
Learner Motivation: A Means of Achieving Proficiency Among Nigerian Learners of English

By

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Abstract

English is taught and learnt in Nigerian schools as a second language. The place of the language in the country and the international community makes proficiency in it imperative if one is to be successful in whatever area of human endeavour one finds oneself in. Despite this obvious fact, the standard of spoken and written English in the country has fallen. Educators, parents, teachers, bemoan this ugly situation. The efforts made by teachers of English to arrest the situation have so far proved abortive since examination bodies like WAEC, NEC, JAMB, etc have continued to lament the poor performance of candidates. To this end, this paper sets to highlight the place of learner motivation in the learning process. Motivation is very essential in language learning, and the earlier teachers begin to motivate learners in ESL classroom the better and more efficient the learning will be.

In the Nigerian education sector, English is taught as a school subject as well as used as the medium of instruction for all school subjects at nearly all levels of education. It is also the most reliable medium of communication in the country. Failure in the language is, therefore, failure in the school system. For decades now, the standard of both spoken and written English has continued to fall. This is evident on the poor performance of the candidates for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations for many years standing. Nowadays, the level of grammatical errors committed by graduates and even post graduate students of our universities, including some that studied English is outrageous. Presently, many fresh products of our school system can hardly speak any better than those that stopped their education carrier after standard six. Parents and guardians, educators, teachers are not comfortable with this ugly trend, especially as English is a language not to be toyed with. In spite of the

tremendous efforts made so far to improve the quality of English taught and learnt in our schools, things have not improved.

Meanwhile, studies in educational psychology have made it clear that learning is facilitated when students are motivated to learn. This implies that teachers should endeavour to facilitate learning by making it interesting to students. They should aim at creating favourable learning atmosphere for their students so that learning will become interesting, enriching, and rewarding. A situation where students perceive school experiences as unpleasant does not encourage learning. Many of them see the classroom as a place where they are meant to study, understand, and even memorize irrelevant material for the purposes of examination. Such bores them. The students see themselves as being at the verge of facing the shame that goes with failing examination or repeating a class and this brings about anxiety which does not augur well for learning. Classroom experiences should be stimulating to the learner so that he will be eager to partake of it. Once this is done, learners will learn unconsciously as if it were a play. This is the ideal situation for language acquisition and should be extended to second language learning.

English as a Second Language (ESL)

English is spoken as a first, second, or foreign language by different peoples of the globe.

It is spoken as a first language in Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Speakers of English as a first language live in countries where English is spoken as the sole official language. Consequently, they conduct most of their communications in the language and speak it with a high level of proficiency. Speakers of English as a first language are mainly monolinguals and monocultural. English is spoken as a second language in Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, South Africa, and all the countries in Africa and Asia colonized by Britain. And in France, India, China, etc, it is spoken as a foreign language. Speakers of English as a second and foreign language learn it when they must have acquired their first language. Quoting JESEL, Afolayan states that:

ESL is usually the sequentially second language of a bilingual person... ESL is a language in which a bi- or multilingual person conducts his everyday activities while sharing this role with another language in which the person has greater linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge.... (123)

So, we learn a second language when our first language- a language we have intuitive knowledge, is grossly inadequate for use in official settings like education, mass media, law courts, sports, and when they cannot serve as a lingua franca between speakers of diverse languages as is the case in Nigeria. A second language is most often not the native language of any of the groups to which it is a second language, but it plays a role similar to it since it is the language which the speaker uses to express his thought outside his local environment. In the words of Azikiwe:

But for us in Africa, the learning of a second language is needed since it is a common medium of communication and also of instruction. For instance, in Nigeria, the mother tongue is perfectly adequate for normal day to day communication within the communities, while knowledge of a second language is clearly desirable, perhaps even a necessity for full participation in the community of nations of the twenty-first century. (20)

Since the Nigerian child needs proficiency in English so as to be able to express their day to day experiences, there is a need for the teacher to help them achieve it.

The Need for Proficiency in the English Language

Judging by the geographical spread of the English language in the world today, it deserves to be called a world language. It is the most widely spoken language the world over. Verghese (1) observes that “one person out of four on earth can be reached through English”. It is the language in which the world knowledge is enshrined and in the realization of this, many people strive to attain proficiency in it. English is one of the international languages used in the deliberations of the UN, AU, EU and other international organizations. It is the language of NATO command. Innovations in the field of science and technology are accessible through the English language as a good number of the world’s scientific literature is written in it. English is also the language of world trade, international sports, aviation, world media, and a host of others. In Nigeria and many other countries in Africa and Asia which were under the British colonial rule, English has continued to serve a unifying factor, cementing the numerous small nations that comprise the countries. It is the reason for the existence of those nations because multilingualism and multiculturalism are their outstanding attributes. Nigeria, for instance, has over four hundred languages confined to ethnic borders. So, English is the only language that links the cultural North to the cultural South of the country. It is and is likely to remain the language of education in many of them. In confirmation of this, India’s Education Commission as cited by Verghese maintains that:

For a successful completion of the first degree course, a student should possess an adequate command of English, be able to express himself with reasonable ease and felicity, understand lectures in it, and avail himself of its literature. Therefore adequate emphasis will have to be laid on its study as a language right from the school stage. English should be the most useful ‘library language’ in higher education and the most significant window on the world. (2)

He goes on to note that what applies to India applies to other former colonies of Britain in Africa and Asia. The medium of instruction at all levels of education in Nigeria is essentially English. The Nigeria’s National Policy on Education affirms that “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English”. Competence in the English language is a prerequisite for sound

education in the country. This is because students answer essay questions during examinations, answer questions in the classroom, interact in one way or the other with their teachers and fellow students from other tribes, and those in institutions of higher learning carry out researches and write the reports, present seminars, and even defend their projects before some panels. All these call for proficiency in the English language if they are to graduate successfully. In fact, the hallmark of an educated Nigerian is the person's ability to express himself in clear and correct English.

Also in Nigeria, English is the official language used in the law courts, administration, commerce and industry, media, sports, etc. In fact, it is the language of most official communication within and outside the country. It is becoming increasingly difficult for people who lack proficiency in the language to partake of both national and international assignments. Consequently, many people learn it for different reasons. Commenting on this, Bamgbose quoted in Sofenwa observes that:

Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language. This is now the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much of internal and external communication. (118).

Since the language occupies this important position in the country, and evidence abounds that the quality of spoken and written English has fallen in the country, there is an urgent need to arrest this situation.

Problems Facing the Teaching and Learning of ESL

There are many problems facing the teaching and learning of ESL in Nigerian schools. Some of them are:

(a) Dearth of Qualified Teachers: Many English language teachers in Nigerian schools are not trained to teach English as a Second Language. Worst still, some of them did not study English at all, but found themselves teaching it because a trained teacher of English has not been posted to their school. These groups of teachers teach their students without taking cognizance of the fact that the students are learning the target language against the background of their native language. A qualified ESL teacher should carry out a contrastive analysis these two languages to identify their areas of similarity and differences. It is when this is done that the teacher comes to terms with the discrepancies in the languages which pose problems to the learner and direct more energy to teaching those ones. This makes learning a lot easier.

Mother Tongue Interference

One of the major problems that confront second language learners is mother tongue interference. Whenever we attempt to learn another language after we have acquired our first language, we unconsciously transfer some features of our first

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language to the second language. This phenomenon is called inter language interference. Interference occurs at all the levels of linguistic analysis, though it is more prominent in speech. It influences second language learning either positively or negatively. Interference influences it positively when it acts as a facilitator. When some language items in the first language are similar to some in the target language, they do not create problems to the learner because they easily substitute them. On the other hand, those items which are completely different from the items of their first language create problem for them. No wonder Nigerian learners of English find it difficult to articulate the dental fricatives, central vowels, and others.

Use of Ineffective Methods

The method which the language teacher employs in teaching his students goes a long way to determine the amount of learning that will take place. It is an invaluable weapon the teacher has to promote the proficiency of his students. Wilkins as quoted by Baldeh defines method as “a set of materials organized into a fixed pedagogic sequence, requiring the use of classroom activities which embody a certain view of language learning” (53). An ESL teacher who knows the content area very well is likely to fail as a teacher if his method does not ginger the students to learn. It has been established that students learn faster if they are interested in the topic. A good teacher of English should, therefore, seek and adopt a method that will facilitate learning in his students.

Lack of Facilities

Many schools in Nigeria, especially, public schools suffer from lack of essential facilities like good classroom blocks, textbooks, appropriate teaching aids and equipment, media facilities, black or white boards, good reading desks, etc. In other words, the learning condition in many schools is not conducive. A little comfort will improve learning in schools because learners learn easily when the environment offers some comfort.

Lack of Motivation

Every normal human child has a great motivation towards learning his language because he needs to satisfy basic wants. Akindele and Adegbite (141) observe that “a child who learns English as a primary means of communication has a greater motivation for learning than a child who learns it as a secondary means”. Nigerian learners of English learn it when they have become proficient in their first language. ESL teachers should endeavour to motivate the learners so that they can achieve proficiency in the target language since according to Baldeh, “there have been extravagant claims that the only thing that matters in language learning is motivation”.

Motivation

We carry out different activities because something moves us to do so. When something energizes or drives us to do something, we are motivated to do that. Motivation has been defined by Woolfolk (2007:372) as “an internal state that arouses,

~~*The Intuition*~~ directs, and maintains behavior. Citing Wiliam and Burden, Yucel (2003:1) wrote that "motivation can be construed as a state of cognitive and emotional arousal which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and or physical effort in other to attain a previously set goal/or goals." Educational psychologists see motivation as a critical aspect of teaching and learning. It is the lifeline for learners, especially in language classroom. It provides the energy that makes learners want to emabark on learning; to what extent they will last in the activity; the degree of hard work needed, as well as how attached they will be to the task. To some extent, success in language learning depends on motivation in the elarning contexts. The cleverest learner who is unmotivated will neither see the need for sustained hard work nor gain useful knowledge from the learning process. But highly motivated learners are eager to learn and are easily absorbed in the learning. They gain useful knowledge of the language even if their language aptitude is low. Infact, researches (Kuhl, 1987; Alison, 1993; Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Dornyei, 2001; Dornyei, 2005; Chamot, 2008) have established a direct relation between motivation and language achievement.

Theories of Motivation

One of the earliest approaches to motivation in the learning process was the social psychological framework of Gadner and Lambert (1972) in which learner motivation in language learning is treated as being born of the desire to integrate with the speakers of the target language or finding a better job in future. But in line with Crookes and Sdhmidt, Yucel (2003:9) stated that "for the classroom teacher, being motivated does not necessarily mean that learners have a desire to integrate with the speakers of the target language, but that they are engaged in learning tasks and maintaining this engagement for a long time". Motivation is therefore of more value in the classroom than any where else since it sustains learners" interest. Moreover, researches (Covington, 1999; Noels, Clement and Pelletier. 1999; Noels. 2001; Benson, 2001) have shown that other variables like satisfying personal ambitions, passing examinations, obtaining certificates, enjoying the learning process, pleasing the teacher/parents, gift items, can as well motivate learners. The discovery of the inadequacy of the social psychological approach led to the formulation of these perspectives on motivation:

The Behavioural Perspective

According to this view, learners' motivation is determined by the use of rewards and punishments. A reward is an attractive object or event that is supplied as a consequence of a desirable behaviour while a punishment decreases the probability of a response. Punishments are not always effective in controlling behaviour, but rewards and incentives are always very efficient in the classroom. In the words of Santrock (2004:415) "incentives are positive or negative stimuli or events that can motivate a student's behaviour". Incentives add excitement to the class and direct the attention of the students to exhibit desirable behaviours only. When certain behaviours are consistently reinforced in a subject, the subject may develop habits to act in certain

The Humanistic Perspective: This view on motivation emphasizes students' desire for personal growth, self-determination and ultimately, self-actualization. In line with this view, Woolfolk (2007:374) stated that "to motivate means to encourage people's resources, their sense of competence, self-esteem, autonomy and self-actualization". The humanistic view is closely related to Abraham Maslow's concept of hierarchy of needs in which he suggests that humans have a range of needs: physiological, safety, love and belongingness, esteem and self-actualization. Learners must satisfy lower needs like the need for food and love before they seek to develop their full potentials as human beings.

The Cognitive Perspective: This view emphasizes thinking since people are considered active and curious, and always searching for information to solve personal problems. In other words, learners have the internal motivation to control their environment and master their world. The cognitive view stresses the need for goal setting and working towards achieving the goal. Learners make efforts to succeed and do not rely on external influence to achieve success as obtainable in the behavioural perspective.

The Social Perspective: Students' motivation is guided by the need to stay connected with the people around them. So, they maintain warm, personal relationships which motivate them to have attachments and positive relationships with peers, teachers and parents. It has been established that such interpersonal relationships in learning environments promote positive academic attitudes and makes learners more satisfied with school.

Expectancy-Value Theories: These theories view motivation as a product of two forces: the expectation of reaching a goal and the value of the goal. For instance, a learner who studies hard to acquire a proficiency certificate in English will also consider the value of the certificate to him or her. According to these theories, when the learner adds the expectation of achieving a goal to the value of that goal he is motivated to pursue it.

Motivation in English Language Classroom

Nigerian learners of English enter the classroom at the age native speakers have mastered the basic rules of their language. Native speakers are born into and grow in their language for it is only through it that they can have their basic needs satisfied. So they are naturally motivated to learn their language. The ESL learner is a linguistic adult who is already competent in his primary language and needs to be motivated as well. Motivation is an essential element in the language classroom. Cohen and Dornyei (2002:172) stated that "motivation is often seen as the key learner variable because without it, nothing much happens. Indeed, most other learner variables presuppose the existence of at least some degree of motivation". Language learning is more tasking than

the learning of other subjects as learners are required to perform in the language they are ~~The learning~~ striving to gain mastery of. By so doing they subject themselves to criticisms on the correctness or otherwise of their usages which naturally affects their psychological disposition in the classroom. The fear of being evaluated negatively and being laughed at by their classmates who are more proficient in the English language lead to lack of confidence and make them unwilling to use the language. Fear triggers off anxiety and once it sets in, the affective filter goes up and stops whatever the learner reads from reaching the Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

To facilitate learning in language classroom, learner motivation must be high. Learners must cultivate the right attitude to the target language if they will succeed. The classroom should not be grim. Language learners should be made to get satisfaction from the learning experience right in the classroom, not just from the prospect of using the language. When they find the learning task before them rewarding, interesting, engaging and meaningful, they are highly motivated to work on it. It therefore behooves the L2 teacher to make his students' learning experience exciting and memorable. He should design language learning tasks with adequate motivational strategies effectively put in place if he wants to produce successful users of the target language.

Conclusion

ESL learners need to be highly proficient in the language to record any meaningful progress in their areas of endeavour. Yet, failure has continued to trail English language usages as well as the school system in Nigeria. The government, educators and teachers have made several efforts to check the situation but nothing seems to have been done. Motivation is an essential ingredient in language learning. It is the life line of language learning. Learners should not only be guided by the anticipation of acquiring a certificate or the prospect of speaking the language well at the end of the learning experience, but also should be motivated by classroom activities in the course of the learning. In most cases, language learners are exposed to the target language through the teacher and the textbook. In other words, much is expected of the teacher since he is the one who determines whether his students will be successful in the learning process or not. An experienced language teacher strives to make his students have the opinion that his classes are vivid, exciting, engaging, and should not be missed. When ESL learners are well motivated they bring out the best in them and the language is learnt with ease.

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