

Mastery of Subject Matter and the Emphasis on Instructional Resources among Secondary School Teachers of English Language

By

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Abstract

The teacher is a key variable in the teaching-learning context, implying that no meaningful talk about improved English teaching and learning is possible without attention to teacher development. The point is this: whatever students will benefit from English instruction is a function of who the teacher is academically and professionally-what he knows, believes and does. Ukeje (2000) captures this supreme importance of the teacher as follows: If the child is the centre of the educational system, teachers are the hubs of the educational process. For it is upon their number, their education and training, their quality and devotion to duty, their effectiveness and efficiency, their competence and their productivity depend on the effectiveness, the capability and the possibilities of the entire educational system and enterprise. The realization of the potentialities of organized education as a veritable instrument for social change and national reconstruction depends largely on the teachers. Excellent educational policies are meaningless unless there are equally excellent teachers to see to their realization. Various governments may vote sufficient funds as enabling resources for education, adequate material resources may be procured, but unless the teachers are properly prepared and positively motivated, little productivity will happen. From what has been said so far about the critical role the teacher plays, it is perhaps clear that if the English teaching efforts are not yielding the desired results, the teacher factor is the first place to look for the cause, that is why the logical question to ask at this point is, what arrangement is in place for preparing English teacher? It is of course clear that the question can only be answered intelligently within the context of teacher education programmes generally. The objective of this paper is to show how adequate subject matter and instrument can be used to enhance effective teaching of English language.

Introduction

Teaching is a uniquely and intrinsically moral enterprise. The teacher consciously or unconsciously is a moral instructor, a moral educationist and a

moral model for his/her students. He/she is also expected to be a moral and change agent and a transformer of his society. The ethical standard for teaching profession represents a vision of professional practice. At the heart of a strong and effective teaching profession is a commitment to teaching and learning. Ethics assumes a greater role in the mode of operation of a teacher as his/her teaching objectives; his styles and methodologies are redolent with ethical flavours.

Teaching brings about understanding: it involves a teacher, a learner, subject matter, and teaching materials. Therefore to bring about learning, the teacher engages in certain activities such as talking, demonstration, instructing etc. all these are the various strategies to bring about learning. The subject of improving language education has always been of concern to stakeholders in education. This is understandable given the close relationship between language competence and educational achievement. That is, students' mastery of the language of instruction is a prerequisite for effective learning. A student, according to Simmons and Baines (1998), "can learn nothing more valuable in school than a mastery over language" Language therefore is not just one of the subjects in the curriculum, it is a tool for learning other subjects. That is why it is believed that the success of language education is the success of education generally and that educational failure is nothing more than a linguistic failure (Baldeh, 1990; Afolayan, 1995; Boyer, 1996; Simmons and Baines, 1998).

The Meaning and Context of English Teaching

It is perhaps repeating the obvious to observe that English is a second language in Nigeria and that is, should be taught as much, but experience and research have shown that it cannot be taken for granted that those who teach English in Nigeria schools appreciate this. Indeed, most of the time, English is taught as if it were a foreign or mother tongue. It is necessary therefore to highlight the distinction between these types of language teaching (Tiffen, 1969; Oyetunde & Muodumogu, 1999).

English is a second language in Nigeria not necessarily because it is the second language, the average Nigerian child acquires or learns after his mother tongue. It is known fact, that some children learn it as the third or even the fourth language. English is a second language because of the many important roles it plays in the Nigerian society. For example, it is a common language in Nigeria, a language of communication between and among people from different linguistics backgrounds. It is also the official language, that is, the language of government, the judiciary, the mass media and commerce. It is also the language used to interact with the outside world. Perhaps of particular interest in this discussion is the fact that English is the language of education. Beyond the very elementary level of schooling, English becomes the medium of instruction and a subject in the curriculum. The National Policy on Education (1981) leaves no one in doubt about this; "government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.

The status of English as a second language implies that it “plays a very key function in the social, professional and educational life of Nigeria” (Banjo, 1989). Indeed, to be regarded as an educated Nigerian, according to Banjo, some level of proficiency in English is required. He justifies this as follows:

If an educated man is defined in Nigeria as one who has had at least secondary education, then no Nigerian who speaks English can be regarded as being educated. The reason for this should be obvious: English is a key subject at the medium of instruction before the end of the primary level.

One important implication of all these is that English has to be taught and learned very well. According to Tiffen (1969), “It is a question of ensuring that pupils have a complete mastery of the language, an ability to use it which is almost second nature.” This certainly would not be the case if English were a foreign language in Nigeria. One doesn’t really need to master a foreign language thoroughly. A foreign language is usually needed for very limited purposes. This was the status of the French language in Nigeria, until regarded as a foreign language in Nigeria. This is because one does not need to learn French very well, or learn it at all, to participate effectively in the life of the country. This distinction needs to be borne in mind by teachers.

It is also important to point out that English is not the mother tongue of any ethnic group in Nigeria, and this means that its teaching in schools is not a question of refining a language already known. Over 95% of Nigerian children depend on the school to learn English. One important implication of this is that the school must compensate for what the home or the immediate environment cannot provide. This situation is compounded by a host of adverse conditions. Examples include overcrowded classrooms, lack of textbooks and other basic instructional aids, students’ exposure to substandard varieties of English, poor reading culture, lack of motivation on the part of students, teachers’ incompetence in the language and students’ varying levels of proficiency in English. These realities are unfortunately a common feature of most public schools setting in Nigeria.

The Goals of English Teaching

It is important to clearly establish what our goals of English teaching should be. Some of these are apparent from what has been said, but it is good to isolate these in specific terms. According to the National Policy on Education (1981), the basic objectives of English teaching are to give children permanent literacy and “the ability to communicate effectively”. Banjo (1989) amplifies this in his observation that instructional efforts should be geared towards helping the Nigerian child to become a bi-or trilingual “who is endowed with the requisite skills to enable him to interact fully and efficiently in the national life and make a success of his career”. He elaborates on this as follows:

...the Nigerian school boy has to learn how to behave appropriately In English, which is a second language, over a wide area which we define as the national life of the country, and he has to behave both in written and in spoken English.

Perhaps what need to be added is that type of English that is taught and learn should not only be nationally accepted but be internationally intelligible. As Adejare (1995) argues,

from inception, the ELT user embarks on an educational career whose final goal could be contact with educated users of English the world over, it is only reasonable for him to learn the world wide dialect. If the need arises to acquire other non-standard dialects, this would be easily achieved at no cost whatsoever, whereas the reverse is not the case.

Abel (2003) reduces what to aim at achieving to the following specifics:

- a. **Listening:** The learners are able to listen to information and enjoyment and respond appropriately and critically in a wide range of situations.
- b. **Speaking:** The learner is able to communicate confidently and effective in spoken language in a wide range of situations.
- c. **Reading and Viewing:** The learner is able to read, view for information, enjoyment and respond critically to the aesthetic, cultural and emotional values in texts.
- d. **Writing:** The learner is able to write different kinds of factual and imaginative texts for a wide range of purpose.

Many researchers have expressed dismay at the English language competence of Nigerian children who have been taught English and in English at the primary school. Secondary school products (who get pushed into tertiary institutions) are a little better. Below are excerpts from expert witnesses: Thousands of such students' entre post-primary institutions with what amounts to a superficial knowledge of English. At best they possess some amount of familiarity with a few hundreds which English is known might be so narrow that, it is restricted to just the spoken medium. When it comes to the written medium, one is difficult to establish whether this is one of the areas that such learners are even familiar with. Only a handful possesses the ability to read or write (Aliyu 1983). Many students come to secondary school knowing little or no English necessitating the continued used of the mother tongue as a medium for teaching other subjects, in some instances. In fact, some teachers complain that in the case of some science subjects, they have to resort to this practice even at the SSS level, to get the students to understand them fully (Mohammed 1995).

University students are also linguistically defective that many would not have acquired a secondary school certificate in English two decades ago, but come in with good grades and no thanks to JAMB, they are literally foisted on the Universities (Adejare 1995). The mastery of reading is still rather illusive among the bulk of both students and teachers and at all levels of the Nigerian education system (Omojuwa 1989). At the tertiary level of education, students have so much difficulty with their communicative skills in English that they cannot function effectively in their academic use of English. The concern being in educational circles is the extent to which the variety and quality of English being learned and used in the school system can serve in achieving Nigeria's educational goals and objectives (Akere 1995).

It is clear from the descriptions above that unless some drastic measures are taken to remedy the situation, a vast majority of learners within the educational system face almost inevitable failure. The logical conclusion, of course is that there is an urgent need for improved English teaching and learning in schools. We can now turn our attention to the issue of teacher development.

The Art of Mastering Subject Matter

The art of mastering subject matter according to Adediran and Adetunji (2011) entails some basic principles which are as follows:

- * **Content Competence:** A teacher maintains a high level of subject matter knowledge and ensures that lesson contents are current, accurate, representative, and appropriate to the position of the lesson within the students' programme of study.
- * **Pedagogical Competence:** A pedagogically competent teacher communicates the objectives of the lesson to students, is aware of alternative instructional materials and select materials of instruction that are effective in helping students to achieve the lesson objectives.
- * **Dealing with Sensitive Topic:** Topics students are likely to find sensitive or discomforting are dealt with in an open, honest and positive way.
- * **Student's Development:** The overriding responsibility of the teacher is to contribute to the intellectual development of the students, at least in the context of the teacher's own area of expertise, and to avoid actions such as exploitation and discrimination that distract students' development.
- * **Dual Relationship with Students:** To avoid conflict of interest, a teacher does not enter into dual role relationship with students that are likely to distract the students development or lead to actual or perceived favouritism on the part of the teacher.

- * **Confidentiality:** Students grade, attendance record and private communication are treated as confidential materials and are released only with students' consent, for legitimate academic purposes and on reasonable grounds. Believing that releasing such information would be beneficial to the students or will harm others.

- * **Respect for Colleagues:** A teacher respects the dignity of his/her colleagues and works cooperatively with them in the interest of fostering students' development.

- * **Valid Assessment of Student:** Giving the importance of assessment of students performance in secondary school teaching and in students lives and careers, teachers are responsible for taking adequate steps to ensure that assessment of students is valid, open, fair and congruent with lesson objectives.

- * **Respect for Institution:** In the interest of students' developments, a secondary school teacher must be aware and respect the educational goals, policies and standard of the institution in which he/she teaches.

Effective Teaching of English Language Education

For effective English language teaching to take place, there is need for utilization of various teaching methods, strategies and techniques. Any method used in imparting knowledge to the learners is usually based on the topic concerned, the related discipline from where the topic is chosen, the objectives to be achieved, learning environment, time, learner characteristics and a host of other factors. However, methods have been categorized into different ways by various experts. These according to Adediran (2014) are: Activity Method, Transmission Methods, Group Methods, Discovery Methods, Playing Methods, Inquiry Methods, Demonstration Methods, Dramatization Methods, Lecturing Methods etc. Some of these methods allow teachers to dominate the teaching while some others are pupils-oriented. Pupils-Oriented Methods are Inquiry Methods, Field Trip Methods, Playing Methods, Discovery Methods, Group Methods, Demonstration Methods, Dramatization Methods, and Project Methods. A method therefore is made up of many techniques. A technique is how a teacher organizes his teaching. A technique is also a specific instructional device employed by the teachers to teach a lesson.

There are many techniques that could be used in teaching English Language. These are project, inquiry, lecturing, simulation, dramatization, role playing, debate, panel discussion etc. Criteria for the application of techniques according to Lijadu (2019) are: values for students in using such a technique, specific procedures needed to be developed, identification of common mistake in applying the technique and evaluation of students' performance. Strategies on the other hand are particular ways of organizing the different techniques used by the teacher to

teach in the classroom so as to achieve the purpose of instruction. In a strategy, there are usually a number of techniques. These are step-by-step analyst in a technique. The following factors according to Lijadu (2019) should be considered when applying methods and techniques to teach English language.

Furthermore, an effective English teacher should possess the following characteristics (Hook 1959, Trimble 1985, Baldeh 1990, Williams 1990, Oyetunde & Muodumogu 1991, Onukaogu 2001) and they represent what teacher goals should be:

- i. Ability to read well, both silently and orally
- ii. Ability to speak and write clearly
- iii. Awareness of relationship between English and other content areas. The effective English teacher has some idea of how ideas are structured in other content areas and uses materials from these to teach reading and writing.
- iv. A sound knowledge of theories, methods and principle of second language teaching and learning.
- v. Awareness of modes of discourse-exposition, narration, description and argumentation- and the distinction between basic or general English and English for science and technology or for specific or academic purpose.
- vi. Ability to generate a scheme of work from the English curriculum or syllabus and to plan meaningful lessons.
- vii. Skill in providing for individual differences.
- viii. Ability to improve students reading
- ix. Tolerance
- x. Sense of humour. Students learn most readily when the conditions of learning are made pleasant and enjoyable.
- xi. Professional attitude/teachers as researchers. This is reflected in a commitment to self-development, attendance at professional meetings, and reading widely in relevant materials, including journals. It also implies being ingenious in managing or handling challenging or diverse conditions (Akeredolu-Ale, Onekulu & Ogidi 1999; Aborisade 2003; Olaofe 2003).

Emphasizing On Instructional Materials for Teaching and Learning English Language

Teaching methods alone cannot bring about the expected result-oriented classroom in English language. Umeaduagu (2000) observed that instructional materials improve the effectiveness of instruction. Dike (2012) also posited that instructional materials are infrastructural facilities that are used to ensure effective teaching and learning in English language. Instructional materials that can be

utilized for effective teaching of English language are classified into two main groups (Commonwealth Secretarial, 1993).

- i. **Software:** This includes video tapes transparencies, films, film strips, charts, graphs, chalk boards, slides and other printed materials.
- ii. **Hardware:** This includes over head projector (OHP), slide projector, film projector, drawing table, etc. Kahn (1991) further classified materials into six main groups-printed materials, individualized study materials etc as in table below:

The Six Classification of Instructional Materials

Printed Materials	Individualized Study Materials	Curriculum Materials
- Books	- Topic Boxes	- New Curricular
- Periodical	- Resources Boxes	- New Curriculum Material
- Newspapers	- Prepared Units of Work	
-Clippings Documents Topic boxes	- Work Cards Starter Units and Ideas	
Projected Media	Large Scale Visual Aids	Media from Real and Simulated Life
- Film Strips - Slides - Tape-Slide Programmes - Loop Film - 8mm and 16mm Films -Micro-Computer Programme - Video Tapes and Cassettes - Audio Tapes and Cassettes - Records (discs)	- Map - Chart - Posters - Drawing - Pictures - Painting Photographs	- Models - Artefacts -Specimens Instruction Games and Puzzles - Manipulative Toys Including Puppets

Conclusion

Effective teaching and learning English language according to Dike (2012) means creating learning environments where students are actively participating and engaged in the materials that are crucial to students learning. Students are more likely to learn and retain what is learnt thereby achieving result-oriented English language classroom if teachers are well-grounded in the subject matter with adequate instructional resources. What all these point to is that, there is a need for improved English teaching and learning in Nigerian schools. For improved teaching and learning to take place, those who teach English must understand the concept of English teaching as a second language and what goals they should aim at achieving.

Recommendations

1. Strengthening Teachers Education Programmes. A longer period for in-service training is needed to be able to provide:

- i. More Academic Content: This should include some familiarity with different forms of written English especially the English of Science and Technology. It is pertinent to mention in this regard that the introduction of COMSKIP and COMSKIPTECH has drawn attention to “those special characteristics of scientific and technical texts written in English-those characteristics that make scientific and technical English writing different from other forms of written English discourse” (Trimble 1985).
- ii. More professional content
2. Institutionalizing In-Service Training. This means that training and retraining must be an integral part of the school life.
3. Access to Books. Relevant books need to be provide in schools to encourage teachers to read. Teachers must be helped to love to read and to actually read and become engaged readers for two key reasons. One, to improve their knowledge of English and two, they will help “create students who are, in turn engaged readers”.
4. Reward System. This means that teachers’ promotion is linked to passing a periodically conducted English proficiency test, and excellent teaching qualities are looked out for and are rewarded in some tangible way. Ukeje (2000) is of the view that subjecting teachers to periodic tests will encourage to make efforts grow academically and it will be in line with what is done in the United States of America.

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