Challenges of Acquiring Second Language: A Case Study of Ekegusii Speakers Learning Kiswahili in Kenya

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Abstract: **Researches done on second language acquisition have shown that learners of the second language do make a number of errors. In many cases these errors are not deliberate but occur naturally due to the first languages structure and how that structure interacts with the language that the learner intends to acquire. This study was carried out among learners of Kiswahili, a bantu language spoken in most parts of Eastern Africa. Those studied were those whose first language is EkeGusii another Bantu language spoken in Kisii county in the western part of Kenya. The study was done with a view to establish grammatical errors that occurred both in spoken and written Kiswahili made by children whose first language is EkeGusii. The study was carried out in the rural area within the southern part of the county. The decision to carry out the study in rural areas was based on the fact that these learners have had less interaction with other languages and therefore the effects of the first language were likely to be more prominent. The study revealed that errors occurred as a result of the first language structure and sounds that were transferred to Kiswahili thereby substantially affecting communication in the second language.**

Keywords: **Grammatical errors, Effects, EkeGusii, Kiswahili.**

1. INTRODUCTION

First language proficiency is a very important basis for second language acquisition. Richards (1974) pointed out that learners' experience in first language is transferred to the learning of second language. This transfer while considered important poses a number of challenges. Sometimes the transfer can result in grammatical mistakes during the process of interaction. This is usually worse when the two languages belong to completely different language families. However even if the two languages belong to one language family, it is still possible for mistakes to occur because of the differences at various linguistic levels of the two languages. Kiswahili and EkeGusii belong to the Bantu cluster of languages.

EkeGusii is spoken in Kisii and Nyamira counties in Kenya. The speakers of the language are called Abagusii. They are believed to have migrated from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The reason for their migration was due to overpopulation, inadequate food, conflicts among themselves and other economic factors. They settled in the western part of Kenya near Lake Victoria. According to a census conducted in 2009, statistics show that EkeGusii is also spoken in Tanzania in those parts of Mara found in Serengeti province. Census of 1979 indicated that speakers totaled about 588,000 people. This number increased significantly to 2.2 million as per the census of 2009. This represented 10% of the total Kenyan population. Most speakers of this language live in rural areas. Roughly there are 500 people in every kilometer per square. Bosire (1993) explains that EkeGusii as a language has two dialects (*Rogoro* and *Maate*). Most official communication is done using the dialect of *Rogoro* since the other dialect of *Maate* has fewer speakers.

Kiswahili is a Bantu language and the first language of many people in the East African region. It is a lingua franca of the African Great Lakes region and other parts of eastern and southeastern Africa., including Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic the Congo. In Kenya, Kiswahili is both a national and official language. Like many other languages, there are varied theories explaining its origin. The most common ones include: the theory that says Kiswahili is an Arabic language or dialect, the theory that states that Kiswahili is a mixture of Arabic and Bantu languages and lastly the one that explains Swahili as a Bantu language. Swahili is characteristically Bantu in its grammar, and it has a large vocabulary of word roots traceable to a common Bantu origin.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Errors are integral part of language acquisition and occur among those learning new languages all over the world. In second language learning process error has at times been regarded as something negative which must be avoided. In foreign language acquisition, these errors can occur during both oral and written communication. According to Lennon (1991) an error is a linguistic form or combination of forms which in the same context and under similar conditions of production would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the native speakers.

Researchers have given different views and suggestions concerning the errors and their sources in the learner's work. The pupils' errors may be seen in light of different processes. Traditionally these processes have been considered to involve a mother tongue and a target language. Wilkins (1972) observes that when learning a foreign language an individual already knows his mother tongue, and it is this knowledge which the learner attempts to transfer.

Selinker (1992) identified five sources of errors. First, languages transfer whereby the learner transfers the rule of his mother tongue to the target language. Secondly is over generalization that occurs when the learner over generalizes rules of the target language in a context where it does fit. Thirdly, strategies of second language communication which refers to errors arising when the learner fails to make use of target- like form of the target rules while he tries to communicate with the native speaker. Fourth, transfer of training which refers to errors that arise as a result of teaching situations. Lastly, he talked of strategies of second language learning which deals with errors that arise when the learner simplifies the target language rules to easier but non-target- like ones.

Richards (1971) when trying to identify the causes of competence errors came up with three types of errors: interference errors which reflect the use of elements from one language to the other, intralingua errors, subdivided into errors due to overgeneralization or to ignorance of rules restrictions, which is incomplete application of rules, or finally due to the false concept hypothesis, which demonstrate the general characteristics of rule learning and third developmental errors when the learner builds hypothesis about the target language based on limited experience. Another division was made by Dulay and Burt in 1974. According to them there are three types of errors: the developmental ones which are based on the identity hypothesis similar to the errors made in first language acquisition, interference errors and unique errors which cannot fall into either of the above mentioned categories.

Ngugi (2007) suggests that first language affects the second one on the phonological level. During a research on the effects of Kikuyu language on Kiswahili acquisition, it was discovered that the effects are more pronounced during articulation and spelling. He emphasized that many errors in the language used by secondary school students resulted from insertion, deletion and nasalization processes. He has explained that this resulted from the difference in structure of the two languages. It is worth noting that both Kiswahili and Kikuyu are both bantu languages but still the differences are substantive enough to elicit the problems observed in the study.

According to Swan and Smith (1987), errors occur in the process of interaction between two languages. This act brings about complexity which by the end of it all causes complications in language usage. Norrish (1983), Brown (1987) on the other hand suggests that errors are unavoidable part of second language learning. They argue that there is a clear indication of growth and development in the second language and through these errors learners do benefit a lot since they are corrected there and then whenever there is a problem.

Kevogo (2007) dealt with grammatical mistakes and how they affect the acquisition of the second language. His emphasis was based on the written Kiswahili whereby he involved the class eight pupils in essay writing. In his research, he discovered that first language had a direct influence in the process of learning Kiswahili as the second language. Richards (1974) pointed out that learners' experience in first language is transferred to the learning of second language. This

transfer is accompanied by errors since the languages are phonologically distinct. These errors can be identified when written texts are analyzed at various linguistic levels.

Massamba (1986), while researching on the effects of local languages on Kiswahili in the Mara region of Tanzania discovered that Kiswahili and local languages affected one another in varying degrees phonologically and lexically. Massamba demonstrated how phonemes are either erroneously inserted or deleted in the use of Swahili words as a result of first language interference. In some instances, vocabulary from local languages of the sampled area is infused into Swahili. Affixes from the first language are inserted into Swahili thus altering the morphological structure. This contravenes the rules of standard Swahili and interferes with the communication process.

Mudhune (2008) while investigating the effects of Dholuo on those learning Kiswahili language discovered that Dholuo caused errors on Kiswahili usage particularly at the phonological level as the speaker usually imported aspects of Dholuo into Kiswahili.

3. METHODOLOGY

Two main methods were used in collecting data that was analyzed in this study. The methods were meant to find out the errors whose first language is EkeGusii make when writing or speaking Kiswahili. The first research instrument involved essay writing. Different topics were given to school learners in class 4-8 and asked to write an essay. Secondly, learners were involved in the pronunciation of words, sentences and various texts. The pronunciations were taped then proscribed for ease of analysis. The study was done in 17 primary schools found in rural areas in Kisii County in Kenya. Rural schools were chosen because EkeGusii language is spoken more in the rural areas as compared to urban centres and therefore the errors are likely to be more prominent when learners from these areas attempt to speak Kiswahili.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

When the learners were exposed to written and spoken Kiswahili a number of errors were observed. The grammatical errors were placed under two categories. First, were those arising from the written work of learners and secondly, errors arising from the spoken word of the pupils. These errors did not occur in the same way and manner.

Errors arising from the pupils' spoken Kiswahili:

Some pupils when exposed to words with some sounds that already exist in ekegusii ended up replacing them with sounds that do not exist in Kiswahili when trying to pronounce a new word. They substituted them with the nearest equivalent sounds available in their phonemic inventory.

These errors came up during the normal classroom lessons. A tape recorder was used as the pupils were pronouncing words and some reading sentences. Some pupils were challenged by some sounds and hence differentiating them became a problem. This made them to end up creating other words which distorted the intended meaning. Examples of errors made are as follows:

Pronouncing /s/ instead of /z/

L-1

   Hu**s**uni instead of hu**z**uni- *Husuni* is a fort while *huzuni* is **sadness**

   Ka**s**i instead of ka**z**i- *kasi* means **fast** and *kazi* is **work**

   Na**s**i instead of na**z**i- *nasi* is **with us** while *nazi* is **palm**

Pronouncing /s/ instead of /ʃ/

L-2

   Mo**s**i instead of mo**sh**i- *mosi* means one while *moshi* means smoke

   Suka instead of **sh**uka -*suka* is **plait** *while shuka* is **alight**

   Saba instead of **sh**aba -*saba* is **seven** while *shaba* is **copper**

Pronouncing /r/ instead of /l/

L-3

    Ku**r**a instead of ku**l**a - *kura* is **vote** and *kula* is **eat**

    Faha**r**i instead of faha**l**i- *fahari* is **pride** *fahali* is **bull**

    Ka**r**amu instead of ka**l**amu- *karamu* is **party** and *kalamu* is **pen**

Pronouncing /c/ instead of /ʒ/

L-4

    Chini instead of **j**ini-*chini* is **down**, *jini* is **demon**

    Ku**ch**a instead of ku**j**a- *kucha* is **daylight**, *kuja* is **come**

    Changili instead of **j**angili –*changili* has no meaning, *jangili*

    is **robber**

Pronouncing /p/ instead of /b/

L-5

    Pap**a** instead of **b**ab**a**- *papa* is **whale**, *baba* is **father**

    Ko**p**e instead of ko**b**e -kope is **eyelid** and *kobe* is **tortoise**

    Pep**e**a instead of **b**e**b**ea- *pepea* is **fan**, *bebea* is **carry for**

From the examples given above, grammatical errors that arose as pupils pronounced words and sentences were identified. By altering one or more than one sound in a word the meaning is distorted. While in some cases the sound put instead of another created another word in Kiswahili, in some cases the resulting word did not have any meaning at all. These errors were as a result of first language interference in the acquisition of the second language.

Errors arising from learners' written Kiswahili:

In the process of expressing themselves through essay writing, the first language led to errors on Kiswahili usage particularly at the phonological and syntactical levels. The pupils imported aspects of EkeGusii into Kiswahili. These errors were put into two categories that is phonological errors and syntactical errors.

Phonological Errors:

Kiswahili language has a phonological system which is distinct from other languages. This can be attributed to the fact that even though it is a Bantu language, it has a unique phonological structure which is a universal feature of all languages. The errors they make during speaking seem to have found their way into the written work. Some of the errors detected could be categorized as follows:

i.   Substitution errors

ii.   Deletion errors

iii.   Errors of solubility

Substitution errors:

While writing in Kiswahili, the learners appeared to substitute some of the Kiswahili sounds with those in ekeGusii that were closest to them. The following examples demonstrate that substitution.

Use of /s/ instead of /z/

There was erroneous substitution of sound /s/ with /z/. Both phonemes are alveolar fricatives. The difference between them is that /s/ is voiceless and /z/ is voiced. EkeGusii phonology does not have sound /z/. Instead of the pupils using /z/ as it is supposed to appear in the word, /s/ was used. This created an error

L-6

Words with substitutes correct spellings

Sawadi	**z**awadi
Hu**s**uni	hu**z**uni
Mche**s**o	mche**z**o

Use of /s/ instead of /ʃ/ and /ʃ/ instead of /s/

As explained earlier, EkeGusii has phoneme /s/. It became easy for the pupils to use the /s/ that they are used to than the other phoneme. EkeGusii does not have the phoneme /ʃ/. This made the pupils to substitute /ʃ/ with /s/ that they are conversant with thus ending with incorrect spellings.

Examples of words with the mentioned error include:

L-7

Words with substitutes   correct spellings

samba	**sh**amba
baha**s**a	baha**sh**a
suka	**sh**uka

It can be seen from the above examples that most times the learners were confronted with /ʃ/ they often used /s/ instead.

Use of /r/ instead of /l/ and /l/ instead of /r/

This was also as a result of mother tongue interference whereby phoneme /r/ gave the pupils a problem. They didn't know where and when to apply it. Phoneme /l/ and /r/ have almost similar characteristics since they are all articulated at the alveolar and are all voiced. The only difference is /l/ when looking at the manner of articulation falls under lateral liquid and /r/ is retroflex. Most words in EkeGusii especially the verbs have phoneme /r/ though it's also used in the Kiswahili phonology. They erroneously substituted /l/ with /r/ while expressing themselves through composition writing. EkeGusii phonology does not have the phoneme /l/. As a result, another neighbouring liquid sound which is articulated at the same place was used. Examples include:

L-8

Words with phoneme substitutes   correct words

Ni**r**ipofika	ni**l**ipofika
Rasima	**l**azima
Rengo	**l**engo

A phenomenon that is difficult to explain is why the /l/ sound that they were not able to use earlier was now being used when the required sound was /r/. This caused a challenge to the learners since they failed to know where to apply /r/ and /l/ in their essays. Examples include

L-9

Words with phoneme substitutes   correct words

Kisi**l**isi**l**i	kisi**r**isi**r**i
Laia	**r**aia
Ka**l**amu	ka**r**amu

Phoneme /p/ and /b/ are stops whereby when pronounced some sounds are made by completely stopping and then releasing the flow of air out of the mouth. /p/ is a voiceless stop and /b/ is a voiced stop. EkeGusii phonology has no phonemes /p/ and/b/. These sounds are articulated as /β/. It is a substitution process of neutralization of two sounds to form another due to first language interference. Both sounds are realized as /b/ in EkeGusii. Kiswahili phonology has both phonemes /p/ and /b/. This becomes a challenge as the pupils end up using /p/ and /b/ anyhow thus ending up with spelling errors in their work.

Examples

L-10

Words with phoneme substitutes   correct words

Penki	**b**enki
Pa**p**a	**b**ab**a**
Ko**p**e	ko**b**e
Ko**b**e	ko**p**e
Basi	**p**asi
Ki**b**indi	ki**p**indi

Use of /v/ instead of /f/

/v/ and /f/ are phonemes found in Kiswahili but not in EkeGusii phonology. It was realized that due to their first language interference, the pupils made errors where these sounds were involved. These two phonemes to a large extent share similar characteristics since they are both labiodental fricatives. The only difference is that /f/ is voiceless and /v/ is voiced. Examples of errors that occurred in the learners written work where the mentioned sounds were involved include;

L-11

Words with phoneme substitutes   correct words

Vimbo	**f**imbo
Kibo**v**u	kibo**f**u
Vikira	**f**ikira

It should be noted as stated earlier above that Kiswahili has several minimal pairs and in many cases, once one sound is changed in a word, it leads to change in meaning as demonstrated in some of the examples already given.

Deletion of phoneme /h/.

Deletion is the omission of one or more sounds such as a vowel, a consonant or a whole syllable in a word or phrase. From the sampled essays, the most frequently deleted sound was /h/. This occurred as a result of the absence of the /h/ phoneme in EkeGusii. The deletion occurred at the beginning of a word and some in the middle. This greatly distorted the meaning since without the phoneme /h/ other different meanings could be derived. For example, instead of writing the following words correctly they wrote them as follows;

L-12

Words without /h/ phoneme   correct words

Raisi	ra**h**isi
Mtiani	mti**h**ani
Ewa	**h**ewa

Syntactic Errors:

EkeGusii syntax and semantics also led to errors of syntax in the Kiswahili essays. The pupils directly translated the EkeGusii words into Kiswahili which led to malformation of some sentences. Another reason for the occurrence of these errors was due to confusion on the Kiswahili grammar rules because some rules in Kiswahili do not exist in EkeGusii. Some of the striking examples syntactic errors include the following:

Errors arising from direct translation of sentences:

Direct translation involves the rendering of text from one language to another one word for word without conveying the sense of the original whole. From the sampled compositions, learners translated ideas directly from EkeGusii to Kiswahili. These translations had correct meanings in EkeGusii according to the way they were used but the meaning did not come

out well in Kiswahili despite the two languages being Bantu. The learners also kept the word order as close to the original as they could but still this had an even worse effect on the second language in some instances. Keeping the word order made the Kiswahili written by the learners sound more like EkeGusii making those who are familiar with Kiswahili and not EkeGusii find it difficult to understand the meaning. They for example referred to quenching thirst as **cooling thirst** simply because in EkeGusii **quenching** is referred to as **cooling**. When that is translated into Kiswahili, it does not expressly mean the same as *kata kiu* which translates to **terminate thirst.**

Errors arising from Concordia agreements:

In Kiswahili subjects and verbs must agree with one another in number (singular and plural). Thus if a subject is singular, its verb must also be singular, if a subject is plural, its verb must also be plural. Apart from the two main clause elements, subject and verb, there are three others which may or may not appear in the clause. These are the object, the complement and the adverbial. From the sampled essays, some learners used the knowledge of their first language and applied it in Kiswahili. This had effects in the meaning to the extent that in some cases the meaning was distorted.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the various challenges that the learners of Kiswahili whose first language is EkeGusii go through. Many of the errors that they make are not intentional but rather arise from the differences in linguistic structure of the two languages that were studied. Those that are involved in helping learners of Kiswahili who speak EkeGusii as their first language would find these findings helpful as they would device means of enabling learners to learn Kiswahili with minimal errors. They would for example find it useful to take the learners through pronunciation lessons especially in areas where the learners are known to confuse certain sounds. It would specifically be useful to school teachers who encounter learners with these kind of difficulties on a daily basis. The method used here could also be used to study other second language learners in other parts of the world.

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