

# IMPROVING THE PROFESSIONAL SKILL OF NIGERIA'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

*Thelma L Akpan*

## **Abstract**

There has been an alarming decline in the performance of students in the English language at all levels of education in Nigeria. Many reasons have been given for this poor performance. Some of the suggestions advanced (o account for this range from poor language policy, lack of interest in learning the language by the students, to poor teaching methods. Very little attention has been paid to the professional skill of the English language teachers in Nigeria. How competent is the teacher of English in Nigeria? "This paper examines the crucial issue of professionalism of English language teachers, it takes a look at who the professional English language teacher is and (he problems caused by lack of professionalism in English language teaching and learning. It then makes practical suggestions for improving the level of professional skill of English language teachers in Nigeria.

## **Introduction**

It is well known that English occupies a very important position in Nigeria today. It is the language of education, politics commerce and government. It is taught at every level of the educational system and till date is the gateway to education in Nigeria. The English language in Nigeria today is a major factor in determining success or failure in other fields of study.

Due to its exalted position in our educational system, one expects better performance in the language by both teachers and students. But this is not the case. Our students find it difficult to communicate effectively in the language and their performance in standardized tests such as the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in English is very poor. This is a worrisome development and has brought about the intensification of efforts by government to produce trained teachers who can teach pupils both at the primary and secondary levels.

Today, the establishment of teacher training colleges all over the federation has ensured the steady turn out of trained teachers in the country to handle the ever - increasing number of students in our primary and secondary schools. The recognized minimum teaching qualification in Nigeria today is the Nigeria Certificate of Education (N.C.E.). The quality and numbers of teachers has greatly increased.

Being a teacher however, does not fully equip one to teach the English language in Nigeria. This is because of the peculiar social circumstances in which the language is taught and learned. With over three hundred and twenty (320) ethnic groups and an equally large number of languages, English is a second language for most Nigerian students. Special skills are needed by the language teacher in order for the language to be properly taught. These are acquired through special training, and most teachers of English in Nigeria today lack this kind of special training and are therefore ill -equipped to teach the language. If we must achieve a great and dynamic economy in this nation, then the level of professional skill of the English language teacher needs to be improved upon since English is the language of education and education, the major way of equipping the individual to ensure a great and dynamic economy.

## **The Need For Professional English Language Teachers**

For this paper, teachers of English are regarded as those persons who instruct in the English language from the primary up to the senior level of the secondary school. It is at the primary school stage that the child's language acquisition process becomes complete and language learning begins. It is at these two stages that the foundation for learning the language well is laid. It therefore follows that competent teachers are needed to teach the language at this foundation - laying stage, so that these students will have a basically good language background which can be built upon at the tertiary level.

Most students seeking entry into tertiary institutions are found to be grossly inadequate in the

English language. This has made it necessary to put in place, remedial English programmes in tertiary institutions. These programmes are called by the names, General English, or English and Communication Skills or General Studies. These programmes are meant to remedy the deficiencies in English that these students carry over to tertiary institutions. Many reasons have been put forward as being responsible for the low level performance in English by students. Reasons like lack of interest on the part of the student, as well as lack of motivation to learn the language, incompetent teachers as well as poor methodology, have been suggested.

Incompetence of the English language teacher is often looked at only in terms of the teacher not knowing the language adequately, and being unable to teach it well for that reason. Competence in English language teaching however goes beyond knowing the language well or being trained in imparting the knowledge. This is because knowing the language does not mean being able to teach the language. It is therefore, the submission of this paper that lack of professionalism of the English teacher is in part responsible for the low level performance of students in the subject. This is a major problem that has not been given adequate attention in English language education.

According to Afolayan and Bamgbose et al (1995) ed., "... the primary instrument of Nigeria's development is the English language", and education is "the agent for enabling the English language develop Nigeria and Nigerians". If we must a great and dynamic Nigeria, English language education needs to be improved upon by improving the level of professional skill of its teachers. This is because English is the language of education in Nigeria and mastery of the language will aid mastery of other subjects, which are immediately relevant for developing the nation. Such subjects as related to science and technology as well as computer are taught using the English medium. English is therefore, central to success in educational endeavors in Nigeria and improvement of its teaching and learning should be given the required attention if we must move this great nation forward.

### **English Language Education and Development Education for a Great and Dynamic Economy**

Developing the economy of a nation is a major goal of all education programmes. Nigeria is still under-developed as a nation. It was rated the 37<sup>th</sup> poorest nation in the world in 1985 by the World Human Development report in TEMPO, 31<sup>st</sup> July (1997) p. 10. Although education is not the only means of development in a nation, it is a major means of development. The language of education in Nigeria is English, so a high proficiency level is needed in the language to ensure success in educational endeavors.

English, the language of education is to be rigorously pursued in order to achieve development- oriented education. Radical changes need to be made according to Olaofe (1997), not just in the teaching methods and in the orientation of the students, but also in the level of professional skill of the teacher to enable him succeed in teaching the language in a second language environment.

"The teacher is the bedrock of success in any development - oriented education programmes" (Olaofe, 1997). This statement cannot be denied since the teacher can make learning take place and to a large extent determines the level of learning that takes place. This is because he can transmit wrong or right information, motivate learners or cause them to be unmotivated. The teacher can help the learner learn the language better by skillful handling of what is taught, as well as handling the students and the general learning situation well.

The teacher training programmes ought to equip the teachers with the necessary skills to ensure quality teaching and learning of the language.

### **The Teachers of English in Nigeria**

According to Richard and Renandya (2002) ed., it is not just enough to know English in order to teach it. If we go about it in this way, then we lower the standard. A teacher of English especially English as a second language, needs to be a professional English language teacher. That is one who possesses a certain degree of professional skill and "expertise" in the teaching of the language. Lack of this kind of professional skill affects the teaching and learning of English negatively.

Most teachers of English are people who are graduates of English programmes with a strong bias in favour of literature. This leaves them unprepared to teach English in language with the degree of mastery needed for a second language situation. The use of this category of people and even graduates of subjects other than English for the teaching of English is necessitated by the shortage of

English language teachers in the country. So most people who "know" English automatically "qualify" to teach it, at least at the lower levels of education.

Apart from this it has been noticed that the average Nigerian English teachers' knowledge of English is limited to linguistic competence. He lacks communicative competence i.e. the ability to use the language appropriately according to relevant factors in the context of use. Thus he "talks like a book", using only the formal variety for all purposes. This defect is transferred to the students because they are just taught the rules of the language which they learn in order to pass exams and obtain certificates. They are hardly able to use the language properly.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Professional Skill of the English Language Teacher in Nigeria**

The improvement of the teaching and learning of English language has been a matter of great concern to governments and educators alike. In the attempt to improve the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria, a lot of attention has been focused on the learner (his roles, needs, motivation) and the teacher (his role, teaching methods, materials). Recently, a lot of energy has been expended on issues of methods/pedagogy in language teaching and not as much on improving the professional skill of the English teacher.

The creation of in-service training opportunities for English language teachers in Nigeria is one way of improving their professional skill. In-service training affords English teachers, the opportunities for self-improvement while on the job. The Post Graduate Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) is one such programme that can equip the English teacher with the basic skills needed to teach the language effectively in a second language situation like ours. Further training will help the language teacher to acquire the repertoire of varieties which constitutes truly knowing the language. The more language he has, the more of it he can enable his students to acquire. Another way of improving the professional skill of the Nigerian English language teacher, apart from teacher training, is teacher development. This is through participation in conferences, seminars, workshops, etc. These development programmes provide the teacher of English with opportunities to interact and exchange views with his professional colleagues, some of who may be more experienced and better qualified in the profession than himself.

Added to the above recommendations is the growing need for up-coming teachers to have mentors who will help them improve their teaching skills while on the job. The practice involves an arrangement in which lecturers who are older on the job have fresh lecturers assigned to them when they first arrive at the school. The job of the older lecturers is to help the new ones improve their teaching skills and to become competent professionals. According to Goodvyn (1997), the mentor's role is very important as it helps the new teachers who are not very experienced to cope with the challenges of classroom teaching and their fears and uncertainties.

Again, the Nigerian English language teacher should be helped to be in contact with the English language and its culture as much as possible, primarily through various kinds of literature in English, films, theatre, music, history, etc. In this way, he will experience the language in action in various contexts and situations. He will also be better able to use these to simulate the English language environment and culture for his students in his English language classroom. This is important because one serious problem in teaching English as a second Language (L2) is the paucity of the target language (TL) in the L2 environment both for the teacher and the students. This is why the services provided by British Council in Nigeria is highly valued and educational institutions should encourage their language teachers to become registered members there and visit it regularly.

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