

IMPROVING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION SKILLS IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: THE CHALLENGES FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

The paper examined the National Policy on Education in relation to English Language acquisition skills as a way of enhancing the cognitive development of the learner. The paper also gave explanation of some important concepts such as language, teacher and education. The paper equally pointed out some problems affecting English Language acquisition skills in our school system and there is a follow up of suggestions on how to remedy the situation through the collective efforts of parents, teachers, education authorities and the government.

Introduction

Language is central to learning and life itself (Boyer, 1996). It is the life wire in human existence. Education be it formal or informal is the function of human development. English language-by extension has a lot to do with the prospect of any meaningful development in an individual and the nation at large. Educators and many researchers all agreed that language acquisition cannot be separated from the acquisition of knowledge. This simply means that the success in language learning will definitely lead to success in education generally. Indeed, the fallen standard of education in our country is not unconnected with the poor acquisition and learning of the instructional language in our classrooms or school system (Afolayan, 1995). The reason is that there is a close link between competence in English Language and education improvement in academic work of the individual. Really, English language is an indispensable tool and catalyst for

the promotion of international peace and solidarity (Ehaho, 1995). In fact it is a key for self-fulfillment and meaningful interaction.

Concept Analysis

From the topic of this paper, main concepts emerge and they are - Language, Teacher and Education. For a clear linkup, let us comment briefly on each of them.

Concept of Language

The word Language is derived from Latin word "Lingua" translated into English as "tongue". According to Webster's International Encyclopedia, "Language is a means by which human beings of the same ethnic region express themselves vocally and communicate with others". And Sapir (1921) sees language as a purely human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, knowledge and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols". While linguists define Language as an arbitrary system of signs and symbols used for the purpose of human communication, it is indeed the most significant means by which people of the same linguistic society or community interact for co-existence.

The bulk of human knowledge is stored in language and the same is transmitted from one person to the other by way of communication. Communication, on the other hand, is a skill of its own which uses language either in its verbal or written form. A language of instruction is also language that can be used as a tool for teaching indigenous languages. Therefore academic language occupies a unique position in a given

curriculum of any level of education system ranging from primary to tertiary level. The National Policy on Education (2004) among other functions stated that the language of education should serve as the medium of instruction and as well studied as a core course in schools and colleges. Other functions of such language (Language of Instruction) as stated in the National Policy on Education(2004) include:

- To promote social interaction
- Preserve culture
- Enhance national cohesion and
- Facilitate interaction across the borders

Nigeria as a multilingual nation adopted English Language from her colonial administrators (British) during the early missionaries and traders in 18th century who introduced English language for the purpose of integration with the indigenes. Be it as it may, Nigeria as a multilingual nation accepted it to be part and parcel of the Nation. Therefore English Language serves as her official language, language of law, business and a unifying factor for the diversified ethnic groups in the country. Because of these indispensable function of English language in Nigeria , the National Policy on Education(2004) specifically tagged it the language of instruction and states that: f 1) It should serve as the language of

Education from upper primary (primary 4) to tertiary level of educational system.
(2) That it should be included as core course of study in the academic curriculum.

For these reasons, English language should be carefully taught in our classrooms for proper understanding, because the success in any academic study depends to a large extent on the efficiencies in the four skills of the language medium which are Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing competences.

It is necessary to point out that the reason why the study of any academic subject often poses problems for students is that they lack good knowledge of English language which

is the language of instruction. It is also a compulsory course of study which by implication cuts across every other subject as it serves as medium by which they learn and are taught.

Concept of Teacher

A "teacher is one whose job is to make others learn especially in an academic environment. That is to say that a teacher serves as a pivot in the learning process. For a person to become a teacher, he must undergo some professional training process in a prescribed institution to enable him acquire some necessary skills needed in the job. This means that he must pass through a Teacher Training Institution, where he acquires the necessary techniques to} make him to be committed to the teaching profession.

Therefore, the goals of teacher training institution according to the National Policy on Education (2004) include, among others, the following:

- To produce highly motivated, conscientious and efficient classroom environment for all levels of educational system.
- To encourage further the spirit of enquiry and creativity in teachers
- Help teachers to fit into the community and the society at large and enhance their commitment to National goals
- Provide teachers with the intellectual and professional background adequate for their assignment and make them adaptable to changing situations
- To enhance teachers' commitment to the teaching profession.

In line with this policy, Hornby (2001, p. 122) defines a teacher as

one who is made, he plans what to teach, knows how to teach, thinks of the best method to use in delivering what to teach, identifies the objectives of the topic of lesson through a well planned and prepared lesson notes and as well employ the use of instructional materials or

teaching aids and uses them adequately for effective delivery of his lesson.

All these he does just to ensure that effective learning takes place among his learners. This proves that anybody can not just be employed as a teacher in an academic set up.

Related to this, Dakun (2001) states that "a teacher must possess a degree of fluency in the language of instruction". This means that the teacher must have a good command of English language to enable him communicate fluently and meaningfully in the classroom. It is good to note that a teacher serves as "Audio visual" and a "Role Model" before his learners, therefore he or she should be all-rounder both physically, mentally and otherwise.

Concept of Education:

Education as we know is a body of knowledge. According to (Hornby, 2001) Education is "a process of teaching, training and learning of ideas especially in schools and colleges to improve knowledge and develop skills in a person from primary to university level.

Hornby (2001, p.371) sees education as the acquisition of knowledge, skills and expertise. National Policy on Education (2004) defines education as "an instrument for social development and formation of ideas in a learner". What this means is that education fosters the total worth of an individual. If so, then, language and education are inextricably tied together. Hence language is the vehicle for imparting knowledge in the teaching and learning process, and both work in a harmonious way for effective acquisition of knowledge in the learner.

No wonder Ayodele, (2004, p.3) declares that "issues of language is very crucial to education and the two crucially decide how far and how well a person can learn because without mastering the language of learning, the learner's aspiration would just remain a mirage".

The point of emphasis here is that there is a close relationship between competence in English Language and education improvement in a school setting. For this reason, English Language teaching and learning in a formal education system, which is the aim of this paper should be looked into to secure the standard of Education in Nigeria.

Situation Analysis

Just like in a building process if the foundation is poorly laid, the house will not last, National Policy on Education (2004) states that English should be studied as a school subject from upper primary (primary 4 to 6) and secondly it should be introduced as language of instruction from this level too. The reason we all know is for the second language (L2) to have a good root in the learner as he proceeds in his academic cadre. Unfortunately the primary education, which is the foundation of educational system, has failed in this task of equipping the child with the needed literacy skills for English Language acquisition. The situation is worse especially where the government owns the relevant institutions tagged "public" schools. The majority of Nigerian children are found in such schools.

The majority of children who have completed their primary school education are neither literate in English language nor in any of the indigenous languages. As reported by Akere (1995), some concerned researchers and language experts have noted that:

...the primary school leavers apart from the products of a few elite private schools does not possess the required competence in the four language skills for both cognitive and communicative functions (p. 196).

This quotation illustrates what the situation of language instruction is like at this level of education, which should in essence serve as the base and foundation of education. The situation is a disservice to an average Nigerian

child because it gives him the false impression that he has been educated (Oyetunde, 2003).

At the junior secondary school level, especially in the Northern part of the country, the story is almost the same. The graduates from the primary school level enter the post primary institution without any good foundation or at most they possess superficial knowledge of English language. Before graduating from the junior secondary school, their vocabulary acquisition level is very low, as they at best possess a few English words that can only enable them to make a limited number of correct sentences. But when it comes to reading and writing as a medium of expression, one will find it difficult to establish whether or not the learners have ever been taught English language in school. Just a few of them depict that they have the ability to read some lines of sentences while writing skill still proves difficult because of poor spelling and grammar.

Even at the senior secondary school, the situation is not different as long as English is concerned. This compels most teachers to be using the native language or mother tongue to explain major points in other subjects like sciences, arts and even in English Language class. As Mohammed (1995:p 14) states:

...many learners come to secondary school knowing little or no English thereby necessitating the continued use of mother-tongue as medium for teaching most subjects.

In fact, teachers resort to the use of the native language or mother tongue in order to get their learners to at least understand their teaching. We can imagine what happens in examination halls especially when the examination is external. In such situations, the question papers are written in English and the children are expected to write their answers in English. The pupils would have no choice or vernacular alternatives.

At the tertiary level, it is certain that many students found in the relevant institutions

could not have acquired genuine certificates especially with regard to English language. They have proved to be so deficient in spoken and written English that most tertiary institutions, including Colleges and Polytechnics, to resort to the introduction of one year Preliminary ("Pre-") programmes. Such programmes that include courses in "Language and Communication Skills" are intended to help in remedying the deficiencies especially in English, which is the language of education at that level.

These programmes are justified since no one can be surprised to see many undergraduates resorting to the use of pidgin English for communication on the campuses. Some students even extend its use to academic matters including examinations. The reason can only be that such students possess poor communication skills. This adversely affects their academic abilities usually determined mainly by oral, written and sometimes practical examinations.

No wonder then Omoju (1999) states that, "What we know as of fact is that writing skills are still rather illusive among the bulk of students at all levels of Education in Nigeria". This ugly situation is rooted in the foundation level of education (primary school) where English language is not given adequate attention by teachers, parents the educators and government.

At the primary school level, pupils are not properly taught and drilled in the English alphabet, let alone that of any of the indigenous languages before they are asked to match letters for words formation (especially in the public schools). The resultant effect is that it leads students to wrong spellings.

Another point is that learners are not given good grounding in oracy skills and this leads to poor pronunciation of words and communication skills.

Equally, they are not given good grounding in pre-reading activities to prepare them for proper and effective reading tasks ahead.

Other factors include: Frequent use of mother tongue even in the language class by both the teacher and the learners; Wrong method of teaching as many teachers use the lecture method even at the early education levels like the primary school; Inadequate use of instructional materials. Many teachers do believe that English language teaching does not require the use of teaching aids other than the class textbook. For this reason, they deliver their lesson unaided. This tends to justify the assertion that "most English language teachers in Nigeria are not thoroughly grounded in both content and methodology" (Ubahakwe, 1988).

The government and education authorities are not doing enough to see to the actual implementation of what the National Policy .stated with respect to language in education, otherwise there wouldn't be variations in practices from State to State and from Local Government to Local Government. As Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999) pointed out, "Some states adopt 'straight for English' policy while others use 'mother tongue' or language of the immediate environment through-out the six years of primary education"

Similar to this is the Government's lack of proper supervision of the schools to see and know what goes on in the system. This would enable the Government to make adequate provision for facilities, such as classroom blocks, furniture, equipment and others needed for effective teaching and learning.

Also, there is the problem of irregular payment of teacher's salaries, allowances including leave grants, which often leads to frequent strike actions. These disrupt continuity in educational activities. Education, as we all know, is continuous process; unnecessary brakes in the learning programmes caused by strikes affect the learner adversely.

Improving Language Acquisition Skills

English is basically the language of instruction in the Nigerian education system. Consequently, competence in it definitely leads to success in the educational achievement of the individual. For this reason, its teaching and learning should be seen as critical and treated as such in schools. In doing so, certain steps have to be taken.

The first step is to give the beginners a foundation by making them to be grounded in the knowledge of the alphabets. This can be done using drills that will help them to master the alphabets before going on to word formation. This will give the beginners the clear idea that words are formed using alphabets in their proper order. In this way, they will effectively develop their spelling and pronunciation skills.

Consequently, the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be properly taught through language "Communicative Language Approach". The approach entails engaging learners in active use of the language in dialogues, word games, contests, problem solving tasks and in classroom interactions and activities. These will help the class to be more learner-centred thereby making English language real to them. It will also make the classroom • lively, thus generate interest among the learners. At the end of the exercise, the approach will enhance their skills in oral and reading comprehension, oral and written expression. This in effect covers the four basic language skills.

Another step for boosting English language learning is "Communicative Language Teaching" (CLT) (Nwosu, 2003). In this approach, materials and documents which present real-life situations of people but are not originally meant for classroom situation, but in any case could be useful for communicative purposes should be brought into the classroom for a study during English Lesson. Such documents or materials should be current and relevant in terms of place, time, and social group

of a people and their activities. These can include, for example, extracts from literature texts, video taped programmes showing real people in their real life activities such as football stars and cultural dancers, instead of pictures or drawings on cardboard papers. Also Audio or tape recordings' from native speakers of English Language, radio and T.V. programmes that are educative could be used. This will help the learners to know that what happens in other countries, which were documented in English Language could also be done in their own local areas. This activity will create and improve their reading and writing skills.

As the students practice communicating in English, there should be mistakes and errors in their speech, and the teacher is advised not to correct such mistakes or errors on the spot. He must allow the practice first and should not interrupt or interfere in their production as this will lower their affective motors and cause inhibitions in them. As Byrne (1976) stated, "...in production stage, the teacher serves as a guide to ensure that real learning takes place by allowing the learners to use the language on their own."

The funding and improving of language education should not be the sole responsibility of the class teacher and school authority. Parents and the government should equally play their roles.

The family as an institution has a lot of influence on the progress of the child's education. Therefore, it should provide him with basic training and discipline in terms of study culture. They should provide the basic needs of the child's education such as required text books, notebooks and other writing materials as well as uniform to make him feel comfortable in the class.

On the other hand, the government considering the importance of English Language to the nation should help to make its teaching and learning more effective by providing adequate

instructional materials, equipment resource based scheme etc to enhance its proper teaching and learning in schools. Such equipment include: Micro-teaching booths to form good micro teaching laboratory in tertiary institutions for in-service teachers.

According to Nnadozie (1995:4) "microteaching" laboratory with all the necessary equipment provides the teacher-in-training a second teach and reteach environment to exploit the skills of the instruction". Related to this is the "Visual Auditory Kinesthetic and Tactile" approach to instruction, (V.A.K.T.) sensory. This multi-sensory approach helps the learner to see, hear, move and feel the impact of language. Other materials such as film slides, film strips, bulletin board, audio-tapes etc should be provided in schools for the benefit and enhancement of experiences of learners.

Also the modern technology has brought the use of micro-electronic media, such as computer which is efficient for accessing information. The potentials of computer in teaching and learning process are numerous. For example, the input, store and retrieval devices of the computer apart from other uses, create opportunities for long-lasting endurance on the part of learners as they explore things. It as well gives them the joy of freedom from too much supervision by the teacher because they learn at their pace. All these are costly equipment that neither the individual classroom teacher nor the school authority can afford, therefore for effective learning, the government should provide them.

It is a well-known fact that teachers are permanent students. For this reason, a programme of "Retraining the Trainer" or refresher courses should often be organised to always keep the teacher up-dated and fresh in the discipline since English Language, by nature, is dynamic. An example is the Computer Literate Programme and Internet Connectivity to enable

the teacher be global and factual in his knowledge of instructional techniques.

Equally, the education authorities and all the examination bodies such as WAEC, NECO, JAMB etc all should come together to harmonize their individual curriculum and syllabus contents in such a way that it will reflect learner's competence in the rules of English Language. This will help the Language teachers to change the ideas of teaching for an anticipated examination questions as it is the case in examination classes (JSS & SSS levels) JAMB candidates etc. This will help them to lay much emphasis on communicative competence, linguistic competence, language rules etc.

Conclusion

English language plays a vital role in educational development and acquisition of knowledge. This paper has outlined some of the problems that hinder English language skills acquisition and equally suggested ways for its effective teaching and learning in schools to ensure success in educational achievement of the learner on particular and the nation at large.

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