

ELECTRONICALLY-PROPELLED INDIVIDUALIZED LEARNING AS A CATALYST FOR THE LEARNING OF COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN UNIVERSITIES' LARGE CLASSES

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Abstract

Communication in English is a core course in Nigerian university system. Consequently, students are in most cases crammed in over-crowded classes to receive guidance from the respective subject matter experts. This is debilitating given that learners in large classes attain lower linguistic progress than learners in small classes. Furthermore, the latter have more chances to access instructional materials and teacher evaluation in addition to participating actively in classroom discourse than the former. The rationale of this paper (which is a product of secondary research) is to underscore the potentialities of utilizing Information Communication Technology (ICT) in the course of facilitating the individualized learning of communication in English in large classes. In consequence, once the current challenges to the use of ICT are surmounted, this paper contends that ICT will engender the individualized learning of communication in English in the apparently large classes in Nigerian universities.

Universities all around the world are established with the pivotal goal of rendering services that will engender societal development in addition to producing graduates that will serve as the turbine engine for the actualization of overall national development. Even though some universities are gradually drifting towards centres that are administered as corporations with business motives thus leading to the emergence of “pseudo universities” (Asabere-Ameyaw, 2011), courses that will lead to the attainment of the goals of the universities are designed and made available for the students to study. In the light of this, Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) in section 8:64(c) of the fourth edition of the *National Policy on Education* (NPE) provides that: “University education shall make optimum contribution to national development by: making all students, as part of a general programme of all round improvement in university education, to offer general study courses as history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.” One of the courses that fit in this category is *Communication in English* (National Universities Commission, 2010). But

then, given that all undergraduates are expected to take this course at a particular point in time, the learner of the course is challenged to study it in large classes. This could be inimical to the English communication achievement of the Nigerian undergraduate – especially if they are not majoring in English. The panacea is for the student to engage in individualized personal study so as to complement the input made by the teacher. This calls for the qualitative and quantitative provision of modern technological provisions to assist the educational sector to grow (Obashoro-John, 2007). It is in view of this that this paper was designed to explore how electronically-propelled individualized learning can enhance the learning of *Communication in English* in the large classes that are apparent in Nigerian universities as well as identify how the Nigerian university education system has been maximizing the facilities to the utmost. It is envisioned that the position of this paper will engender a situation whereby Information and Communication Technology (ICT) will be prioritized by students of Communication in English as a catalyst for enhancing individualized learning in large classes.

Individualized Language Learning: An Operational Description.

Given that there is no one best way of teaching English (Robertson and Acklam, 2000; Lavery, 2001), many teachers have been capitalizing on the eclectic approach to English language teaching. This will check the deficiencies using a discrete method for a group of learners might generate from the perspectives of being impotent to meet the needs, abilities and interest of each of the learners in a group. Eclectic method is good because factors such as the level, age and culture of the learners, teacher proficiency in pedagogy, availability of instructional time and materials as well as the objectives of the English language lesson do guide the teacher towards selecting and making appropriate methods seamless in order to teach at an appropriate time and situation.

There is a departure from teacher-centred lesson to learner-centred approach. In consequence, Nunan and Lamb (2000:27) suggest that “learner-centred classrooms are those in which learners are actively involved in their own learning process.” This provides opportunity for learners to be engaged in actual language study in such a way that they could be guided to activate what they have internalized, via the guidance of the teacher, in actual language use domains. However, the teacher still remains important. In consequence, Ke (2008:14) posited that:

The classroom is seen not as the place where learning takes place, but instead, as a place where administration is dealt with, where learners are advised and given feedback, and where learners are inspired to go out to do their own learning.

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Given that it is learners' linguistic output that would necessitate the kind of advice and the feedback the English language teacher will provide, the class remains a place where some kind of English language learning could take place. This is because as the teacher reinforces, consolidates and corrects the learner, the learner's consciousness is raised in respect of their strength and weakness. Thus some sort of language learning has taken place. However, Fengying (2003:39) cautioned that:

... begrudgingly given praise will take away confidence and self-esteem even from high achieving students... By focusing solely on mistakes and errors, and thereby ignoring the successful attempts of students, the teacher gives them the false impression that they are failure.

Thence, instead of the classroom to act as an enhancing environment, it would end up debilitating success in learning English as a second language in the classroom. According to The New London Group (2000:18): "... learning process need to recruit, rather than ignore and erase, the different subjectivities, interests, intentions, commitments, and purposes that students bring to learning." Graddol (2006:72) concurred and stated that: "In relation to language learning, expectation that all learners in a class will be at the same level of proficiency ... is giving way to approaches which allow more personalized learning." This therefore necessitates individualized learning. Individualized learning in the context of this paper is a process that entails learning a language via a structure that depicts one learner one teacher or instructional medium at a particular time. It could be through self-learning or teacher matching his or her teaching styles to a learner's learning styles, needs, abilities and attitude.

Individualized learning gives the learner the opportunity for self-learning in self-initiated and self-control manner but under the guidance of the teacher of English and their assistants. Individualized learning in this context is imperative given that Abbott and Ryan (2003:206) underscored that success in language learning is determined, among others, by "... the amount of independent reading, regardless of subject matter, which the child does." This indicates that language learning is made more effective when the learner's previous knowledge, acquired via independent study, is built upon.

One of the features of individualized learning is learners of English are activated to engage in active English language studies within and outside the classroom. In the light of this, MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed (2004:49) posited that "... effective learning is not a passive process confined to either the classroom or to the process of study." Thus, language learning could be explicit, implicit or incidental. Learners of English should therefore be prompted to embark on discovery activities. Tomlinson (1998:ix) described discovery activity as an activity "... which involves learners investing energy and attention in order to discover something about

the language for themselves.”

The bottom-line in individualized learning is language learners optimize and prioritize their own responsibility for learning language by themselves. Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and William (2003:59) opined that “... learning cannot be done for the student; it has to be done by the student ... teachers are also needed to train their students to take responsibility for their own learning.” In addition, Rushton (2003:99) emphasizes that: “Taking responsibility for their learning helps children learn to focus their attention.” In consonance with these, Petty (2004:17) provides that in self-directed learning, “... learners are encouraged to take responsibility for its effectiveness. They are encouraged to be active rather than passive in their attitude to learning, over-helping by the teacher is discouraged as it is thought to encourage dependency.” The chief concern of individualized learning is for the learner of English to make optimal use of personalized self-learning in respect of what they have been taught in the classroom or what they envisage they will be taught in the future so as to boost their communicative competence.

Learners of English can take advantage of English language learning facilities in order to actualize individualized learning. These are called self-access materials. Tomlinson (1998:xii) defined self-access materials as: “Materials designed for learners to use independently (i.e. on their own without access to a teacher or classroom). They are normally used by the learner at home, in a library or in a self-study centre.” They can be in the form of electronic and non-electronic media. For example, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2007:30) reported that: “Radio and television have helped expand access to secondary education in Brazil, India and Mexico, among others.” Where feasible, learners can be prompted to develop their own learning materials. In line with this, Mohammed (1995:138) suggested that: “Students can also be made to create their own learning materials, thereby helping to raise their competence and retain their interest in the language.” Self-access materials facilitate individualized language learning because learners select and utilize them based on their interests and learning styles thus enhancing learner-centred discovery activities.

Another self-access language material is language laboratory. According to Robertson and Acklam (2000:40) it is: “A room with individual booths where students have their own cassette players. The students wear headphones so they are able to work by themselves. This means that listening exercises can be conducted at the students’ own pace.” The advantage of this and other self-access materials is it gives the learner the chance to supplement and consolidate what has been learned in the classroom. Here, learners develop goals in relation to the provisions in the curriculum and work towards accomplishing them. This provides basis for internal

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locus of control. Richards (1985:23) reported that:

Johnson and Paulston (1976:39-46) spell out learner roles in an individualized approach to language learning: (a) the learner is a planner of his or her own learning program and thus ultimately assumes responsibility for what he or she does in the classroom; (b) the learner is monitor and evaluator of his or her own progress; (c) the learner is a member of a group and learns by interacting with others; (d) the learner is a tutor of other learners; (e) the learner learns from the teacher, from other students, and from other teaching sources.

This summarizes the nature of individualized language learning. But then, language learning is dynamic and feasible for different situations. For this reason as this paper proposes individualized language learning, Graddol (2010:122) opined that "... what works in a pilot may not work on a large scale without a redesign." This implies that reviewers of our proposed model need to apply constant eclecticism and pedagogic innovations to suit their contexts. This can be achieved via reflective teaching.

Large Communication in English Classes in Nigerian Universities and Individualized ICT-based Learning: The Present State of Affairs

It is clear that the NPE is not explicit on the place of English language as subject or medium of instruction in university education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). However, it is apparently clear that English language is very invaluable in the Nigerian university curriculum (Mogbo & Ikwuka, 2007). For this reason, English is a core General Studies course in Nigerian universities. Nigerian university students need English for academic and survival strategies in a globalised world. The National Universities Commission (NUC) expects the university undergraduates in Nigeria to take *Communication in English I and II* as core courses. Generally, it is expected that the following topics will be treated (Effective Communication and Writing in English; Language Skills; Writing of Essay Answers; Comprehension; Sentence Construction; Outline and Paragraph; Collection and Organization of Materials and Logical Presentation; Punctuation – for I, and Logical Presentation of Papers; Phonetics; Instruction on Lexis; Art of Public Speaking and Oral Communication, Figures of Speech, Précis, Report Writing – for II). An appraisal of the performance of secondary school leavers in English language in the examinations administered by Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB), National Examinations Council (NECO) and The West African Examinations Council (WAEC), will reveal abysmal achievement (Awonusi, 2011; Umeh, 2010). By the time they enter the university, it is expected that the university; through its English Studies programme in the General Studies unit, will attempt to improve the students' proficiency in English. Graddol (2006:85) provided that in such context "... a major role of the classroom is teaching

learners a more formal and standard variety.” Retrospectively, Afolayan (1979:5) underscored that: “If there is a need for a course in the Use of English for the native speakers of the language, then, undoubtedly, the need is greater for the non-native users of the language.”

A review of the rate at which candidates are enrolled into Nigerian universities will reveal that the learners of *Communication in English* will have to take the course in classes that contain 200+ students (except where adequate arrangement is made to engender class-size reduction). Thus the Nigerian university student is expected to augment what they learn in the class with the adequate utilization of the facilities provided by ICT. This is called blended learning. Hence, according to Obashoro-John (2007:183), the complex nature of university education “... and modern demands (from students) make formal face-to-face classroom learning, under the guidance of a teacher, an insignificant provision for all those who are to benefit from university education.” For this reason, the candidate is expected to be exposed to the techniques of optimizing the opportunities provided by ICT. Thus, Asabere-Ameyaw (2011) underscored that when undergraduates are “... familiarized with the use of these technologies, access to information will no longer need the presence of teachers, although the teacher’s action remains to be an indispensable source of knowledge and understanding.” In consequence, where ICT is prioritized, the teacher assumes the role of knowledge broker, assessor, agent of constructionist learning and a cooperative and collaborative learning facilitator.

According to Obashoro-John (2007:184), ICT can be defined as “... the physical structure of network of computer-based system (hardware, software and media) for the purpose of organising, processing, communicating, assessing, presenting, storing, retrieving and simplifying information when needed in the right form.” Foyewa (2010:78) concurred and reported that ICT is primarily concerned with the “... handling and processing of information using electronic devices thereby creating opportunities to handle text and images, number and graphs, instructions, sound and music and to process information by organizing, storing and retrieving, sorting and analysis (sic), presenting and communicating.” When linked to language learning, Udofot (2010:201) provided that Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) as an aspect of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) may be explained as the application of the computer in language teaching and learning.” CALL can as well be regarded as Technology Enhanced Language Learning (TELL). In the case of language teaching and learning, ICT, CALL or TELL facilities come in different forms. The technologies that can be used in ICT-based language learning include diskettes, floppy discs, CD-Rom, MP3, online data base and websites, discussion boards, e-mail, blogs, computer-aided assessments, electronic simulations and games, e-dictionaries, radio, television and satellite transmissions, video cassette

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recorders, i-phones, i-pads, hi-tech mobile phones etc (Foyewa, 2010; Obashoro-John, 2007, Robertson & Acklam, 2000).

In view of the above, Luke (2000:70) succinctly provided that: “Of all the innovations in communications technologies over the past two decades, the video cassette recorder (VCR), computer and now the global network of the internet have had the most profound effect on ... education.” In consonance, Robertson and Acklam (2000:28) underscored that: “Computers are increasingly a part of everyday life and the internet has, since the middle of the 1990s, revolutionised communication. The revolution has found its way into the classroom ... and students have access to computers at home.” It is envisioned that those who have access to ICT will make positive use of it to the utmost.

ICT is a catalyst to individualized learning of *Communication in English*. This is given the fact that candidates can download software via the internet on their phones and embark on personal study. Software that enhances electronic language testing is readily available in different forms. Talking dictionaries can be used to boost the internalization of the elements of phonetics. Candidates can record their utterances and communicative acts for comparison with accepted models using Audio Active Comparative resources (Akudolu, 2004) and by extension video recording. With these, learners need not over-rely on the teacher thus breaking the barrier created in respect of classroom participation, access to instructional materials and effective feedback and evaluation in addition to overall communicative achievement by large classes.

According to Udofot (2010:201) even though the use of computer in universities dates as far back as the early 1960s, in the case of Nigeria; the use of computer “... in language learning and teaching is a very recent development which is yet confined to few specialized institutions.” This is despite the fact that a plethora of findings abound on the positive impact of ICT (especially the audio aspect) in the learning of oral English (Kutigi, Gambari & Gana, 2010). An observation made by the writer in all the Federal and State tertiary institutions located in Yobe State indicates that language laboratories and ICT facilities are grossly underutilized in respect of individualized language learning. Except for the purpose of responding to teacher-initiated assignments, most students rarely utilize the facilities provided by ICT for personal English language studies. Furthermore, most students prefer using the internet facility for social media and cognate social networking instead of explicit English language learning. Even in the case of responding to teacher-initiated assignments, some students use ICT negatively by engaging in what is called “copy and paste” in school slangs. This is inimical to innovation and independent English language learning. In sum, it can be emphasized that ICT is not adequately used for

the purpose of individualized learning of *Communication in English I & II* despite the potentials readily available and accessible. Several factors are ascribed to the trend. They include lack of ICT literacy, lack of financial resources, paucity of home-generated software, inadequate access to ICT resources and lack of infrastructure (Adeleke & Rahman, 2010).

Conclusion

Communication in English I & II are core courses in the Nigerian university system. For this reason, most undergraduates are made to offer the courses in large classes. This kind of situation exacerbates students' inability to participate actively in classroom discourse in addition to denying the students adequate access to instructional materials, feedback and evaluation. Thence, this is capable of affecting the students' communicative attainment negatively. But then, a panacea can be found in information and communications technologies (ICT). This is because independence and innovation, in this present age of globalization, in English language learning is not delimited to the declarative and procedural knowledge of English but also involves the knowledge of how to optimize electronically-propelled language learning. Curriculum innovation entails that strategies in language learning and learning styles must keep changing. One of the changes brought about by this situation is e-learning. Techniques in themselves do change and accessing them could be constrained. Given that the journey so far reveals that the utilization of ICT for the purpose of learning *Communication in English* is grossly inadequate, this paper concludes that with concerted consciousness-raising, ICT can be utilized to effectively facilitate individualized learning of *Communication in English* in the large classes that abound in Nigerian universities.

Recommendations

The following are recommended in the light of the main focus of the paper:

1. Learners should be exposed to ICT skill before they are enrolled into the university system. The basic education level and the secondary school system should help in this direction. In addition, ICT skill can be acquired via self-study and support from the home.
2. Adequate funds should be released to universities so as to enable them provide ICT facilities proportionate to the number of students. Governments at all levels, proprietors of private universities, alumni associations, trust funds, philanthropists, external linkage opportunities among others should assist in this case.
3. Nigerian subject matter experts in English should be given adequate training on how to develop e-learning materials. This will make them produce English learning software that is relevant to the needs of the Nigerian learner of English.

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4. Undergraduates should be encouraged to make optimum use of their phones, iPods, tablets, smart phones and internet cafes outside the university campus so as to minimize over-dependence on the inadequate resources in the university system.
5. Solar energy, inverters, rechargeable batteries and other alternate sources of energy should be maximized so as to solve the basic infrastructural problem of power outage. Undergraduates should be given soft loans to purchase electronic devices that can enhance individualized learning.

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