

PERTINENT ISSUES IN THE "USE OF ENGLISH" PROGRAMME IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Use of English as a service course is compulsory for all students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is traceable to the fact that lectures, tutorials and practical are carried out in English Language. Examinations are also written in English. Reading comprehension, summarising, note-taking and examination are some of the most difficult task for Nigerian students. This paper therefore examines the pertinent issues in the use of English programme and it's relevance to Nigerian education system.

Keywords: Reading comprehension, summarising, note-taking and examination

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural country. It is estimated that over 450 indigenous languages exist in the country (Jowitt, 1991; Akinjobi, 2004). The multiplicity of languages in Nigeria was compounded with the advent of the colonisers and the introduction and implantation of the English Language in the Nigerian environment. Though the exact date of the introduction of the English Language to the country is not known, it has been with us for about three centuries and a Nigerian variety has emerged. English is now regarded as a Nigerian language (Akindele & Adegbite, 2005). The English Language in Nigeria enjoys a prestigious status, having a high premium placed on it as the nation's lingua franca. It is the language of administration, trade, commerce, and industry, as well as international communication. Most importantly, English is the language of integration. It has been able to unify the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria, thereby enabling cross communication and co-existence. English is also the language of instruction in Nigerian schools as well as the language of science and technology.

Yates (1992) observes that of more notable importance is the increase in the international and technological function of the English Language as the dominant language of the cybercafé and the most used language in the Internet. Besides, it is an elitist language which promotes mobility and raises the status of speakers socially, politically and economically. English functions across the world as the language of power and of inclusion and exclusion in participation in global activities.

Babajide (2002) has pointed out that the fast developing technologies have literally broken down the boundary walls of nature and we now live in a world of globalized economy, academy, polity and information flow. In this setting, English is the medium of interaction between individuals and nations. According to him, 'for any nation particularly in the third world to be relevant and derive the maximum benefit from the opportunities that abound in every area of human need, for personal advancement and national development, English is a sine qua non. Babajide (2002) further said that up to date, the country is still faced with the dilemma of selecting an indigenous language that will foster socio-economic interaction among the diverse linguistic and cultural groups in the country and at the same time promote national unity. Till the dilemma is cleared, English will still remain the official language in all the official domains, including education, in Nigeria.

The Advent of English Language in Nigeria

The exact date that English language usage started in Nigeria is not certain. However, it is believed that the first intimate contact between the British and some ethnic groupings in Nigeria was in Southern Nigeria. This must have been at some period before the Atlantic slave trade. It is on records that as from 1553 English men paid frequent visits to the Nigerian shores, especially the ports of

Ancient Benin and old Calabar, and the type of communication which evolved between the English men and the Nigerians was a simplified kind of communication in English called Pidgin.

English has come a long way in Nigeria. The language came with colonialism in the mid-nineteenth century. Before English became a missionary potent tool of colonial interaction, the European missionaries had found it heritage necessary to converse with the natives, and to convert them from 'paganism' to Christianity. Thus, the need to have catechists, mass-servers, and other church officials who understood and spoke the language of the white man compelled the early missionaries to teach new converts the language of the new religion. Sylvester (2004). English has assumed a great importance and performs various functions in Nigeria. It has continued to serve as an official and second language in Nigeria. Besides the official language it plays in communication, it is also regarded as a 'Language of Unity' because more than any other language, it is more frequently used in inter-tribal and social communication. Omodiaugbe (1998).

The colonisers did not only introduce and implant the English language; they also brought along with it the introduction of formal education to Nigeria. Ogu (1992) records that the colonial administrators trained the natives as clerks, messengers, interpreters, etc. for administrative conveniences while the missionaries established schools to teach their converts to be able to read the Bible. Fagbulu (1982) points out that in 1842, De craft and his wife established a home school in Badagry not only for training converts to be able to read and write but also to read and understand the Bible. In all these, English was the language of instruction and has ever since continued to function as such in both public and private schools in Nigeria.

According to Lambo (1992), the history of teaching, learning and use of the English Language cannot be divorced from the history of education in Nigeria. As schools were established both by the colonial administrators and the missionaries, English was used as the language of instruction. However, it was with the proclamation of the 1882 Education Ordinance that English was officially declared the language of instruction in schools. This declaration raised the status of English. The status was even raised higher with the 1926 Education Ordinance which made certification in English.

Multilingual / Linguistic Heterogeneous Nigerian Society

Nigeria is a linguistically diverse region with different ethnic groupings. Different scholars put the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria at between 250 and 450. Most of these languages are not mutually intelligible. This is even worst in the South-South Nigeria where every kilometer is a different language that is why Pidgin English is more dominant in part of Nigeria than the other parts of Nigeria like the Yoruba, the Igbo and the Hausa language blocks. With these diverse languages the only language that is easily understood by all is the English language which is spoken in different variants like the broken English, Pidgin English and the Standard variant. This is one of the driving forces for the wide spread and promotion of English language in Nigeria. Nigeria has about 450 indigenous languages, as reflected in the words of and English in the country's first National Anthem: 'Though tribes and tongues may Nigeria differ / in brotherhood we stand'. Emenanjo (1990) says: Nigeria is a classical multi-lingual mosaic in which minority languages, which are very many in number, live cheek-by-jowl with major languages . . . Nigeria is at a micro-level, not only the melting pot of African socio-political and linguistic realities but also the meeting point of divergent but, paradoxically, convergent views on multilingualism, minority languages and language policy. So, in spite of the fact that English is foreign, it has become a language that has helped to weld together the many people that constitute Nigeria. Because of English, the Hausa speaker can communicate with his or her Yoruba compatriot, the Edo with the Ibo, the Tiv with the Fulani. Munzal Jibril (1989) gives the projected population of some of Nigeria's linguistic groups.

Nigerian Official Language

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. In 1946 constitution of colonial administration first made English language the official language of Nigeria and as the language of colonial administration. On regaining political 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 to their use. English as the official language is the language used by government functionaries in carrying out instructions and functions in government offices.

The Status of English in Nigeria

Among the different languages spoken in Nigeria, English as a language has carved a niche out for itself. It is a language of its own class that emerged out of a mammoth of other languages. English language did not come to Nigeria just on its own. Its incursion into Nigeria was caused by lots of factors like trading, slavery, colonization and missionary activities in Nigerian by the Europeans and this was done in phases. English language in Nigeria was imported from Britain and adequately modified from time to time through the process of adaptation since its incursion in Nigeria environment. Its dominance in government circle in the colonial times and particularly in the 1950's to the present is an uncontroversial fact. In fact, its dominance in recent times has reached an unbearable peak with the increasing impact of globalization in world economy and technology. In terms of English language aggressive expansion and spread, recently the British council in its English 2000 Project made some interesting and impressive statement about the extent in which the English language is used in the world today. It says that it is used in over 70 countries as an official or semi official language and it has important status in over 20 countries, including Nigeria., (the italics is mine). It is evident that one out of five of the world's population speak English to some level of competence and the demand for the other four fifths is increasing on a daily basis as it is the language of books, newspapers, airports and air traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising. It is true that over two third of the world's scientists read in English. Third quarter of the world's mail is written in English; while 80% of the world's electronically stored information is done in English. Of the estimated 40 million users of the internet, the majority of its users communicate in English, (Asoba, 2000).

Nigeria as a country has its own variety of English which differs from that of other countries. On investigation of the English language in Nigeria thus far, there is no doubt that there is Nigerian English. Adeniran (2005) as quoted from Adetugbo (1997) says that academic considerations of the status of Nigerian English (NE) have established the distinctiveness of this dialect of the language and taken perceptions of its existence beyond the realm of fiction. Bamgbose (1998) says that, the debate over whether NE exists has by now become a non-issue as features of instances of its spoken and written forms have been described and the descriptions published in outlets within and outside its territory. Ekpe (2007) writes extensively in the emerging evolutionary of world English and the varieties that have developed especially in Nigerian English, which he says English as a global language has developed many varieties (ranging from standard, non-standard, dialect, national, regional, Creole, hybrid, pidgin, rotten to broken).

“Use of English” Programme in Tertiary Institution in Nigeria

The role of English on our educational system cannot be overemphasised. This is because lectures, tutorials and practical are carried out in English. Examinations are also written in English. Reading comprehension, summarising, note-taking and examination are some of the most difficult task for Nigerian students. Their poor performance in both school and public examination is often attributed to their deficiencies in these skills. The above background justifies the inclusion of the use of English in the curriculum of Higher Education in Nigeria. Use of English as a service course has been made compulsory for all students in Nigerian tertiary Institutions. But because of the heterogeneous nature of the students taking the course, planning and teaching are often difficult. Students come from different language backgrounds and belong to different disciplines. \the student's language ability on admission also varies.

According to Bamgbose (1997), the main purpose of the use of English course is to make the students linguistically competent as University students. This requires that they should be able to:

1. Read academic texts

2. Make notes from lectures and books
3. Write essay
4. Write reports, minutes and letters
5. Make information accessible in speech and writing

This purpose strengthens the relevance and usefulness of the Use of English programme to all categories of students in Nigerian Universities or tertiary institutions. Universities will henceforth be used in this essay to include all tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This is because students admitted into tertiary institutions have all passed through the Ordinary Level English, their varied competencies notwithstanding.

Opara 1998 quoting the A.B.U, General English syllabus say that:

“The purpose of General English (Use of English) is to upgrade the student’s standard of English. General English is to act as a service course for all students, preparing them for the demands of studying in the language and for using it as a medium of instruction. To this end, the performance skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening form the core of the curriculum while study skills is an additional area designed to help students get the most out of their formal education. Grammar has been included solely as means to produce more effective writing: it is not ‘intended to produce authorities on rules governing the English Language.

Relevance of the use of English programme

The issue of relevance is of utmost importance in designing a course for any group of learners. Adult learners are more critical and would want to use the usefulness of any course they do in their activities. Relevance in this situation implies the specific language needs of students in tertiary institution. Education has to address the relevant problems of the learner. The use of English programme is unique. This is because the class consists of students with mixed abilities who in addition come from different backgrounds. Some may have attained sufficient proficiency in English on admission while others may not. Some students actually come into the university with very poor background in English. The use of English course should address the problems of these two extreme groups. The objectives of the Use of English programme derive solely from functionalistic considerations. The course does not set out to “produce authorities on rules governing English Language”. It is a service. It’s a fact, a tool or an instrument designed to enable students obtain optimal benefits from their various disciplines and to utilise to the fullest the extensive literature in their various fields of study. The utility of the use of English programme is not limited to self-improvement in academic performance but also extends to the enhancement of the important skills of communication which spills over to their chosen fields of study. It is designed to enable students increase their ability to communicate experiences, to articulate ideas and concepts, to interact meaningfully not only with the selected few in their chosen field of study but with people in general (Opara, 1990).

We have tried to establish the relevance of the Use of English programme in the curriculum designed for Nigerian Universities. Experts have confirmed that selection of content; teaching method and evaluation procedure quite often combine to make a course effective or ineffective.

CONCLUSION

English language has come to stay and compete favourably well with other languages in Nigeria. In a multilingual environment, it is the usefulness of a language that determines the status or importance of the language in the mist of other competing languages in the linguistics market place. English language has been adopted as a national language in Nigeria because it is the only language commonly used by everybody as a medium of communication. It is a language that has unified people of diverse cultures and languages. It is the language of politics, government, commerce, and education, instruction in schools, mass media, and law. It is the language of international and international interaction. It is the language of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic communication in Nigeria. The status of English language in Nigeria cannot be compared with that of any other language because of the various roles it plays in our society and it will remain so for a long till the time another language will be developed enough to challenge it. Moreover the mode of teaching should be in form of

programmed, self-instructional packages. This will enhance their opportunities of getting maximum benefits from the course and enable them to proceed with the reading demands of their various disciplines without frustration.

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