

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF TEACHING “USE OF ENGLISH”: A CASE OF COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY ZARIA

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Abstract

In the two Colleges of Technology in Zaria studied, “Use of English” is taken as a course and a ‘bridge’ every student must cross in order to communicate and function as an academic and practical technologist. This paper explains why the teaching of the course is yet to make an impact on students’ language proficiency. Aspects of grammar, which usually pose as problems to such students are explained. The study also serves as a guide for language teachers in such colleges to know areas of English language to be emphasised in their language classes.

Introduction

It is widely agreed that English language is socially, economically and educationally useful worldwide. It is as popular in Nigeria as the Naira. English language taught in technology is meant to reinforce students’ knowledge of English learnt in Primary, Secondary and Teachers’ Training Institutions. In the Colleges of Technology, the teaching is to develop in the students the art of being able to say and write their practical reports easily and fluently. “Use of English” as it is called by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), a General Study Programme, sounds not to pose anything new from what the teaching of English had been from the colonial era because right from then, English has been taught and used in all institutions of learning in this country. In fact, without the knowledge of English, none of the tertiary institutions would have reached the level at which they are today. Good performance in English is considered an asset.

In this paper, it is accepted that language teachers are in the position of helping students develop skills in communication and the art of language relevant to its use should be to students doing different courses in different areas of technology. According to Ayanniyi (1999), it is imperative for teachers to understand basic concepts about the nature and use of language. This study takes a look at the present state of English language teaching and the attitude of technology students towards English language in the College of Leather Technology, Zaria and the College of Agricultural Technology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

Use Of English” A Better Perspective Of Teaching English Language In A Technology Institution

Use of English” as a course which is also called “English Communication Skills” taught in polytechnics/Technology Institutions and in the Universities is justified pedagogically, theoretically and academically to meet the language needs of students doing various programmes of specializations. Pedagogically, students are taught not just General English that which they themselves feel they need (Osagbami, 1994). Theoretically, what is focused and taught is beneficial to them (Munby, 1978). Moreso, academic success is ensured since communicative English required for vocational courses such as technological courses is given prominence (Adeyanju, 1989).

Presently in Nigeria, people in various professions and occupations seem to be aware of the role English language plays in their various fields. English language is now taught to various students of different occupations in higher institutions in which much attention is focused on special registers peculiar to different fields. Such students should be taught to explain the use of devices exclusive to their different fields. For this reason, the type of a language programme that will make learners function in relevant situations is the ideal. This is a new direction in language teaching and learning to boost the interest of students which seem to have been lost as a result of General English offered by conventional colleges. This type of language programme could change the attitude of some students who think they could just walk into the examination hall to write

Attitude Of Students Towards English Language

Attitude, according to McFarland (1979), is defined as “readiness to act in a certain way expressed by a person’s words, gestures or facial appearance”. The College of Leather Research Institute, Zaria and College of Agricultural Technology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria studies clearly showed their attitudes towards English language, in all the above mentioned areas. Their attitudes also affect their use of English language in their areas of specialization using English to explain what they were doing in their content areas. The information was collected during the second semester, 2000/2001 session from the Higher National Diploma 1 students of the two colleges.

According to reports got from their English lecturers, students take English language course for granted. They were mostly seen in the language class late or absent many at times. Some were seen during tests and examinations to write without preparing for examinations. Many who had the course carried-over would not attend classes for a make-up and as result, such students would continue to carry it over for another two to three years before they know what to do.

Reports from the students themselves showed dislike for the course. Some said they did not have to know English since they did not need to speak it in their offices after graduation. Many agreed that English language is a necessity for all students because it is the language of instruction, of the textbooks they use, for banks, courts and so on. But they found it difficult to learn and write because of the poor background they had from primary to secondary schools. According to them, they were not well taught. Many at times, they said, they had no English teachers. Some argued that they needed not to waste their time studying English, instead they focused on their courses which are science oriented that needed much attention. (Staff and students questionnaire on “Attitude of Technology students towards English language course).

The reports got from both students and teachers of the Colleges studied are disheartening. Several technology students take English language course for granted. They are not interested in the course. They felt the course was not helping them in their fields of specialization i.e. no relationship. They did not realise that inability to understand the language of education had affected their performance in the courses they are doing especially when they were to describe or report what they did practically.

Impediments to Students’ Interest in Language Use

The conditions under which “Use of English” is taught in these College could not help students develop positive attitude towards English language. The language classes were full of both qualified and unqualified students admitted on merit and on concessions as result of condoning certain conditions that some ought to meet. There is usually a limited period of a language class for remedying students language problems which the teacher has to follow strictly. There was no facility for validating students’ results brought to the college before being admitted into these colleges. In the language class, there was no specific textbooks used. The language teachers were virtually the only source of knowledge for the students in English. There was no language laboratory for proper teaching of phonology. The students’ poor attitude can be improved if the conditions under which the ‘Use of English’ is taught mentioned above could be improved. Also if all necessary conditions are met, students will benefit more and they will be more proficient in their use of English language than they are at present.

Below are selected student’ works on Description and Discussion topics in their courses.

Sample 1, Description of a Termite.

“Termites”

“It attacks growing crop or in the store e.g. maize, millet, sugarcane, trees e.g. rubber, cocoa, tea, coffee. The normally eats the plants tissues to serious stage. Some time they fall the plants”. (Source: Student’s practical notebook 2000/2001 session.).

The above description does not show what a termite is. The student only listed what it does to crops and trees. From the title one thinks more than one termite is to be described but the statement starts with singular it: There is no coherence, no relevant phrase is added, lists of crops are mixed with those of trees of what termites destroy. The writing is full of misuse or none use of articles, pronoun 'they' is a wrong use of capitalization and separation of one word into two. Segments 'sometime'. The work ends with a construction typical of the student's language construction"... They fall the plants".

Sample 11 Student's reaction to a listening comprehension passage using points jotted.

Typhoid Fever

Question: Why is typhoid fever rampant in the rural areas than it is in urban?

A student's answer:

"Typhoid is rampant in the rural than the cities this is because people in the rural areas are uneducated than hygiene while in the cities".
(Source: A students notebook, 2000/2001 session)

The work above shows that students use of English language lacks inadequacies in mechanics involved in the spoken and written forms. At discourse level, there is no coherence within the statements to help a reader understand the message the student wants to pass across. At a lexical level, there is redundancy. Mechanically there are: wrong spelling, wrong capitalization, wrong use of punctuations and wrong choice of words. No message is passed across.

Prospect In Teaching Use of English

According to Osagbami (1994), a teacher is able to help students change their attitudes by the way he handles his course. Teacher's method of instruction is very important. Every teacher should desire for his students an attitude of self improvement got from his teaching. An English language teacher is not just a 'teacher, but that who teaches the language for a certain purpose - i.e. aiming at his students, communicating effectively in the language of education both verbally and in writing of whatever they are doing, practically. A technologist who is knowledgeable of whatever he is constructing should say or write such for any educated person to gain from. A teacher of English in such institutions should also have the knowledge of what his students are doing practically so as to use relevant materials for his teaching in the language class. Teaching what is relevant in a language class according to Olaofe (1999) produces "citizens fully equipped to promote national prosperity and economic dynamism". The teacher needs to incorporate the use of scientific English for academic purposes - i.e. teaching registers, field related writing, scientific report writing type of essays, not taking and informally written discourse topic common to everyday use. Such language teaching technique is referred to as practical-language- in-action, (Osagbami, 1994). This is saying that students in real life situation need to speak of objects and tools before them not as if they are out of sight and out of reach. Linguistic inadequacies in the practical use of language can place the speaker at a disadvantage in practical matters. A language teacher with the knowledge of what his students need and so teach in will make them acquire specific skills and competence for specific operations necessary in their fields. Students are bound to show interest in what they know will benefit them.

The study posits that learners have different needs and different interests and that before they can be motivated to learn effectively, their needs and interests must first be met. Ever and Latorre (1969) also show that the English needed by particular groups of learners could be identified by those groups and linguists can analyse the linguistic characteristics of their special areas of study. English should be a medium of innovation, creativity and productivity. Thinking and expressive processes of learners must not be carved out in a foreign language. The use of English language taught on vocational institutions should make students think creatively, make decisions, solve and

identify problems, see things with inner eyes, apply facts to reality and their reasoning productivity to be greatly enhanced.

An approach a language teacher needs to employ in teaching students of this level is communicative type which is brought, towards the use of English to function in relevant situations through the integration of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). When the four are integratively used in a language class, communications is meaningful and language proficiency is ensured among students. It is also a sort of motivating students to enjoy language since it is now creatively used in a natural situation.

Recommendations

1. There should be a radical change in teacher preparation endeavour particularly English language teachers. They should be fully equipped with new directions, current in language teaching and learning.
2. A teacher should be a motivator, creative and mature in dealing with students. A language teacher should have the knowledge of the courses his students are doing afore time. He is expected to cooperate with the content teachers so as to know more about tasks peculiar to students' special areas. He is also to be more conscious of registers of students' fields. These could serve as language materials to use in language classes.
3. 'Use of English language class need to be enriched with educational resources such as radio, using recorded instructions on phonology, discorsal topics, novels for reading and magazines so as to ease the ache of seeking for materials to use.
4. An urgent call is necessary for science and technology textbooks in English course.
5. Also qualified, mature and experienced English language teachers are recommenced to teach 'Use of English' at the tertiary institutions.

Conclusion

The above study has explained how the teaching of "Use of English" in the Technology Colleges in Zaria is yet to achieve its purpose. Even though the course is compulsory for the students, more of them show negative attitude towards it as a result of the type of orientation they had from primary and secondary schools. It is now clear that English teachers at these levels need to see how students' interest could be developed by making English language more practical and interesting, employing current methods of language teaching.

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