

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR SCHOLARSHIP

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### **Abstract**

Language is an indispensable cultural legacy with which all forms of human interaction are carried out. It is undoubtedly, the most important medium through which man's day-to-day activities are conducted. Nigeria being a multilingual society has no indigenous language that serves as a lingua franca. As a result of that English Language is not only used as a lingua franca, it is also used as core subject in our curriculum. This paper therefore, examines the role that English Language plays as a tool for scholarship.

### **Introduction:**

Language, in general terms, is the instrument, which many uses to understand his own physical and psychological being and to relate with his fellow human beings. Thus, language is man's means of communication both in intra-personal and inter-personal contexts. To achieve this, man uses a sequence of arbitrary vocal symbols, which are intelligible to the people who inhabit the same geo-political enclave with him. To be regarded as language, the vocal symbols have to possess the capacity for exhaustively cataloguing the concepts and phenomena which obtain in the given society. Language, therefore, is a dynamic entity which grows and expands in terms of lexical frontiers, novelty of meaning

and syntactic patterns and structures as society continues to evolve. It follows; therefore, that language is a unique attribute of man and it is an indispensable aspect of his culture. For as Smith (1969:104) puts it:

*Language is the learned, shared and arbitrary system of vocal symbols through which human beings in the same speech community or subculture interact and hence communicate in terms of their common cultural experience and expectations.*

Language is a repository of racial memories and it is through this function that language is seen as the articulator of a people's way of life. , It is language that creates the link between the past, the present and the future of any human

organization. Thus, man and language are inextricably bound together in a complementary tangle. This bound is what underscores the assertion that there can be no human civilization and development without language and that without man, there can be no language. For, one cannot, irrefutably, regard the closed system of signs and calls made by animals as language.

The foregoing explains that language is the prime denominator in human reasoning concept formation concrete formulations and abstract configurations. Language therefore, is the springboard and articulator for all knowledge systems be these indigenous or expatriate, traditional or Euromodernist in nature and outlook. If rustic language generally performs these human services then, Language given its large geographical and human spread and its level of standardization and development has a larger capacity to meet these human linguistic needs. These functions of Language will be discussed later in this paper.

### **English Language in the Nigerian Situation**

The English Language is not indigenous to any of the tribal nationalities which make up the contemporary Nigerian nation state. Nigeria is reputed to have upwards of 395 full-fledged languages but none of these is English. Also many children born in cosmopolitan settings and especially the offspring of inter-tribal marriages, grow up with English as their first language. But even these children

cannot claim English as their mother tongue rather English serves as the language of mutual co-relationship and saves such homes from becoming towers of Babel.

English Language is indigenous only to a tribe in England. Historical linguistics has it that the advent of English language to Nigeria dates back to the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Usage of the language then was limited to coastal towns like Calabar, Benin, Opobo and Lagos. It is the spread of European commercial, administrative and missionary activities to the hinterland that compelled the colonists to introduce formal tutelage in English. The English Language became both the medium for and a subject of scholarship. This situation has not changed till today, and English has remained our unofficial lingua franca.

Many Nigerians, bristling with a deep sense of nationalism, have called for the replacement of English with an indigenous language or languages. These people have always argued that English is an alien language and that it is a legacy of colonial domination. They have also argued that it is racist and discriminatory towards black Africans as evidenced by the plethora of disparaging compound words like Black Maria, black sheep, blackleg, blackmail, black Sabbath etc. that exist in English Language. All these arguments have their intrinsic relevance, but they have not succeeded in reducing the status of English both in the world of scholarship and in society as a whole.

Research has shown that children learn better when they are taught in their

mother tongue or in urban settings in the language of the immediate community in which the school is located. When the child is taught in his own indigenous language, he learns faster and retains knowledge better. He therefore grows up as a well-adjusted and socialized human being.

Grant (1972:145) summed up the relevance of mother tongue to child training and scholarship when she argues that:

*The child's ideas and thoughts are in his own language and will be long after he is speaking quite good English. If the child is to be encouraged to think for himself...he must first be helped to think in his own language...The culture of his people is found in the child's own language, and the language should be taught at its purest and best so the child can appreciate the literature, stories, songs and poems of his country and perhaps, add his own contribution to them when he grows older.*

All these are very salutary arguments, which should have helped in the formulation of a dynamic language policy for Nigeria. This however, has not been, and is the case. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (1987) rather encourages multilingualism and has failed to sponsor the development of any indigenous language to the level of replacing English language. In the school system, English is still the dominant medium of instructions. In the wider society, English is the instrument for governance, administration of justice and

the collation and dissemination of news and information. English is being touted as the instrument of national cohesion and therefore, development. One cannot deny this with the kind of xenophobia which is manifest in relations across the tribal enclave with in Nigeria. Thus, the English Language has been and will for a long time ahead remain our dominant means of communication and scholarship.

### **The Functions of English in the School**

The English Language like any other developed language, performs certain functions which enable the teacher to discharge his duties and the schooling child to benefit from formal instruction hence, the concept of scholarship involves the corpus of knowledge, the teacher and the taught with the medium as a connecting chain. In the world of scholarship, therefore, language is indispensable as a means of learning. As Barnes (1972:113) argued:

*Language is so deeply embedded in many subjects of the ...curriculum that it is sometimes difficult to separate learning the concepts and processes of a subject from learning to use language to represent and use these concepts and processes.*

As already noted, English is the dominant medium of instruction delivery in Nigeria and this is both reinforced and enhanced by the fact that it is also a core subject in the curriculum. It is true that for most Nigerians, scholarship is synonymous with the acquisition and competent usage of English Language. In the school system, many teachers

discharge their duties almost entirely in English language. At Lower levels of education, many teachers flog children for using their mother tongue with in the classroom. Some unscrupulous teachers even extort money from pupils who speak vernacular. In the wider society, many parents tend to be more fond of their children who are fluent in English than those who exhibit admirable competence in the mother tongue. These traits may be negative but they are still prevalent in our society. Specifically, language performs seven functions as outlined by Halliday (1973). These are discussed here in relation to English.

In normal life, English like any other language, performs an instrumental function for its user. The language affords the child the means to get things done through his usage of language and communally acceptable kinesics. At early stages of a child's development, the child cannot use language and this inability often leads to linguistic frustration, which is expressed through intermittent crying. These handicaps and the attendant frustration are eliminated as the child gradually acquires and uses language.

The English Language also performs a regulatory function for the child. This function enables the child to control both his own actions and those of his fellows through adherence to what is considered to conform to norms, values and beliefs, which obtain in the society. It is through this function of English Language that the child is able to internalize instruction delivered by parents, siblings and teachers. Thus, through the

use of language, the child comes to an understanding of what is expected of him and learns to devise ways of coming to terms with social reality.

For the school-going child, like the adult, English Language performs an interactional function in that it enables him to establish and sustain relationship with chosen people amongst those whom he encounters as he gets on in life. The child's ability to acquire and use different registers and per-related parlance will determine the success of his social interactions and help mould his character.

The next function of English Language which is the personal functional; is closely related to the interactional function of language. This personal function of language enables the child to express himself and through this establish and assert his individuality. It is the personal use of language that helps to bring out the individual psychology of the child and also determine how well he gets on in life.

The English Language performs a heuristic function for the child. It is this function of language that affords the child the means for exploring and understanding the physical world in which he lives and to acquire knowledge not only of physical phenomena but also of abstractions. It is through the heuristic function of language that the child acquires proper concept formation and to ask questions as means of acquiring wisdom.

English Language performs a representational function for the child in that it affords him the means to express his personal emotions, conditions and

propositions. This may be the apex of language acquisition skills as the child, through this function, can now use language to affect the consciousness of people around him.

One important function of English Language for the students of English and Literary Studies is the imaginative function. This function enables the child to nurture and use his gift of imagination to understand the world interpret human motives and actions, and to think in divergent and creative ways. The very creative child can explore the benefits of this function of language so as to use it with much novelty and aesthetic appeal. This can form the buds for a flowering of imaginative literature.

The Educational Implications of Using English Language

### **The Educational Implications of Using English Language in Scholarship**

The Educational and linguistic implications of the continued currency of English Language in our society and its prominence as both a medium of instruction and as a core subject are legion. Some of these implications are obvious as they derive from sentiments, which have their roots in assertions of nationalism. Other implications, which are academic, are discussed in the following section.

Language, generally, is the generator of healthy social relationships. If a child acquires negative language habits and is consistent exposed to faulty language, he is bound to experience problems in his attempts to relate even with peers and other siblings. It is imperative therefore, that the

child grows up in a linguistic environment which derives from and reflects the norms and values, which govern social conduct in his time and locale.

The school going child may not always have good language experiences outside the classroom. He may also never have had opportunities of encountering novelty of expression, which could enrich his vocabulary and broaden his mental horizon. Thus it is the responsibility of the school and the teachers to provide the child with such experiences a may be lacking in the world outside the classroom. This argument is buttressed by Barnes, Briton and Rosen (1971:126) when they opined that:

*School could be a place where pupils enrich their resources, because it would be there that they encounter new verbal strategies and were inspired to more ambitious uses of language than those provided outside.*

A school that is staffed with teachers who are themselves poor users of English cannot meet these expectations. This is the problem which a curious language scholar is very likely to be confronted with in many schools and even in tertiary institutions. Many teachers who are responsible for the up bringing of children use language that is far below the competence level expected of students in general English classes. Directly or remotely, such a trend inculcates bad language habits in children and because children see teachers as role models, these negative habits easily become steadfast and fossilized.

It follows therefore, that efforts have to be made to expose children to good language early in and throughout life. Bernstein (1971) contended that quite often, educational failure is the consequence of language failure. In contemporary times, the one easily available index for the much touted fall in the standard of education is the inability of schooling children to express themselves in simple, correct English. Yearly, results in secondary and intermediate level examinations in English language as a subject have been annoyingly poor. These demand redoubled efforts by the language teacher, and also by the enterprising students.

Enhanced competence in language usage is a matter of attitude. Students who are interested in attaining high level of competence and performance in English Language should explore and benefit from resources outside the teacher and the classroom.

The school-going child needs some form of tutelage that will enable him use language to accomplish much in life. This is why instruction should be aimed at enabling him to attain high levels of communicative competence in the language of instruction rather than acquire bookish knowledge or rules, patterns and structures. At junior levels of education, children should as much as feasible be exposed to experiences and situations which reflect or give rise to the corpus of knowledge to be learnt. Also, lesson planning should progress from the known to the unknown and from the concrete to the abstract. This will enhance concept

formation and enable the child to relate what is studied at school with trends and processed in the wider society. This, indeed, is the basis for functional literacy. Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation and language scholarship is often hampered by negative traits as code-switching communicative excellence. To overcome the problems, children need to strive to become co-ordinate bio-lingual so that they can be competent users of both their mother tongue and English Language. The co-ordinate bi-lingual is more likely to perform better in tests and examinations than the compound or subordinate bio-lingual.

In the context of College of Education, students should begin to realize that the courses in language and communication skills might be their terminal formal encounter with English Language both as a subject in the curriculum and as a service medium for instructional delivery systems.

Efforts should therefore, be made to derive optimal benefit from the courses so that students will graduate into independence and competent users of English Language both for scholarship and for general communication.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this paper has been on what roles English Language can play in effective scholarship. The issues raised have been treated from the perspective of the schooling child because he is the target beneficiary of the teaching – learning process in both formal and informal contexts. It is hoped that this exposition

will enhance students' understanding of the purposive uses to which English Language as a tool for scholarship can be put and through this, strive to attain communicative excellence in the use of the language in both spoken and written forms.

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