Prevalence and Dimensions of Cross-Language Transfer of Yoruba Syntactic Skills in English Comprehension among Junior Secondary Students in Oyo State Nigeria

Adedeji Maruf Abidemi

Article History: Submitted-03/05/2020, Revised-20/05/2020, Accepted-21/05/2020, Published-05/06/2020.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental process of learning. The ability to read is at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning (Tella & Akande, 2007), and one of the target goals of reading is comprehension. An efficient and successful reader is one who comprehends what they have read. Reading comprehension or ‘rapid and thorough assimilation of information from text’ is fundamental to success in all aspects of modern life, including education, productivity in society, and the employment world (Hogan, Bridges, Justice, & Cain, 2011). Ozkan and Tongur (2014) stressed that reading comprehension skill is an invaluable instrument for overcoming learning challenges. In Nigeria, one of the aspects of the lessons in general English Language classes is reading comprehension. A credit pass in English is mandatory for candidates’ admission to any course of study in a Nigerian tertiary institution (Osisanwo, 2005) and the ability to comprehend what is read in preparation for an examination as well as the actual examination questions is essential. It must, however, be noted that reading comprehension in English is accorded wider currency and more recognition than Yoruba language learning and examination. This is because while Yoruba language as a subject is optional to students, English language is offered as a core and mandatory subject for all students across all departments in Nigerian secondary schools (Central Intelligence Agency, 2015).

As a matter of concern, further studies have also shown that the majority of Nigerian secondary school students possess poor reading habits, let alone comprehend what they read (Aina, Ogungbeni, Adigun, & Ogundipe, 2011). It is also revealing, as noted by Kolawole (2009), that nothing has changed significantly at the secondary school level in Oyo State as far as reading is concerned. In their contribution, Adeniji and Omale (2010) also indicated that the condition of reading in the State is bad to the extent that many learners could not understand
simple passage. To put it directly, the poor performance of Nigerian students in English Language public examinations has been located, albeit partially, in their lack of competence in reading comprehension (Idogo, 2011, Adekola, 2012; Odejobi, Ajayi, & Olokunlade, 2014; Ajayi, 2015). The poor performance of students in English language public examinations has also been linked to many factors, one of which is poor reading comprehension (Adekola, 2012, Falayi, 2015).

Meanwhile, Bishop and Snowling (2004), in their extended model of reading, identified syntax as one of the supporting components of reading. Syntax stipulates how linguistic units should be marked and ordered to convey distinct meaning. According to Hana (2011), syntax is the level of linguistics that studies sentence structure. Syntax serves the purpose of aiding successful reading comprehension. That is, the success of reading is also a proof of sufficient mastery of syntactic skills. This consequence, according to studies, is traceable to the possibility of cross-language transfer influencing learning a second language, which can either be positive (Cummins 1979; Seidenberg & McClelland, 1989; Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2002; Bishop & Snowling, 2004) or negative (Wang, Cheng, & Chen, 2006; Cain 2007; Koda 2008; Wang, Ko, & Choi, 2009). While the early idea of transfer is of the opinion that cross-language transfer halts when learners master L2 linguistic knowledge, later studies assert that transfer will not end at any given point throughout L2 development (Koda, 2008). What has been demonstrated above is that in any situation of language contact, there can be a resulting linguistic influence between languages. For instance, studies on Yoruba-English influence show that transfer increased with increasing proficiency in English. In addition, the influence of Yoruba on English is greater than that of English on Yoruba and increased with proficiency in English among the bilingual students (Harris, 1987).

It is against this background of the language transfer’s prevalence and dimensions in reading comprehension for students’ academic achievement that this study focused investigation on the prevalence and dimensions of Yoruba syntactic skills transfer in students’ English reading comprehension in junior secondary schools in Oyo State. Moreover, prior works on these skills’ contribution to literacy acquisition have yielded inconclusive findings; and to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, not much emphasis has been placed on the educational implications of this study where English language skills form the basis of other educational pursuits. Therefore, these findings necessitate further studies on syntactic skills transfer in relation to academic
performance of secondary school students in the study area, especially in reading comprehension; hence this study.

An analysis of the performance of candidates in the English language over the years revealed a discouraging performance in the comprehension aspect of both internal and external examinations (Kolawole, 2009). Recent studies like Bishop & Snowling, 2004 and Carrey, Connie, David & Kevin (2016) also showed that the acquisition of Reading Comprehension in English (RCE) skills is contingent on the students’ ability to appropriately transfer skills from mother tongue (MT). The extent to which the aforementioned syntactic skills transfer influences RCE has become a subject of debate as a consequence of increasing poor academic performance in the English Language at later stage of schooling. Although many researchers like Onike (2009), Carrey and Connie (2015), Carrey, Connie, David, & Kevin, (2016) and Okanlawon, (2016) have carried out investigation on language transfer’s contribution to reading comprehension, not much has been done on the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills in English reading comprehension. There is, therefore, a need to examine whether the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills would have any link with the English reading comprehension of secondary school students; hence this study.

The purpose of the study was to assess the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills in the English comprehension among junior secondary students in Oyo State. In furtherance to this, the study was to assess the underlying interrelatedness between the students’ mother tongue, Yoruba and the English reading comprehension. It would further research into word-order and morphosyntactic abilities of the students in the two focal languages (Yoruba and English). The specific objectives of the study are to determine the prevalence of syntactic skills transfer in reading comprehension of junior secondary school students in Oyo State and also examine the dimensions of syntactic transfer skills in the two languages of Yoruba (L1) and English (L2) possessed by junior secondary school students in the study area.

In line with the research objectives, the following research questions were asked and answered in the study.

- What is the prevalence of syntactic skills transfer in reading comprehension of junior secondary school students in Oyo State?
What are the dimensions of syntactic skills in the two languages of Yoruba (L1) and English (L2) possessed by junior secondary school students in Oyo State?

METHODS

The study adopted the descriptive research design because all the issues of concern to the researcher were available in the schools. The descriptive research design was suitable to ascertain to a measurable extent the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills in the English comprehension among junior secondary school two students in Oyo State. The study population covered junior secondary school two students in schools in Oyo South and Oyo Central senatorial districts respectively in the State. The study sample consisted of four hundred Yoruba-speaking junior secondary school two (JSS2) students in the State. From two senatorial districts in the State, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were selected using simple random sampling technique and school as a stratum. Four schools were selected from each of the two LGAs using stratified sampling technique, giving a total of eight schools. Purposive sampling technique was used to select fifty students from each of the eight schools, giving a total of four hundred students in all.

In order to examine the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills in the English comprehension among junior secondary students in the selected schools, two research instruments were used to gather data for the study, namely: Language Reading Comprehension Tests (LRCT) and Syntactic Skills Transfer Inventory (SSTI).

Both content and face validities of the research instruments were ascertained by the supervisor to the researcher and judgement of language experts in the department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State, Nigeria. They all assisted in making necessary modifications and adjustments to the test instruments.

Trial testing was carried out by administering the instruments on JSS2 intact class that was not involved in the study in another Local Government Area. This was done in a school, which has similar characteristics as those in the area of study, which was not part of the study. The researcher observed that the students attempted the questions on LRCT and SSTI. Field testing of both LRCT and SSTI was carried out to determine the reliability of the instrument. The data obtained from the testing were subjected to reliability and difficulty tests. Cronbach’s alpha was used to measure the internal consistency of the research instruments. A reliability coefficient of 0.70 was obtained. This led to modification in some of the syntactic skills and reading
comprehension questions. Thus, the instruments were considered valid and reliable for use in this study.

**Language Reading Comprehension Tests (LRCT):** The LRCT was designed by the researcher to test the students’ understanding of passage contents. It was used to assess the students’ reading comprehension performance in relation to their syntactic skills in English and Yoruba. Two comprehension passages drawn from locally published English and Yoruba language textbooks (widely used by mainstream Junior Secondary School II) were selected and adapted for the test. That is, one passage was from English textbook and the other passage from Yoruba textbook. Each student answered five questions on each of the two comprehension passages. The students were asked to read the passage silently before answering questions on the passages. There were five multiple-choice questions with four options for each passage. The LRCT was scored based on the marks obtained in the comprehension passages. Specifically, passage understanding was identified and scored as “1=correct” and “0= incorrect”. The focus of the analysis was to assess the students’ reading comprehension performance in the two languages.

**Syntactic Skills Transfer Inventory (SSTI):** The Syntactic Skills Transfer Inventory was designed by the researcher to examine the dimensions and prevalence of syntactic skills in the two languages of Yoruba (L1) and English (L2). The inventory was divided into two sections viz: Section A and Section B. The two sections tested the students’ understanding of basic word order patterns in English and Yoruba and their ability to detect and correct morphemic violations in sentences of the two languages. Information gathered was used to determine the prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba (L1) in English (L2) of the students. There were ten questions under each of the two sections. The SSTI was scored based on the mark obtained in each question. Specifically, each question was identified and scored as “1=correct” and “0= incorrect”. This instrument held significant importance to determine whether there are prevalence and dimensions of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills in the English comprehension among junior secondary students in the State.

**RESULTS**

The results of the analyses were presented in the tables below.

**Research Question One:** What is the prevalence of syntactic skills transfer in reading comprehension of junior secondary school students in Oyo State?
In order to answer research question one, students’ scores on Language Reading Comprehension Test and Syntactic Skills Inventory were subjected to descriptive statistics, the result is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics of Students’ syntactic skills transfer in Reading comprehension in Oyo State.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntactic Skills</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td>f(%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCE</td>
<td>15(3.8)</td>
<td>57(14.3)</td>
<td>87(21.8)</td>
<td>98(24.5)</td>
<td>94(23.5)</td>
<td>49(12.3)</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RCY</td>
<td>40(10.0)</td>
<td>86(21.5)</td>
<td>88(22.0)</td>
<td>98(24.5)</td>
<td>56(14.0)</td>
<td>32(8.0)</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>1.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOE</td>
<td>51(12.8)</td>
<td>38(9.5)</td>
<td>51(12.8)</td>
<td>60(15.0)</td>
<td>96(24.0)</td>
<td>104(26.0)</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WOY</td>
<td>130(32.5)</td>
<td>109(27.3)</td>
<td>91(22.8)</td>
<td>41(10.3)</td>
<td>12(3.0)</td>
<td>17(4.3)</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>104(26.0)</td>
<td>54(13.5)</td>
<td>69(17.3)</td>
<td>84(21.0)</td>
<td>76(19.0)</td>
<td>13(3.3)</td>
<td>2.03</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MY</td>
<td>222(55.5)</td>
<td>55(13.8)</td>
<td>54(13.5)</td>
<td>29(7.3)</td>
<td>15(3.8)</td>
<td>25(6.3)</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Mean Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>12.77</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the result of descriptive statistics of syntactic skills transfer in reading comprehension of junior secondary school students in Oyo State. Considering the mean scores, it can be deduced from the table that the students have a mean score of \( M=2.87 \) in reading comprehension in English Language even as the students have a mean score of \( M=2.35 \) in reading comprehension in Yoruba Language. The junior secondary school students have the highest mean score of \( M=3.06 \) in word order in English Language indicating its prevalence over other syntactic skills, though they have a mean score of \( M=1.37 \) in word order in Yoruba Language. Also, the students have a mean score of \( M=2.03 \) in morphosyntactic in English Language, while they have a mean score of \( M=1.09 \) in Yoruba Language.

**Research Question Two:** What are the dimensions of syntactic skills in the two languages of Yoruba (L1) and English (L2) possessed by junior secondary school students in the study area?

**Table 2: Dimensions of Syntactic skills in Yoruba (L1) and English (L2) possessed by junior secondary school students.**
Table 2 shows the dimensions of syntactic skills in the two languages of Yoruba (L1) and English (L2) possessed by junior secondary school students in the study area. It is shown that students recorded a higher mean (M=1.37, SD=1.33) in word order aspect of Yoruba Syntactic skills than morphosyntactic knowledge (M=1.09, SD=1.52). Likewise, students recorded higher mean (M=3.06, SD=1.77) in word order aspect of English Syntactic skills than morphosyntactic knowledge (M=2.03, SD=1.56). Indication is shown from this result that student demonstrated better understanding in word order aspect of syntactic skills than they did in morphosyntactic knowledge across the two languages. This is reflected in their mean values of the two languages.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In view of the result analysis and its interpretations presented in this study, the following were the findings based on the two research questions. The findings of the study showed that junior secondary school students in the study area had prevalence of syntactic skills transfer of word order in reading comprehension. Many studies have demonstrated that L2 reading comprehension can be influenced by L1 transfer as outlined by Lado’s (1957) contrastive analysis of hypothesis, and Bishop and Snowling (2004), and the current study provided further empirical evidence supporting the hypothesis. Among the study sample with a range of proficiency levels in Yoruba and English, Yoruba-speaking JSS2 students’ L1 ability showed a strong, positive, statistically significant prevalence of syntactic skills transfer in their L2 reading comprehension. These findings showed that the students with higher Yoruba syntactic skills tended to acquire good English (L2) reading comprehension.

This result is in line with the findings of Carrey, Connie, David & Kevin (2016) who found that syntactic skills transfer of word order consistently predicts reading comprehension. Although some previous studies reported a transfer relationship between Yoruba (L1) syntactic skills and English (L2) reading comprehension (Onike, 2009; Okanlawon, 2016), the focus has usually been on interference with no case study of with junior secondary school students in
Nigerian schools. However, this study like Carrey and Connie (2015) and Carrey, Connie, David & Kevin, (2016) discovered a prevalence of syntactic transfer of L1 which would positively influence performance in reading comprehension in L2. The findings also showed the dimension of the syntactic transfer skills in the students’ Yoruba (L1) and English (L2), in which they demonstrated a better understanding in word order aspect of syntactic skills than they did in morphosyntactic knowledge across the two languages. On the basis of the findings, it may be argued that grammatical knowledge (word-order) predicts better comprehension and is usable as an indicator of success in reading. The results of the present study seemingly countered to the findings of Chik et al. (2012) that word order skill was less important to reading comprehension than morphosyntactic knowledge. However, the result showed that contribution of morphosyntactic skill to support reading comprehension might be overtaken by word order skill because increasingly long texts were introduced in secondary schools. The findings of this study further revealed that English word order of syntactic skills prevails over other syntactic skills across the two languages. It was revealed from the findings that there is a positive significant relationship between Yoruba syntactic skills and English reading comprehension of the students in the study area. It was also discovered that student’s L1 syntactic skills has an influence on their English reading comprehension.

From this study, it implied that knowledge of syntactic skills of L1 fosters improvement in the academic performance of students’ English reading comprehension. Although both languages (Yoruba and English) are typologically distant and substantially different in terms of structural properties, they still share common underlying language properties.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the conclusion of findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to further enhance the influence of cross-language transfer of Yoruba syntactic skills on English reading comprehension of students’ learning performance. Bilingual students should draw on the correspondence between L1 and L2 syntax to support their L2 learning. Educators should take note of issues and strategies of syntactic skills transfer in improving students’ L2 reading comprehension. Curriculum planners should take advantage of possible prevalence and dimensions of L1 syntactic skills transfer in designing an effective L2 learning programme. Workshops, seminars and conferences should be organized for language teachers on the new innovative ideas of cross-language transfer across languages. The language teacher should be alert to the challenges posed by students’ unrestrained dependence on Yoruba syntactic skills.
transfer and the transfer’s influence on their reading comprehension in English language. English Language teachers should take advantage of bilingual students teaching innovations with a special attention to influence of Yoruba syntactic skills transfer on reading comprehension of English Language. Authors of language text books should include appropriate skills across languages in order to improve students’ learning skills in languages.

Works Cited:


Prevalence and Dimensions of Cross-Language Transfer of Yoruba Syntactic Skills in English Comprehension among Junior Secondary Students in Oyo State Nigeria


www.galaxyimrj.com


