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Speaking Difficulties Encountered by EFL Learners: the case of Shupamem native speakers

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Abstract

This paper investigates the speaking difficulties encountered by Shupamem (a grassfield Bantu language spoken in the west region of Cameroon) native speakers in learning English as a foreign language. It is observed that despites the improvement of the teaching method and materials in the Cameroonian secondary education, many Shupamem speakers engaged in English learning do not speak accurately. Based on the data collected from selected students of Terminalein some schools of the Noun division where Shupamem is spoken, the paper posits that the main challenges these learners face are phonological and syntactic, originating from (i) the lack of asymmetry between their L1's sound system and that of English, and (ii) the lack of a one to one correspondence between the position of some English and Shupamem sentence constituents.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Ur (1996) identifies four factors that are responsible of speaking difficulties, namely, (i) *inhibition*: students are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy; (ii) *nothing to say*: students have no motive to express themselves; (iii) *low or uneven participation*: only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all; (iv) *mother-tongue use*: learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel less exposed if they are speaking their mother tongue. The outcome of this research proves that learners can still face many speaking challenges with the aforementioned conditions respected. This paper questions the way the learners' L1 may influence their English speaking skills. An L1 (also referred to as mother tongue) is the first language acquired naturally by a child, in a non-formal situation. It is normally not taught in school but acquired through the daily life interactions. The paper is structured into

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four sections. Section one gives an overview of Shupamem, and section two presents the methodology adopted in the research. Section three presents and discusses the findings, while section four proposes further strategies to overcome these challenges and improve on the learners' speaking skills.

1. Overview of Shupamem

Shupamem (ʃýpǎmə̀m) is a Bantu language spoken in the Noun division of the West region of the Republic of Cameroon. Like other languages of the same family, it is an SVO, a noun class and a tone language. Its sound system contains twenty-eight consonants and ten vowels that can be lax or tense. It also displays three level tones (high, mid and low), and four contour tones (rising, falling, high-mid, and low-mid) the rising and the falling ones are the most present in the discourse. Shupamem has fifteen Noun classes displayed in the paradigm singular/plural, (Nchare 2012), and three tenses, namely the present, the future and the past.

The present tense is usually not dissociable from aspect, precisely the habitual, the progressive and the evidential aspects. The past tense is structured into four tenses: the immediate past (P1) which is not morphologically realized, the recent past (P2) marked by the morpheme *pé*, the intermediate past (P3) marked by *pí*, and the remote past (P4) marked by *kàpí*.

In the same view, there exist an immediate future tense (F1) marked by the morpheme *nántuá*, an intermediate future tense (F2) marked by *nálɔ́ʔ* and a remote future tense (F3) marked by *nántuálɔ́ʔ*. These tense markers are left-adjoined to the verb, as illustrated in (1) and (2) below:

(1)

a.	*mɔ́n*	*pé*	*jʉ̀*	*pén*
	child	P2	eat	fufu
	"The child ate fufu"			
b.	*mɔ́n*	*nálɔ́ʔ*	*jʉ̀*	*pén*
	child	F2	eat	fufu
	"The child will eat fufu"			

In addition to being a language of trade, Shupamem is used in religious and traditional ceremonies such as marriages, birth celebrations, funerals, and in traditional and modern music and films.

2. Methodology

This study addresses two main questions: (i) what are the main speaking difficulties encountered by Shupamem speakers of Terminale in the Noun Division? (ii) What are the factors that contribute to the existence of these difficulties?

2.1.Sample population

As a case study, this work involved only the students of Terminale of three secondary schools in the Noun Division. Terminale is the last class of the secondary education in Cameroon that gives way to the tertiary level of education. Here, students are supposed to speak English correctly because they have been learning it for twelve years (six years in the primary school and six years in the secondary schools).

2.2.Research instruments

Class observations, semi-structured interviews and curriculum analysis were used in this research. During the class observation, records and notes were taken in order to identify the speaking difficulties encountered by the students. Semi-structured interviews aimed to collect the students' beliefs regarding their English speaking difficulties. Curriculum analysis consisted in questioning the content of the textbooks in use in these secondary schools in order to identify their contribution to the learners speaking difficulties.

2.3.Data analysis

The data were analyzed qualitatively. The speaking difficulties identified were grouped into subjects according to their nature (phonological and syntactic).

3. Findings and comments

On the nature and factors that contribute to the speaking difficulties identified in the data, the study reveals that they are phonological and syntactic and originate from the students' L1 as well as from their textbooks content.

3.1. Phonological difficulties

The data revealed some phonological interference in the learners' speech. Interference is the error in the learner's use of a foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue, Lott (1983: 256). There is tendency for learners to replace some English sounds by others from their native language (Essono 1979). This phonological interference affects the consonants, the vowels and the tones.

3.1.1. English vsShupamem consonants

On the one hand, the English sound system contains 25 consonants (9 voiceless and 16 voiced), as shown in the table below:

Place/Manner of articulation	Bilabial	Dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labiovelar	Glottal
Plosives	p b		t d		k g		
Fricatives	f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ			
Affricates			tʃ dʒ				
Nasals	m		n		ŋ		
Liquids			l r				
Semi-vowels				j		w	h

Table 1: English consonants

On the other hand, works on Shupamem (Ward 1983, Boum 1977, Nchare 2012, Ngoungouo 2016, Njutapmvoui 2017 and others) revealed 27 consonants, excluded those that have undergone some phonological processes such as palatalization, labialization, nasalization, etc. They are presented in the table below:

Place/manner of articulation	Bilabial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labiovelar	Glottal
Plosives	p b		t d		k g	kp gb	ʔ
Fricatives	f v		s z	ʃ ʒ	χ		
Affricates					kχ		
Nasals	m	ɱ	n	ɲ	ŋ		
Liquids			l r				
Semi-vowels				j		w	h

Table 2: Shupamem consonants

It appears from the inventory above that some Shupamem consonants do not exist in English, and reversely. This justifies the interferences of Shupamem consonants in some English words produced by the informants. Some of them are illustrated in (2) below:

(2)

a. Teacher → /ti:ʃə/ instead of /ti:tʃə/
b. Search → /s∈ʃ/ instead of /s∈tʃ/
c. Joke → /ʒəYk/ instead of /dʒəYk/
d. Joy → /ʒɔɪ/ instead of /dʒɔɪ/

It appears from the data above that the affricates */tʃ/* and */dʒ/* which do not exist in Shupamem are pronounced as */ʃ/* and */ʒ/* by most Shupamem speakers. Similarly, given that most of Shupamem consonants are nasalized in the words initial positions, strange phonological interferences like the following are encountered in some Shupamem speakers' speech:

(3)
a. Bread → /mbred/ instead of /bred/
b. Good → /ŋgYd/ instead of /gYd/
c. Dust → /ndʌst / instead of /dʌst/

It is observed that the sounds */b/,/g/* and */d/* are nasalized in the words above.

3.1.2. English vsShupamem vowels

Some of the English and Shupamem vowels are not identical. The English sounds /ɜ/, /ʌ/, /ʊ/ and /æ/ are not attested in Shupamem. Likewise, the Shupamem vowels /a/ and /ʉ/ are inexistent in English, as seen in the tables below:

i ɪ	ɨ	u ʊ
e ɛ	ə ɜ	o ʌ ɔ
æ a		ɑ

Table 3: English vowel sounds

	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɨ ʉ	u
Mid-high	e	ə	o
Mid-low	ɛ		ɔ
low		a	

Table 4: Shupamem vowel sounds

Vowels allophones are a challenge to English learners. In fact, an English vowel is pronounced differently depending on its phonological environment. The combination /ea/ is pronounced as [i] ("peak"), and [e] ("bread"). The records collected for this study revealed that most Shupamem speakers would pronounce these sound as [peak] for "peak" and [bread] for "bread". Other examples are illustrated hereafter:

(4)
a. Man: /man/ instead of /mæn/
b. Go: /go/ instead of /gəʊ/
c. Young: /juŋ/ instead of /jʌŋ/
d. Person: /pɛrsɔn/ instead of /pɜ:sn/

It is observed that vowels contained in the English words above are not articulated appropriately, contributing to the speaking difficulties.

3.1.3. The interference of Shupamem tones in English words

Tone is a phonological property which describes the pitch of the voice during the production of words. English is a toneless language unlike most African languages including Shupamem. The latter displays three level tones (high, mid, low). It also has some contour tones, whereof the rising and the falling are the most present in discourse. They are presented in the table and illustrated in (5) below:

Level tones	High [́]	Mid [̄]	Low [̀]
Contour tones	Rising [̌]	Falling [̂]	

Table 3, Shupamem tones chart

(5)

- High: *pý:* "badness"
- Mid: *jéjēn* "yard"
- Low: *pỳ* "we"
- Rising: *jìndǎm* "to gossip"
- Falling: *ndâm* "gossip"

Due to this presence of tones in Shupamem, most learners tend to reproduce these tones into English. On the one hand, the level tones may not be perceived because they sound like the English stress. On the other hand, contour tones are perceived in either vowel of the English words produced by Shupamem speakers, as shown in (6) below:

(6)

a. dinner /dǏnə/ instead of /dInə/
b. Good /gYd/ instead of /gYd/
c. Days /deÎz/ instead of /deÎz/

We observe that the sound /I/ of the word /dǏnə/ bears the rising tone while /Y/ and /I/ of /gYd/ and /beiz/ bear the falling tones, which they are not supposed to.

3.2. Syntactic difficulties

The syntactic difficulties that Shupamem speakers encounter originate from the positions of the various sentence constituents in both languages. Although English and French are SVO languages, their sentence constituents do not always occupy the same positions. Passivization and the positions of wh-question, possessives, and tense morphemes are examined hereafter.

3.2.1.1. Passivization

Passivization is a syntactic operation which consists in turning an active sentence into a passive one. The object in the active sentence becomes the subject in the corresponding passive sentence. Consider the following:

(7)

a. Tim broke the vase
b. The vase was broken by Tim

Tim is the subject in (7.a) and the complement in (7.b). *The vase* is the direct object in (7.a) and the subject in (7.b). This change is due to the passive transformation that occurred in (7). Unlike English, Shupamem does not attest passive constructions. The agent is always the subject of the sentence and precedes the verb. This is exemplified in (8) and (9):

(8)

a.	*Mɔ́n*	*kàpí*	*séntə́*	*ŋgré:t*
	Child	P4	break	glass
	"The child broke the glass"			
b.	**ŋgré:t*	*kàpí*	*séntə́*	*mɔ́n*
	glass	P4	break	child
	*"The glass broke the child"			
	Intended: "The child broke the vase".			

(9)

a.	*Màtwá:*	*pí*	*kŭm*	*lé:rà?*
	Car	P3	knocked	teacher
	"The car knocked the teacher"			
b.	**lé:rà?*	*pí*	*kŭm*	*màtwá:*
	teacher	P3	knock	car
	*"the teacher knocked the car"			
	Intended: "The car knocked the teacher"			

It is observed that (8.a) and (9.a) above are active sentences. The nouns *mɔ́n*"child" (8.a) and *màtwá:* "car" (9.a) are agents and subjects. As argued previously, passive constructions are not licensed in Shupamem. This justifies the ungrammaticality of (8.b) and (9.b).

The absence of passivization in Shupamem makes the learners unable to produce passive sentences on their own. They consider the agent to always appear before the verb as in Shupamem.

3.2.1.2. The position of the wh-items in interrogative constructions

The English wh-items appear sentence-initially, though base-generated inside TP. In Shupamem, on the contrary, the unmarked position of wh-items is sentence-final. Their extraction to the sentence initial position is highly constrained and rare in discourse. Consider the following:

(10)

a. **What** did you eat? (English)

b.	*Wù*	*pé:*	*nʒʉ́*	***kùə̀?*** *(Shupamem)*
	2sg	P2	eat	what
	"What did you eat?"			

In the example above, the wh-item *what* occupies the sentence initial position in English and the sentence finial position in Shupamem.

Due to this difference in the unmarked positions of wh-items in English and Shupamem, the data analysis revealed that many learners form sentences in English with wh-item in-situ, as illustrated in the data below:

(11)

a. You have eaten **what**?
b. You live **where**?
c. You are talking to **whom**?

The wh-items are in-situ in the data above, as they normally appear in Shupamem. Though not incorrect per se, they do not respect the wh-extraction constraint in English.

3.2.1.3. The position of possessives

English possessive adjectives precede the nouns that they modify. Consider the following:

(12)

a. I love **my** mother
b. *I love mother **my**
c. The students lost **their** pens
d. *The students lost pens **their**

It appears from (12) that English possessive adjectives always precede the nouns that they modify. Their presence after these nouns renders the sentence incorrect (12.b, 12.d).

In Shupamem, possessives can precede or follow the nouns that they modify. The unmarked configuration is noun<possessive, whereas the structure possessive<noun is used for emphasis. Consider the data below:

(13)

a. *Mə́* *ná:* *ŋgʉ́ʔ* *ná:-**ʃá***
1sg Prs. Love mother-my
"I love my mother"

b. *Mə́* *ná:* *ŋgʉ́ʔ* ***já**-nă:*
1sg Prs love my-mother
"I love my mother"

c. *χà:lèrèwà* *pí* *gbáʔ* *pé:ʃì-**ʃáp***
students P3 lose pens-their
"The students lost their pens"

d. *χà:lèrèwà* *pí* *gbáʔ* ***jáp**-pé:ʃì*
students P3 lose their-pens
"The students lost their pens".

As opposed to English, the data in (13) reveal that Shupamem possessives can be right-adjoined or left-adjoined to the nouns that they modify. The postnominal position of the possessive adjective is the most frequent structure in Shupamem.

For this reason, most learners transpose this configuration into English, which leads to incorrect sentences like (12.b) and (12.d) above.

3.2.1.4. The position of tense morphemes

In Shupamem, tense morphemes are pre-posed to the verb, whereas they appear as suffixes in English regular verbs. Consider the examples below:

(14)

a. The teacher goe**s** to the market
b. The student play**ed** with his friends

(15)

a. Lé:ràʔ tié ŋgwə̀n mfə́ ndʉ̀mté:n
Teacher Prog.Prs go to market
"The teacher goes to the market"

b. ŋgà:lèrèwà pí kà:m pó: sú:n-pí
student P3 play with friend-his
"The student played with his friends"

We observe in (14) that the tense morphemes in English are the suffixes /-s/ in *goes* and /-ed/ in *played***.** They appear after the verb**.** In (15), the tense markers *tié* and *pí* precede the verbs *ŋgwə̀n* "go" and *kà:m*"play". Due to this, Shupamem speakers expect the tense marker to precede the verb as in their language reason why their sentences usually contain no tense markers as illustrated hereafter:

(16)

a. *The child play football yesterday
b. *The teacher come to school tomorrow
c. *We succeed our exams last year

It is observed that no morpheme is used to indicate the tense of the verbs in the sentences above. Moreover, many could designate any other morpheme that precedes the verb in the English sentences as the tense marker.

3.3. The content of the teaching materials

The main problem identified in the structure of the English textbooks is the lack of phonetics and phonology or the least attention they are given. Examining the books "Stay stunned" in use in the three schools where the research was conducted, it was discovered that the only aspects of sounds studies taught to the students are the English alphabet and stress marking. It is known that the letters contained in a language alphabet do not represent all the sounds of that language, and that stress is unpredictable on words. On the one hand, the letter "a" in English is pronounced as /ei/, /æ/, etc., depending on the contexts. On the other hand, there is no indication on the English word that tells where the stress should be placed.

4. Recommendations

To overcome the speaking difficulties mentioned in this paper, English teachers should lay emphasis on the English sounds production. The English consonants, vowels and stress should be taught and practiced in classrooms. Concretely, the students should be able to identify the place and the manner of articulation, the state of the glottis, and the airstream mechanism of each English sound. The textbooks should contain the lessons on speech production, not only the alphabet and stress.

In the same line, the position of each English part of speech should be taught to learners. Further, their positions resulting from syntactic transformations such as passivization, relativization, topicalization, focalization and question formation should also be taught.

Conclusion

This paper outlined the major speaking difficulties faced by Shupamem speakers learning English as a foreign language. It revealed that most of these difficulties are related to phonology and syntax. They originate from the difference in the structure of sounds and some sentences of English and French. The phonological difficulties are rendered as sound interferences and do not affect the semantic interpretation of the utterance. The syntactic ones however impact the sentence grammaticality, because sentence constituents in human languages are not placed anyhow.

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Abbreviations and symbols

F1:	Immediate future tense
F2:	intermediate future tense
F3:	remote future tense
L1:	first language
Vs:	versus
Prog.	Progressive aspect
Prs.	Present tense
P1:	immediate past tense
P2:	recent past tense
P3:	intermediate past tense
P4:	remote past tense
SVO:	Subject-Verb-Object
TP:	Tense Phrase
*:	ungrammatical
→	Becomes