

Oral English as an Aid to Learning in Higher Institutions in Nigeria

Dr. Kwasau A. Ayuba
 Department of General Studies
 Nigerian Defence Academy (NDA)
 Kaduna – Nigeria.

Abstract

In the Nigerian institutions of higher learning today, English language is the only language of instruction and communication whose knowledge of skills is much needed to successfully pursue academic studies in different areas of specialization. Most institutions, focus on grammar and syntax to the disadvantage of the oral genre of the discipline. However, Kwasau (2004:15) reports that the oral use of English Course is not effective at all in enabling the students to acquire the oral skills needed for learning and communication especially in the University. Drury, in Bolaji (2001:1-10) observes that the issue of oral ineffectiveness and incompetence of students in the tertiary institutions in Anglophonic African countries seems to be uniform. The paper, analytic in methodology, dwells on the structure of oral English, its basic sounds and how a teacher should help his students to take care of such sounds in the language for functional and communicative competence in Nigeria.

Introduction

The essential focus of this paper is on the art of oral communication which is referred to as speech. The paper focuses on oral speech skill and how it can be improved by ways of remedials and recommendations that can be applied to improve the general standard of the language in Nigeria. However, the character of man is either revealed or concealed through his speech unless of course he has the discipline to conceal his emotions. And if we agree that such manner should in most cases be pleasant to our fellow beings, we can then agree that the essence of good speaking is also the essence of good grooming. Nicky (2004:15) maintains that, generally, there are two coherent aspects thus, the perfect manipulation of sounds in the language and secondly, the aesthetic aspect, as well as the imaginative or intellectual. During correction in the class, these two aspects must be considered together and treated as a whole if true communication in any language is to be considered.

Oral English Sounds and Letter Forms

We all know as corroborated by Bolaji (2001:ibid) that in writing a language such as English, we use letters to represent the sounds we pronounce or say when speaking the language. For instance, we know that when we write the English word “cat”, the letter **c** represents the initial sound, the letter **t** represents the final sound we pronounce when using the word in spoken English. To be able to write a language, we must therefore begin by learning the letters used in writing the language; we must know how each of them is shaped, and how each may be used alone by itself or in combination with some others to form the written words representing the words used in the spoken form of the language - Edward (2008:341). And so, to be able to write English, all of us have to learn the letters used in writing the language: Aa, Bb, Cc, etc. It is selections from these letters that are combined in certain ways in writing “cat” (c + a + t) and in writing any of the millions of other words that are used in spoken English: b + o + y → “boy”; g + I + r + l → “girl”; m + a + n → “man” w + o + m + a + n → “woman” etc.

Now, to be able to speak a language, what do we have to learn first? First, we have to learn the sounds (i.e. the small units of sound produced in the mouth with air coming from the lungs) which are used in speaking the language. To be able to speak English, we must for example know how to pronounce:

- a. the different sounds represented by the initial letters in “cat”, “mat”, “rat”, “sat”, etc
- b. the different sounds represented by the medial letters in “cat”, “cot”, “cut”, “cut”, etc
- c. the different sounds represented by the final letters in “cat”, “cap”, “cab”, “can”, etc

We must learn how each sound is pronounced by itself, how it may be combined with one or more of the other sounds to form the words we use when speaking the language. According to Dare (2009:16), some of the sounds used in speaking any two or more languages and some of the ways the sounds are combined in the spoken forms of the languages will of course be similar; but some of them will be quite different. This is because there are no two languages that have just the same sounds and have the sounds combined in just the same ways all through in their spoken forms.

The Essentials of Phonetic Symbols

In ordinary writing, a particular letter could stand for two or more sounds. For example, when writing English, we use the letter **a** to represent quite different sounds in “mat”, “take”, “ball”, and “many”. And different letters (or combinations of letters) **a**, **ai**, **ea**, and **e** to represent the same sound in such English words as “any”, “said”, “dead”, and “pen”. The question then is: How do we ensure that we have letters each of which actually stands for a particular sound, all the time? It is in response to this question according to Hudson (2005:132) that some special letters known as phonetic symbols have been devised, so that they can be used in place of ordinary letters for more conveniently representing the sounds that are used in speaking any human language. Geoffrey, et al (2002:341-348) postulate that the advantage in using phonetic symbols is that (unlike ordinary letters) each of them represents one sound, and always represents that particular sound, each time it is used; and different phonetic symbols are used for representing different sounds.

For example, we use the phonetic symbol /e/ to represent the single sound represented in ordinary writing by the different letters (or combinations of letters) **a**, **ai**, **ea** and **e** in such English words as “any”, “said”, “dead”, and “pen” respectively; we use the different phonetic symbols /æ/, /eI/, and /e/ for the different sounds represented in ordinary writing by the single letter **a** in such English words as “mat”, “take”, “ball”, and “many” respectively; and we use no phonetic symbols at all for letters like **b**, **k**, and **g** that do not actually stand for any sound in such English words as “comb”, “knee”, and “gnaw”, respectively. (In “comb”, the **b** is not pronounced in knee, the **k** is not pronounced; and in “gnaw”, the **g** is not pronounced.) As you can notice already, some of the phonetic symbols (e.g. /e/, /eI/) look like the ordinary letters used in ordinary writing, and some (eg/ i:/, /æ/) do not. But each of them is usually enclosed in slanting lines (/ /) to distinguish it from an ordinary letter. There are altogether 44 basic sounds used in speaking English, and each of these has a phonetic symbol used all the time for referring to it.

English Linguistic Sounds

As we have just said, there are, 44 basic linguistic sounds used in speaking English. Of these, 20 are vowels while the remaining 24 are consonants.

The vowels are all quite soft, gentle sounds, eg:

- /æ/ as in "mad", "mat", "fat", "pan"
- /i:/ as in "tea", "bee", "field", "key"
- /e/ as in "pen", "said", "any", "dead"
- / U: / as in "book", "push", "could", "would"

In pronouncing any vowel, the mouth is open and air from the lungs inside the chest (i.e. the air used in speaking) just passes freely through. But there are noticeable differences in the shape the lips assume when different vowels are being pronounced. Some (e.g. /e/ as in "pen") are pronounced with the lips loosely spread; some (e.g. / U: / as in "book") are pronounced with the lips rounded; some (e.g. /i:/ as in "tea") are pronounced with the lips in a rather flat shape; etc.

However, the consonants are generally hard, strong sounds, eg:

- /b/ as in "boy", "rob", "robber", "bubble"
- /p/ as in "put", "top", "upper", "paper",
- /g/ as in "girl", "keg", "again", "goggles",
- /k/ as in "key", "tick", "action", "kick",
- /s/ as in "send", "ask", "hiss", "census",

In pronouncing a consonant, the air from lungs is partially or completely obstructed (eg between the lips as when pronouncing /b/ or /p/, so that the air has some difficulty passing through.

It is the air from the lungs forcing its way through the partial or total obstruction that causes the hardness associated with each consonant. For instance, pronounce the vowel /e/ (as in "pen") and then the consonant /p/ (as in "put"), and notice how the air passes out unhindered in the case of the vowel /e/, and as if bursting some obstruction in the case of the consonant /p/. Again, pronounce the vowel /o/ (as in "book") and the consonant /s/ (as in "hiss") and notice how the air flows out freely in the case of the vowel /o/, and as if forcing its way, through a narrow opening in the case of the consonant /s/.

Voiced and Voiceless Sounds of English

All the vowels in English (and in most other human languages) according to Geoffrey et al (ibid) are normally voiced. That is to say, while they are being pronounced, there is some buzzing or humming in the throat. This buzzing is caused by some vibration (i.e. some quivering) that takes place in the throat when each vowel is being pronounced. Try and pronounce to yourself several times each of the following sounds, which are the 20 vowels in English:

/ɪ/ as in "bit" / ʊ:/ as in "book"
 /e/ as in "pen" / U/ as in "cut"
 /æ/ as in "mad" / ʌ/ as in "agree"
 /ɒ/ as in "dog"
 /i:/ as in "tea" / u:/ as in "cool"
 /a/ as in "hard" / ɜ:/ as in "girl"
 /ō:/ as in "port"
 /eɪ/ as in "go" / eə/ as in "hair"
 /Iə/ as in "here" / I:/ as in "boy"
 /aɪ/ as in "life" / ō:r / as in "poor"

Try again and pronounce any of these vowels, while the fingers of one hand are laid lightly on the front of the throat, and you will be able to feel the vibration that produces the buzzing sound in the throat.

However, Sidney et al (2009:28) agree with other scholars that it is not every consonant that is voiced. Some are voiceless, that is to say, while they are being pronounced, there is no buzzing in the throat. Of the 24 consonants in English, only 15 are voiced (i.e. accompanied with buzzing in the throat), and they are as follows:

/b/ as in "boy" / m/ as in "me"
 /g/ as in "girl" / n/ as in "no"
 /d/ as in "day" / s / as in "sing"
 /v/ as in "vote" / l/ as in "look"
 /z/ as in "zoo" / r / as in "praise"
 /σ/ as in "this" / j / as in "yes"
 /ʒ/ as in "pleasure" / w/ as in "wall"
 /aʒ/ as in "joke"

And the following 9 of them are the voiceless English consonants (ie those that are not accompanied with any buzzing in the throat):

/p/ as in "pen" / θ/ as in "thin"
 /k/ as in "key" / s / as in "she"
 /t/ as in "tea" / ch/ as in "chalk"
 /f/ as in "fall" / h/ as in "house"
 /s/ as in "see"

The voiced consonants in English (e.g. /b, g/) are closer to the vowels in that they do not sound as hard and as strong as voiceless ones (e.g. /p, k/). Try and pronounce the voiceless consonant /k/ and then the voiced consonant /g/ to yourself several times; and notice each time that /k/ indeed sounds harder and stronger than /g/.

- (i) However, as a self-help measure, find a competent teacher of English who will actually pronounce for you each of the vowel and consonant sounds, and get you to imitate him or her until you can pronounce them correctly yourself.

- (ii) Just as there are English vowel and consonant sounds (used in speaking the language), so there are English vowel and consonant letters (used in writing the language). However, though English has 20 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds, it has just 5 vowel letters and 21 consonant letters and the following are the 5 vowel letters of English: A/a, E/e, I/i, O/o, U/u. And the following are the 21 consonant letters: B/b, C/c, D/d, F/f, G/g, H/h, J/j, K/k, L/l, M/m, N/n, P/p, Q/q, R/r, S/s, T/t, V/v, W/w, X/x, Y/y, Z/z. Between them, the vowel and consonant letters are used in ordinary written English for representing all the vowel and consonant sounds of the language.

But then sounds are more conveniently represented, particularly in the teaching of spoken English, by using the phonetic symbols. Remember not to confuse the symbols with ordinary letters.

Having dwelt on the sound system of English, let us now turn to the significance and the problems associated with spoken English in our society with a view to proffering possible solutions.

English is the language of government, instruction and business in this country. It stands to reason therefore that we must have a thorough grounding in both written and spoken aspects of the language, but what is happening instead is that the former is more emphasized than the latter.

It is generally accepted that the standard of spoken English is low amongst sections of our community. To quote Stant Tom (2008) in his book "Some Suggestions for the Improvement of Spoken English"!

"The importance of Spoken English in Most English Speaking Countries as a medium of education and as a means of national and international communication demands a high general level of proficiency, in performance and understanding than exists at present".

This could be because we are at present held down by the use of the English Received Pronunciation (R.P.) instead of working towards a Standard Nigerian English which must also be internationally acceptable to all speakers of the language "English" as J.P. Clark states in "A Reed In the Tide" is "a language that no longer the copyright of any one people or nation ...". Since, however, we have nothing else but R.P. to teach at present, we must look into how the use of this particular "dialect can be corrected and improved.

We will now examine the problems of spoken English as they appear among two vital sections of the country, I mean, teachers and students. We criticize teachers for one main reason, their influence for better or for worse on their students. If we can only realize that a teacher with a high standard of the language can indirectly improve the standard of his students we would go a long way in solving the problems of spoken English.

When their students at a later stage take their respective positions in society they in turn will influence others around them and certainly their children, and so we will have a progression of the teachers' influence and an increasing infection. No matter which way we look at the problem, we will find that the root cause derives from what the student has picked up at school. We maintain that the role of parents and the home environment of the students are not as great as the influence of the teacher. That the parents' standard of speech will influence the student is undeniable but the student spends more time at school than he does at home, whether he is a day student or boarder, more so if he is a boarder.

Many remedies have been suggested by other writers on the subject, for example that phonetic studies must be included in the training of primary and secondary school teachers. But Maggie (2005:18) warns that we must watch out so that such phonetic study is not overstressed, becoming an end in itself. Stant (ibid) again puts this very well.

"Utterance may be intelligible, as far as sounds, and grammatical structure and lexis are concerned, but ineffective in that it may not carry, in a given situation, the meaning and implications which the speaker wishes it to have equally, it may, to the hearer carry implications which the speaker is unaware of, and most certainly does not wish it to have. We are not, clearly, concerned with sounds alone in this connection- in fact, practicing teachers and textbook writers should rarely attempt to deal with them in isolation from appropriate linguistic and situational contexts- but with registers and style".

That is, a teacher must not only act as a good influence in diction but also influence his students by his imaginative and creative use of the language, suiting the manner of speaking to his students' level.

Another remedy I would suggest is that a teacher should help his students to take care of speech sounds in his first language, and appreciate that language. This care and appreciation will, we hope, be transferred into the second language.

This brings us now to our final problem, which appears amongst our students. We have seen that the main source arises from inadequate performance by the teacher; others could be

- (i) The lack of practice of Oral English after school, that is the non- continuation of practice and exposure of an acquired skill outside the school environment.
- (ii) That Oral English is only a part of the aural as well as oral experience of language learning amongst Nigerians.
- (iii) Finally there is an inbuilt inhibition against sounding "Non Nigerian" especially amongst adults.

At this point, we shall have to look closely at some points raised earlier in this paper, namely, that in speech there are two aspects, the "physical" and "the imaginative". How can these two aspects be corrected among students?

In correcting an acquired habit, especially at a later stage in life, there are no short cuts. H.E. Adetugbo (1979:28) puts it very aptly:

"One by one the student's unsound acquisitions must be replaced by sound ones; we must teach him a new language. Now this cannot be done by means of spontaneous methods alone; unconsciousness will not undo the work consciousness has done; the natural powers which enable us to assimilate normal speech will rarely, if ever, turn bad habits into good ones, or convert pidgin-speech into normal speech. What has been done consciously must be undone consciously. We must put him through courses of drill-work, and all these things will require his careful and even concentrated attention".

It will of course take a long time to change any acquired bad habit to a good one. The idea that a one year or two or even most fantastic of all, that a six-month course will achieve anything is ridiculous. Any length of course will naturally make the student aware of his faults, which is good to a point, but it will not achieve correction to a satisfactory standard.

In the submission of Banjo (1971:15), a wise corrective teacher will not plunge his students straight into drill exercises of sounds, but will take the step of making the student realize that he has a mouth! An amazing statement, but speech is movement, so when we speak our mouth must open, otherwise no sound will come out and if it does, it will be much distorted. But what usually happens even with many native speakers of the language is that the mouth is locked, and so we get what I termed in an earlier paper the "tetanus disease speaker". In his reaction also, Bolaji (2001:91) observes that a bad habit like this can only be cured through a systematic loosening of the speech organs until they can move with ease. After taking care of this aspect, the teacher can then turn his attention to sounds. Pre-recorded tapes are useful in correcting stress and intonation because both together are the tone or music of the language which is comparatively easy to listen to and acquire. But speech sounds are far more difficult, particularly to an older person. Here, speech and auditory organs have become set to a particular hearing and formation of certain sounds. No amount of listening to pre-recorded tapes will achieve much change. What is required is a change of one set of habits to another under the direction of a skilled teacher. Pre-recorded tapes then are best used as a supplement to the lesson. **We must be careful not to confuse methods we use in teaching languages to beginners and methods that should be used for corrective purposes.**

This is not to say that prerecorded tapes cannot be of any use. In a country like ours, where there are very few trained speech experts, they can be quite useful, but then, in the hands of very unknowledgeable teachers of the language, they may do more harm than good. Why I say this is that the expert teacher finds himself many times in the same position as a doctor, who, confronted with an emergency case, must diagnose and give the necessary prescription immediately. He has not the time to consult medical journals or texts. Likewise, the speech teacher, and indeed the teacher of English, must be able to listen to his students, diagnose their disease, and give immediate prescription.

Now the problems he may encounter with one class may not be the same as in another class, because he is dealing with human beings, each with his or her own peculiar habits, idiosyncrasies, and environmental or social background. Using books and tapes as a guide according to the situation, the teacher should be able to change methods from one class to another, this kind of flexibility can only be achieved by a speech teacher.

When we come to the question of the imaginative use of the language, here we concentrate on WHAT is being said and not on HOW. The skill of the trained teacher is needed here, for he must know all the tricks of the trade to achieve desirable results. The untrained teacher, it must be remembered, has no books and pre-recorded tapes to help him in this area of his work. The nearest collection of pre-recorded tapes available to him is a new set by the British Council now in the market. In this section of speech correction, we are not primarily concerned with sound structures, stress, intonation, lexis or semantics; we are concerned in giving him a free rein to explore into his inner self, to utilize his power of imagination to the full, and to transmit his ideas into WORDS.

All this we may term Indirect Method or speech acts. In doing this, any mistakes made by the student during training can then be corrected at the end of the class. This really is direct method through drill exercises as advocated in some books. By this method we are simply adhering to the old rule of teaching that one must proceed from the "known to the unknown". There are many methods we can use here. Some of the best are through oral composition, that is, impromptu speech in a given situation or on a theme. Impromptu speech according to Osasona et al, (2003:39), is when a speech maker has a very short notice or none at all to speak on a topic or called upon to pronounce a language item. This is also termed speech on the spur of the moment. If properly done, this has the additional advantage of improving written composition, more so, with poetry and drama.

In suggesting various remedies, some may, and rightly so, bring us to the question of time. There is very little time in the already crowded school and college or University curriculum to allow us to pay special attention to this subject. I do not think that forty minutes in school need be set aside specially for corrective purposes. If ALL teachers can undergo a corrective course ALL through their training, they will then be in a much better position to detect any flaws in their students and spend five minutes or so at the end of their lessons correcting them. More detailed work can then be left to teachers of English. In my experience with Cadets of the Nigerian Defence Academy, this method has been very helpful. And if we start this method from primary to secondary level, it is natural and inevitable that over half of the secondary school leavers will be considerably proficient in spoken English, which saves us spending so much time on basic correction at University level.

There are, we know, not enough oral English specialists in our tertiary institutions today. At present phoneticians are doubling up with oral English; this is fine if the subject remains in speech science but hopeless when speech science moves as it must do into speech arts where phoneticians have not the technique or knowledge to cope. As we have emphasized again and again throughout this paper the combination of speech science as well as the art is important for effective oracy in communication.

We make the following recommendations therefore to the appropriate Educational bodies and authorities:

- (a) Corrective courses in spoken English must be included as a subject in all the Teacher Training Colleges and departments of Education in the Universities in Nigeria.
- (b) Nigerian Teachers of English in addition to their training in English Grammar and literature should have a thorough knowledge of the techniques of improving Spoken English at various school levels, enabling them at the same time to make better use of the already available materials in the market, and
- (c) It is heartening that the West African Examinations Council and NECO are now resuscitating their International Oral English examination, which was put into cold storage without any reasons. This is strongly recommended.

These recommendations if looked into with sympathy will help tremendously in raising the standard of spoken English in the country as a whole thus, enhancing learning through oral or Spoken English in our educational institutions in Nigeria.

References

- Adetugbo, A. (1979). *Nigerian English Grammar and Communicative Competence*. Ibadan - Nigeria; Ibadan University Press.
- Banjo, A. (1971). *Towards a Definition of Nigerian Spoken English*. Ibadan, Nigeria - Ibadan University Press.
- Bolaji, a. (2001). *Spoken English*. Ibadan – Nigeria; Scribo Publications Ltd.
- Dare, S.C. (2009). *Errors In English Grammar and Usage*. Ibadan- Nigeria Dalag Prints and Pack Ltd.
- Edward, F. (2008). *Language: Structure and Use* (5th Edition). Boson-USA. Thomson Wadsworth.
- Geoffrey, et al. (2002). *Friendly Communications In “A Communicative Grammar of English.”* Edinburgh Gate, England. Pearson Education.
- Hudson, R.A. (2005). *The Structure of Speech In “Sociolinguistics. (2nd Edition).* UK. Cambridge University Press.
- Kwasau, A.A. (2004). *The Phonetic and Phonological Perspectives of Languages in Contact: A Focus in Jju and English As a Second Language. An Unpublished Conference Paper Delivered at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NDA – Kaduna.*
- Maggie, T. (2005). *Processes that Change Grammatical Relations In “Syntax” (2nd Edition).* London: Hodder Education.
- Nicky, S. (2004). *Being a Good Speaker: In “Mastering Communication”(4th Edition).* Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stant, T. (2008). *The Language of Success. Some Suggestions for the Improvement of Spoken English.* AMACON: New York, USA.