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ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NIGERIAN POLYTECHNICS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Introduction

The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1977:52) gives the aim of technical education as the provision of trained manpower in applied sciences, technology and commerce. The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) which is the body charged with coordinating polytechnic education stated the aims of the English and Communication Skills course (ECS) as the improvement of the students' knowledge of language and communication so as to enable them carry out educational tasks in their areas of

specialization with greater efficiency.

A high level of language proficiency is required from the polytechnic students in order that they be able to fulfill the demands of their profession and to achieve the objectives of the NPE and the NBTE. The technical students need the necessary competency and proficiency to enable them adapt to their professional environment. They need to know the grammar of the language, the phonology, principles of correspondence, how to write reports, disseminate technical facts and concepts (Brumfit, 1995) to

Abstract

This paper looks at the close relationship between English language and education. It examines the problems and prospects of English language teaching in Nigerian polytechnics. Our educational system will continue to suffer serious setbacks as long as our students are not able to develop fully their linguistic and communicative competence.

Keywords: English Language, Teaching, Nigerian, Challenges, Prospects

develop the skills of creativity and understand the techniques and processes of production.

RELEVANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN POLYTECHNIC EDUCATION

The English language is indisputably an official Language and second language in Nigeria. In fact, there is now a growing number of Nigerians to whom English is a first language. It occupies a unique position in the country because it is the language that facilitates communication between Nigerians irrespective of the linguistic, cultural, ethnic and social barriers (Adedeji, 2005:74). There is a close and perceptible relationship between language and education. Language stands rock solid in any educational system as it is the medium by which educational concepts are imparted and learnt in Nigerian tertiary institutions, English retains its dominant edge as the exclusive medium of instruction and will remain so for long time to come English is and will continue to be the language for identifying, categorizing, transmitting and applying new knowledge according to real life situations for the purpose of national growth and development (Olaofe, 1988:17). In the English language courses techniques of composition writing such as relevance and organization of content, expression and mechanical accuracy are taught to the students. This is aimed to developing in the students the ability to express themselves and communicate effectively using the English language. It is the language used to enable students extend their linguistic competence to the new demands imposed upon them by the field of science and technology. Students in the polytechnic require the ability of expressing themselves clearly, succinctly and intelligibly using the English language. A failure to do this can lead to the non- achievement of the goals of the NBTE. It has been proven that poor performance in English is correlated with poor performance in other subjects (Mohammed, 1995: 138).

POLYTECHNIC ENGLISH COURSE: PROBLEM AREAS

Despite the importance of English, unfortunately, most of available research evidence and pronouncements on the English of Polytechnic students show that the students' overall communicative competence in the language is declining. And although in some places, there is a heightened interest in the English language, teachers in the polytechnic often face various difficulties and challenges while teaching English. This deplorable situation of English

learning and teaching is simply intolerable and constitutes a serious indictment of the existing educational practices.

The following extract which can serve as an example is a formal letter of apology that a student wrote:

Last week Tuesday I come journey late this lecture. My absent in c/ass are because I leave at Zaria city are because I take long tracken before I come to the junction when I enter the /7otor then include I drop the 2 motor before I come to the school. Please I hope you are very sorry to this my important problem (sic)

Thus, the illiterate level at which the polytechnic students communicate does not make br good communicative effectiveness and stigmatizes them. There are many reasons why students' performance in English in the polytechnic is on the decline. The problems may be learner, method, teacher or system induced among others.

1. Lack of learner motivation/interest: In most instances polytechnic students are not motivated to learn English, they erroneously feel that as science and technology students, they only need to know enough English to enable the function in their subject areas and as long as their fellow scientists are able to understand them when they speak and to decipher what they write then the little English they have learnt is sufficient. They skip English classes at will and when they do show up, it is likely due to fear of failure, or fear of the lecturer more than a desire to learn. The learners hardly pay attention in class, some chatting with their classmates or using their handsets doing "2go" this writer had recently reprimanded a student for engaging in 'facebook" during lectures. Sometimes during the English classes, they are engaged doing tasks in other subject areas theit they feel are more important to their career advancement.

2. The NBTE—the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE):

The body charged with coordinating polytechnic education itself constitutes a problem in English language teaching in the polytechnic. Its attitude towards the GNS courses of which English is among leaves a lot to be desired. These courses do not form part of the programmes evaluated during accreditation visits by the NBTE. This neglect makes the course to be operated according to the whim; and caprices of the various polytechnics. Most

departments are at liberty to either offer the course or not as they deem *fit*. When asked as why the course is not offered, they cite the NBTE course outline/guideline, which does not contain English as their reason.

3. The NBTE Syllabus: This is also another problem area in the polytechnic English course as it is not yielding the desired result. There is no cohesion in the syllabus, with a lot of repetitions of topics; it is mostly not an ESP based syllabus and there is a general preponderance of form over function in the use of language. There is a neglect of discourse and it fails to emphasize on communicative competence.

4. Insufficient time, resources and materials: The English course in the polytechnic also suffers from lack of adequate time. The number of contact hours (2 hours per week) provided for in the curriculum is insufficient for any meaningful teaching and learning to take place. Also, in the timetable, one finds that most English periods are relegated to the afternoon, usually 2pm - 4p when the students are already stressed out and fatigued. This is a time when no meaningful learning can take place. Overcrowded classes are also a problem in most polytechnics, where you have 200 or more learners packed into a language learning situation, then both the teacher and the students are placed in a chaotic situation, sometimes, because of sheer number some students are forced to stand at the back of the classroom, while others stand outside by the windows listening or pretending to listen to the lectures.

5. Lack of language laboratories in most polytechnics: is also another problem, and where they are available they are often poorly equipped and the teachers are not trained in the use of them or lack interest in utilizing them.

6. Poor background: It is a well known fact that in Nigeria, English language teaching (ELT) right from the primary schools through to the secondary schools is a sorry state. This affects the students because many of them import the English language problems of these lower levels into the polytechnic. As far back as 1995, almost two decades ago. Mohammed (1995:133) gave the high rate of failure as measured by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) as being in the region of 70-75%, the situation as we all know is worse now.

7. Attitude: This can be looked at from different perspectives: the schools, the students, the teachers of other academic subjects. The schools constitute a problem because they see the English language course as not being a core course in the polytechnic. As a course that is not being visited for

accreditation by the NBTE, they often feel reluctant to allocate resources to the course. We also find teachers who have not read English teaching English in the polytechnic especially those from OTM (office technology management) and banking and finance. They teach business communication. Teachers of other subjects also neglect to emphasize to their students the importance of the language course. They claim that they are only interested in the points the students make and not the correctness of the language, this negative attitude rubs off on the students. The students also have no interest in the course. Their attitude towards the language affects their performance as it is believed that a positive attitude will facilitate learning while a negative attitude will not (Williams, 1990:343).

8. The English language teachers: Teachers of English may themselves through their incompetence in the language hamper the language learning process. The teacher by not presenting his lesson well or by not giving learners enough explanation or practice, or by selecting the wrong method or approach to language teaching can cause a problem in English language teaching. The question of what standard to teach is also a problem in English language teaching in the polytechnic. Standard here is associated with the ideal of the language as produced by the proficient and educated users (Wilkinson, 1995:33). One finds English language users in the polytechnic using any variety at their disposal

Nigerian English, pidgin and even sometimes code mixing with Hausa during English lessons.

9. Fossilization: This refers to a state where the learner has internalized and mastered the wrong forms so much that no amount of teaching can improve upon his performance (Corder. 1973:268). Once a learner feels that he has a sufficient command of the target language that he needs to communicate with, he makes no effort to progress further. Fossilization can be caused by poor background, lack of interest and lack of significant input from the teachers and the syllabus.

10. Problems inherent within English itself: The fact that English grammar has its own set of complicated rules and regulations makes it a tough language to master. Students over generalize rules without being aware of exemptions. This is especially a problem because of the fact that the rules of English differ from those of the students' first/native languages. Some of the troublesome rules include: lack of correlation between orthographic and phonetic features,

lack of consistency in word formation rules, lack of consistency in syntactic rules among others (Olaofe, 1988; p. 25).

11. Lack of extensive reading: It has been proved that students do not engage in extensive reading, this affects their performance because they have poverty of ideas and a poorly developed vocabulary. Achebe (1985:1) observed that students do not read, they have no mastery of the language of discourse nor of the material of discourse. They do not have the linguistic equipment which is very important even in science. Extensive reading consists mainly of reading supplementary readers, novels, magazines, journals and newspapers. According to Olaofe (1995:24) extensive reading helps students to possess “a good storage of lexical items, proper mastery of the various syntactic forms of English. Sentence and discourse organization, systematic thought pattern punctuation and spelling and handwriting. Despite these very important skills, it has been proved that polytechnic students do not read extensively; do not consult journals and research extracts where current information can be obtained. To even get them to read the prescribed texts for literary appreciation is a herculean task. They would rather wait for the lecturer to give the plot summary.

The list of problems given above is certainly not exhaustive; there may be other problems that are peculiar to particular polytechnics. The paper will now give a few errors that were perceptible in diploma 2 students’ writings in Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic Zaria. These errors could be attributed to the problems listed above:

Inappropriate choice of lexical items

- I. Students have to know the hazardness they are likely to face in the society
- II. But if these same course is being introduced into the secondary schools in this country, when there is any emergency, the 1 cm/or level of learning students will be able to handle such problems with maturity in action

Connectives

- I. I am here to talk about the importance of computer science, in spite of this, the course should be introduced in all secondary schools in Nigeria

- III. Everybody must be conversant with mathematics and that does not withstand however, it is very important in science and technology

Substitution

- I. Nobody knows more about the computer machine than the computer analyst have
- II. Nowadays, the society is filled with so many sick and disabled ones which need the doctors attention

Adjuncts

- I. It is also applied major/yin the lab
- II. Especially 1 mathematics is the study of figures

Nouns

- I. Computer can be used to collect and analyze datas
- II. This disease is caused by bacteria's

Adjective

- I. The course I am offering has greatest advantage than the other course
- II. Many students see mathematics as the most toughest subject G. Concord

Concord

- I. The student will know how to operate the computer, they will also know how to interpret data
- II. Actually, I has been heard about the courses that is science laboratory technology

Tenses

- I. Descriptive statistics dealing with method of collecting and analyzing data.
- II. Even the water works can used the method for the production of drinking water

Verb phrases

- I. The students have not come to know the importance of mathematics and statistics.

- II. For many years, an investigation were been make on how to convert salt water into drinking water

Lexical verbs

- I. Furthermore, the introduction of computers i9 our industries has go a long way in reducing the work of a laborer
- II. The importance of this very course that I m now undertaken cannot be overlooked

Pronouns

- I. I want to tell you that you need mathematics even if it are studying French
- II. From the previous scientists which discover that water comprises of H2° As mentioned above, these errors were sampled form the student essays and are given to buttress the point of the paper that the problems of ELT affects students' linguistic and communicative competence. These errors not only hamper teaching and learning, but also stigmatizes the students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the problems of ELT discussed above, the paper will try to proffer solutions which are aimed at enhancing the quality of instruction of the English course. If this is done the errors of the students will be eradicated or minimized.

1. The NBTE should cohere and streamline the ECS syllabus with that of other courses offered in the polytechnic. English language should be made compulsory for all students. A review of the syllabus needs to be undertaken. The present syllabus needs to be expanded and enriched to incorporate other things like discourse strategies to enable the students achieve communicative competence. The present bias of the syllabus towards form over function should be redressed. The NETE also should address clearly the issue of course codes and state clearly who is to teach what, to avoid the present practice where teachers of other subjects teach English. The number of contact hours also provided for English in the curriculum should be increased.

2. The schools should ensure that' they employ adequate and qualified teachers to handle the course and also provide materials which could aid both the teaching/learning process. These could be in the form of textbooks, computers, language laboratories, e-libraries and other relevant teaching materials.
3. The students should be motivated to learn and use the language. They should be taught that one learns a language not only by watching or hearing others speak or by having the language explained but by also practicing and transferring language use to situations outside the classroom. The students should be able to project themselves into the roles of both encodes and decoders. This will enable them to edit their written work by providing immediate feedback on what has been learnt. Students should be made aware of the constant need for revision, learning and re-learning throughout the ECS course.
4. Teachers of other academic subjects need to be sensitized on the need to be role models for the students. They can be involved in the language learning process by giving the students tasks that involve creative, innovative and communicative use of language.
5. The ECS teacher in the polytechnic should use an integrated approach in his teaching to make it more effective and meaningful. Where he has too large a class, he can divide the students into groups to make them more manageable. The teacher should have a good knowledge of textbook evaluation in order to be able to adapt existing English textbooks to get the specific needs of the students on the issue of what variety to teach, the teacher should be able to choose a variety that is nationally acceptable and internationally intelligible. The teacher should endeavor to organize teaching based upon perceived problem areas. Areas that are seen to be easy for the student should be treated first, while highly problematic and be taught last. They should encourage the students to have a positive attitude towards the English course.
6. The students should be encouraged to read extensively as it exposes them to a wide range of current and topic issues and will help them learn new words and expressions.
The teacher should flood the students with copious reading materials which can enable them to have a good storage of lexical items. They

should be encouraged or be made to compile a reading diary which consists of new words learnt. Just as the problems given by the paper are not exhaustive, so also the solutions provided are by no means the only solutions.

CONCLUSION

That English language plays a very significant role in the educational system is an undisputable fact. That there are many problems bedeviling English language teaching in polytechnics in Nigeria is also not in doubt. Many people are involved in ELT, and face many challenges in the ELT classroom. The paper tried to highlight some of the problems and proffered solutions to them. English has turned into a universal language, its presence and value in the world has expanded. This is challenge to the English teachers. They should make ELT geared towards making their learners competent in the language, so that they can be able to function in the language.

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