

## THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS ON COMPREHENSION AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE (L<sub>2</sub>) LEARNERS: IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

By

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### **Abstract**

*Very many factors have been found to influence second language learning. For instance, affective factors such as attitude, motivation and personality have usually been acknowledged to play important role in second language learning. Other factors include environmental factors which could be geographical and/or cultural. This discourse will review the various ways in which cultural constraints and cultural differences impede comprehension among second language (L<sub>2</sub>) learners. Emphasis will be on listening, reading pragmatics and viewing comprehension.*

### **Introduction**

Second language acquisition is the process by which people learn languages in addition to their native language(s). The term second language is used to describe any language whose acquisition starts after early childhood (including what may be the third or subsequent language learned). Second language is often referred to as (L<sub>2</sub>) in comparison with the first language (L<sub>1</sub>) (Krashen, 1982).

Second language acquisition attracts a lot of difficulties arising from learner factors (external and internal); affective factors, individual variation, cultural variation etc.

The learner external factors include social disposition, input and intake, interaction; internal factors have to do with the learners' pattern or order of language learning. The affective factors include anxiety, personality or self-concept and motivation; individual variation includes language aptitude, age and strategy use and then cultural variation connote differences in background.

All the factors addressed above make second language acquisition a unique but error bound-endeavor. However, whatever roles these factors play in second language acquisition, comprehension is critical to language learning and usage.

Here we shall concern ourselves with how cultural variations affect comprehension at various levels among second language learners.

### **1. The influence of cultural constraints on Listening comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users.**

Listening comprehension depends most on acoustic and auditory clarity. It has to do with decoding and acting out of verbal information whether first hand or recorded in a tape. The decoding and positive reaction envisaged from an L<sub>2</sub> user may be delayed or non-existent owing to cultural constraints. This is one of the reasons interlocutors laugh over non funny issues or frown over non serious matters. Again, it is common knowledge that L<sub>2</sub> users transfer some language elements in their L<sub>1</sub> into their L<sub>2</sub> learning and usage. As a result when some fossilized elements or sounds are

applied in speech, listening comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users is hampered especially when the fossilized sounds or elements are not existent in the linguistic background of the listener.

Fancy the following examples of fossilized language elements;

- Yoruba fossilized ‘ead’, ‘and’, ‘heat’ etc relative to English ‘head’, ‘hand’ and ‘eat’. This apparently distorts the meanings of the above English words and make comprehension difficult for non Yoruba listener.
- Yoruba Igbo L<sub>2</sub> learners’ fossilization of the /z/ sound relative to the Igbo /s/ sound in the sentence ‘ezi’ m Oyo instead of ‘esi m Oyo’ (1 hail from Oyo).
- The Yoruba Arabic speaker’s fossilization of ‘Sapter’ relative to English ‘chapter’ etc.
- Hausa speaker’s fossilization of ‘Pilip’, ‘friend’, ‘feter’ relative to English ‘Philip’, ‘friend’ ‘Peter’ respectively. Anambra (Igbo) speakers’ fossilization of ‘rawlence’, ‘Rondon’ relative to English ‘Lawrence’, ‘London’ etc.
- Further on this issue, a Yoruba speaker perceived Igbo greeting ‘kedu?, o di mma (how are you? Fine) as ‘Gedu’ o du njee (wood/timber? It is good edible).
- I had a personal experience when I took lectures on research method with a Yoruba lecturer at University of Ibadan who fossilized the word ‘mayor’ relative to the word ‘measure’, I continued to take meaningless notes until he released his note to the class.

Also, unfamiliar supra-segmental elements like tones, intonation, ascent, stress etc. cause hitch in listening comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users.

The fact I am making is that fossilization hampers listening comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users. Fossilization being ‘linguistic phenomena, items, rules, subsystem which speakers of a particular native language (NL) will tend to keep in his inter language (IL) relative to a particular target language (TL), no matter what age of the learner, or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in TL. (Selinker, 1969), these constitute a sample of cultural constraints to listening comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users.

## **2. The Influence of cultural constraints on reading comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users:**

Reading has to do with decoding of written text. It has to do with making of meaning out of the print. Comprehension is fundamental and critical to reading. For mature readers, reading has no meaning and a sheer waste of time if comprehension does not occur.

However, comprehension can be hindered by cultural constraints in various ways. For instance, it is only natural that people write the way they speak. For one who speaks using language lore like idioms, proverbs most likely applies such in his written discourse. For instance Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi and Chinua Achebe to mention but a few are adept in the use of linguistic aphorisms. These give second language users who come from a different background extra processing load before comprehension takes place.

Again, apart from use of linguistic aphorisms, there are certain concepts that are customized or indigenous to the writer which when reflected in the discourse affect comprehension adversely. In the Igbo acculturation programme organized for the Igbo L<sub>2</sub> learners from Nigerian Colleges of Education, there are some concepts that are used crude because they are customized Igbo concepts without English equivalent. At such classes, comprehension is delayed. The L<sub>2</sub> learners may or may

not have name for such concepts in their native language. For instance, ‘Ukpo’, ‘achi’, ‘ofo’ etc. (soup thickeners) constitute a sample. That is where visual communication becomes pertinent in L<sub>2</sub> teaching and learning. Furthermore, research has shown that cultural constraints or variation affects examination performance. Alastair et al (2000) reveal this when they conducted a multicultural educational assessment on mathematics using a foreign student, Pakistan who immigrated to England and seemed to be under-performing in mathematics. The researchers analyzed using discrete piont approach ten (10) different questions drawing samples from questions he performed very well in and samples from the questions he performed below expectation. Their analysis revealed that he under performed in questions that are culture specific or bound but did well in other questions.

### **3. Influence of cultural constraints on pragmatics comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users.**

Comprehension of pragmatics is strong evidence of increasing language competence among L<sub>2</sub> users. The ability to understand words when used in different situations and contexts brings L<sub>2</sub> learners near native speakers’ competence. And here is another language level where culture affects comprehension adversely. For instance, the second language users need to understand the language use and rules governing language use in the target language. In Yoruba, for a birds eye view, there is a difference in the use of the word ‘ose’ and ‘ese’. Sometimes, they are alternated. In the case of ‘ese’ the ‘e’ is a plural marker that applies to elders as a mark of respect. Again, it is most unlikely to hear a young one asking an elderly ‘bawoni’, or ‘kedu’ in the case of Igbo. Also such expressions as ‘ota mi de, ada mi do in Ibira language (Yoruba) can be misinterpreted as ‘father bring knife my enemy is here’ by an L<sub>2</sub> user because of cultural difference.

Collocations are interpreted differently ie literally by L<sub>2</sub> users. For instance, an old man who captures the hash economic condition with an expression, ‘Amu akughaala ikpere’ can be misunderstood to actually mean that ‘penis has grown beyond the knee’. Also in pragmatic contexts, an L<sub>2</sub> user may fail to understand such principles as ‘anaghi agu nwa onu (children are not counted) in Igbo culture.

In pragmatic discussions, there are taboo words or expressions that are confined to a special group (language of the cult) etc which are permissible to ones culture. Such words or expressions attract code switching when the need for their use arises but the L<sub>2</sub> users may not understand the reason for the avoidance and consequently fall short of expectation of usage or experience communication freeze when the expected expression is skipped by the native speakers. Cultural constraints make L<sub>2</sub> users not appreciate euphemistic applications in the target language. For instance, the term ‘agwo’ (snake) is not mentioned in the night in core Igbo setting, instead it is tagged ‘eriri (rope). Elucidating on this point, second language users of multi dialectal languages have problems of meta language i.e one concept is called different things in as many dialects as existent in the target language. For instance, in Ngwa Igbo, elderly people may refer to ‘money’ as ‘Nwa Ohuu’ (New Baby) or Ojomma’ whereas the standard form is ‘Ego’. The same Ngwa-Igbo refer to fifty naira note as ‘Baby Note’. These expressions that deviate from the standard forms would certainly create comprehension gap for L<sub>2</sub> learners. Mode of settlement in Igbo land certainly differ widely from that of the Yoruba and the Hausa. Discussions centering on rural habitation and architectural structure of any of these tribes may not attract full comprehension to an L<sub>2</sub> learner. The Yoruba do not masquerade in their culture. Masquerading is a peculiar cultural event for the South East and South South people of Nigeria. A non indigene of these ethnic groups may not appreciate certain

roads are deserted at certain times whereas the indigene are able to interpret the routes, warnings, signs and signals of advancing masquerade.

In the same vein, second language user may not appreciate that items are priced in descending order in Yoruba setting but in ascending order in other cultures. All these have to be taken into account while teaching pragmatics to L<sub>2</sub> learners in order to facilitate comprehension.

#### **4. The influence of cultural constraints on viewing comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users.**

The concept of viewing comprehension is a recent phenomenon. The fact that communication transcends oral and written medium lends credence to the emerging perception of viewing comprehension (Hoven 1999). In her analysis of listening and viewing comprehension in multimedia environment saw intimate relationship between viewing comprehension (V.C.) and listening comprehension (L.C.) as it applies particularly in L<sub>2</sub> situation. Cross cultural researchers are focusing on the meanings conveyed by gesture, expression and body language leading to viewing comprehension among L<sub>2</sub> users. More often than not, second language learners make use of gestures and other forms of body language to comprehend linguistic information which ordinarily would have eluded them.

However the culture differences also bring about hitches in viewing comprehension. For instance, the gesture that signifies ‘come’ in Nigerian context is a sign of ‘goodbye’ in Western context. The gesture that means ‘I warned you’, ‘serves you right’ in the Igbo context may either be nonexistent in other ethnic groups or conveys a different meaning all together. My little nephew use to run away from other children whenever he visited the village from the city. No one could fathom why he had phobia getting close to his mates in the village until the he asked my mother if the children in the village were all lunatics. My mother answered that none of them was indeed. The poor boy asked, ‘then why are they always naked? To the little boy born and groomed in the city, only lunatics appear naked.

Again, the sound a core Northerner produces during conversation to show gross attention and comprehension is interpreted as resentment and indifference in the Igbo setting and audience.

#### **Conclusion**

Comprehension is the fundamental target in any mode of communication; oral, print or gesture among native speakers as well as L<sub>2</sub> users. This has implications for L<sub>2</sub> teaching and learning in a multilingual and multicultural society as ours. This challenges the L<sub>2</sub> teachers to use visual and real live objects when they can to concretize their lessons especially culture-specific concepts. The language lessons would have to be infantilized in order to reduce stress for the learners and help them keep their affective filter low enough for optimal language intake. A lot of improvisations are needed from the teacher who would gently guide the learners through the development and usage of new vocabulary in a pragmatic sense. Excursions and acting out roles are inevitable in this situation. Also, to bridge the cultural constraints in second language comprehension, the need for acculturation programme is not only pertinent but imperative for L<sub>2</sub> learners. This will ensure greater and deeper immersion into the target language and its culture.

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