

REFLECTIONS ON THE DWINDLING QUALITY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN 21ST CENTURY NIGERIA: CAN THE TREND BE REMEDIED?

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the language situation in the 21st century Nigerian Colleges of Education. It attempts to distinguish between the standard and quality of English language. It focuses on the causes and remedies of the dwindling quality of English language. It proffers steps to be adapted in enhancing the quality of English language in Nigerian Colleges of Education.

The acquisition and use of languages are believed to be the most important and effective keys to the store house of human achievement. Language is said to be the best means for any group to maintain its cultural identity and autonomy. It is one of the most important features that distinguishes human beings from other lower animals. Language is the basis for communication and one of the greatest achievements of human beings.

The Federal Government through the National Policy on Education (2004) encourages language education and the setting of standards in our schools, hence, the emphasis on language education in the school curriculum at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates that the mother tongue (L1) should be used as the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education. Thus, in the last years of primary school and the first three years of secondary education the mother tongue (L1) and English language (L2) and English language (L2) are use side-by-side as medium of

instruction. It is true that the use of the (L1) and the (L2) in the teaching and learning process does not only help in preserving the value of ones culture but also enhances ones understanding of the lexis of both languages.

One noticeable achievement in the Federal Government's language policy is in the fine-tuning of the 1925 memorandum on Education in British Tropical Africa in an attempt at enhancing the quality of English language. While the standard of English language was clearly stated in the curriculum, the memorandum saw the need to integrate the use of vernacular into the teaching of English language as a means of enhancing the quality of the language as a medium of instruction in schools.

What Standard or Quality and at What Level?

There is currently a proliferation of English variants especially in independent countries. The English of the United States is not the same as the English of Nigerians or Canadians. There is a distinctive difference between the Standard English language and the linguistic code English which is the transformed and subverted variants found in many countries. It is true that the Standard British English is confined essentially in the British Isles.

If the linguistic code which is integrate into the English language curriculum at various levels is taken as the standard in Nigeria, then we need not discuss the "Dwindling Standard" because it does not exist. The curriculum is there to guide the language teacher who ideally goes

the extra mile in not only strictly adhering to the course content of the curriculum and ensuring that same is properly streamlined and covered before the end of semester but goes beyond this in terms of method and materials employed in the teaching of English language in schools. So, it is not the standard but the quality that is lacking.

It is only in English language that double standard exists especially at the tertiary level-one standard for those who major in English as a course and another for those who use the language in the acquisition of other courses – (Communication Skills). It is only at the primary and secondary levels that a unified standard is taught. The question that arises is, if communication skills which is geared towards teaching the rudiments of communicating in English should be the standard for the sciences, technology and management courses? This amounts to a reduction in quality. Thus, one will not be surprised if a graduate in mathematics is unable to write an application for a job having studied mathematics in English Language throughout the duration of the course in a tertiary institution. Thus the expression is qualitative, not standardized education.

Dwindling Quality of English and the Contributory Factors

Having touched on the controversy on whether it should be the dwindling standard or quality, and having settled for quality in place of standard, the question is, what are the contributory factors to the dwindling quality of English language? Moja (2000) sums up the factors thus, “A Federal Minister of Education following a nationwide tour of schools stated that the basic infrastructure in schools such as classrooms, laboratories, workshops, sporting facilities, equipment and libraries were in a state of total decay. The physical conditions of most schools were pathetic”. The above statement credited to a Minister failed to point out that

most schools lacked the above mentioned facilities and that most primary and secondary schools do not have libraries and where they exist especially, at the tertiary level, the libraries are stocked with obsolete books and materials.

Another factors that calls for immediate re-examination is in the area of statistical data and population figures. Unless the erroneous assumption that census figures are meant for revenue allocation to states, the problem of over population in class rooms will continue to dog the policy makers and those charged with the responsibility of implementing the nation’s education policy. As long as policies are politicized, and subverted for political gains the quality of English language will continue to dwindle.

Funding remains the greatest cog in language education in Nigeria. At present it cost about N3,400.00 (Three Thousand Four Hundred Naira) per year to educate a child at the primary level, while government allocation per pupil per year remains about N50,00 (Fifty Naira). No wonder the immediate past Minister of Education Oby Ezekwesili who saw education funding as a cooperate social responsibility was not only forced by the prevailing circumstances to initiate the Private Sector Partnership but in her desperation was forced to take education to the floor of the Nigerian Stock Exchange in an attempt not only to source for funds but also to involved individuals and society in education funding. Iro (2000) states that “so long as policies are distant from people whose lives and welfare it affects, positive effect of such policies will not occur”.

Why should a graduate teacher who is expected to teach his major course in English language on graduation be taught communication skills in English? If the medium of instruction for all courses studies in schools is English language then this phenomenon no doubt has over the years covertly contributed immensely to the dwindling quality of English language in schools.

Coupled with the above is the erroneous assumption that any graduate teacher in spite of his discipline could teach English language as a subject.

Furthermore, the English language curriculum did not take into consideration current developments in the language. The curriculum is yet to be properly fused and streamlined with the content of other courses. Hence, students do not see the relationship between English language and other courses.

A situation where United Nations Organizations such as the UNESCO and the World Bank are allowed to dictate our education policies without due consideration for our history and experience does not augur well for the nation's language education. That a programme succeeded in one part of the globe does not necessarily mean that the same programme must work elsewhere. Such programmes should be modified to suit the needs of the people on whose welfare it is expected to impact. This is true when one considers the variants of English language that have evolved in various countries over the years.

Possible Remedies

Higginbotham (1971) stated that "acquiring a language is in itself an intellectual process of progressive complexity" therefore the English language Teacher must of necessity engage students in a continuous spiral programme with emphasis on the need for sequence and articulation in the instruction of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In this regard the Teacher should in essence concern himself with promotion of understanding and application of principles and procedures that are relevant to the development of the four language skills.

Students should be made to understand the inter-relationship between oral and written English language such that the language becomes functional in terms of relationship with

other subject, human concern and activities. Also students' capacity for independent inquiry and study should be developed through selection and implementation of ameliorative, development and enrichment activities.

English language should be taught with the mother tongue (L1) or the language of a child's immediate environment at the developmental stage of a child. This will not only improve his lexis of the language but offers the child the opportunity to compare English with his native vernacular thereby improving his understanding of the English language.

Facilities and equipment should be provided and schools should compulsorily establish well stocked libraries with current books and learning materials. If students should have access to current and interesting literature books, there will be improvement in the quality of English language.

The language of science Technology and globalization is English. Leiper (1998) asserted that "English accounts for over 80% of the world's digital traffic. Warschauer (2000) observed that over 3.4 million e-mail messages were sent in the United State alone in 1998". The import of this is that there should be emphasis on information technology and computer literacy since this will greatly enhance the quality of English language. Therefore schools should be made through government fiat to establish well equipped computer laboratories and internet outfits.

Communication skills as a course should be removed from the General Studies curriculum in Colleges of Education. Student teachers should be made to compulsory major in English language and a teaching subject. This will ensure that the teacher has a good knowledge of the language with which he delivers his lectures.

Government should increase its education subsidies. The private sector initiative should be given a boost through government fiat. A specific percentage of the annual profit of

private companies should be ploughed into providing necessary infrastructure especially classrooms. This will reduce the present state of overcrowding in classes thereby enhance learning and the quality of English language in schools.

Language teachers should of necessity be bilinguals. This will in no small means improve the learning and quality of English language.

Conclusion

Language is the only means through which academic and intellectual development can be achieved and Nigeria being an Anglophone country. English language offers great potentials. Kelly (1956) spelt out four types of learning activities for children and adults, they are:

- I. Associational (or rote) learning
- II. Appreciational learning
- III. Motor (or psychomotor) learning
- IV. Rational learning

Associative learning involves the development of associative chain or mental pattern by which facts, information and experience are retained, recalled and reorganized by distinguishing between items while appreciational learning includes the process of acquiring attitudes, ideas, satisfactions, judgement and knowledge concerning values. Furthermore, psychomotor involves the acquisition of skills while rational learning is clearly intellectual in nature.

All the above types of learning activities should be brought to bear under classroom situation in the cause of English language learning to enhance the quality of the language in schools.

Finally, the recent consistent drift from the Arts to the Sciences and the dearth of language teachers to other professions have

become so pronounced that the trend can no longer be ignored.

This trend should be checked through encouraging the study of languages especially, the English language by including it in the special list of courses whose candidates enjoy the Federal Government patronage in terms of scholarship. English language teachers should be given the necessary encouragement through special incentives.

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