

Bilingual Communication in a Multi-Lingual Society: Problems of English Language Learning and Use In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the role of English as a language for specialized education and the language of assimilation by Nigerians for wider communication in the country. The objective is to identify the factors that act as constraints to effective teaching, learning and use of English in Nigeria. Content analysis of secondary data sources shows that the role of English a language for education or as an official language conflicts with its role as a language of assimilation and integration, These conflicting functions which English language performs in Nigeria are at the root of the teaching and learning problems in the language. The paper examines the environmental, instructional, psycholinguistic, cultural and pedagogic factors that may affect the teaching and learning of English and recommends that English language (L2) should be taught and learned based on contrastive analysis with the first language (L1), to enable the learner perceive the similarities and differences between English and Nigerian languages in phonology, lexical and syntactic characteristics.*

KEYWORDS: *Bilingual communication, English Language learning in Nigeria.*

2. INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of the Europeans in Nigeria in the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of the geographical area now called Nigeria spoke over 250 indigenous languages. English was first introduced into Nigeria through the activities of early Christian missionaries whose activities were not confined to evangelism. They were also engaged in educational activities which included the teaching of English (Tomori 1974).

But English as an official language in Nigeria came with the colonial administration later in the 19th century. It was used principally in the few schools and colleges that emerged and to some degree, in government and company offices. (Aliyu and Masagbon 1998). The school environment at that time had some limitations as a setting for language learning. Despite these structural limitations in the educational system, efforts aimed at improving the teaching and use of English were satisfactory (Aliyu and Masagbon, 1998), because the schools had manageable class sizes, a reasonable supply of English textbooks and learning materials, a high level of motivation among learners and persistent interest and positive attitudes of teachers. (Aliyu and Masagbon 1998).

Since the introduction of the Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1970; the Nigerian Schools have been beset with several problems that have negatively impacted on the teaching and learning of English in Nigerian schools. With the school gates opened to all and sundry, the Nigerian school is now faced with the problem of large and unmanageable class sizes, poor and inadequate supply of textbooks and learning materials, a visibly low and some indifference among teachers regarding the outcome of their learners' efforts. These conditions have cumulatively and collectively affected the learning of English in Nigeria and negatively impacted on the quality of knowledge and skills acquired by the Nigerian graduates. Inadequate or poor communication skills are the bane of the Nigerian graduate and efforts should be made to remedy the situation. Presently, the teaching and learning of English ends at the secondary school level. This should not be the case. There is need to improve the quality of teaching and learning of English beyond the secondary school level. There is need to provide a multidisciplinary remedial English learning programme for all students at tertiary institutions to enable those with poor language skills to improve themselves (Aliyu & Masagbon 1998).

1.1 The Role of English in the Nigerian Society

In Nigeria, English fulfills four functions, such as, national official language, language for elite education, language of assimilation and language for specialized education (Ubahakwe 1974). But because of the vastness and multiethnic nature of the country, the role of English among the Nigerian people varies and sometimes conflicting. Its significance will depend on the speaker's attitude, the content and level of competence expected of the learner, the mode and method of instruction and the time at which English language is introduced to the child (Ubahakwe 1974).

Ubahakwe further observes, that the role of English in Nigeria as the language for specialized education or as an official language conflicts with its role as a language of assimilation. He maintains that, these conflicting functions, which English language performs in Nigeria, are at the root of the teaching and learning problems associated with English language in Nigeria.

1.2 Learning of English in Nigeria

For many Nigerians, English is far from being the language acquired after the mother tongue. In the northern states of Nigeria, which are predominantly Moslem, many pupils are made to learn Hausa and Arabic next to their mother tongue, while in the Southern states, many pupils especially those along the linguistic border in Edo, Cross Rivers, Rivers, Delta, etc learn Edo, Efik, Igbo, Urhobo or Yoruba along with or soon after their mother tongue (Oluikpe 1974). However, the extent of the demand and desire to learn English is conditioned by several factors, among which are, the level of participation in modern structures and the importance attached to the learning of English. For instance, the demand for education is more visible among people engaged in cash crop farming than among those who are still predominantly subsistence farmers. Similarly, the demand for education varies as a direct function of the proportion of adult persons engaged in non-agricultural activities. This demand Clignet (1970) observes, increases regularly with the level of urban development and with both the size and the number of European dominated economic concerns. Clignet (1970) notes however, that ethnic differentials keep declining concerning the demand for education and that the entire Nigerian population and Africa generally is increasingly aware of the economic, social and political benefits derived from academic experience which is tied to English language learning. Yet, there are still variations along ethnic lines in the intensity of this demand, that is, the variation both in the educational expenditures, that families are willing to make and in the growth patterns of their educational expenditures. For example, families in southern Nigeria are more accustomed to devoting part of their budget to educational expenditures (English reading, writing and arithmetic) than their northern counterparts, where resources are more limited and for whom such expenditures still constitute a new experience, and may prefer the learning of Arabic language for religious and cultural reasons, as opposed to English which is the language officially demanded by the government Clignet further observes that the financial support given to schools by the federal government (Universal Primary Education (UPE) is more likely to have adverse effect on the enrolments of the northern than of the southern population. For example, Islamic values tied to the Moslem religion are at complete variance with the requirements of modernization and accordingly, Islamicized African people are markedly underrepresented in the post primary institutions (Clignet 1970).

In more general terms, however, the academic performance of children seems to depend more on the degree of exposure of the ethnic groups to European influences and by the number of generations having attended educational institutions. Unarguably, a relatively large proportion of students derived from the southern parts of Nigeria, most especially southwestern Nigeria have educated parents and even grandparents, whereas this is not so among pupils of a northern origin. Such second generation educated parents are more likely to exert an effective control on the academic behaviour of their offspring. In this context, the educational level of parental generations remains the most powerful predictor of the academic career of an individual and the proficiency in English language (Oluikpe 1974).

1.3 The Use of English

Even though English is used as an official language, the students' motivation is instrumental rather than integrative. He neither wishes to develop a native speaker accent or the ability to think like a native speaker (English men). He does not reject oral proficiency but finds it difficult to accept oral proficiency norm which is socially nonfunctional in his immediate community (Adekunle 1976).

A study of the pattern of language choice in the Nigerian speech community by Adekunle (1976) reveals linguistically homogenous and linguistically heterogeneous communities. The favourite language of the home in all the states of Nigeria studied is the mother tongue (90%), followed by pidgin as a second choice and by English as a third choice. However, the study also showed that this situation varies from state to state. At work, the study showed that English is the favourite in all the states, though the situation changes when the factors of intimacy and informality are introduced into the speech, especially in the linguistically homogenous Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo states.

There are very many linguistic groups in Nigeria and each group brings to the learning of English a different consonant and vowel system, syllable structure and tone which affect the reaction of the group not only to English grammar but also to oral and written English (Taiwo 1974). According to research (Taiwo 1974), most Nigerian languages, especially Yoruba are tonal, using the penetrative scale on a somewhat uniform pitch. These subtleties of the English language "rise and fall" are foreign to it. These deficiencies arising from the

language contact between English language and Nigeria's indigenous languages and the non-functionality of English outside the school and workplace settings, acting together with lack of motivation on the part of learners and teachers have negatively impacted on the use of English in Nigeria.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In Nigeria, English coexists with about 250 Nigeria's indigenous languages. This language contact and interaction situation has produced reciprocal influences between English language and Nigeria's indigenous languages. (Akere 2005:1). An analysis of the utterances of those who teach or learn English in Nigeria shows a hybridization in morphological and syntactic structures in English patterns resulting from the interaction between English and Nigeria's indigenous languages. (Akere 2005).

Research studies on the bilingual situation in Nigeria using contrastive analysis of English and Nigerian languages reveal some interference features and pedagogical defects in the methodological orientation of those who teach and learn English in Nigeria. In a country where there are at least 250 indigenous languages, there are odds against the Nigerian student in learning English, because the student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he already has a language of his/her own and he is being asked to learn another language (Iyama and Adamu-Ogiegbaen 2006).

An analysis of senior secondary school certificate results in English between 1996 and 1998 by Olapoo (1998) cited by Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen (2006) shows that the percentage of failure in English language is increasing with 53.36% in 1996 and 72.71% in 1998. This poor performance is attributed to the lack of a rich and stimulating language environment needed for the development of verbal and intellectual skills needed for language learning during the formative years and beyond. This lack of English language skills, have impacted negatively on the academic performance of the Nigerian graduate (Iyamu and

Aduwa-Ogiegbaen 2006). For instance, World Bank Report (2001) cited in Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen (2006) indicates that Nigerian graduate skills have deteriorated over the past decade. This is particularly evident in two areas; poor mastery of the English language and lack of requisite technical skills. These shortcomings were particularly observed in oral and written communication and applied technical skills. These deficiencies, the World Bank Report said, have made the Nigerian graduate unproductive and unfit for the labour market and sometimes the larger society and this has been socially costly to the country (Iyamu and Aduwa-Ogiegbaen 2006). The report traced the deficiencies in English to insufficient academic preparation and communication, necessary for social interaction in the work place, school and for functional literacy.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The above description outlines the problems in the teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria. In this context, the study has the following objectives.

- i. To examine the role played by English language in the Nigerian society.
- ii. To identify the Environmental, Socio-Economic, Cultural, Organizational, Pedagogic, Psycholinguistic and communication constraints to effective teaching and learning of English in Nigeria.
- iii. To determine the pattern of language use and choice vis-à-vis L₁ and L₂ in Nigeria.
- iv. To identify new ways of improving the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria.

The Methodology consists mainly of content analysis of documents and publications

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the second language learning situation, retention and forgetting can be affected by certain factors which include mutual competition, frequency interference and psycholinguistic mechanisms such as retroactive and proactive inhibition and negative transfer.

4.1 Mutual Competition

According to Olagoke (1980), there is competition between the response in the first language and the second at recall, and success depends upon the relative associative strength to the common stimuli and the ability of the individual to reduce the responses in such a way as to give them distinctive contexts. Competition may even be so strong as to depress all alternative responses so that the learner forgets everything or wrong responses may occur

4.2 Frequency Interference: Sociolinguistic Considerations

According to Adekunle (1976), English forms with other Nigerian languages; a behavioural whole and constitutes one of the varieties of the same verbal repertoire in the Nigerian speech community. Because of the heterogeneous nature of Nigerians, English is used formally and informally interchangeably with other native tongues to discuss private or official matters in the home, office, at school and at public gatherings. This background situation adversely affects the acquisition of oral proficiency in English. This is because the attitude of the learner towards English and the attitude of the peers, parents, teachers and people in the immediate community can affect his motivation, inspite of the appropriateness of the methodology used.

4.3 Psycholinguistic Mechanisms that affect Retention and Remembering in Second Language Learning

Several factors can affect retention and remembering in second language learning. These factors have been identified by Olagoke (1980) as follows:

4.3.1 Retroactive Interference and Inhibition

This is the inhibiting effect of an interpolated learning on the retention of an original learning. Retention of what is learnt in the second language situation depends on what has been formally learnt in the native tongue.

4.3.2 Proactive Interference and Inhibition

This deals with the effect of previous learning on the retention of the new material (L₂).

4.3.3 Positive or Negative Transfer

Positive transfer may take place when the new learning is similar to one already learnt, and the learner receives help from his previous experience. On the other hand, negative transfer can occur when the habits and patterns of the native language are transferred to the learning and speaking of English language.

4.4 Factors affecting the Quality of Teaching and Learning of English in Nigeria

4.4.1 Poor Socio-Economic Background of Learners

The average Nigerian child comes to school for the first time to enter the world of books. He or she owns a book of his or her own when he or she goes to school and has never seen books owned by others (Tomori 1974). As a result, the child lacks the neurophysical coordination necessary for learning to read. Tomori (1974) reported in his studies that one of every three pupils in Nigeria lacked class readers, exercise books or rulers, either because their parents were too poor to provide them or because the pupils had lost them. Many parents also feel that if the Universal Primary Education (UPE) was termed 'free' by government, then the government schools should provide the necessary contact with books at school. Their lack during lessons constitute a very grave setback to learning.

4.4.2 Media of Learning English

The Nigerian primary school child is dependent almost entirely on his school (Tomori 1974) for learning English. The influence of latent English language is very small and often pernicious. For instance, newspaper reading is very poor and so the child hardly forms a reading habit at home. There are very few children pictures, books and paper magazines, published in Nigeria in English. Added to this, Nigerian dailies are expensive, dull and rarely entertaining. Only very few of them have children columns and more often than not, the language used is not simple enough to get across to the primary school child (Tomori 1974). Most Radio English programmes targeting the primary school children are on during school hours, but the schools hardly tune in because they fear it might interrupt with the normal timetable.

4.4.3 Cultural Factors

Most English texts used in Nigeria are written using the models used in monolingual communities. One wonders how this could be implemented successfully in a multilingual community such as Nigeria where anthropologists have reported over 250 different languages (Brann 1973). The Nigerian situation is such that English language is the only link between the various ethnic groups and the textbooks that are in use are not designed to meet the linguistic needs of the specific language groups in Nigeria, but written for all Nigerians even at the primary school level. The result is that errors which have close correlation with structural and cultural contrasts seem to be endemic with us and tend to pass for the newly discovered variant form of English called "Nigerian English" (Oluikpe 1974). Added to this is the problem of 'translational English' which emanates from cultural differences between L₁ and L₂ and consequently this can

impede international communication. These differences are found in such cultural items as marriage, farming season, burials, births, foods, sports and superstition (Oluikpe 1974).

4.4.4 Deficiencies in Pedagogic Methods

Taiwo (1974) has identified gaps and inconsistencies in the structural pattern of teaching English in primary schools, which violate the elementary linguistic principles of teaching. For instance, many structures are either not taught at all or taught at the wrong time.

4.4.5 *The Knowledge and Personality* of many English language teachers at the primary school level is inadequate and undesirable. Their spoken and written English is very poor. In addition to stylistic mistakes, there are grave errors of pronunciation such as pronouncing words (homophones) such as:

ship- cheap, had - hard
zoo- sue, full - fool
very- ferry, sit - seat
then- den, Norse - Nurse

Among the Yorubas, for instance, Tomori (1974) reported that there are seven vowel sounds and the Yoruba teacher, unless highly trained uses his native sounds in place of the pure 12 vowels of English, hence he treats the above as homophones

4.4.6 *The pupil teacher relationship:* In a general number of cases, the pupil-teacher relationship is not what it should be, especially at the primary level, where the emotional aspect of education is probably more important than at any later stage. Not many teachers at this formative level are sympathetic enough.

4.4.7 *The grammatical and lexical textbooks.* Tomori (1974) observed that the English textbooks used in Nigeria do not emphasize the contrastive features of L1 and L2. According to Tomori, the average Nigerian use of lexical items in English in certain words are confused with the first language situation. For instance, items in the first column below are used for those in the second column.

* Middle - Centre	* hear	-	Understand
* Road - street	* under pregnancy	-	pregnant
* Wound - injury	* say the truth	-	Speak the truth
* Dress - clothes	* cut hair	-	have a hair cut

4.4.8 Lack of Readiness Programmes

There is an inadequacy of reading readiness programmes and pre-reading activities, and very little attention is devoted to such activities in the elementary schools. Since the environment that the child comes from may not provide opportunities for incidental learning and role playing, the child coming in contact with formal education for the first time is handicapped. Such readiness can be at four levels. Taiwo (1974) identifies the following levels.

- i. Mental and intellectual level.
- ii. Experimental background, speech and verbal levels.
- iii. Social and emotional attitudes, including both individual attitudes and ability to play and cooperate with other children.
- iv. Physical conditions such as lack of housing, electricity and other physical comforts, devoid of extreme heat, cold or rainfall which characterize the life of the average Nigerian child at home and at school.

4.4.9 Unsuitable Reading Passages

Most initial reading texts do not treat matters of intrinsic interests to the child and therefore cannot easily stimulate his interest in reading. Worse still, where they exist, very little variety is provided (Taiwo 1974).

4.4.10 Lack of Vernacular Teaching

In Nigeria, the tendency has been to suppress the mother tongue (Awoniyi, 1957). The first Education Ordinance (1982) for Nigeria recognized only the English language in schools. Gradually, the status of English rose higher than that of the mother tongues. Later, it was realized that utilization rather than neglect of the mother tongue was an essential principle of language methodology. Research evidence tends to support the view that adequate training of the pupil in the mother tongue is not in conflict with adequate training in English. It has

also been scientifically shown that it is not only advantageous but also highly essential to teach the mother tongue. Studies tend to show that when pupils were taught with their mother tongue, a better knowledge of English was subsequently acquired in a comparatively short time and a comparatively small expenditure of efforts (Platten 1953). The studies confirmed that those who have little skill in writing down in their mother tongues what they have in mind, often have great difficulty in expressing themselves on paper in English. (Gurrey 1948)

4.4.11 Attitude of the youth towards English.

The youth see English as a colonial language and question the dominant role of such a colonial language in their future lives in an age of science and technology. The lack of motivation of teachers at the primary school level and the endless changes in the methodology and texts used in teaching have also affected English language learning negatively. These substrata influences aided by teachers' incompetence and lack of devotion caused in part by inadequate training in English have made English language learning problematic. In addition to these negative influences, there is the problem of religious education in Muslim communities, in that the Arabic literature used for religious classical or scholarly language creates a problem with the bilingual group situation.

5. SUMMARY

This study diagnosed the problems in English language learning in Nigeria and the effects of these problems on national development. English language serves as a national official language, a language for general and specialized education, a language for assimilation and a language for integration. These various roles which English language plays in Nigeria are sometimes conflicting in that its role as a language for education conflicts with its role as a language of assimilation and integration. These conflicting functions which English language performs are at the root of the teaching and learning problems in the language. There are several environmental, socio-economic, cultural, psycholinguistic pedagogic and organizational factors which impede effective teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria, that require intervention at the level of policy, curriculum, training, instruction and management.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the teaching and learning of English be extended beyond primary and secondary schools to the tertiary institutions by providing a multidisciplinary remedial English learning programme in tertiary institutions to enable those with poor language skills to improve themselves.

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