

AN EXAMINATION OF THORNY ISSUES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIAN POLYTECHNICS

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ABSTRACT

English language is one of Nigeria's potent means of gaining access into the world of scholarship such as science, technology, arts, literature, mass media, commerce, to mention but a few. In Nigeria, it is the medium of acquiring formal education which enhances the social and economic status of individuals and consequently, the nation. It has served and is still serving as the only language that cuts across all ethnic boundaries in Nigeria. In spite of all these the aim and objectives of including the GNS English in the polytechnic education have not been achieved judging from the present poor performance in the students' spoken and written English. It behoves on the Polytechnic teachers' of English language to do everything possible for their students to attain a high level of proficiency in both oral and written communication skills, so that they are not excluded from the cream of the world's scholarship. A lot of thorny issues have stood the way of qualitative teaching and learning. This paper therefore, examines some factors that affect the teaching and learning of English as a second language in the polytechnic system in Nigeria and recommends viable strategies to stem the tide.

Keywords: *English Language, Teaching, Polytechnics, Competency, Learning*

Introduction

The historical socio-cultural and geo-political character of Nigeria as a nation shows that English is used as a second language. English as a second Language (ESL) is a situation where users have their own indigenous languages but use English as a mandatory means of communication in official and public life. Like in the case of Nigeria, it is because of the existence of many apparently unrelated languages. Ogbuehi(2003:16) regards English language as a second language because it is:

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 language operate alongside English, especially in the private sector...

Nigerians acquire English language through formal education as a second language. They speak first language as L₁ (mother tongue) and second language L₂ (English). The English language as a second language occupies a pride of place in Nigerian educational system apart from being a distinctive subject in the curriculum. It is also the only conventionally accepted medium of instruction through which other subjects from primary school to all levels of tertiary institutions are taught. Indeed, no other subject serves such a dual purpose and this makes English language unique. For example, for entry into any tertiary institutions a credit, pass in English language in the SSCE, NABTEB, NECO, GCE is a pre-requisite and compulsory. Where candidates fail to make this grade, they are admitted into Pre-NCE, Pre-ND or remedial class where they spend one year to make the grade which qualifies them to proceed to the normal programme. Thus, the schools, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities remain the unrivalled agents of the teaching and learning of English language.

It is apparent that English language has assumed an excellent academic pedigree in the educational system in Nigeria that no indigenous language is in the position to rival it as a lingua-Franca in the near future. Achebe (1975:58), hammers on this point when he maintains that only one language is enjoying national currency in Nigeria and concludes that; "...today for good or ill, that language is English. Tomorrow, it may be something else, although, I very much doubt it." This functionally means English is more important for now, than any of the ethnic languages in Nigeria as it cuts across all the ethnic boundaries. Despite the special pride of place of English as a second language in the Nigerian educational system, the general performance of the Nigeria's students has been found to be poor. The students' spoken as well as written English are very prone to errors. Grammatical errors corrected by the stroke of red pen are often overwhelming. Apparently, this may be partly responsible for the poor academic performance and high level of unemployment in Nigeria. The World Bank Report reveals that poor mastery of English Language and lack of requisite technical skills is a serious challenge of Nigerian graduates. This is very disheartening and constitutes a great source of worry and headache to the teachers of English language as it stares them in the face. No doubt, the aim of establishing the polytechnic will be defeated if nothing is done to stem the tide. The researchers therefore, seek to examine some thorny issues in the qualitative teaching and learning of English as a second language in the Nigerian polytechnics.

THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE POLYTECHNIC EDUCATION

The teaching of English as a Second Language (ESL) in the Nigerian tertiary institutions is basically to help improve the students' oral and written communication skills since English is the only medium of communication through which all other courses are taught. It is also to attain a high level of communicative competence. The ESL learners in polytechnic learn English for Specific Purposes (ESP). This is an enterprise which involves training and practice. It is in view of this the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) included English Language and Literature in English as general Studies courses in the polytechnic curriculum. Communicative competence linguistically refers to user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology, semantics as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately in the language. This is also the speaker's knowledge both of the grammatical rules for appropriate use in social contexts. Alo (2003:3) affirms that it is "...the knowledge of linguistic forms, such as phonology, lexis, grammar and usage." Elegba (2012:4) lends credence to this as she asserts that; "... the need

to acquire competence in English as a second language is becoming highly necessary in the age of high technology when equipment are becoming more sophisticated and computerized..." But the question is, have these aims been achieved over the years in the teaching and learning of English language in Nigerian tertiary institutions? The fact remains that the aim and objectives of teaching and learning of English language in the Polytechnic system have not been achieved as a result of some thorny issues. Consequently, this study examines and explicates such thorny issues that are easily noticed in the qualitative teaching and learning of English as a second language in the Nigerian polytechnic system.

One of the thorny issues in the qualitative teaching and learning of English language is poor linguistic foundation of the students. The ESL learners in the Polytechnic have poor English language foundation right from their primary through secondary school education. An empirical survey by Elegba (2012:3) shows that:

Many polytechnic students lack proper foundation in English Language. They have neither learnt nor mastered the basic grammatical structures and their rules at the primary and secondary levels. This affect their knowledge of grammar, lexis, phonology, semantics, spellings and punctuation marks to the extent that some students do not know the symbols of some punctuations talk more of how or when to use them in writing.

The fact remains that most of these students are not exposed to the standard varieties and the basic grammatical structures at early learning stage. 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. A second problem is the great linguistic challenge of the school environment which is different from that at home. Consequently, all the varieties a student comes in contact with sometimes coalesce in his/her spoken and written task, producing a home-grown variety called "Nigerian English". For example, to seek permission most students would say; "I am coming" in place of "just a moment" or "I would be back shortly." Also, the word 'wonderful', according to "Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English" means 'great, 'amazing or good'. But most students use the same word as a common exclamation for any event that is 'good', 'bad' or 'admirable'. It is even used for achievement or even failure.

In most cases the Polytechnic ESL learners impose the Lexico-Syntactic structures of their indigenous languages on English as a result of ignorance of the rules of usage of English language. Below are some few cases of substandard usage by the ESL learners resulting to syntactic errors (The asterisks represent substandard usages):

- 1*. Don't put your mouth in to this matter.
Don't interfere in this matter.
- 2*. I will follow you to Jos.
I want to accompany you to Jos.
- 3*. He is a big man.
He is an/a affluent/rich man.
- 4*. Leave the chair at the door mouth.
Leave the chair by the door way.
- 5*. If you enter my mind
If you guess what I have in mind
- 6*. The food is sweet.
The food is delicious.

- 7* To hear smell.
To perceive a smell.
- 8*. He ate our money.
He embezzled public funds.
- 9* She is our first born in the family.
She is the eldest child in the family.
- 10* If you want to become somebody.
If you want to be successful.

Banjo (1989:3) defines this brand of English as a brand that is socially accepted in Nigeria and internationally intelligible. But Oji (1997:20) debunks this assertion and cautions that: “The strongest reason against the introduction of a Nigerian version of English in this country is that it will smack off unprecedented chaos in the teaching and learning of English language as a second language.” The introduction of foreign elements into the 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 because it could smack off an unprecedented welter in teaching and learning of English. Harmer (1985:43) in his review of other types of “English”, asserts that; “...we get unsuccessful learning where standard.” He further refers to non-native English as ‘orphans’ in search of their parents.

The fact is that the British standard variety of English has a pride of place in the Nigerian Polytechnic education which cannot be compromised with any non-native English because of its adverse effect on the Polytechnic education. As Banjo (1989:3) clearly states “...success at each level of Nigeria educational system depends largely on the competence in English.” This means that polytechnic students need to really work hard towards enhancing their grammatical competence since it is upon it that everything depends in their academic pursuits after their programme.

Presently, the current curriculum introduced by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for some departments in the polytechnic has exacerbated this situation. The students in some departments are deprived of taking English for the full duration of their programmes for no cogent reasons while some are to be taught in a semester what was meant for two semesters thereby making the curriculum cumbersome for students who have little or no background in English. The issue is, if students who take English throughout the duration of their programmes are still deficient in both spoken and written communication is this new curriculum then a welcome development for the polytechnic system? Hutchison and Waters (1987:18) incisive appraisal makes this point clear. According to them:

Language learning is not a matter of linguistic knowledge. The most fundamental problem of the second language learning is the mismatch between the learners’ conceptual/cognitive capacities and the learners’ linguistic level. In mother tongue learning they develop together. In second language they are grossly out of focus. The second language learner is someone who is conceptual and cognitively mature but linguistically an infant.

The thorny question, is one semester enough to make those deprived students proficient in the use of English as a second language? The answer is simply NO! It therefore behoves on NBTE as stakeholders of the polytechnic education to give a second look at the present curriculum, as it forms a toll-gate to the polytechnic students improving on their communication skills.

Furthermore, the student’s nonchalant attitude and ignorance is another thorny issue. Most polytechnic students erroneously believe that the major courses of their areas of specialty are more relevant than the elective courses. Consequently, they develop apathy towards ‘borrowed’ courses from other departments especially English. This negatively affects their interest in communication skills. As a result they develop poor reading habits and only a few of them bother to buy relevant available teaching materials or look up words and their meanings in dictionary thus poor vocabulary and diction. The apathy affects their competence in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In fact the attitude of polytechnic students has shown that they do not appreciate the significance of the English language and communication as a means of gaining access to their academic pursuit and the world of technology. Sometimes, these students make cynical comments like; “I am a technologist and not a student of English language.” This comment obviously reveals the students’ disaffection for English language and probably their English language teachers.

Although, some of these students have very good grades in their O’ level English, personal experience has revealed that they lack both tacit knowledge of the language and the ability to use it efficiently. The nonchalant attitude and erroneous belief of the polytechnic students must be changed if they are to benefit from the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

The nature of English is another thorny issue in the learning and teaching of English in the polytechnic. This is as a result of the idiosyncrasies of English. The idiosyncrasies of English pose a great threat to the teaching and learning of English as a second language. The ESL learners sometimes hardly know which is which in a given situation. This confusion is normally found in English words that have the same sounds but different spellings and meanings (Homophones).

Below are some few cases:

A	Aloud/Allowed	Aloud - (not silent) as in - He spoke aloud. Allowed - (permit) as in — He allowed me to slap him.
B	Court/Caught	Court – (a place for trying cases) as in - The magistrate is sitting in the court. Caught - (Past tense of catch) as in - We chased the thieves and caught one of them.
C	Write/Right	Write - (make letters with pen, etc.) as in - I will write a letter to you. Rite - (ceremony) as in - We performed the marriage rite. Right - (correct) as in - The answer is right.
D	Fare/Fair	Fare - (Money charged for a journey) as in - The driver asked for his fare. Fair - (Just) as in - It is not fair to condemn him for the crime he did not commit.

The seemingly inconsistent nature of rules in the formation of English plurals is another major area of confusion to the ESL learners. Generally, the ESL learners have the notion that all nouns that end with {s} are plurals. However, nouns like politics, linguistics, mathematics, dynamics, phonetics, news, mumps, etc. are plural in form but take a singular verb. There is also situation where these types of noun that end with {s} take a plural verb because they refer to one pair. For example: (i) The pants are too short.
 (ii) These scissors cut everything.

Again, the contrastive consonant and vowel systems of English are also aspects of English that create some difficulty to ESL learners in the polytechnic as they are not found in the mother tongue. Consequently, ESL learners interchange the English consonants and vowels with what is available in the mother tongue resulting to wrong pronunciation in English. The fatality of phonological interference phenomenon is that intelligibility is lost and sometimes these faulty pronunciations find their ways into the polytechnics ESL learners' writing process as reflected in the essay of so many students in the polytechnics.

These idiosyncrasies of English and inappropriate learning and application of rules have posed great challenges to the polytechnic ESL learners who therefore have to work harder towards grammatical competence. This also means that the polytechnic English teachers have to intensify their efforts towards the mastery of grammatical rules. Nonchalant attitude of the English language teachers is another thorny issue that engages the attention of the researchers. To hold a degree in English language is one thing but to teach it effectively is another. Most teachers of English language in the polytechnics do not encourage the students to master basic rules of grammar as they, themselves, do not apply the rules in communicating with their students outside the classroom situation. Consequently, the students get used to vague and ungrammatical expressions. Bright and McGregor (1970:237) emphasize the need for intelligibility and grammatical accuracy on the part of learners of English as a second language when they conclude that:

We cannot be content with communication, however, clear the plain sense, because it carries also such depressing messages to the reader about the writer's level of literacy. The learner has got to master the conventional use of the grammatical signals of the language.

This calls for hard work and dedication on the part of English teachers in teaching rules and principles of grammar in the polytechnic for the attainment of some appreciable measure of communicative competence among the polytechnic students. Timoye (1992:7) lends credence to this when she adds that; "Those who have taught in real L₂ situations and still insist on simple communication ability failed to acknowledge the ridicule poor user of L₂ grammar is exposed to.

Attitude of non-English lecturers and other members of staff is also one of the thorny issues. Most non-English language teachers in Polytechnics misconceive the teacher's made material like textbooks provided by the English language teachers as a means of extorting money from the students so as to increase the English teacher's earning power. Such people discourage their wards or children from buying those teacher-made materials especially prepared to deal with the students' identified grammatical problems. Some of them also see English language as a complete distraction which does not allow the students to concentrate on their areas of specialty. After all, these students are trained as technologists and are basically concerned with practical work and not necessarily with communicative skills. Against this backdrop, they ask embarrassing questions like; "if a student has met the admission requirement in English, why does he/she need to offer English again as a course? Why don't we allow these students to concentrate on their areas of specialty instead of bothering them with foreign language?"

The thorny issue is, is it true that a technologist only needs his hands in doing his job without communicating? The fact is, if what is said by the technologist does not correspond with what is meant, can work be done properly? This prevailing attitude of the non-English lecturers make teaching of English language in the polytechnic an arduous task as it does a lot of harm to the

concerted effort of the polytechnic English teachers and some hard working ESL learners. This situation is purely out of ignorance.

Conclusion

The millennium technological development which teachers of English envision for the polytechnic education through communication competence will continue to be a mirage if the thorny issues identified in the teaching/learning of English as a second language in this research are not properly handled, as failure in the main medium of education is an apparent indication of failure in the Polytechnic Educational system. Until the Polytechnic ESL learners attain a high level of proficiency in English, they are on the verge of being excluded from the world's scholarship and national technical development-oriented education. Afolayan (1984:34) makes this clear when he suggests that; *"For a development-oriented education to take place in Nigeria there should be the assignment of a new development-oriented role of English language within the educational programme of the nation."*

The plans for technical development-oriented education in the polytechnic through the main medium of communication have a great prospect of improvement. Thus, it is imperative for both the English language teachers and the ESL learners in the Polytechnic to gear their efforts towards the acquisition of a brand of English that will expedite successful transfer of knowledge in all spheres of life. Otherwise, the polytechnic students would receive a Diploma or Higher National Diploma certificate that has a stigma or being handicap in communication skills. Consequently, they cannot achieve the highest expectations in their respective fields. A generation of students who are mediocre could be dangerous as a vacuum would be created in the transfer of knowledge because of their lack of confidence and grammatical skills needed in the main medium of education.

Recommendations

Beside the few suggestions on the way forward after each thorny issue, above, as a matter of practical solution to the thorny issues in the teaching of English as a second language, the polytechnic English teachers need to be pedagogic in the teaching and learning of grammar. This is to build up the communicative competence of the students.

- ✓ Parents need to ensure that their children or wards go to schools where they can be given qualitative teaching and learning of English language in order to have a solid foundation in English language.
- ✓ The student must be given orientation on the need to be serious and improve on their spoken and written English through GNS English as it will make them develop the right attitude to this course.
- ✓ The NBTE need to critically look at some of the recent designed curriculum in GNS English and its adverse effect on the polytechnic students.
- ✓ The polytechnic teachers of English must be pedantic and be mindful of the language in their interaction with students whether outside or in the class in order to inculcate the habit of the correct usage of English Language.
- ✓ The polytechnic management should also emphasize on the importance of GNS English in the students' careers.

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