

LEARNING OF ENGLISH AND ATTAINMENT OF SET OBJECTIVES: A MIRAGE OR REALITY

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Abstract

English as a language occupies a unique place in the educational set-up in Nigeria. As a language, it is used for instruction at all levels of Education. As a subject, it is the only subject which prospective students need to pass at credit level to qualify for admission into Nigeria's Tertiary institutions. It is the only subject taught compulsory at all levels of education in Nigeria: pre-primary, primary and secondary while at the tertiary level, there are such compulsory general courses as language and communication skills, use of English and so on. Contrary to the expectations of Education planners who seek to equip our school leavers with high quality English, both spoken and written, it is sad to say that the quality of English as exhibited by our schools' graduates today is nothing to write home about. What has made the attainment of the set objectives a mirage? This paper examines the several obstacles which have been identified.

There are many documents in Nigeria today which guide the study of English. They include the National Policy on Education: NPE, the 9-year Basic Education curriculum English studies for Jss 1-3 and of course the WAEC and NECO senior secondary school syllabuses.

From these documents, it is observed that the main objectives of English language at the senior secondary school level and beyond are to:

- (1) Help students develop mastery in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- (2) Help students become confident and competent in the use of spoken and written English;
- (3) Develop the language proficiency necessary for performing well in other school subjects;
- (4) Equip students with an adequate range of words and sentences that could enable the students to communicate effectively in the context of the different kinds of everyday situations which the student is likely to come across in the society.

As can be seen, it is expected that a student who has successfully completed secondary school Education should be equipped with the level of English that he can function near flawlessly in English in the society. This however, is not the case with Nigerian secondary school graduates.

The Role of English in Nigeria

The roles played by English in Nigeria are enormous and significant. First, is the assertion that English is by far the most important language in Nigeria because English is the Lingua Franca. With over 400 indigenous languages, none of these has risen to the status of being used as a national language to the displacement of English.

The curriculum is written in English. Most of the books are written in English. In terms of instruction, English language remains the preferred language. No wonder the JSS 1-3 English studies curriculum stipulates the use of English among teacher/student, student/student verbal interaction and so on.

English is so important that it is the only subject which a prospective student seeking admission into tertiary institutions must have a pass at credit level to stand any chance of admission.

In administration and politics, English remains the language of the civil service. In conducting the business of the National and state Houses of Assemblies, English is the language of business.

In Judiciary, court proceedings are carried out in English and judgements are as well given in English. Generally therefore, English is the vehicle for communication, social interaction, learning, information among others.

Evaluating Students' Performance in English

In spite of the numerous and important roles which English plays in Nigeria, it is observed that performance has not been encouraging. Even among the highly educated, the performance in English is still questionable. In April 2011, general elections were held in Nigeria. For the presidential elections, only professors and vice-chancellors of Nigerian Universities were appointed as state returning officers. In their announcement of results, many of these professors used the words "number of votes casted" as against "number of votes cast". If at the very top, such errors are noted, how much less at the bottom?

In the senior school certificate examination, there is high degree of failure. For instance Asinya (2012) wrote that statistics show that in the 2011 May/June SSCE Examination result, of the over one million candidates who sat for the examination, only 22% passed English. Generally, the English of the Nigerian graduate is nothing to write home about. Regrettably, these are the same people who are found teaching in our secondary schools.

Factors Militating against the Achievement of Set Objectives

As children enter secondary school, the general expectation is that by the time they pass out, they should have achieved a good command of English thereby meeting the set objectives already discussed.

However, this is not so in most cases. What then is responsible for this poor state of affairs that has made the attainment of set objectives in English a mirage rather than a reality? Some of the factors shall be discussed.

Lack of Qualified Teachers

Most of the schools especially private schools are staffed with unqualified teachers. This is because in order to minimize spending, most of these private schools employ very lowly qualified staff whose pay is very low. O'level holders are sometimes engaged.

For the public schools, it is very often the case to find non-English graduates being asked to teach English in schools they are posted to. Graduates of Theatre Arts, Religious studies, History, political Science and other graduates of humanities are often drafted to teach English. Without doubts, they lack the prerequisites to do so and as expected, the students they teach can never do well.

Williams (1979) observed that a secondary system staffed by outstanding graduates may do a lot better than that staffed by “lame ducks”. Gall and Word (1978) posited that “the students receiving instructions from skill (qualified) teachers record more apparent and encouraging scores and show skillful academic competence than those whose teachers are unqualified”. In summary therefore, the quality of learning received by learners is a reflection of the quality of the teacher. Ukeje (1966) stated that:

If teachers are not sufficiently qualified for the work they are supposed to be doing, the methods of teaching are largely not in consonance with modern concepts of educational theories and practice.

A good number of those teaching in the secondary schools are not professionals. This is because many of them never read Education and by that they are not professionals. Udo (2006) defined profession as “a field of economic activity requiring academic preparation above the high school. Hence, Aboho (2006) concluded that “a profession may be said to be an organized group performing special duties in a society”.

Maduewesi, Aboho and Okwuedei (2010) see the teacher as “the one who has the ability to exercise the skills for pedagogy”. By the reasoning of Gbamanja (1997), a teacher who is not professionally trained cannot perform the important role of influencing the personal development of their students. Efebo (1999) added a voice by saying that the professional teacher knows how he “speaks and conducts himself in the presence of his students with the intention of changing their behaviours”. This is true because learning is all about behavioural change.

Because professionalism is lacking in many of our teachers, Maduewesi et al (2010) point out that the teachers will lack the abilities to exercise the skills of pedagogy. The end result is that the students’ performance in English keeps being very poor.

Mother Tongue Interference

It has earlier been mentioned that there are over 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria. When children start school, most of them do so after acquiring their mother tongue – MT. As a result, their MT influences how they use English. Some of the sounds they meet in English like interdental fricatives /ð/ and /θ/ do not occur in the MT hence they end up substituting them with /t/ and /d/. In the case of vowels, the quality of vowels may not be the same. Generally, Nigerian languages characteristically have less number of vowels than English. This is an obstacle on the way of being a good speaker of English. Adding his voice, Christopher (1981) said that: “The cause of the interference is as a result of existence of some sounds in the mother tongue which are not found in English. This in other words could be said to be phonological difference in the language”.

Environmental Factors

Femochiaro (1978) asserts that where English is taught in an English speaking country or community, students would naturally have many opportunities for direct contact with the language outside the classroom.

The geographical location of Nigeria places us at an environmental disadvantage in terms of English usage. Many learners of English come in contact with English when they are taken to school for the first time. The teachers may use English in the class but after school, the child reverts to vernacular for the rest of the day until he returns to school the following day.

Emenyonu (1975) writes that "...there was a revolutionary change in school in the mid forties when communication in English language got all the attention. There were schools where it was punishable to converse in vernacular except at the approved period".

Today, encouraged by the National Policy on Education, NPE, vernacular is the fancy of the day thereby ensuring that contact with English is minimal at the initial years in primary school. When at a later age the children are introduced to English, they suffer some set-backs because by the words of Olagoke (1979) "it is generally believed that children learn best in the language of their birth and early socialization". Since children do not socialize early in English, they encounter problems later in their study of English.

Lack of Non-Human Resources

It is not only human resources that can help in the effective learning of English. There are many non-human resources that are needed for the effective teaching of English. They include what we generally refer to as instructional materials or learning Aids like books, wall charts, video, television, radio sets, language laboratories, ICT materials and so on.

There is no gainsaying the fact that where the materials listed above are not available in their correct quantity, the learning of English, and by extension, any other school subject will become very difficult. In some cases, where the textbooks are available, they are obsolete or some may be lacking in content.

Some of the materials like basic textbooks ought to be bought by the parents. Unfortunately, some parents do not pay attention to such issues. They put up a very negative attitude when it comes to supplying their wards with prescribed texts. Others that have to be provided for by the government or schools management suffer from poor budgetary allocations. The scenario painted above does not produce good school leavers.

Learner's Attitude

Attitude is very critical in every endeavour one embarks upon. Attitude can be positive or negative.

Writing on attitude, Horrocks (1964) in Asinya (1997) observed that "attitude is an expression by word or feelings about a person, a thing or a situation". Smith (1968) sees attitude as "a relatively

enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner”.

Narrowing down to studies, Thomas (1978) in Asinya (1997) confirms that “attitude of students towards subjects influences response variabilities and performance considerably”.

When students have a negative attitude towards their studies, their output will be very poor. We are in the computer age. Browsing of the internet and watching of home videos occupy the students’ attention for a greater part of the day. Even during lessons, it is common place to find students watching movies using their cell phones. The end result is that they end up cheating during examination. The attitude they put up during lectures has been very negative and this does not allow them to learn well. Their attitude towards the subject and the teacher having been negative, there is no way such students could be good performers in English. This point is buttressed by Bills (1975) who said “students with negative attitude towards a subject or teacher do not learn with the same degree as students with positive attitude”. Poor attitude certainly breeds poor performance.

Remedies

The various factors militating against the attainment of set objectives in English have been highlighted. No claim is being laid to the point that all the factors have been enumerated. But having examined some, remedies can now be proffered.

Teacher Retraining

Much of the blame has been put on the teacher. This is because no learner can perform more than what he is being given by his teacher. If the teacher is good, the learner shall very likely be good as well. This therefore means that the teacher must be taken care of academically so that he too can impact positively on the learner. To this end retraining programmes should be mounted for secondary school teachers of English. This will help update their knowledge while on the job.

Training of Non-professional Teachers

It is a fact that almost 50% of the teachers in our secondary school are not professionals. They did not read Education. In our schools, we have graduates of political science, Theatre Arts, Sociology, social works, physics, Biology, Chemistry, Geology, English, Geography and other courses. They have only found themselves in the teaching line because they could not find jobs elsewhere. Such teachers should mandatorily be made to do a post-graduate diploma in Education to make them fit into the teaching profession. Those of them who have been conscripted into teaching English due to lack of qualified English language teachers will be better off in teaching English even if they read B.A (Hons) English or even Language Arts. They need professional training to be better on the job.

Language Experts at the Lower Level

Since interference plays a major role in the English language learning process of the students, it is hereby suggested that those who teach at the lower Basic level should be well armed with linguistic knowledge to be able to lead the learners to know where differences exist between their Mother Tongue (MT) and English Language. The Tiv child should be made to know that whereas

there is no difference between /l/ and /r/ in Tiv, a big difference exists between the two in English. This will prevent them from saying “rate” when they mean “late”. The Hausa child will also learn not to say “fall” when he means to say “Paul”. This is necessary to give the students a good foundation during their early years in school.

Provision of ICT and Other Materials

We are living in a world that Information and Communication Technology is taking over almost all aspects of our daily activities. If schools have internet facilities, students can explore the facilities to learn better English through English Language learning programmes. They can listen to Model speeches on tape recordings and video clips among others. English teaching tapes abound in the markets and with the provision of hardwares, teaching of English can be made more simple and interesting.

Discipline in Schools

Attitude was one factor which was identified to be militating against the achievement of set objectives in the English learning process. Having seen that students at time put up negative attitudes, it becomes pertinent to apply discipline to make them sit up. Ozigi and Canham (1978) and Mgbodile (1986) have pointed out that discipline is necessary for academic and moral growth. Adding to this, Ezeocha (1990) noted that “the school morale could be high or low depending on the tone of the discipline of that school. No academic work can grow where indiscipline exists”.

If indiscipline is allowed to persist in a school, it destroys learning as Ada (2000) puts it “indiscipline disrupts the teaching/learning environment and retards successful learning”.

Conclusion

With the way things are going, it is clear that Nigeria will continue to produce very low quality secondary school graduates of English. But since both the causes and remedies have been highlighted, it is hoped that if the remedial measures outlined here are applied and the recommendations upheld, the set objectives in the teaching of English shall be attained.

Recommendations

1. Teachers should constantly be retrained to make them effective.
2. Non-professional teachers should be given on the job training.
3. ICT facilities should be provided in all schools.
4. School administrators should ensure discipline at all times in our schools.
5. Learners should be encouraged to procure reading materials.
6. Holiday lessons should be organized for pupils and students to keep them abreast with current trends in English.

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