

## **The Challenges of Effective Teaching and Learning of English in Multilingual Settings**

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### **Abstract**

*The indispensability of effective teaching and learning of English as second language (ESL) in a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-dialectal society like Nigeria is unquestionable. This is because it is the only language that cuts across all ethnic boundaries and the official medium of instruction through which learners learn other subjects in the school curriculum. It is therefore, the only potent means of gaining access into the world of knowledge such as science, ICT, technology, arts, mass media and commerce in Nigeria. In spite of this, the Nigerian learners' heterogeneous linguistic background continues to be a major obstacle to English proficiency in the country. Consequently, the learners' spoken and written English are fraught with different forms of interference errors, ranging from phonological, syntactic, morphological, semantic and lexical interference. These situations have led to miscommunication, lack of clarity in conversations, low interaction between the teachers and students, as well as, poor comprehension among learners. This study therefore, adopts a documentary approach to examine how the Nigeria's multilingual nature affects effective learning of English in her educational developmental strides. It recommends ways which ESL learners can make the teaching and learning of English very easier, effective and better. It therefore, behoves on the management of schools and teachers of English language to do adopt the recommendations in this study so their ESL learners are not excluded from the "Cream of the World's" scholarship programme.*

**Keywords:** English Language, ESL learners, Multilingual Setting, Interference Errors, School managers, ESL Teachers, Proficiency skills

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic, multilingual and multi-dialectal society. According to Dada (2006), "Nigeria happens to be one of 22 most linguistically diverse countries in the world. The 15<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Ethnologies' report reveals that there are about 510 living languages coexisting with one another in Nigeria." Its diverse cultural groups include Hausa in the north, Yoruba in the South-West and the Igbo in South-east. There are other ethnic groups like the Jukun, Igala, Nupe, Ijaw, Tiv, Ibibio, Ebirra, Mumuye, Fulani, Fulfulde, Bachama, Bura, Kutep. Lunguda, Yanda, Michika, Birom, Kakanda, Yargen, Calabar, Mbula, Margi. Kaka, Kanuri, Efik, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Idoma, Benin, Baruba, Iggede etc. These are languages spoken by the approximate number of ethnic groups in the country but are mutually unintelligible to one another. Danladi (2013), lend credence to this fact that, "The multiplicity of languages in Nigeria is so egregious that languages of people living within a 25 kilometres radius are massively different and incomprehensible to one another" Thus, the need for the use of a language that cut across these ethnic groups becomes absolutely necessary. It is in view of this that the National Policy on Education adopts English as a compulsory subject being taught from lower to higher level of education. According to Udosen (2007), "English language therefore, plays a pivotal role in their

lives, they have to learn English for concept development, personality and intellectual development, formation of positive attitudes to education, effective exploration of their environment and a very healthy socialization process.” Agwu and Chukwu (2019) corroborated that:

*The features of multilingualism in Nigeria manifest in the form of diversity of languages and language groups, the absence of common indigenous language, diverse ethnic and cultural groups, presence of heterogeneous and homogenous language groups and more commitment and loyalty of people to their individual languages. This situation therefore created a fertile ground for the position which English occupies in Nigeria since independence.*

Though English language has been adopted as an official language many decades ago in Nigeria, teaching and learning it in a multilingual setting is fraught with lot of issues. Fatoro (2015) observes that the chief reasons as “The fact that every Nigeria is endowed with his/her mother tongue but compelled to learn a second language.” She further opines that Nigeria is a nation that has witnessed a cross-current of linguistic activities due to her inherent multilingual nature...” Onyenweaku et al (2017:3) observed that:

*The existence of multiplicity of languages in the country without an indigenous lingual-franca makes it expedient that national language that enjoys mutual linguistic intelligibility across the country be urgently developed to enhance mutual interaction and easy communication but citizens of diverse sociolinguistic background.*

Obviously, the Nigerian nation’s multi-lingual nature makes the use of English a means of intercultural and interlingual communication. Previous studies have also revealed the linguistic concern of teaching and learning English in a multilingual class. However, many of those researchers did not look at the situation from the nation’s educational and professional opportunities for the learners. It is against this back drop that this study aims at looking the challenges faced by the ESL teachers and learners in a multilingual context. It explores how factors like: lack of equipment, explosion of students’ population without corresponding teachers, students’ laissez-faire attitude and interference phenomenon affect the effective teaching and learning of English as a second language, as well as, the nation’s educational developmental strides.

### **The Status of English as ESL in Nigeria**

Second language refers to the language a person learns on top of his first natural language. Generally, it comes at a later stage in the process of social formation. According to Ogbuehi (2003), “an assessment of the historical, socio-cultural and geo-political character of Nigeria as a nation shows that English is used as a second language”. She further defines the ESL as

*...an alternative to the mother tongue in a country with multiplicity of indigenous languages. English serves in administration, education, law, mass media, international commerce, and diplomacy and in all other official situations. The indigenous languages operate alongside English, especially in the private sector.*

The existence of many apparently unrelated languages in Nigeria gives English language the status of second language (L2) to many people while it is the first language (L1) to a few others. It plays a significant role in education, politics, government, administration, the judiciary, economic and legislation, social and cultural interaction. It provides Nigeria with a lingua-franca which the Longman Dictionary of the Contemporary English defines as “language used by many (by people) whose main languages are different.” This shows how important English is in Nigeria as ESL compared to its ethnic languages. It is not just a language for official activities but also a

unifying language of interactions as a result of the country's multilingual nature. It is the medium of acquiring formal education which enhances the social and economic status of individuals and consequently that of the nation.

### **Aim and Objectives of Teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria Schools**

Learning English language as second language in Nigerian schools is for a specific purpose. English language plays conspicuous roles in the Nigerian education system as such whenever education is mentioned, the English language comes to the fore. It is thus indispensable and invaluable measuring the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of Nigerian schools without English. The main aim and objectives of teaching English language in Nigerian schools are as follows:

- to further improve the students' level of proficiency and competence in English language usage.
- to increase the students' ability to master and manipulate the various language skills at a higher level
- to expose the students to the principle and practice of written communication to enable them master skills in the use of English in various professions.
- to enable students cope effectively in the use English language in their profession, as well as interact with others in a work place.

The National Policy on Education supports this fact by maintaining 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. Today, no student can gain admission into any of Nigerian higher institution without a credit pass in WAEC, NECO, NABTEB in English. English is also compulsory for undergraduates who undertake GSS 101 (Use of English 1) and GSS 102 (Use of English 11) in the Universities while Use of English courses undertaken in Nigerian Colleges of Education and the Polytechnics. To be regarded as an educated person in recent Nigeria, according to Banjo (1996), some level of proficiency in English is required and he further justifies his claim:

*If an educated person is defined in Nigeria as one who has at least secondary education, then no Nigerian who speaks no English can be regarded as being educated. The reason for this should be obvious; English is a key subject and the medium of instruction before the end of the primary level.*

Thus, credits in all the subjects but a poor performance in English in the West African School Certificate Examination for instance, renders the WAEC result redundant because one cannot use to apply for admission into any institution in Nigeria. In the higher institutions, a student who fails the use of English courses can never graduate unless he re-registers and pass the examination. The greatest asset of the English language is that it is a good instrument of thought and creativity and students are expected to be very proficient or skilled in both the spoken and written forms. Poor knowledge of the English language is thus a clear indication that one may perform poorly in other subjects or courses because examinations in these subjects or courses are expected to be written in English. The incessant desire by the Nigerian government for effective teaching of the language in our schools is rooted on the belief that western education especially a knowledge of the English language would equip them (Youths) with the techniques and skills essential for improvement of personal status in the emergent economic and social structure.

This invariably shows that the aim and objectives of teaching and learning of English in Nigerian schools are practically to improve on the students' oral and written communication skills and consequently attain communicative competence which Alo (2003), defines as "...the knowledge of linguistic forms, such as phonology, lexis, grammar and usage." Communicative competence linguistically refers to user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, semantic, as well as, social knowledge about how and when to use utterances

appropriately in a language. This is also the speaker's knowledge both of the grammatical rules for appropriate use in social contexts. The need for Nigerian students to acquire competence in English is unquantifiable as technology and equipment are becoming more sophisticated and computerized today.

### **Issues in Multilingual Setting**

The Teaching and learning of English as Second Language (TESL) in a multilingual setting is a daunting task. This is due to the fact that persons raised and educated in such a diverse linguistic setting like Nigeria is faced with peculiarities and distinctions of languages. According to Rasheed (2017:150)

*Multilingual classrooms are considered as the biggest challenge for the English language teachers and students... the teacher and the students face a number of problems due to different local languages spoken by student in classrooms. Multilingual classrooms are not easy to handle and sometimes it becomes very difficult for the English teachers to cope with the challenges of teaching in a multilingual setting.*

No doubt teaching English in a multilingual setting is the biggest challenge today, because to Fatiloro (2015), "learners of English as a second language find it difficult to learn because of the sudden break from a familiar language to a non-familiar one." Despite the fact that English language has received a wide currency in Nigeria, teaching it in a multilingual class room is another thing entirely as it is faced with myriads of obstacles ranging from the students' weak linguistic background, overpopulation of students, anxiety among learners, lack of essential teaching facilities, students' laissez-faire attitude, as well as interlingua and intralingua errors, the rigidity in the teacher's compliance with the curriculum, inadequate teachers' training, faulty instructional materials and wrong instructional techniques among others. These constitute a great source of worry to the researchers in this study. According to Adakonye and Danjuma (2009) "...students have developed positive attitude towards the use of L1 and Pidgin in their daily conversations than the Standard English probably because of the fear of committing mistakes which is the biggest hindrance in learning English language." In an empirical survey of Higher National Diploma students by Elegba (2013), she observes that:

*Most polytechnic students rarely not master the rules of grammar, phonology, lexis, semantics or registers of English language nor acquire the socio-linguistic competence necessary for them to comprehend and answer questions on reading passages, write good essays, and communicate effectively and function maximally in the society.*

Obayan et al (1989), in their studies also traced the ESL Learners' problem right from childhood. In their views: "the first problem which faces the Nigerian child learning English for the first time at primary school level is how to adjust the mouth and ears to the new language which is very different from most Nigerian languages." The fact is learning a language is fostered when a learner begins with spoken variety as this variety carries all the emotional and cultural nuances of the language and makes creativity in written language easier. For it is imperative to note that a rich stimulating language environment during the early years and beyond is essential to the development of verbal and intellectual skills necessary for language learning in a multilingual classroom. Sadly, most Nigerian students are not exposed to the standard varieties and grammatical structures at early learning stage. Consequently, their spoken and written English is prone to multiple grammatical and interlingual errors.

Mother Tongue (MT) interference issue is another major issue in the teaching of English in a multilingual setting. This is also known as transfer errors when a learner's native language(L1) influences their second language (L2). It is also the deviation from the norms of either language which occurs in a speech of bilinguals as a result of their familiarity with two languages. For instance, in interlingual errors; Musa very hardworking instead of Musa is very

hard working. Baba car Instead of Baba's car. e.tc. This occurs at all linguistic levels such as syntactic (grammatical), phonological (mispronunciation), semantic or morphological, etc. The Phonological interference is noticed at the levels of segmental and supra-segmental features of spoken language-sound, syllable, stress and intonation. In the articulation of individual sounds words are frequently, mispronounced. For instance, the fricative sounds /f/, /v/, as well as, the plosive sound /k/ are produced in strange ways and the word five or fifty is pronounced as /p ip/, fifty or /pipti/ or /pipiti/ etc. Gaksu et al (2017), lend credence to this when they assert that:

*Most Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba native speaking students ...have difficulty in the production of English sounds that are absent in the three Nigerian languages. For instance, Hausa speakers of English insert a vowel sound within a consonant cluster, the Igbo and Yoruba speakers substitute English consonant sounds that are absent in Igbo and Yoruba languages. In most cases it has been found out that the pronunciation of English sounds by Nigerians is perceived with great mother tongue interference.*

In the case of stress, the students or learners insert vowels in the midst of consonant clusters as a result of the absence of consonant clusters in his/her L1 sound system. In most cases most students or learners interchange the English consonants and vowels with what is available in the mother tongue resulting to wrong pronunciation in English. Thus, English words like 'school' /sk:ul/ that is pronounced with "sk" followed by "oo" sound is pronounced as /sukulu/ while bread as /buredi/ and sugar as /suga/. Also, in the case of the distinction between the short and the long vowels such as / i / and / i: / /u:/ and /u/ are not differentiated when pronouncing words that contain them as in **bit, beat, sit, seat, pull, pool** etc. These are long and short vowels respectively that should have long and short duration in their articulation. In some regions /r/ sound is substituted with /l/ sound and vice versa. So, it is not uncommon to hear speakers from such regions pronounce 'rawyer' **instead of** lawyer, 'rove' **instead of** love, 'laphael' **instead of** Raphael, 'rod' **instead of** lord etc. It is pertinent to note that the fatality of mother-tongue interference or interlingual errors phenomenon on English is that intelligibility of the target language is completely reduced.

Again, in some cases, the ESL learners or students impose the lexicon-semantic structures of their MT on English. In this case, they attach meaning to certain words which usually mean different things entirely in Standard British English. Consequently, most ESL learners lose focus in the second language and all the varieties the students come in contact with sometimes coalesce in their spoken and written task, producing a home-grown variety called "Nigerian English". For example, to seek permission, most learners or students would say; "I am coming" **in place of** "just a moment" or "I would be back shortly." They often say "please borrow me your English text book" **in place of** lend me your English text book. The word 'wonderful', according to "Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English" means 'great, 'amazing or good' but most Nigerian students use the same word as a common exclamation for any event that is 'good', 'bad' or 'admirable.' In fact, it is even used for achievement or even failure.

Similarly, at the syntactic and lexical level, words are usually arranged in sentences following the syntactic and lexical pattern of indigenous Nigerian language of the speakers. Consequently, the learners commit errors of direct transliteration which Adakonye and Baba (2009), record as:

1. I will follow you to Jos **instead of** I want to accompany you to Jos.
2. He is a big man **instead of** he is an affluent man/ a rich man.
3. If you enter my mind **instead of** If you guess what I have in mind
4. The food is sweet **instead of** the food is delicious.
5. I can hear smell of the rotten egg **instead of** To perceive a smell.
6. The boys are longer throat **instead of** The boys are gluttons.
7. She has a bad mouth **instead of** She is insulting.
8. My mind is there **instead of** I am attentive.

9. Don't put your mouth in this matter **instead of** don't interfere.
10. My head is aching me **instead of** my head is aching.
11. Please turn the soup **instead of** Please stir the soup.
12. The matter is paining me **instead of** the matter worries me.
13. The governor has stolen our money **instead of** embezzled our money.
14. I want drink mineral **instead of** take soft drink.
15. My mind tells me that he will come **instead of** have the feelings that he will come
18. The woman's head is not correct **instead of** the woman is insane.
19. allow me to hear the news **instead of** listened to the news.

From the foregoing, it is very clear that the introduction of foreign elements into a more highly structured domain of language such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax has an adverse effect on the intelligibility of the second language learners as such could smack off an unprecedented welter in teaching and learning of English language in multilingual class room. Obviously, one cannot be content with learners or students' miscommunication; however, clear it is, if it carries depressing messages. Therefore, the Nigerian ESL learners need to make serious effort to master the conventional use of the grammatical signals of the target language else his/her communication in English will continue to remain vague.

Furthermore, the Nigerian learners'/students' nonchalant/laissez-faire attitude towards English language today is another issue in the teaching and learning in multilingual setting. According to Kennan (2009:2), most students learn grammar at school level for the purpose of passing the tests and examinations. Szynalski (2014:29), also corroborates that, "all English learners are excited at the idea of being able to communicate in English fluently. However, they usually do not care about the intricacies in the learning process..." In fact, most Nigerian students erroneously believe that English is not their father's language, so, there is no need to be committed in the learning. Consequently, they develop apathy towards speaking or writing in correct English and resort to the substandard and no matter what the teacher do or say the learners would continue speak pidgin or the substandard varieties variety which affects their performance.

### **Recommendations**

To overcome the obstacles facing the teaching and learning of English in a multilingual setting like Nigeria, the following steps and action must be taken:

- There should be special workshop and training based on English language pedagogy for the polytechnic ESL teachers. This will enable them make language learning process in a multilingual classroom easier, effective and fruitful.
- There should be hard work and dedication on the part of English teachers by taking into consideration the heterogeneous linguistic background of the learners and employ the appropriate teaching theories and practices that are flexible and leverage learners' diverse linguistic background.
- ESL teachers need to adopt a multilingual approach which allows learner of English to access their full linguistic repertoire for the purposes of accelerating their English proficiency.
- ESL teachers also need to be pedantic and ensure that learners' use of substandard variety/vernacular are prohibited.
- ESL teachers need to develop the habit of rewarding the effort of learners so as to motivate their struggle to acquire the English language skills.
- The school syllabus and curriculum must be well structured to avoid difficulty and ambiguous English language syllabus.
- Parents should be enlightened to play important role in the lives of their children with the need to arouse the interest of their children or wards by providing the necessary instructional materials and conducive learning environment for English at home.

- School management and stakeholders need to re-orientate the learners on the significance of learning English in their life to improve on their spoken and written English.
- Government and school management as a matter of priority should come up with a framework for national language policy that will enhance the provision of the basic instructional materials that fit a multilingual context, as well as, training and retraining of ESL teachers.

## Conclusion

Until the above recommendations in this study are taken seriously, many Nigerian ESL learners' 'English proficiency' will remain 'wishful thinking' thus putting them on the verge of being excluded from the Cream of the World's scholarship programme and the national technical development-oriented education. This implies that the Nigerian students' success in life largely depends on their English proficiency acquired through effective learning. Therefore, any ESL teacher who teaches in real L<sub>2</sub> situations and still insists on simple communication skill ability failed to acknowledge the predicament the Nigerian poor users of L<sub>2</sub> are exposed to in the future.

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