

Challenges of teaching English as a second language in Nigeria.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges posed to the teaching and learning of English as a second language in a multilingual country such as Nigeria. Even though the language of instruction in the Nigerian educational system is English and has been so from colonial times, the teaching of the subject to students for whom it is a second language continues to pose enormous challenges to both the teachers and the learners. Perhaps, a major evidence of this challenge is the massive failure of students in public examinations in English language nationwide and the inability of these students to communicate properly using the language. Among the underlying factors for these challenges identified are; inability of producing the right calibre of teachers, institutional decay, overcrowded classes and poor motivation among teachers and learners. The writer concludes that these challenges can be minimized if teachers and learners are committed to the task of teaching and learning, while the relevant authorities provide the necessary materials and an enabling environment for the task.

Key words: challenges, teaching and learning, English as a second language, teachers, learners.

Introduction

English language is universally regarded to be the world's most important language. In Nigeria, several studies like Adeyanju (1983), Adekunle (1985), Bamgbose (1994), Sabe (1995), Fakeye and Ogunjimi (2009), Ajibola (2010), to mention just a few, have commented on the importance of English as a second language. The language has many designations in the country which include; second language, official language, lingua-franca, national language, language of higher education and language of international communication (Adekunle, 1985, in Sabe (1995).

These labels may or may not be functional but it is an indisputable fact that English is one of the languages widely used

in Nigeria. In a multilingual country such as Nigeria, with about 400 languages (Crozier and Blench, 1992), English serves as an important medium of interaction for the various ethnic and linguistic groups. According to Adeyanju (1983), "apart from dominating our public and social life as the most widely used language across the country, English reaches into our homes through all media and some of our children even speak it as their first language".

Although the Nigerian National Policy on Education recognizes the importance of indigenous languages and has already directed their teaching and learning in schools, English still maintains its leading position as the medium of instruction from the latter part of the primary school to the university (National Policy on Education,

1981). Fakeye and Ogunjimi (2009) maintain that this policy document on education categorically states that for a child to be adequately educated in the modern sense of the word, a good mastery of English is a necessity. The English language is indeed, the pivot on which the educational wheel of Nigeria rotates.

Today more than ever before, there is a growing need for the English language to be taught and learnt properly at all the levels of the Nigeria educational institution. Unfortunately, however, events have shown that the performance of students in English is far below expectation as their English, both spoken and written is replete with numerous grammatical and other forms of errors. This trend has been observed and acknowledged to be responsible for the massive failure of students in public examinations. Decrying the situation, Oyata (1984:65), comments:

Much is left to be desired about our students' performance in English. Their writings by and large are replete with circumlocutions, poor punctuation and wrong or improper use of lexical items.

The low performance of Nigerian students in English which has been worsening since the mid 1970s is often attributed to factors like poor attitudes towards the second language, inadequate training of teachers, poor teaching methods, non-availability of teaching materials, poor supervision, poor learning environment, poor motivation of the teachers and the learners, the explosion in student-population with consequent pressure on scarce facilities, interference from the local languages and currently, the boom in information and communications technology which contributes to the diminishing culture of reading among the learners (Akwanya, 2010). These and other problems have continued to pose enormous challenges to

teachers of English as a second language and other stakeholders in the educational system of Nigeria. It is in connection with these challenges that Dipo (2007), observes that the signs are all there to see that the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria are bedeviled with many difficulties, most of which are posing serious challenges to scholars.

In the foregoing discussion, the importance of English as a second language in Nigeria and the need for its proper use have been briefly touched upon. The rest of the paper draws attention to the teaching of English as a second language, challenges of teaching English as a second language, tackling the challenges of teaching English as a second language and finally, a conclusion is drawn.

Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

Different types of English language teaching programmes can be identified. Among others, they include; teaching English as a second language, teaching English as a foreign language, teaching English as a mother tongue, teaching English for academic purposes, teaching English for specific purposes and a host of others. For Ayotunde (2012), the nature and demands of each of these English teaching programmes differ, particularly in terms of learning content, time available, class size, physical arrangement of class, teachers' skills and knowledge, learners' background and availability of learning materials.

Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL), which is a major area in the study of language, with its attendant challenges is the focus of this paper. In the views of Ajibola (2010), a second language (L₂) could be regarded as a language which is usually the sequential second language of a bilingual person. It may or may not be the sequential second language of a multilingual

person but, which may however function as a second language in societal bilingualism. In Nigeria, English has been considered as a second language for quite some time despite the multilingual nature of the country. For this reason, its teaching and learning should be undertaken with great precision.

Challenges of Teaching English as a Second Language

Teaching English as a second language or for whatever language teaching programme that may be identified is faced with numerous challenges. Several scholars in Language Education, Linguistics and other related disciplines (Akwanya, 2010, Patrick, 2009, Ajibola, 2010) have identified a number of factors that pose serious challenges to the proper teaching and learning of English in Nigeria. Some of the factors include; poor training of teachers, non availability of teaching aids, poor methods of teaching, poor motivation among teachers and learners, size of class and physical structures, time available etc.

The teacher is a key factor in the success of English as a second language programme. Teachers of English at all levels of the educational system need to be specially and professionally trained. They should be good models in especially, the spoken form of English. Their skills, knowledge, personality and professional efficiency must be impeccable. However, it is observed that several unqualified personnel are engaged in teaching English particularly, at the primary and secondary school levels. It is a common knowledge to find graduates of History, Sociology or Political Science teaching English in our primary and secondary schools. This practice is really dangerous as such “teachers” lack proficiency in English language hence, they constitute bad models for the students.

The problems of physical structures and educational materials constitute challenges to the teaching profession, especially the teaching of English as a second language. Most of the educational institutions in Nigeria lack basic materials to facilitate effective teaching of English. For instance, our schools are in dire need of textbooks, audio – visual materials such as videos, tape recorders, televisions and functional language laboratories. In terms of physical structures, many schools in the country are in bad shape.

Motivation is another key factor to ensure the success of teaching English as a second language. Thus, both the teacher and the learner need to be adequately motivated. Unfortunately, it is observed that motivation among teachers to teach the language and on the part of learners to learn is generally lacking.

A common feature that poses a threat to the success of any English language teaching programme in Nigeria is the phenomenon of large classes. Nwagu (2012), opines that teacher to student ratio has more than doubled at all the levels of education in Nigeria, ranging from 1:80 at the primary and secondary school levels instead of the approved ratio of 1 teacher to 35 or 40 students to 1:200 and above at the tertiary levels.

When classes are too large, effective teaching and learning will not take place. The teacher will not be able to pay reasonable attention to every student and the quality of teaching will be affected. Consequently, most aspects of the second language teaching, such as speech work and essay writing cannot be effectively carried out. Valerian (1991), cited in Ajibola (2010), emphasized that large classes affect the quality of the teaching delivered and the concentration of the students. Some of the problems posed by the students, the maintained include; lack of paying attention

to the teacher or hiding from the teacher's attention and indisciplinary behaviours such as interrupting the teacher by the noise coming from students at the back who are not paying attention. Similarly, Bailey and Nunan (1996), identify the following problems associated with large classes; impeding free movement of the teacher, many students bidding for teacher's attention, less interpersonal relationship between teacher and students hence, teacher may not be able to help each student individually, tasks are often finished at a time later than expected, lesson planned may not be covered and marking of class and homework are more difficult.

In the process of learning English as a second language, all the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing should be emphasized. This requires that reasonable amount of time should be devoted to these skills. But in most cases in the Nigerian context, there is no equitable allocation of time for the aforementioned four basic skills.

Poor teaching methods employed by the teachers is one of the challenges confronting the teaching of English as a second language in Nigeria. Many English language teachers hardly ever attend seminars and workshops which usually keep teachers abreast on modern approaches to language teaching. It is an undisputed fact that poor methodology of teaching destroys students' interest in the subject.

This section has concentrated on the identification of some factors that pose serious challenges to the effective teaching of English as a second language in Nigeria. In the subsequent section, ways through which these problems can be curtailed or minimized are suggested.

Tackling the Challenges of Teaching English as a Second Language

There is an urgent need for ensuring effective teaching and learning of English as a second language at all the levels of education in Nigeria. This need is borne, out of the exigencies of our times; students' improved performance in public examinations and overall success in their academic as well as in their workplaces. As was outlined in the preceding section, effective teaching and learning of English is faced with challenges which revolve around human and material factors such as the teachers, the learners, the physical environment and educational materials.

The teacher's role in the teaching and learning of English as a second language is very important. The second language teacher must be a specialist, well trained and equipped with other necessary qualities that are needed to do the job. Brumfit (1985) posits that "a language teacher should be professionally trained and well-informed". To ensure this professional development and efficiency of language teachers, training facilities should be provided. Therefore, language teachers should be sponsored to attend both local and international seminars and workshops on recent teaching methodologies so that their knowledge on contemporary issues in language teaching is updated. In-service and pre-service training facilities should also be provided as a way of motivating the teachers.

The learner is an important figure in English as second language situation. This is especially with the learner – centered approach now in vogue. At any level, the teaching of English as a second language must be highly interactive and situations must be set up for the learners to actually use the language. The learners must be in contact with the language frequently. In

order to get the learners to do this, they should be motivated and their interests aroused and sustained without which the second language cannot succeed. To motivate the students and sustain their interests in the language, the teacher should be dynamic and creative so that he can bring all the resources at his disposal to bear on his business. He should be sensitive to the needs and aspirations of his students by ensuring that he varies his method to suit them.

The physical environment and lack of educational materials constitute great challenges to the successful teaching of English as a second language in Nigeria. The phenomenon of large classes is a typical feature of environment – related problems of teaching. As a panacea to the various problems of large classes, the skillful teacher should adopt group discussion and pair work while he roams round the class to give the needed information. In addition, professionally trained teachers should be employed to adequately man the overcrowded classrooms manned by over-worked teachers.

The issue of inadequate physical structures is another environmental factor that negatively affects the teaching of English language. To arrest the situation, adequate well illuminated and ventilated classrooms should be provided.

Inadequate supply of educational materials such as textbooks and audio-visual aids are also hindrances to English as a second language teaching. As a way out, our educational institutions should have well stocked libraries, functional language laboratories and audio-visual aids like televisions, computers and internet facilities. The language teachers should also possess the requisite knowledge to use these facilities.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some factors that constitute challenges to the teaching of English as a second language in Nigeria. It is apparent from the paper that effective teaching and learning of English is affected by human and material factors such as the teachers the learners, the physical environment and educational materials. The identified challenges can be curtailed or minimized, through teachers' and learners' commitment to the task of teaching and learning, while the relevant authorities provide the necessary materials and an enabling environment.

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