Journal of Modern European Languages and Literature (JMEL)

Vol. 5 January 2016 ISSN: 978-978-48450-4-5 (Online & Print)

The Challenges of Teaching English Language in Nigeria

Ifeyinwa Obiegbu Ph.D

Abstract

The teaching of English language in Nigeria can be a very daunting task. This paper examines some of the challenges the teacher faces in the classroom ranging from decline in reading culture, lack of adequate attention in the classrooms, cultural and psychological background of the learners, poor motivation of the teachers,lack of exposure to modern teaching methods and teachers inadequacy to teach effectively. Some suggestions are proposed to deal with the situation and they include: improvement in reading culture, the employment of more qualified English language teachers, the use of internet facilities and ICT, availability of adequate resources such as larger classrooms, public address systems, language laboratories and in-service training for teachers among others.

INTRODUCTION

English language in Nigeria is very essential. Its importance is such that a credit in the language including four other subjects at the western African school certificate offers one a space in the job market and is a prerequisite to vie for Nigeria elections. English is the major language of commerce, international relations, politics, science and technology. English is now the world's language and it is spoken by one in five of the world's population. It is the language of international commerce, popular culture, the internet and holds an unassailable position among world's major languages. With over four hundred ethnic languages in Nigeria, the need for a lingua Franca, the language that every citizen can be understood when spoken, has actually heightened the need for the English language. The English language is a prerequisite for admission to universities and is also compulsory for all first year students in the universities as specified by the National Universities Commission (NUC). It becomes very pertinent that University lecturers who are English experts should teach this all important language efficiently and effectively to produce a transparent change in the students. This paper therefore portends to articulate the challenges facing both the students and the lecturers in this context. The observation has been garnered for over twenty years of teaching the Use of English language at the National Metallurgical Training Institute, Onitsha, a research institute under the Federal Ministry of Mines

JMEL January 2016. All Rights Reserved.| http://www.jmel.com.ng |

and Steel Development. We have also interviewed lecturers engaged in similar functions in the tertiary institutions in Anambra State.The analysis examines the challenges facing the learners and teachers and concludes with recommendations.

Challenges facing the learners

A. **Foundational Problems:**

Generally, there are interferences facing the learners of English language in Nigeria. Mother tongue interference plays a primary role. In Anambra State for instance, where the general means of communication is Igbo language, one discovers that the local language is a hindrance to the easy learning of the English language. Standard British English is scarcely the norm. Habit is resistant to change. It is a very serious challenge to students to unlearn their wrong habits and imbibe that which the teacher is striving to impart. This notion is what Corder (119) calls the; in-built-syllabus' which goes hand in hand with the idea that learners will not learn what they are not ready to learn. He goes on to give a psycho-linguistics constraint on learning, suggesting that learners are hard-wired in such a way that they will learn linguistic terms in an internally determined order as opposed to one determined externally by a syllabus writer or teacher.

b. **Decline in Reading Culture**

Comprehension is at the centre of reading. Collins and Check (64) describe reading as the process that requires the use of complex thought processes to interprete printed symbols as meaningful units and comprehend them as a thought unit in order to understand a printed message. According to Rubin (20) "reading is a total integrative process that starts with the reader and includes the affective, perceptual and cognitive domains. Okebukola (60) affirms that through reading, humans have the tools to transmit knowledge to each succeeding generation. It allows one to listen to the wisdom and people of the ages. This is emphasized by many different religious traditions. The Apostle Paul admonished timothy, "study the show yourself approved unto God" (1st Timothy 12:157) Islam holds acquisition of knowledge (literacy reading, etc) in high esteem. The Holy Qur'an reveals

that the first communication (injunction) between Allah and Prophet Muhammed was knowledge –based, - Igraa -meaning "read" or recite" (Qur'an 96-1-5)

Douglas (20) asserts that every child must become fully competent in reading to succeed in school and discharge responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic society. Reading is the foundation of much enjoyment in life. Unfortunately, the new wave of information technology has gripped the younger generation in a most tenacious and fascinating manner. These young ones would rather browse all day or night than exert their energy on reading. Browsing on the internet actually proves more exciting and alluring than reading. The result is that they are exposed more to listening, which is only an aspect of language learning. Thus, we have students who are able to speak well but fail woefully when faced with the challenge of writing. This affects not only their performance in the Use of English as a course but other courses including those directly relevant to their discipline. The inability of organised thoughts and presentations are evident in the students' performance. Teachers of English know that proficiency in the language is acquired through voracious reading of quality books, novels, magazines and newspapers.

Reading acquaints one with correct spellings and punctuations, makes room for the reader to pause and ponder, allows for check-ups of unfamiliar expressions and noting these things down. Through the printed words, one can differentiate between homophones and homonyms. Also, reading literary works and novels written by native speakers of the language present it (the language) within its cultural context. According to Hammer (24). "Most adults can learn a language without studying it provided they are in the right contact with it".

We are in total agreement with him. This is because experience has shown that the best way of learning a language is to be exposed to it in a natural context. This is what reading good English does to the learner; it provides the massive raw materials which is then polished in the classroom.

JMEL January 2016. All Rights Reserved.| http://www.jmel.com.ng |

Preference for the electronic media is therefore a challenge to the young learner of English language since it robs him of precious hours that could be gainfully employed in reading. Children with poor reading skills in English language will definitely receive poor grades, get easily distracted and frustrated, have behaviour problems, seem to dislike school, and often fail to develop to their full potentials. Good reading habit helps to develop a steady and constructive mind and the learning of English language is made much easier.

C. Lack of Adequate Attention

As a compulsory first year course, the Use of English language classrooms are generally over-populated. It is common to have up to eight hundred students in the Use of English classroom. Some of these students may never get a sitting space inside the classroom throughout the course duration. In such a large class, it is a near-impossibility to attend individually to students while teaching is going on. Language teaching requires thorough oral and written exercises. The teacher may share the students into smaller groups of twenty or thirty for purposes of class work, but this does not offer student's individual attention. Furthermore, when written assignments are given, it is a herculean task to mark all of them efficiently. If this feat is achieved, it becomes much more difficult to call each student or group to explain where they went wrong. Unfortunately the teaching of English language demands such attention.

Challenges facing the Lecturers

A **Teachers Inadequacy to Teach Effectively.**

Most English language teachers have problems teaching the language at the tertiary institutions. Among the areas of difficulties by teachers in the teaching of English is the teaching of Concord-Agreement of subject and verb. Teachers hardly teach this area. Conversely, students find it difficult to understand this aspect of English grammar. Again, most teachers do not teach ways or approaches to tackling Comprehension passages to the students. They do not go beyond reading the passages in class and answering the questions that follow.

JMEL January 2016. All Rights Reserved.| http://www.jmel.com.ng |

Professor Ayo Banjo in a foreword written to David Williams (99) "English Language Teaching: An Integrated Approach" stresses the importance of approaching the problem of proficiency in English from the lower level of educational system. In the forward he states that:

Given the understandable importance of English language at all levels of the education system, it is important to ensure returns which are commensurate with the vast amount of time and resources spent on the teaching of the subject. It is generally agreed that the problems lie with the foundations at the primary levels, and a great deal of energy has been expended in recent times on various forms of remedial programmes, even up to the university level.

B. Difficulty of the English Language

The teaching of English as a course poses many challenges to the language teachers. English is a second language (L2) in Nigeria and has its own features or characteristics which makes its learning and teaching very uneasy. Second language is a technical representation of the functional position of that language rather than its position in sequential order of acquisition (Onuigbo & Eyisi (79).

The problems include interference which comes as a result of language contact or Mother Tongue interference. This problem is made very clear in phonology, vocabulary, syntax and semantics. This is one of the reasons why students who do not have English language as a major course tend to develop lukewarm attitude towards it.

C. Lack of Textbooks

There are not enough textbooks to be used in the teaching of English language. Where the textbooks are available, they are out-date. Most lecturers depend on lecture notes to impart knowledge. The students' lecture notes are full of spellings and grammatical errors which are indicative of the poor language background of the students. Ayodele (84).

JMEL January 2016. All Rights Reserved.| http://www.jmel.com.ng |

D. Lack of Basic Teaching Needs

Our Institutions lack basic teaching needs like large classrooms to accommodate the great number of students who do Use of English as a basic GS course in the Universities. In situations where these large classrooms exist, there may not be microphones to help the teachers to reach out to the teeming population of students. What happens is that only the few people who are in the front seat benefit from what the teacher is saying. The rest just gist with friends till the lecture is over. In most cases, the number of students that stand by the windows to the classroom far out number the students who are inside the classroom. The end result is that the objectives of teaching the use of English to first year students is not achieved. Again, there are no language laboratories in most Universities. The time also allotted to the teaching of the Use of English is hardly enough for the language teacher and the objectives of the lessons are far from being achieved.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

In view of the above findings, the following are discernible facts to be considered and checked. The Use of English classrooms is not adequate for all first year students learning English language in the Universities. Government should increase the efforts of infrastructural development in the Universities by building bigger halls to accommodate students for such courses. Also, teaching helps like loud speakers should be made available to the Use of English classrooms to enable learning become more effective. The students should be empowered to be responsible for their own learning and the teachers should be empowered also to reflect on practice, discover what learners need to be able to develop and try out more innovative approaches to teaching.

Though the teaching of English language has got its challenges to the language teacher because of mother tongue interference, there should be in-service trainings to encourage the teachers of English. There are current theories of language teaching that are still alien to the Nigerian teachers of English. The Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT) is an example. The CLT emphasizes the use of language by a learner in a range of contexts and for a range of purposes, such as reading, writing, speaking and listening

through active learner involvement in a wide range of activities, tasks and strategies to communicat- Carter and Numan (219) Incidentally, the CLT has existed for about thirty years now, yet many English teachers are not aware of it.

The effects of electronics teaching especially the use of computers in the teaching-learning process cannot be over-emphasized. It is suggested here that computers should be supplied to all tertiary institutions and this effort will help in the teaching of the Use of English courses. For instance, if the use of power points are inculcated in the teaching/learning process, it will facilitate learning. Students should also be encouraged to develop a reading culture which is a powerful avenue to self development.

Language teachers should equally be directly motivated. Government should set out funds that would be used for in-service training for all English language teachers in tertiary institutions. This effort should serve as an encouragement to the teachers. Teachers should attend academic conferences to become more exposed to new teaching techniques, become more academically bouyant and better equipped to face the challenges of English language teaching.

References

Ayodele, B.O. National Language Policy in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects in Higher Education. Journal of Educational Development. (JONED) 5, 85-91, 2004.

Banjo, A. English Language Teaching: An Integrated Approach. Ibadan:Mosuro publishers 1999.

Cater, K and D. Numan. The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to Speakers of other Languages ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hamp, L.A. English for Academic Purposes in: The Cambridge Guide to Teaching English to speakers of other Languages. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Collins,D. and Check, L. In-Service for Teacher Development in Sub- Sahara Africa. USA: Open Universty Press, 1997.

Corder, C. The Language Teacher's Voice. Oxford:Macmillan Heinemann, 2000.

Mazrui, A.M. English in Africa: After the Cold War. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2004.

Onuigbo, S.M. & Eyisi, J. English Language in Nigeria: Issues and Developments. Calabar: Paclen Publishers, 2009.

Okebukola, C. An Introduction to Language. New York: Holt,1988.

Rubin, J. Teaching English to the World. London: British Council,1990.

JMEL January 2016. All Rights Reserved.| http://www.jmel.com.ng |