

THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: FUNCTIONS AND PROBLEMS.

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Abstract

Many students in tertiary institutions find it difficult to express themselves fluently in English language talk less of passing it as a subject taught in class where they are needed to express themselves in writing. These are caused by some factors. This paper examined the teaching of English language in Nigerian tertiary institutions: functions and problems. After stating the many numerous functions of the English language in Nigeria, the problems militating against the effective teaching of the language were stated to include: employment of unqualified and inexperienced teachers, delay in updating lecturers knowledge and qualifications, poor remuneration, poor implementation of the school curriculum, inadequate facilities and resources. Recommendations made include that lecturers should not delay in updating their knowledge and qualifications, employment should be given to only qualified teachers of English language, the government should see to the improvement of the poor salary structure of the lecturers, school management should ensure lecturers sponsorship to conferences, the requirement of the normal class size in the various tertiary institutions should be adhered to strictly.

The success of any student in the tertiary institution depends largely on high level of competence in English language as it is the language of education. This is affirmed by Bamgbose (1971), when he stated that the Nigerian child's access to the cultural and scientific knowledge of the world is largely through English language. If a student is to have high performance in other subjects, it becomes necessary for him to master English (both implicitly and explicitly). Going by the role English language plays in the developmental strides of the nation, it is therefore necessary to consider and proffer solutions to those problems stated to include: employment of unqualified and inexperienced teachers, delay in updating lecturers knowledge and qualifications, poor remuneration, poor implementation of the school curriculum, inadequate facilities and resources militating against it. This paper takes a look at the teaching of English language in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: Functions and Problems.

The Promotion of English Language in Nigeria

The existence of English in Nigeria and its wide acceptance and spread are caused by several factors. They include:

Multilingual / Linguistic Heterogeneous Nigerian Society

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse region with different ethnic groups. There are many indigenous languages and most of these languages are not mutually intelligible. With these diverse languages, the only language that is easily understood by all is the English language. This is one of the driving forces of the wide spread and promotion of English language in Nigeria.

Language Policy

This is another factor that has led to the promotion of English language in Nigeria. The colonial administration introduced the language policy and it was adopted by Nigeria after gaining her political independence. The colonial administration made sure that their language policies in all its colonies were in favour of English language. This is still practiced today as seen in our educational policy where English still remains the major language of instruction in schools, language of performance evaluation, a requirement for securing admission into institutions of higher learning as well as gaining employment. All these have facilitated its spread and promotion in Nigeria.

English has been the only official and generally acceptable language in Nigeria. It is the only language that has spread aggressively breaking every ethnic and language barriers. There is hardly anywhere in Nigeria that you will not find someone who can speak English, at least the “pidgin” or “broken” English.

The status of English as the official language in Nigeria contributes to the promotion of the language in Nigeria. English as an official language has been allocated functions as the language of the media, education, politics and legal drafting etc. The 1946 constitution of the colonial administration first made English language the official language of Nigeria and also the language of colonial administration. When Nigeria eventually gained independence in 1960, English was still adopted as the official language for the country. The 1979 constitution went further to approve the use of English language at the National and State Houses of Assembly; alongside any of the three major Nigerian languages: Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba or language of the state in question only and only when adequate arrangements have been made for their use.

Attitude of the Society

Arising from the roles the English language plays in virtually all the sectors of the country, the general attitude to English language in Nigeria is favourable to its growth and promotion. In Nigeria today, literacy is attributed to the ability to speak and write English Language. Anybody who cannot read and write is an illiterate person, hence, everybody tries to speak it. In some homes, parents do not allow their children or wards speak their indigenous languages, it is English language everywhere. Most private and government schools do not allow students to speak any other language apart from the English language. Even the teachers are prohibited from speaking other languages. The penalty ranges from fine to suspension or hard labour. All these attitudes have led to the promotion of the English language.

State of Development of the Indigenous Languages

Another factor that adds to the promotion of English languages in Nigeria is the fact that most Nigerian languages have not developed. Most Nigerian languages lack standard orthography, modernization of the numeration system, creation of meta-language (this makes it possible for a language to function as a language of study and instruction) and production of literary materials in these languages. English as a language has usurped all these functions thus its fast spread and development.

Prestige Associated With the Language

Those who are proficient in the use of English are respected and are accorded a place in the society. Good command of English is seen in our society today as a sign of good education and anyone who does not speak the language is not respected as he is regarded as uneducated. It is true that anyone who speaks good English is considered sophisticated and according to Oriola and Olapade (2000), this may result in an upward review of his status. The values and prestige attached to the ability to speak English, make many people to crave for learning and speaking English and this has led to its wide spread all over Nigeria.

Justification for the Teaching of English Language

The reasons for the teaching of English language today in tertiary institutions are numerous. The overall goal of the study of English usage today says Galvan (1977), is to develop a sense of appropriateness in the language. Appropriateness varies with situations, that is, speaker, audience, purpose and content of the message. Teachers and students should be concerned with getting the best possible response in the widest variety of communication events. The best prepared teacher for this type of situation will be one who understands the language deeply, reads widely, observes accurately and is an active participant in the communication process (Galvan, 1977).

English language, opined Oderinde (1979), is taught in Nigeria so that learners could use it both as second language and as an international language. He propounded two major abilities which the learners needed. They are the skills of listening and speaking. The listening skill is that which equips the learner with the ability to understand without difficulty, spoken English which satisfies the requirement of international and internal intelligibility. Speaking skill on the other hand enables the learner possess the ability to express himself clearly in flexible and fluent conversational English, the features of which are internationally and internally accepted.

McPherson (1977), proffered another skill needed by the learner of English language. This is the skill of effective writing. According to her, “writing skill forces form on what has been amorphous, makes precise and permanent experience that which has been vague and fleeting.” Added to these skills of listening, speaking and writing is the reading skill. It cannot be discounted if English language is to be effectively taught in schools. The fourth skill which is reading was put forward by Britton (1977), when he stated that “The reading skill enables learners have the ability to process the word on the page and take away a meaning in the mind.”

In the teaching of English language, giving written exercise and assignments as well as marking them play very important role in the learner’s lives. This is referred to as assessment of what the learner has acquired. Petty and Petty (1977) recognized this when they opined that “... students should be helped to examine their competency in all of communication activities in order to discover those skills and abilities that need development, followed by opportunities to practice them in meaningful ways”. The need for assessment and feedback in reinforcing the learning of English language is very crucial to effectiveness as the students stand to benefit educationally from their tutor’s response to what they have produced. Through feedback, students can identify their strength and weaknesses and as such improve where weak.

Functions of the English Language in Nigeria

The English language has been made to perform several functions in Nigeria such as:

The Language of Education

English has been widely used in the propagation of education in Nigeria and this is used in all facets of education. It seems to be the most important function of English in our society. At all the levels of education in Nigeria, the English language is the most widely used language of instruction in schools. This has been given backing by the Nigerian Education Policy (1977) which makes it mandatory for the English language to be the most frequently used language of instruction in our schools especially at the secondary and the tertiary levels. The indigenous languages are often used mostly at the primary level of education, though rarely as every school considers the English language as the only suitable language of teaching and learning.

Apart from being the language of educational instruction in Nigerian schools, it is also the language of educational evaluation in our schools. It is applicable at all levels of educational institutions in Nigeria.

Language of the Government

The English language is the language of government in Nigeria because all the transactions in government offices are carried out in the English language. Minutes, official correspondence, memoranda, circulars, instructions and directives are given out in the English language. Proceedings of meetings are written and conducted in English in government offices. Most government protocol and propaganda are carried out in English.

English language has dominated the political arena in Nigeria as the language of political campaigns and propaganda. This is so because Nigerian society is linguistically diverse and for a politician to communicate adequately with a diverse population with different shades of language, English is the only language because it is the language that can be understood by a large population. Debates in the states and the National Assemblies are conducted in English language.

The Language of Commerce and Industry

Transactions in commerce and industry are mostly carried out in the English language and Pidgin English as well as in some local languages. English is the only language used in the board rooms during meetings by members of staff. Inter and intra business transactions are done in the English language. Transaction in the banking halls are carried out in English. Trading in the stock exchange market is also performed in the English language. Although in small settlements like towns and villages where the settlers are likely to be from the same ethnic group and language, business transactions would likely be carried out in the local languages and pidgin or broken English.

The Language of International Communication

When Nigerians want to engage in international business or transaction of any kind with persons beyond Nigerian geographical boundary, English becomes a readily available language to be used either in the country or outside the country. Announcements at the airports are done in English because foreigners are likely to be among the passengers. It is only in few instances that indigenous language like Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and at times pidgin are used in passing information across.

The Language of the Media

The English language is the most extensively used language in the Nigerian media. When we refer to the Nigeria media, we mean both the print and the electronic media. Although there are some papers published in the indigenous languages, majority of the daily news papers (like The Guardian, the Times, The Vanguard, The Punch, The sun, This day, The independent etc) are published in English. The weekly magazines like, This Week Magazine, the News Watch Magazine etc. also do their publications in English.

The electronic media which comprises the private, the state and the federal owned television and radio stations broadcast most of their news in English. While English dominates news casting in the private and the federal broadcasting stations, some state owned studios have been trying to promote the use of their local languages and the use of Pidgin English as well.

The Language of Law and Legal Drafting

Almost all the books in law and legal drafting are written in English. All the volumes of the Nigerian constitution from inception till date are written in English. The 1979 constitution is written in English. All the law books used in all the courts in Nigeria like the Supreme Court, the court of Appeal, the High courts, the Magistrate courts and their proceedings are conducted in English and sparsely mixed with Latin and Greek vocabularies. Although in some customary courts, their proceedings are conducted in both English and the local languages such as the Sharia court done in both Hausa and Arabic languages, there is no statute or law book of any of the government establishments, corporations or institutions that is written in any of the Nigerian languages for now. Every decree, bill, edict, bye laws etc. is written in English language. Even the proceedings and teachings in our legal education are done strictly in English language. In our country, oaths are sworn to in English language as well as affidavit in support of claims and lost documents.

The Language of Science and Technology

Just like in any other areas, the language of science and technology in Nigeria is English. In information and technology, the language used is usually English. Since science and technology have their bases in foreign countries, their terminologies have to be transferred to us in the language of the country of origin.

The Language of Social Interactions

In most social gatherings in Nigeria, English is used as means of social interactions. For instance, in traditional marriage, naming ceremony, house opening ceremony, parties and child dedication, the language mostly used is English, and at times, code switched or code – mixed with the indigenous languages.

Problems Militating Against the Effective Teaching of English Language in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions.

The problems are as follow:

Employment of Unqualified and Inexperienced Teachers - Employment these days are based on connection and not on competence. This has really had adverse effect on the teaching of English language in our schools. Less qualified person can be given a teaching job while leaving the more qualified person since he or she was not recommended by a top government official. It is the students that usually suffer. Halliday (1974), was critical about the unqualified language teacher whom he described as being ignorant of the essential factors and thus pose serious problem to the effective teaching of the subject in schools, and cautious against underscoring the importance of qualified teachers.

Delay in Updating Lecturers Knowledge and Qualifications – Some lecturers after some years of employment do not see the need to update their qualifications or knowledge. This could pose serious problems to the effective teaching of the subject as such lecturers may possess only outdated facts or information that has been overtaken by time. The English as a subject is dynamic and not static, hence, the teacher should continually update his knowledge of the subject to be effective.

Poor Remuneration - This is one factor known to affect the effective teaching of English language. Most of the teachers are dissatisfied with the salary earned at the end of the month. From these meager salaries, they make researches and sponsor themselves to conferences which ordinarily ought to be sponsored by the school management. No wonder there is a delay in knowledge and qualifications update.

The poor financial conditions of teachers have also lead to series of strike actions which have truncated the school calendar severally. This state of affair result to learners having very little of the subject.

Inadequate Facilities and Resources - Most tertiary institutions lack facilities such as buildings, furniture, offices, laboratories, well equipped libraries, microphones, plants etc. which are needed for the effective teaching of the subject. It is observed that the available ones are not maintained because of lack of maintenance culture.

Poor Implementation of the School Curriculum - Some lecturers do not ensure proper implementation of the school curriculum. They are unable to cover their scheme before the end of the semester. They believe in allowing the students to do most of the work themselves by giving them series of assignments without teaching them even after doing the assignments. The students are therefore left in the dark because they are not told whether what they have done is right or wrong. Lecturers are supposed to give the students the course outline at the beginning of the semester so that they will be abreast with what they should know. Leaving the students without knowledge of this does not ensure proper implementation of the curriculum.

Large Class Size - The size of a class will definitely have effect which could be negative or positive on the effective teaching of the language. The class size in most tertiary institutions is a mockery of what should be obtained. In some institutions, students are more than 200 in a class. A small class promotes active participation in the learning process. On the other hand, large class is disadvantageous because the individual will be buried in the crowd. Some of the problems associated with large class include the problem of arranging the learners to have intensive conduct with the language, coping with noise and managing limited resources. Personalized attention is totally absent in large class situations. It also puts teacher under pressure by the sheer number of scripts waiting to be marked.

Time Allotted to English Teaching - Another problem that militates against the effective teaching of English language is time. The writer have observed that time allotted to the teaching of the subject in our institutions is not enough to achieve the desired effectiveness and standard in the subject. The teaching of the subject inadvertently suffers due to inadequate time allotted to it by the school time table committee.

Learners Background - The learners background could hinder or enhance the effective teaching of the subject. Children from educated parents whose home, environment and social status reflect good quality interaction in English, which is also the language of the school, will definitely perform better than children from homes whose parent are not educated. Hence, Britton (1977), saw of the home as “a language workshop in which the child serves an eager apprenticeship”.

The idea that children from educated parents and high social status do better in English at school, was also confirmed by Ezewu (1983), when he noted that:

Children from families with a high social economic status usually speak good English before going to school. This is because their parents who already have good educational background provides sound models of English at home from which the children learn.

These category of students in line with Ezewu’s view will not be a hindrance to the effective teaching of the subject because though they possess their mother tongues, they have been introduced to the use of English at a very tender age. Thus at school, the teaching of the subject is not entirely strange to them. On the other hand, children from illiterate parents feel alien to the use of English because of their lack of initial exposure and experience in the language within the family unit. Such children’s speech or organs have been built upon the sounds and features that are available in their mother tongue. This act as stumbling block in the learner’s language relations as there is interference in the learning of a new language (English). This really poses serious problem and slows down learning.

Conclusion

There are bound to be problems in the teaching of English language in tertiary institutions. To solve these problems, all hands (teachers, learners, government, parents) must therefore be on deck so as to produce graduates who have been groomed and refined (whether spoken or written) and can represent both within and outside the country.

Recommendations

To ensure the effective teaching of the English language in our schools, the following recommendations are made:

1. Employment should be given to only qualified teachers of English language in view of the highly technical nature of the job of language teaching.
2. English lecturers should not delay in updating their knowledge and qualifications considering the dynamic nature of the subject.
3. The government should respond to the poor salary structure of the lecturers to avoid the continuous strike actions and truncation of the school calendar.

4. Management should assist lecturers by sponsoring them to conferences. This will no doubt, help them to improve on themselves rapidly as they engage in researches.
5. For adequate implementation of the school curriculum, lecturers should ensure that students get the course outline at the beginning of the semester rather than leaving them in the dark. Also, lecturers should ensure they teach and complete their schemes instead of allowing the students to do the learning themselves.
6. The requirement of the normal class size should be strictly adhered to by school management so as to promote active participation in the learning process. For instance, in Polytechnics, National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) requirement for a normal class size is 60 students in a class.
7. Government and school management should ensure that facilities needed for the smooth and effective teaching of the subject are provided. Already existing ones should be properly maintained and managed.
8. English lecturers should be committed to their discipline. It should be done with passion and they should begin to appreciate their position and calling.
9. Parents on their part, should ensure initial exposure and experience of the English language within the family unit so as to ensure better performance at school.

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