonation in

The teacher may use Gimson's (1975) cassettes and book for the presentation, since both materials provide the spoken texts and explanations of their prosodic features. Or, he may decide to use his own special recordings accompanied by his own explanations of the features. The teacher may also select an appropriate extract of a written text (conversations in texts or passages from plays studied in class are ideal for this purpose) which he must first reproduce in spoken form on tape before its presentation to learners. A typical visual representation of such a text[2] during presentation is shown in the sample text below, followed by guidelines on explanation of intonational features in the text.

The text represents a typical conversation from a larger prose text. It is used to illustrate the basic intonation tunes of English and the meanings they represent. The presentation should be ideal for class three pupils. There is no definite pattern of presentation being suggested here; indeed teachers should very much rely on their wealth of experience in the presentation. A few hints may, however, be helpful.

Step 1: The passage should be read in the written form by the class; this is done before any tunes are represented.

Step 2: The setting of the passage must be understood by pupils, to ensure that appropriate tunes and meanings are assigned. For example, the sample represents a conversation between a soldier and a superior officer, with the junior officer answering questions asked by the superior one. The status and mood of each speaker should be reflected in the interpretation given to the text.

Step 3: Next, the spoken version of the text is played to the pupils and listened to twice. First, they can listen to the text all through. Later, the teacher can rewind the tape; and as it runs the second time, he pauses at relevant points and guides pupils in assigning appropriate intonation tunes to the information units in the text. It is, of course, assumed here that the intonation tunes of English have already been taught to pupils in the lower classes. The class might, for example, recollect the following brief information about intonation tunes in English.

Five tunes of intonation are identified in English phonetic description (cf. Halliday 1967, Ogundipe and Tregidgo 1972, Ladefoged 1975, Gimson 1975 and 1980) in presenting grammatical and attitudinal cues to meaning. The tunes are realized by five different pitches represented thus:

(a) Tune 1 (Fall: ↓) This represents a falling pitch level in English and it is used in unemphatic statements, vocatives, questions seeking information (i.e. wh-questions), commands, utterances showing annoyance or those confirming an idea or ideas.

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[2] Refers to notes at the end of the paper

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