Singular-Plural Distinction in Izon and its Influence on the Teaching/Learning of Plural Formation in English

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Abstract

This study examines singular-plural distinction processes in Izon and highlights the difficulties these may pose to the teaching and learning of plural formation in English so as to suggest ways in which teachers can design an effective teaching method to tackle the perceived difficulties. The study, which made use of 100 subjects of an average age of eleven years drawn from the Arogbo-Izon community of Ondo State, Nigeria, reveals that Izon inhibits the learning of plural formation in English as the majority of the subjects exhibit the influence of the a-plurality marker and the reflexive pronoun formation process in Izon thereby pluralizing all English nouns through the addition of *-s* and deriving the reflexive pronoun (their selfs or their selves) through the addition of *self* to the possessive form of the pronoun (their) as against the object form (them) preferred in English. To ensure that the subjects are assisted to overcome these difficulties, the study employs a ten-step contrastive approach which proves very effective as the subjects' performances, after the application of the method, recorded a tremendous rise in the percentage of correct responses from 26 per cent to 94 per cent (plural formation in nouns) and from 46 per cent to 100 per cent (plural formation in pronouns). The method is, therefore, recommended for the teaching of English in the Izon communities in Nigeria and in other similar ESL situations both within and outside Nigeria.

Keywords: Bilingualism, second-language, teaching, methodology, Izon

1. Introduction

English, Nigeria's most important and, perhaps, most useful colonial legacy (Bamgbose, 1971: 35), occupies a unique place in Nigeria's multilingual setting because of its significant role and status in national life. As Nigeria's official language, English has, according to Adetugbo (1979: 167), come to be seen as "the country's most important language" because of the several significant functions it performs, especially in government, politics, education, business, the mass media, science and technology, international relations, inter-ethnic communication, and national unity, national consciousness and cultural awareness (Adekunle, 1995; Jowitt; 1995; Awonusi, 2004a and Owolabi, 2007). Adegbite (2009: 74 & 75) summarizes the roles that English plays generally in Nigeria thus:

It serves educational and administrative purposes … complements the indigenous languages which serve as mother tongues of different people as a further means of preserving, recording and exploring the world … enables the learner to know more people and understand information about other people's cultures … It serves some vital economic roles: providing opportunities for gainful employment, requirements for admission into tertiary institutions and opportunities for speakers, writers and media practitioners and artistes to gain access to a wider audience … It is used for personal and social communication and interaction at the local, inter-ethnic and international levels … The knowledge of English confers social advantage and an enhanced social status on an individual … It helps to project the indigenous language culture internationally…

Considering the several significant functions that English performs in Nigeria, it is not surprising that so much attention and resources have over the years been devoted to its teaching in Nigerian schools at the expense of the Nigerian languages (Adeniran, 1978; Adekunle, 1995; Akere, 1995; Awonusi, 2004a and Awonusi, 2004b). In spite of the preference, attention and resources that the teaching of English enjoys in Nigeria, however, it is quite disappointing, as Amuseghan (2007: 320) notes, that there is a remarkable decline in both communicative and

linguistic competence of the learners of English in Nigeria. As Akere (1995: 180) observes, there is evidence everywhere in the educational system that the standard of English expressions is very poor and that pupils lack the required language skills to cope with both the learning and the communicative tasks at the various levels of education. Mohammed (1995: 138) reports that there has been a steady decline in the performance of students in English Language in the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations and that, between 1988 and 1992, the percentage of failure was high and consistent as it stood between 70% and 75% annually in this five-year period. Similarly, in 1997, only 6.54 % of the candidates who took the examinations got credit passes in English Language, while nearly 67% had outright failure (Bamgbose, 2001 and Uzoezie, 2004). Asikhia (2010: 230) also reports that only 29.59%, 25.36%, 34.48% and 29.94% passed English Language at credit level in the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 respectively. While announcing the release of the 2012 May / June West African Senior School Certificate Examinations results at a media briefing in Lagos[1] on 10th August, 2012, Dr. Iyi Uwadiae, the head of the Nigerian National Office of the West African Examinations Council, stated that 38.1% of the candidates who sat for the examination had credits in at least five subjects, including English Language and Mathematics. This, according to him, was better than what was obtained in 2010 when only 23.71% passed at least five subjects, including English Language and Mathematics, at credit level, and in 2011 which recorded only 30.91%. This high rate of failure is alarming and has, therefore, become a genuine source of concern to all stakeholders in the educational sector: government, teachers, parents and students, to mention just a few. Thus, all hands are on deck to find out the problems which cause this dismal performance in English in the educational system so as to proffer solutions to them.

One of the problems often identified, however, is poor teaching method (Orji, 1987; Afolayan, 1995 and Adegbite, 2009), arising especially from the inability of language teachers to devise an effective pedagogical approach to tackle the difficulties and errors caused by negative transfer from L_1 to L_2. In the Nigerian multilingual setting where there are over 250 ethnic groups and 350 indigenous languages, most Nigerian learners of English are expected to have possessed the knowledge of their respective MTs before they are exposed to the English language which is usually learnt at school later in life. According to Adegbite (2009: 75), the process of acquisition of the first language in Nigeria begins in infancy, at birth; and the child achieves competence at about five years. In contrast, learning English as L_2 begins, for the majority, at the primary school at age five. Unlike the L_1 speaker who learns language fresh, the Nigerian learner of English as an L_2 is a "linguistic adult" who has already had some mastery of his / her L_1 before learning the L_2. Since the Nigerian languages are acquired at an earlier age and with far greater thoroughness than English, it is also expected that certain aspects of the Nigerian languages will interfere with corresponding aspects of the English that is learnt and used by Nigerians (see Bamgbose, 1971: 41; Kirk-Greene, 1971: 141, Adekunle, 1979 and Okunrinmeta, 2008). This view is hinged on the assumption that L_2 acquisition is determined by the learner's knowledge of his/her L_1 because, as the learner learns the L_2, he/she transfers, either positively or negatively (Lado, 1957), aspects of the L_1 to the L_2. If the knowledge of L_1 helps or facilitates the learning of L_2, there is a positive transfer, which is known as 'facilitation'. If, however, the knowledge of L_1 inhibits the learning of L_2, then there is a negative transfer, which is known as 'interference' (Weinreich, 1953). Thus, the learner's knowledge of L_1 either assists the learning of the L_2, (especially where there are similarities between the L_1 and the L_2), or inhibits it where there are differences between the two languages thereby resulting in negative transfer of L_1 habits to L_2. According to Fillmore (1976), learning the second language is … in the case of the second language learner … inhibited in some ways by his knowledge of a first language. Prior knowledge of a first language may predispose the learner to look for familiar ways of expressing in the new language meanings he is accustomed to expressing in his first language. He will be inclined to make the kinds of distinctions in the new language – perhaps inappropriately – that were relevant in the first.

This may also imply that where there are differences between the L_1 and the L_2 of a second language learner and where he/she, because of one difficulty or the other, makes an inappropriate or negative transfer of L_1 habits to L_2, this may result in errors. Thus, as Lado (1957) and Corder (1975) observe, difficulties and errors in L_2 acquisition are attributed to negative transfer of L_1 habits[2]. The responsibility of a good teacher in the ESL classroom is, therefore, to ensure that an effective pedagogical approach is designed to assist learners to overcome these errors. In the Nigerian situation where Nigerian learners of English do transfer, rather inappropriately in most cases, their knowledge of the Nigerian languages in the process of learning English, the most effective methodology, as Olagoke (1985) proposes, is the one that gives a detailed description of the English language and compares this to what obtains in the learner's native language. This is where the application of contrastive pedagogy becomes necessary. However, as Awobuluyi (2009) observes, most of the teachers of English in Nigeria have no training in contrastive linguistics and, therefore, are unable to understand and consequently devise effective pedagogical strategies for combating the mostly mother-tongue induced kinds of

learners' errors that recur in their pupils' written and oral performances in the language. Even where some of them have the knowledge of contrastive linguistics, the prevailing atmosphere in some Nigerian ESL classrooms does not encourage the use of the approach. As Adegbite (2009: 80) notes, "in certain schools, indigenous languages, pejoratively called vernaculars, are highly prohibited in preference for English" and, thus, making it practically impossible to make any reference to any Nigerian language when teaching English in such schools. However, if English must be effectively taught in the Nigerian ESL classroom where the majority of the learners have already mastered the systems of the mother tongue (the Nigerian languages), it is necessary for teachers to go a step further to tap the rich resources provided by the learners' knowledge of the Nigerian languages since, according to Adegbite (2009: 88), previous learning experiences serve as input which may facilitate the learning of the L_2, especially when these previous experiences are positively manipulated to the learners' advantage. It is against this background that this study experiments the teaching of plural formation in English in the Nigerian ESL situation. Specifically, the study examines singular-plural distinction processes in Izon[3], highlights the difficulties these may pose to the teaching and learning of plural formation in English and suggests ways in which teachers can design an effective teaching method to tackle the perceived difficulties.

2. Research Procedure

This study focuses on the teaching / learning of plural formation in English in the Nigerian ESL classroom and, thus, employs the contrastive pedagogical approach to second language teaching to highlight the difficulties that the differences between the learners' L_1 (Izon) and L_2 (English) may pose to the effective learning of plural formation in English. For the language teacher in the Nigerian ESL classroom to effectively teach the grammatical rules of English, it is necessary, as Olagoke (1985) observes, to give a detailed description of the target language (English) and compares this to what obtains in the learners' native language. Thus, the study employs a ten-step contrastive pedagogical approach in which the rules of plural formation in English are compared to those in Izon so as to assist the learners to overcome the difficulties arising from the differences between the two languages and the resultant errors these may cause.

To achieve this, the study made use of 100 Junior Secondary School (JSS 1) students of an average age of eleven years, who speak only Izon and English and have lived within the Izon culture for at least five years, drawn from four secondary schools in the Arogbo-Izon community of Ondo State, Nigeria. The schools selected are: Arogbo City Academy, Arogbo (with a total population of 60 JSS 1 students); Community Grammar School, Biagbini (56 students); Ukparamah Grammar School, Bolowoghu (58 students) and; Ijaw National High School, Arogbo (76 students), thereby producing a total population size of 250 JSS 1 students. The 100 subjects used for the study were randomly sampled through the following sampling procedure. A ten-item questionnaire was designed to ascertain the subjects' linguistic and cultural background. A total of 250 questionnaires were administered. After observing the responses of each respondent, it was realized that 16 out of the 250 JSS 1 students failed to meet the requirement since they do not speak only Izon and English and have not lived within the Izon cultural environment for up to five years. Thus, the number dropped from 250 to 234: Arogbo City Academy, Arogbo (56 students); Community Grammar School, Biagbini (53 students); Ukparamah Grammar School, Bolowoghu (55 students) and; Ijaw National High School, Arogbo (70 students). The names of all the 234 JSS 1 students were copied out from the class register in each of the four schools selected for the study. 25 students whose names coincided with the multiples of two occurring between one and fifty were then picked from each of the four sampled schools. The sample consisted of 53 boys and 47 girls.

The 100 subjects sampled for the study were given a twenty-item plural formation exercise in English to ascertain the extent to which the differences in singular-plural distinction processes in Izon and English can pose difficulties to the learning of plural formation in English in the Izon (Nigerian) environment. Based on the performances of the subjects in this plural formation exercise in English, the subjects were, through a ten-step contrastive method, exposed to singular-plural distinctions in English with reference to various plural formation processes in Izon so as to draw their attention to the sources of the errors they commit in terms of plural formation in English. After a period of two weeks, another twenty-item plural formation exercise was given to the subjects to ascertain their post-exposure performance and, therefore, the degree of effectiveness of the method in the teaching of English in the Nigerian ESL situation.

3. Singular-Plural Distinction Processes in Izon

The way singular-plural distinction is made in Izon nouns is different from the way it is done in English nouns. Singular-plural distinction in Izon nouns is usually made in the following ways:

1)   The form of the noun or pronoun itself:

Singular	*Plural*
kịmị bọ[4] (person)	*kịmị abụ* (people)
iyọrọ bọ / iyọrọ araụ (woman)	*iyọrọ abụ* (women)
yabị (uncle)	*yabị oni* (uncles)
ẹ (I/me) (1st pers.)	*wọ* (we/us) (3rd pers.)
i (you) (2nd pers.)	*ọ* (you) (2nd pers.)
u (he/him) (3rd pers./masc.)	*ọni* (they/them) (3rd pers.)
a (she/her) (3rd pers./fem.)	*ọni* (they/them) (3rd pers.)
anị (it) (3rd pers./neuter)	*ọni* (they/them) (3rd pers.)
ẹnị (my) (1st pers./poss.)	*wọnị* (our) (1st per./poss.)
inị (your) (2nd pers./poss.)	*ọnị*[5] (your) (2nd pers./poss.)
unị (his) (3rd pers./masc./poss.)	*ọnị* (their) (3rd pers./poss.)
anị (her) (3rd pers./fem./poss.)	*ọnị* (their) (3rd pers./poss.)
anị[6] (its) (3rd pers./neuter/poss.)	*ọnị* (their) (3rd pers./poss.)

2)   Definite articles:

Singular	*Plural*
tọbọụ bei/ tọbọụ ma (the child)	*ọwọụ ma* (the children)
zei bei (the husband)	*zei oni ma/zei abụ ma* (the husbands)
ere araụ ma (the wife)	*ere abụ ma*[7] (the wives)
yaforo ma (the mother-in-law)	*yaforo abụ ma* (the mothers-in-law)
aga mị (the behaviour)	*aga ma* (the behaviours)
kịmị bọ mị (neuter) (the person)	*kịmị abụ ma* (the people)

3)   Certain demonstratives:

Singular	*Plural*
bei kụwị bei (this star)	*ma akụwị ma* (these stars)
bei isọnọ bei (this ant)	*ma isọnọ ma* (these ants)
ma yin ma (this mother)	*ma ayin abụ ma* (these mothers)
ma ere araụ ma (this wife)	*ma ere abụ ma* (these wives)
mị fẹrẹ mị (this plate)	*ma afẹrẹ ma* (these plates)
mị buru mị (this yam)	*ma aburu ma* (these yams)
u bei kụwị bei (that star)	*u ma akụwị ma* (those stars)
u bei isọnọ bei (that ant)	*u ma isọnọ ma* (those ants)
u ma yin araụ ma (that mother)	*u ma ayin abụ ma* (those mothers)
u ma ere araụ ma (that wife/woman)	*u ma ere abụ ma* (those wives/women)
u mị fẹrẹ mị (that plate)	*u ma afẹrẹ ma* (those plates)
u mị buru mị (that yam)	*u ma aburu ma* (those yams)

4)   The affix a- plurality marker:

In Izon, especially in the Arogbo-Izon dialect, ***a*** is usually prefixed to a singular consonant-initial noun when it is preceded by the qualifying forms of the numerals two to twenty-nine[8] e.g.,

ma akịmị (two men)	*tara awarị* (three houses)
nininẹn azruru (eight rooms)	*isẹna*[9] *fẹrẹ* (nine plates)
oi sọrọn azaraụ fịnị[10] (fifteen friends)	*oi sidiyo abịdẹ fịnị* (sixteen cloths/ dresses)

si ma aduhin fịnị (twenty-two nights)   *si tara abẹlẹ fịnị* (twenty-three pots)

si nininẹn adụwẹi fịnị (twenty-eight corpses)   *si isẹna kịrị fịnị* (twenty-nine times)

Sometimes, a singular vowel-initial noun, which does not begin with the letter *a* may take the *a* plurality marker as a prefix when such a noun is preceded by the qualifying forms of the numerals two to twenty-nine e.g.,

sọrọn aidi (five fishes)   *sidiyo aidou* (six breasts)

oi aobori (ten goats)   *oi nin aọnana fịnị* (fourteen sheep(s))

oi sọrọn auku fịnị (fifteen lice)   *si aẹkpụrụ* (twenty shoes)

si sidiyo aebe fịnị (twenty-six pots)   *si nininẹn augo fịnị* (twenty-eight eagles)

But when a singular vowel-initial noun begins with letter *a*, the *a* plurality marker is usually elided when the noun is preceded by the qualifying forms of the numerals two to twenty-nine e.g.,

ma aga (two behaviours)   *sọrọn adị* (five faces)

oi ama (ten towns)   *si arụ* (twenty canoes)

si sọrọn aru fịnị (twenty-five shirts)   *si sọnọma atụta fịnị* (twenty-seven onions)

It should, however, be noted that from *suwei* (thirty) through *suwei isẹn fịnị* (thirty-nine), the *a* plurality marker is usually dropped while the qualifying forms of the numeral occur after the noun[11] which may begin with a consonant or a vowel, e.g.,

kịmị suwei (thirty men)   *aru suwei kẹnị fịnị* (thirty-one shirts)

zei suwei mamụn fịnị (thirty-two husbands)   *ere suwei tarụ fịnị* (thirty-three wives)

kụraị suwei nin fịnị (thirty-four years)   *isọnọ suwei sọrọn fịnị* (thirty-five ants)

zuru suwei sidiyo fịnị (thirty-six rooms)   *ọgụmụ suwei sọnọma fịnị* (thirty-seven frogs)

warị suwei nininẹn fịnị (thirty-eight houses)   *abirei suwei isẹn fịnị* (thirty-nine brothers)

But from *mesi* (forty) upwards, the *a* becomes prefixed to the numeral and both the prefix *a* and the noun, whether consonant-initial or vowel-initial, precede the qualifying forms of the numeral e.g.,

kụraị amesi (forty years)   *zuru amesi oi fịnị* (fifty rooms)

kịmị atara asi (sixty men)   *ere anin asi* (eighty wives)

kasị anin asi oi fịnị (ninety chairs)   *ọtọlọ asọrọn asi* (one hundred flies)

zei aoi asi (two hundred husbands)   *fun ama ọdẹ* (eight hundred books)

buru asọrọn ọdẹ (two thousand yams)   *ololo aoi ọdẹ* (four thousand bottles)

oko aoi sọrọn ọdẹ fịnị (six thousand cups)   *bẹlẹ asi ọdẹ* (eight thousand pots)

However, when the qualifying forms of the numeral begin with *ọdẹ*, (that is, multiples of four hundred), the *a* plurality marker may be prefixed to the second element of the qualifying numeral e.g.,

warị ọdẹ amesi (sixteen thousand houses)

ẹkpụrụ ọdẹ amesi tarụ fịnị (seventeen thousand and two hundred shoes)

kasị ọdẹ amesi sọrọn fịnị (eighteen thousand chairs)

iye ọdẹ amesi oi fịnị (twenty thousand things)

arụ ọdẹ amesi oi mamụn fịnị (twenty thousand and eight hundred canoes)

aru ọdẹ atara si (twenty four thousand shirts)

duhin ọdẹ atara si oi sọrọn fịnị (thirty thousand nights)

pouye ọdẹ anin asi (thirty-two thousand stones/rocks)

ofoni ọdẹ anin asi isẹn fịnị (thirty-five thousand and six hundred hens/cocks)

oporopo ọdẹ asọrọn asi (forty thousand pigs)

ere ọdẹ asọrọn asi oi kẹni fịnị (forty-four thousand and eight hundred wives)

ẹrẹ ọdẹ asidiyo asi (forty-eight thousand names)

kana ọdẹ asidiyo asi sọrọn fịnị (fifty thousand cages)

It is also important to note the following:

kẹnị buru igbedi (one million yams)   *ma azuru igbedi* (two million rooms)

tara awarị igbedi (three million houses)   *sidiyo akasị igbedi* (six million chairs)

oi akụwị igbedi (ten million stars)   *si adiriaberi igbedi* (twenty million leaves)

kẹnị duhin opu igbedi (one billion nights)   *oi afun opu igbedi* (ten billion books)

si azei opu igbedi (twenty billion husbands)

The ***a*** plurality marker may also be prefixed to a singular noun, whether consonant-initial or vowel-initial, co-occurring with a prenominal qualifier which may be a quantifier, a demonstrative, a possessive or an adjective[12] e.g.,

(i) Quantifiers

zụwa awarị (some houses)   *zụwa aẹkpụrụ* (some shoes)

zụwa afun (some books)   *zụwa aobori* (some goats)

buhin akịmị (many men)   *buhin aidi* (many fishes)

buhin akasị (many chairs)   *buhin aidou* (many breasts)

tara azei (three husbands)   *nin aisọnọ* (four ants)

sọrọn ayabị (five uncles)   *oi aọtọlọ* (ten flies)

(ii) Demonstratives

ma aburu ma (these yams)   *u ma aburu ma* (those yams)

ma aidi ma (these fishes)   *u ma aidi ma* (those fishes)

ma abịra ma (these hands)   *u ma abịra ma* (those hands)

ma atọrụ ma (these eyes)   *u ma atọrụ ma* (those eyes)

ma aẹkpụrụ ma (these shoes)   *u ma aẹkpụrụ ma* (those shoes)

(iii) Possessives

ẹnị awarị (my houses)   *ẹnị aidou* (my breasts)

inị azuru (your rooms)   *inị aobori* (your goats)

unị akasị (his chairs)   *unị aogigan* (his doors)

anị abịra (her hands)   *anị aofini* (her fowls)

wọnị abịdẹ (our cloths/dresses)   *wọnị aọnana* (our sheeps)

ọnị[13] akụraị (your years)   *ọnị aidi* (your fishes)

ọnị afun (the books)   *ọnị aụkụ* (their private parts)

(iv) Adjectives

uku atịn (heavy sticks)   *lẹlụ aukụ* (dirty private parts)

dubulu akịmị (plump men)   *pịnyọn pịnyọn aidou* (pointed breasts)

ikị abịdẹ (stained cloths/dresses)   *ebi aidi* (good fishes)

dahaịn azei (tall husbands)   *sei aere* (bad wives)

bụrụ aburu (rotten yams)   *bịra sụwọ aebe* (cheap pots)

pịna akasị (white chairs)   *wowo adiriaberi* (red leaves)

The ***a*** plurality marker may also be prefixed to a consonant-initial plural noun co-occurring with a prenominal qualifier e.g.,

buhin adaụ abụ (many fathers)   *zụwa azowei abụ* (some friends)

ma akịmị abụ ma (these people)   *u ma atinimọ abụ ma* (those teachers)

ẹnị adaụ abụ (my fathers)   *wọnị ayin abụ* (our mothers)

ebi azei abụ (good husbands)   *sei abụna abụ* (bad relations)

But when the plural noun co-occurring with the prenominal qualifier is vowel-initial, the ***a*** plurality marker becomes elided e.g.,

sei ere abụ (bad wives)	*ebi iyọrọ abụ* (good women)
buhin ọwọụ (many children)	*zụwa owei abụ* (some men)
wọnị ere abụ (our wives)	*dahaịn owei ọwọụ* (tall boys)

4. The Teaching/Learning of Plural Formation in English in the Izon Setting

Singular-plural distinction processes in Izon, as shown in the preceding section, are different from those in English where, apart from the **-s** suffix which most English nouns employ to indicate plurality, some other singular-plural distinction techniques are employed.[14] To ascertain the extent to which these differences in singular-plural distinction processes in Izon and English can pose difficulties to the learning of plural formation in English in the Izon environment, the subjects were given an exercise where they were told to give the plural forms of the following nouns and pronouns:

goat	lion	nose	watch	fly
party	leaf	knife	wife	thief
foot	louse	mouse	child	sheep
oil	information	himself	herself	itself

52 of the subjects, (that is, 52 per cent), pluralized all the nouns through the addition of the -s suffix thereby indicating that the subjects treated the -s plurality marker in English as equivalent to the *a-* plurality marker in Izon which almost all[15] plural nouns in Izon must take to indicate plurality. However, the remaining 48 subjects, (that is, 48 per cent), indicated plurality correctly in varying degrees, especially in those nouns which do not require an -s for plural formation. Specifically, 26 of the 48 subjects pluralized all the nouns correctly while the remaining 22 had problems with the non-count nouns which they also pluralized by adding an -s.

Similarly, 52 of the subjects, (that is, 52 per cent), used the form *their selfs* as the plural of *himself, herself* and *itself* instead of *themselves*, while 2 subjects (2 per cent) used *their selves*, thereby bringing the total number of incorrect responses to 54 per cent. This substitution of *their selfs* or *their selves* for *themselves*, as Okunrinmeta (2011) notes, is traceable to the Izon language where all reflexive pronouns are derived by adding *ozu* (self) to the possessive forms of the pronouns e.g.,

ẹnị ozu (my self)	*inị ozu* (your self)
wọnị ozu (our self)	*ọnị ozu* (their self)
unị ozu (his self)	*anị ozu* (her self)

Since *them* is an object pronoun, it is incorrect in Izon to say *ọ ozu* (themself). This is why *ọnị ozu* (their self) and its plural *ọnị aozu* (their selfs) are preferred in Izon.

Two difficulties have been identified here. The first, as indicated in the performances of 52 per cent of the subjects, is the pluralization of all English nouns, (including those that do not indicate plurality through the **-s** suffix), by adding **-s** to the singular form of the noun, which is traceable to the predominant use of the a- plurality marker in Izon. The second is the derivation of the reflexive pronoun (their selfs or their selves) through the addition of *self* to the possessive form of the pronoun (their) as against the object form (them) preferred in English. This is reflected in the performances of 54 per cent of the subjects where the reflexive pronoun, *their selfs* (52 per cent) or *their selves* (2 per cent), occurred.

The challenge of the English teacher is therefore to design an appropriate methodological approach that can be used to effectively tackle the errors that arise from the differences between the two languages (Izon and English). The most effective methodology, as Olagoke (1985) proposes, is the one that gives a detailed description of the target language (English) and compares this to what obtains in the learner's native language (Izon). This is what this study experiments. The 100 subjects sampled for the study were exposed to singular-plural distinctions in English with reference to various plural formation processes in Izon so as to draw the attention of the subjects to the sources of the errors they commit in terms of plural formation in English. The methodology employed in this study follows the following procedure:

Step 1: The nouns and pronouns given to the subjects earlier were listed and each of the subjects was called upon to read them.

Step 2: The subjects were told that, in Izon, all these nouns and pronouns can be pluralized through the a-

plurality marker e.g.,

kẹnị obori (one goat)	*oi aobori* (ten goats)
wọnị bousei (our lion)	*wọnị abuosei* (our lions)
ẹnị nini (my nose)	*ọnị anini* (their noses)
kẹnị ira di iye (one watch)	*si aira di aiye* (twenty watches)
bụrụ ọtọlọ (rotten fly)	*bụrụ aọtọlọ* (rotten flies)
ebi toi kiri (good party)	*ebi atoi akiri* (good parties)
kẹnị diriberi (one leaf)	*si adiriaberi igbedi* (twenty million leaves)
u mị ẹdẹhịn mị (that knife)	*u ma sọrọn aẹdẹhịn ma* (those five knives)
sei ere (bad wife)	*sei aere* (bad wives)
kẹnị furuwei (one thief)	*sidiyo afuruabụ* (six thieves)
lẹlụ bụwọ (dirty foot)	*lẹlụ abụwọ* (dirty feet)
kẹnị uku (one louse)	*oi sọrọn auku fịnị* (fifteen lice)
dubulu oke (plump mouse)	*dubulu aoke* (plump mice)
ebi tọbọụ (good child)	*ebi aọwọụ* (good children)
dirimọ ọnana (black sheep)	*dirimọ aọnana* (black sheep(s))
kẹnị pulo (one (keg oil)	*nininẹn apulo* (eight oil(s))
kẹnị egberi (one information)	*oi aegberi* (ten information(s))
unị ozu (his self)	*ọnị aozu* (their selfs)
anị ozu (her self)	*ọnị aozu* (their selfs)
anị ozu (its self)	*ọnị aozu* (their selfs)

Step 3: The subjects were also told that since all Izon nouns are pluralized through the a- plurality marker as shown in step 2 above, and since many Izon-English bilinguals are aware of the fact that most English nouns show plurality through the -*s* suffix, there is a tendency for some Izon-English bilinguals[16] to interpret the a-plurality marker as equivalent to the -s suffix in English and, therefore, to pluralize all English nouns, (including those that do not indicate plurality through the -*s* suffix), by adding -*s* to the singular form of the noun. This is, however, misleading because the a- plurality marker is not equivalent to the -s suffix in all instances.

Step 4: The subjects were told that the Izon a- plurality marker may only be interpreted to be equivalent to the -s suffix in English in such English words as *goat: goats, lion: lions, nose: noses* and *watch: watches*, which usually show plurality through the addition of -s or -es to the singular. Other examples include:

hospital : hospitals   seat : seats

card : cards   boy : boys

mango : mangoes   mango : mangoes

Step 5: In such English nouns as *fly, party, leaf, knife, wife, thief, foot, louse, mouse, child, sheep, oil* and *information* which do not show plurality through -s or -es, it is wrong and misleading to interpret the a- plurality marker as equivalent to the -s suffix since some other techniques are applied in these nouns to indicate plurality:

(i) The majority[17] of nouns which end in -*f* or -*fe* usually change this to -*ves* in their plural forms, e.g.,

leaf : leaves   knife : knives

wife : wives   thief : thieves

calf : calves   half : halves

(ii) In nouns that end in -*y*, the -*y* changes to -*ies* e.g.,

fly: flies   party: parties

lady: ladies   city: cities

baby: babies   lorry: lorries

(iii) Some nouns also show plurality through vowel change, e.g.,

    foot: feet   tooth: teeth

    mouse: mice   louse: lice

    man : men   woman: women

(iv) There are some nouns in English which show plurality by adding *-en* to the singular:

    chid: children   ox: oxen

(v) Some nouns which end in *-um, -is, -eau, -on* or *-us* usually show plurality by the addition of *-a, -es, -x, -a* or *-i* respectively:

    stadium : stadia   stratum: strata

    analysis : analyses   hypothesis: hypotheses

    bureau: bureaux   portmanteau: portmanteaux

    phenomenon: phenomena   criterion: criteria

    stimulus : stimuli   locus: loci

(vi) There are some nouns which use the same form for singular and plural, e.g.,

    sheep: sheep   deer: deer

(vii) There are some nouns in English which are called non-count nouns. These nouns usually indicate plurality by using a suitable count-noun which serves as a descriptive label, e.g.,

oil	a barrel of oil	two barrels of oil
information	a piece of information	some pieces of information
bread	a loaf of bread	three loaves of bread
salt	a pack of salt	five packs of salt
chalk	a piece of chalk	some pieces of chalk
glass	a sheet of glass	two sheets of glass
news	an item of news	some items of news

(viii) Such nouns as *pants, scissors, shorts, pliers, trousers* and *glasses*, which are usually treated as plural, can be rendered as singular in the following ways:

pants	a pair of pants
scissors	a pair of scissors
shorts	a pair of shorts
pliers	a pair of pliers
trousers	a pair of trousers
glasses	a pair of glasses

Step 6: The subjects were told to take note of the singular and plural forms of the following pronouns:

I/me (1st pers.)	we/us (3rd pers.)
you (2nd pers.)	you (2nd pers.)
he/him (3rd pers./masc.)	they/them (3rd pers.)
she/her (3rd pers./fem.)	they/them (3rd pers.)
it (3rd pers./neuter)	they/them (3rd pers.)
my (1st pers./poss.)	our (1st per./poss.)
your (2nd pers./poss.)	your (2nd pers./poss.)
his (3rd pers./masc./poss.)	their (3rd pers./poss.)
her (3rd pers./fem./poss.)	their (3rd pers./poss.)
its (3rd pers./neuter/poss.)	their (3rd pers./poss.)

myself (1st pers./ poss.)   ourselves (1st pers./poss.)

yourself (2nd pers./poss.)   yourselves (2nd pers./poss.)

himself/herself/itself (3rd pers./poss.)   themselves (3rd pers./poss.)

Step 7: The attention of the subjects was drawn to the fact that, in Izon, all reflexive pronouns are derived by adding *ozu* (self) to the possessive forms of the pronouns: *ẹnị ozu* (my self), *inị ozu* (your self), *wọnị ozu* (our self), *ọnị ozu* (their self), *unị ozu* (his self) and *anị ozu* (her self). Just like in Izon, the reflexive pronouns *myself : ourselves* and *yourself : yourselves* in English are derived by adding *-self* to the possessive forms *my, our* and *your*. But, unlike what obtains in Izon, the third person singular reflexive pronouns *himself, herself* and *itself*, as well as the third person plural reflexive pronoun *themselves*, are formed by adding *-self* to the object forms *him, her*[18]*, it* and *them*.

Step 8: The subjects were told that Steps 5, 6 and 7 explained why it was wrong to have *leaf: leafs, knife : knifes, wife : wifes, thief : thiefs, fly : flys, party : partys, foot : foots, mouse : mouses, louse : louses, child : childs, ox : oxes, sheep : sheeps, deer : deers, oil : oils, information : informations* and *himself/herself/itself : their selfs*.

Step 9: The correct plural forms of the nouns and pronouns listed in Step 1 were copied out and the subjects were led to read them several times. Each subject was also called upon to read them.

Step 10: After a period of two weeks, the following exercise on plural formation was given to the subjects so as to ascertain their post-exposure performance. The subjects were told to provide the plural forms of the following nouns and pronouns:

child	cup	loaf	goose	yourself
tax	body	plateau	deer	furniture
equipment	basis	rice	wharf	myself
sheep	medium	radius	herself	criterion

It was noticed that 94 of the subjects, (that is, 94 per cent), pluralized all the twenty words tested in Step 10 correctly. The remaining 6 subjects, (that is, 6 per cent), still had problem with the pluralization of the non-count nouns *furniture, equipment* and *rice* and, thus, used *-s* to pluralize them. A comparison of the subjects' pre-exposure and post-exposure performances shows that the number of correct responses, in terms of plural formation in nouns, rose from the 26 per cent initially recorded to 94 per cent as 68 more subjects were able to pluralize all the nouns correctly. This represents a rise of 68 per cent. Similarly, the number of correct responses, in terms of plural formation in reflexive pronouns, rose from the 46 per cent initially recorded to 100 per cent as all the 100 subjects were able to correctly pluralize the reflexive pronouns *yourself, myself* and *herself* as *yourselves, ourselves* and *themselves* respectively. This proves that the methodology employed in this study, which gives a detailed description of plural formation in the target language (English) and compares this to what obtains in the learner's native language (Izon) so as to draw the attention of the subjects to the sources of the errors they commit in terms of plural formation in English, is effective since there was, after the application of the method, a considerable improvement in the subjects' performances in the sense that the number of subjects who initially had problem with plural formation in English was drastically reduced.

5. Conclusion

The present study explores singular-plural formation processes in Izon so as to ascertain the extent to which these can influence the learning of plural formation in English. Based on the performances of the 100 subjects sampled for the study in a twenty-item plural formation exercise in English, the study reveals that Izon has tremendous influence on the learning of plural formation in English as the a- plurality marker and the reflexive pronoun formation process in Izon affected the way the majority of the subjects pluralized the nouns and reflexive pronouns tested to ascertain the subjects' pre-exposure performances in plural formation in English. To ensure that the subjects are assisted to overcome the difficulties arising from the differences between Izon and English in terms of plural formation, a ten-step contrastive approach, which compares plural formation in Izon and English, was adopted so as to draw the subjects' attention to the errors they commit and to correct them. Two weeks after the application of the method, another twenty-item plural formation exercise was given to the subjects to ascertain their post-exposure performance which showed a tremendous improvement in terms of plural formation in nouns since the subjects recorded 94 per cent of correct responses as against the 26 per cent initially recorded. Similarly, the performance of the subjects in terms of plural formation in pronouns rose from 46 per cent to 100 per cent showing a rise of 64 per cent. The improvement in the post-exposure performances of the subjects indicates that the method is effective and, thus, it is recommended for the teaching of English in the

Izon-speaking communities in Nigeria and other similar ESL situations both within and outside Nigeria.

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Notes

Note 1. Dr. Iyi Uwadiae's address was retrieved from http://www.waecnigeria.org/pdf/Press_Release2012.pdf, on November 8, 2012.

Note 2. However, advances in psycholinguistics, especially in the area of L_1 and L_2 acquisition, have drawn attention to the fact that all errors in L_2 acquisition cannot be attributed to L_1 interference. There are some errors which stem from the acquisition process itself. These errors are developmental and, thus, intralingual in nature, and not interlingual. According to Richards (1974), they are caused by overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, or by developing false concepts about L_2. He argues that these errors cannot be attributed to L_1 interference because the same errors are committed by L_2 learners from different L_1 backgrounds. Such errors are, therefore, better explained through the recognition of the existence of universal

developmental sequences which characterize the various developmental stages that the L$_2$ learner, just like the L$_1$ learner, passes through in the process of language acquisition (see Hatch 1983, Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982, McLaughlin, 1984, Ellis, 1985 and Hamers & Blanc, 1989).

Note 3. zon is one of the seven languages that form the language-cluster called Ijo or Ijaw. Izon is spoken in Ondo, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa States of the oil-rich Niger Delta region of Nigeria. It can be sub-classified into South western (including Arogbo), North western (including Mein), South central (including Bumo) and North central (including Kolokuma) (see Williamson, 1968 and Jenewari, 1989). The Arogbo dialect of Izon is what is used in this study.

Note 4. *Kịmị* in Izon means *man* but it may be used as a generic term to cover both men and women as people.

Note 5. *Ọnị* (your) is said on a low tone while *ọnị* (their) is said on a high tone.

Note 6. Though *anị* also appears under feminine, it is different neuter *anị* in this context. While the feminine pronoun *anị* is uttered with the low tone, its neuter counterpart takes the high tone.

Note 7. *Ma* following the singular noun as in *ere ma* (the wife), *iyọrọ tọbọụ ma* (the girl) etc. indicates femininity, while *ma* occurring after the plural noun as in *ere abụ ma* (the wives), *iyọrọ ọwọụ ma* (the girls) etc. indicates plurality.

Note 8. This excludes *oi kẹnị fịnị* (eleven) and *si kẹnị fịnị* (twenty-one) which do not take *a* e.g., *oi kẹnị kịmị fịnị* (eleven men) and *si kẹnị zuru fịnị* (twenty-one rooms).

Note 9. For *isẹn* (nine), *oi isẹn fịnị* (nineteen) and *si isẹn fịnị* (twenty-nine), the *a* is usually attached as a suffix to the numerals as in *isẹna fẹrẹ* (nine plates), *oi isẹna kụwị fịnị* (nineteen stars) and *si isẹna warị fịnị* (twenty-nine houses).

Note 10. Fifteen is also called *diye* in Izon.

Note 11. Plurality in this case is usually indicated by the numerals *suwei* (thirty) to *suwei isẹn fịnị* (thirty-nine).

Note 12. This excludes nouns that begin with the letter *a*.

Note 13. See 4 above for the distinction between *ọnị* (your) and *ọnị* (their).

Note 14. While most English nouns usually form their plurals through the *-s* suffix added to the singular form of the noun (e.g., boy: boys, book: books, card: cards), some form theirs through a replacive (e.g., man: men, foot: feet, tooth: teeth), through the addition of the *–en* suffix (e.g., child: children, ox: oxen) and through zero plurals (e.g., deer: deer, sheep: sheep), among others (see Christophersen & Sandved, 1969 and Huddleston, 1984).

Note 15. See 11 above.

Note 16. These include especially those whose level of education and exposure to good English is low.

Note 17. However, such nouns as *chief* and *cliff* only add -s to the singular to derive the plural forms *chiefs* and *cliffs*. Similarly, in such nouns as *hoof* and *wharf*, both forms are possible: *hoof: hoofs/hooves; wharf: wharfs/wharves*.

Note 18. This may not pose any problem to the Izon learner of English because both the possessive form and the object form are written as *her*.