

Mother Tongue and Performance of Junior Secondary School Students in English Language; Past, Present and Future

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Abstract

The Poor performance of students in English Language in our secondary schools has been traced to their poor reading and comprehension. This could be attributed to non – provision of children's needs. Many parents do not buy textbooks for their children to practice what they have been taught at home. Uncaring attitude of students to their learning of English Language as a second language also contributes to their poor performance students do not stay in the classrooms for many periods. Also government's promises to provide textbooks to students are not always fulfilled. Large number of students in the classroom is another problem of poor performance of students in English Language. At times, students cannot take down what they are taught under this poor condition. Insufficient numbers of qualified English language teachers in Government Schools also lead to poor performance of students in English Language. There are not enough chairs and desks in the classroom for easy learning and writing for the students and incentives are not provided for the teachers of English Language to make them committed. This paper therefore seeks to explore the mother's tongue and the performance of Junior Secondary School students in English Language from the past, present and future and make recommendations on the way out.

Key words: *Reading, English Language, Mother Tongue, Junior Secondary School, Poor Performance.*

Introduction

Language is the primary and the most highly elaborated form of human symbolic activity. It appears the most significant factor which distinguishes man from animals Language also transmits the society's value, attitude, norms and tradition from one generation to another. This is why language is said to be the custodian of culture.

Okedara (2003) defines language as method, means or system of sharing ideas, thoughts, feelings, experiences and so on, using sounds, signs, and symbols. She goes further that with language, man is endowed to deal with changes in his environment because of the importance of communication to man. In fact, it could be said that without language, the life of a nation becomes meaningless.

In Nigeria, there are three major languages that are recognised politically and educationally by the federal government. These languages are Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. English Language, according to Hornsby (2006) is 'the language, originally of England, now spoken in many other countries and used as a language of international communication throughout the world.' It is the officially approved and recognised language of communication in Nigeria, with this various tribe in Nigeria interact with one another more easily.

Moreover, the main efforts at developing English Language came from Christian Missionaries who were anxious to convert the indigenous population to their religion.

It is therefore became accepted among Nigerians who wished to take part in national activities, that a choice of national languages, unconnected with inter – ethnic hostilities became imperative.

English Language is used in all institutions in Nigeria starting from primary schools to the universities. Thus, English has crept into the national and international activities of Nigeria. However, due to the fact that each Nigerian has his/her mother tongue, each faces a lot of problem in proper mastery and usage of English language, such problems are the competence and performance in the usage of the language. This study is therefore set out to examine mother tongue and the performance of junior secondary school students in English Language past, present and future focusing on the student's competence and performance in the mother tongue.

CONCEPT OF COMPETENCE AND PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Opoola (2001) defines competence as ability skilfulness, command and knowledge takes to perform in the concept ascribe to the effective use of the mastered by the speaker of a language while communicating with another speaker the same language.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language Glossary (TEFL 2004) defines communicative competence as the ability to use the language effectively for communication, having this type of competence involves acquiring both socio – linguistic and linguistic knowledge (or developing the ability to use the language accurately, appropriately and effectively).

Alo (2003) says that communication is concerned with the knowledge and ability which speakers need to possess in order to use language appropriately in communicative situations. For example, if I know English Language, it means I can use the resources of English (sounds, words, phrases, sentences, rhetorical devices) correctly and appropriately in given contexts and situation. Not only that I must have other kinds of knowledge of socio – linguistic in nature. Linguistic competence embraces the knowledge forms (sounds, lexicon, grammar, and usage). This type of knowledge enables the language user to produce well performed utterance and sentences.

Atoye (2001) says the distinguished feature of the communication competence model, initially was its insistence on teaching the learner not the linguistic structure of language but the actual use in various contexts, otherwise known as registers. While the grammatical competence model has its immediate goal the learner's mastery of the syntactic structure, otherwise referred to as the grammar English. However, Atoye proposes the merging of the grammatical model with Communicative Grammar Model (CGM). He opined that teacher should teach basic components of English as well as teach students the oral aspects of English Language. According to Atoye (2001) the communicative competence model, being proposed, unlike the communicative model does not recognise the importance of grammatical competence but in fact, holds a firm grip of grammatical structure as essential aspects of knowledge of English to be acquired by any would be successful of the language.

Opoola (2001) mentions variables that are responsible for incompetence among the competent user of English as a second language. In his submission, the following factors can hinder good performance in English – psychological impediment, interference phenomenon, error avoidance phenomenon, educational background, family status and profession, reading habit, mimicry, speech apparatus, defects and fear of examination.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Where there is more than one language in a community, there is a great possibility that one of the languages will acquire prestige to itself while the others will not. Several factors determine the choice and use of language of an individual. These range from economic to political, to social. The English Language in Nigeria has utilitarian value for the average use because it enjoys special recognition in the fields of administration, education, industry, inter – ethnic communication, media, entertainment and international communication. As the language of administration in Nigeria,

English Language permeates the three tiers of government; Federal, State and Local. This is because government policies and official publications are written in English. Also the Nigerian constitution is written in English Language and indeed it is difficult for any presidential aspirant who cannot speak English Language to qualify for nomination.

The place of English Language in the country's educational system cannot be overemphasized. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), made provision for language(s) in education, and the language provisions of the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Although the policy stipulates that mother tongue be used as the medium of instruction in the crucial primary education and for the attainment of basic education literacy, it confers a special status on English Language by making it the language of instruction from the upper primary school onwards.

Due to the multilingual nature of the country, English Language performs the role of integrating the different ethnic groups in the country, thereby assisting in the task of nation – building through the achievement of integration and stability without which any nation can develop meaningfully. The English Language in Nigeria therefore functions most importantly as a symbol of national unity.

But how has English Language fared so far in Nigeria? English has become firmly established as a second language in the country. The fact that many have been exposed to English Language would make one to presuppose that their children would fare well with the language in an educational setting.

Babatunde (2001) confirms this in the expression of disappointment on the falling standard of English Language of Senior Secondary Schools leaver whose mastery of the language was expected to increase with the introduction of the six – year senior secondary educational programme which provided longer years of exposure to English Language. So, although many things went wrong for many reasons, the problem of falling standard or decreased proficiency in English Language has as much to do with the teachers as well as the learners.

THE METHODS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

Method is the theoretical underpinning of teaching. It is usually evolved from the principles and practices generally held as current and acceptable in a particular discipline at a given point in time.

A teacher requires the knowledge of methods as well as he does of the subject matter. Indeed, any teaching devoid of method is like presenting tea without sugar to a non – diabetic parson! It is the ingredient that makes the soup. The language teacher that lacks the methods of teaching will have his energy wasted and leave the learners worse after the lesson than he met them. It is the method he uses that will make him memorable to the learners long after the lesson. Method is broader than technique; the latter comprises the questions asked by the teacher and his ways of asking them during the lesson, his lesson plan, arrangement of his classroom, manners of relating with the learners and other classrooms – related but teacher – initiated activities. Lawal and Olajide (2004) emphasizes that the teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL) should not only have knowledge of the subject matter, but also be sensitive to the needs of the learners. Olajide (2009) underscores the relevance of methods to the teaching of English at the secondary school level in the second context as he observes, “the dynamic teacher... knows that there cannot be effective teaching – learning without appropriate teaching methods”.

There have been many methods of language teaching, each method has had its period of popular acceptability, due to its striking features and efficacy, but none can be said to be the best. What has always been the recommendation is that English teacher is flexible in the choice of methods (Olajide, 2009). No old method is completely useless. One method we feel may be appropriate for the teaching programme is Grammar Translation Methods (GTM).

THE GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHODS (GTM)

Dated back to the 19th century, the Grammar Translation Method is the foremost traditional method of teaching a foreign language, especially an endangered language. It was evolved by Kelly (1969), a German scholar who opined that the knowledge of the language is pre-requisite to all types of knowledge. Hatt (2000) explains further that the Grammar Translation Method views language as a combination of discreet written words that can be translated into the foreign equivalents. The method emphasizes the knowledge of rules to create sentences in the target language through the translation will also rigorous translation drills. The following are the features of Grammar Translation Method.

- * Learning the grammatical rules of a language and drawing comparison and contrast between the rules of the learners' mother tongue and the target language as well as emphasizing the few exceptions.
- * Translating vocabularies from the mother tongue and the target language, thus enriching the vocabulary stock of the learners.
- * Making literacy (and not really oracy) its focus; thus emphasizing reading and writing skills. In other words, it strives to enhance accuracy and not necessarily fluency.
- * Class teaching is conducted in the native language, and numerous and relevant examples are given to drill the learners.
- * It conceptualises language in terms of written code, which can best be taught based at the levels of grammatical units.
- * Introducing the Mother tongue (MT) as the medium of instruction.
- * Paying little or no attention to pronunciation as the emphasis is on the communication.
- * Translation of literary texts from the target language to the Mother Tongue (MT). Therefore exposing them to practical written passages.
- * Little or no attention is paid to the context of the text.

However, as teachers of English, it is our belief that methods of teaching are instrumental to effective learning. Specifically, the GTM integrates the MT and targets language. This old methods would seem relevant to the present day ELT because of its unique tendency to enhance the development of the receptive skills of language (listening and reading). Receptive skills need to be sufficiently developed to feed the productive skills of speaking and writing, which can be made possible by permitting the use of the learner's mother tongue.

The Problem of Teaching and Learning of English in the Nigerian Secondary Schools

Vital as the English language is to Nigeria education, its teaching – learning has continued to grapple with fundamental problems. Such problems have to do with the intricate nature of language, the status of English in the country, cumbersome policy regarding language in education, inadequacy of instructional materials and most importantly, poor methods of teaching (Olajide, 2007, 2009). The performance and improvement of the teaching – learning of grammar in the secondary school is specifically of interest to this paper. Grammar is crucial component of school curriculum and how the components are taught should be a concern to all. In this connection, Olajide (2009) identifies the learner's psychological condition, pedagogical inadequacies and the country's political instability as some of the greatest challenges confronting the teaching and learning of English.

The secondary school student is young and impressionistic. The language he speaks and understands (only fairly) is his mother tongue. It should be remembered that the mother tongue has been acquired by the child, relying on the facilities different from those he will now require in school, where he is possibly encountering English for the first time. In the latter context, he is faced with a second language that he must learn in order to record necessary academic progress and societal relevance. He needs far more time to interact with English than he has taken with his mother tongue in order to gain appreciable competence which Alabi (2009) recommends as the goal of language teaching. Even if the time to interact with English is available say on the school time – table, the teaching. Even if the time to interact with English, there would be no successful learning of the language; and where the pupil is well motivated, the problem of mother tongue interference could still pose a hindrance.

As observed by Chomsky (1975), the human brain cherries order and functions in a manner that can be likened to a computer. Once a language has been stored in it (brain), it finds it difficult to take another language, except through proper facilitation. Interestingly, within the secondary school age (this is up to about the first thirteen years of life) a person can be helped to be proficient in as many languages as possible. This underscores the role of the teacher whom Lawal (2006) describes as the “chief resources person”.

The school teacher of English in Nigeria is faced with many problems. His knowledge of English is hardly adequate, since he does not have to be a specialist in English language teaching as he teaches many subjects to a particular class and may not be willing to devote special time to the mastery of English. Thus, he is most likely to teach the subject superficially. His lack of professionalism makes him oblivious of the resources available to him for the effective teaching of English. He also does not quite appreciate the onerous task that decision – making places on the committed and professional English studies teacher. His instruction is not based on any instructional model, through models help to give focus and add value to teaching. In addition to his professional inadequacies, the school teacher of English hardly links up with parents and larger society calls for instructional aids such as books, magazines and pictures, from parents, the teacher and re – invent the teaching – learning process.

There is also the problem of political instability. Successive governments vary the ways they address issues related to Education. However, all of them have accorded English a prominent place in Nigerian education. The English language has continued to enjoy ascendancy over indigenous languages, although many Nigerians are quite uncomfortable with it. Such people wonder why it has been so difficult for the nation to substitute the language with a native one. However genuine the people's worries may be, linguistic realities about Nigeria cannot relegate English, at least, for now. The multilingual nature of the country would make it difficult for a native language to emerge as the lingua franca without leading to acrimonies. Incidentally, the countries that have advanced in the world are those that use indigenous languages in education.

The complex linguistic situation in Nigeria has serious implication for the teaching and learning of English the learner learn from a grossly disadvantaged position, having carried their different mother tongues into the English language classroom to interfere with the situation at hand in order to eradicate domination, marginalisation and suppression, UNESCO (2005) has introduced programmes like Education for All (EFA) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) respectively. The programmes emphasize that education should be made accessible to people all over the world, regardless of gender, and social – cultural differences, no matter the forms of disability they may suffer from.

The major problem confronting the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigerian junior secondary schools are:

1. Language transfer (Interlingual)
2. Misuse of application of rules (Intralingual)
3. Inadequate and misuse of instructional materials and techniques

Language Transfer

Language transfer gives rise to interlingual errors which are based on the interference theory. The transfer of learner's first language patterns into those of the second language constitutes one of the bases for interlingual interference and when it has a negative effect it becomes a problem.

Evidences of first language interference are most prominent at the phonological level. This makes it possible to situate the ethnic background of some Nigerian users of English by the way they speak and write English. These variations are due to the following factors.

- i. The stress pattern
- ii. Absence of some English vowels and consonants in the Nigerian languages.
- iii. The source of exposure to English

Misuse of Application of Rules (Intralingual)

Errors in this category reflect general characteristics of rules of learning e.g. over-generalisation or misuse of application of rules, thereby producing incorrect forms of analogy. Learners make inductive generalizations about the target language system based on the data to which they are exposed. As a result of the restriction based on the data, learners who are ignorant of the exceptions to certain rules of grammar generalize and produce incorrect forms by analogy.

The inability of learners to apply the exceptions to rules leads to errors in the formation of plural and the past tense patterns. The general rule of adding the morpheme to form plural words is applied. For example, it is appropriate to add an "s" to the word "dog" but inappropriate for a word like "fish". The plural form has to be 'fishes' as a result of a specified exception to the rule. The tendency to add the-ed morpheme to any word in the past tense often leads to some wrong forms. By this overgeneralization, the past tense of 'sleep' becomes 'sleped' while that of 'broadcast' becomes 'broadcasted' instead of 'slept' and 'broadcast' respectively.

Inadequate and Misuse of Instructional Materials and Instructional Techniques

Some problems such as mentioned above arise from inadequate and misuse of instructional materials and instructional techniques used by the teacher. The language teacher is expected to be dynamic in his instructional techniques. He should be conversant with the modern trends in language teaching. Teachers who fail to develop on the job are bound to be dormant and ineffective. The assumption by learners that the teacher is infallible makes this type of problem quite dangerous to the teaching and learning process.

Inadequate or no preparation by teachers could also result in bad teaching. Note of lesson which should guide teaching are seldom prepared or made use of by many secondary school teachers while some feel complacent with sketchy schemes of work.

Teacher's use of the indigenous language to communicate ideas in the second language, though a common practice, does not facilitate the learning of second language and its grammar. A teacher's technique of teaching can be said to be faulty if he fails to make use of instructional materials where they are required.

Implications for English Language Teaching and Learning

The significance and causes of problems discussed so far have serious implications for teaching and learning of English language. Errors impair the intelligibility of both the spoken and written forms of English, hence the need to eliminate or at least minimize its occurrence. For effective communication therefore, the two practical criteria of intelligibility and acceptability must be met. The language teacher has a Herculean task ahead of him in the attainment of effective communication. He must, for a start, be proficient in the target language; he must possess apt content and pedagogical skills if effective teaching is desired.

Growing out of the first language phenomenon is the assumption that is not common for a second language user to attain equal mastery with native speakers. All the same, learners' errors could be minimized if they are exposed to the target language early enough.

The treatment of phonological errors should be carried out with all seriousness. The aural-oral skills which are often poorly taught due to paucity of resources both material (language laboratory, tapes and other audio aids for listening and production skills) and Human (qualified and professionally competent phoneticians) must be given due consideration.

The misapplication of rules of the target language, which often leads to intra-lingual errors, can be minimized if such rules are positively presented to learners. It is relevant to say that even the rules are explicit; learners' effective mastery of the linguistic generalizations is largely dependent on their practical application of rules in the construction of utterances, rather than their conscious understanding of the rule in question. Such rules should therefore be carefully presented and followed up with constant practice and reinforcement.

Teachers' misuse of teaching materials and techniques can be remedied by teachers and language curriculum developers. The latter should be charged with the development of meaningful and graded items which are suitable to second language learning. The ability of the teachers to make appropriate selection is of paramount importance.

Conclusion

English as a second language in Nigeria is used across the domains, its teaching and learning has however not been too successful, the problem can be minimised through teachers' and learners commitment to the teaching and learning process. The art of spelling can be perfected through constant practice and reading. Learners should be encouraged to cultivate the habit of constant use of the dictionary when in doubt about spelling of any word. Apart from the consent and pedagogical skills which teachers must acquire they must acknowledge the inestimable role of motivation in second language learning. Since English is so important in all sectors of our national life government, legislation, judiciary, religion and education it is important that the learner see it as an indispensable learning tool which, if well studied, understood and applied, will facilitate development in order areas of the intellect and will greatly assist the speaker to express his creativity.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion in this paper the following recommendations were made:

- * The method of teaching and learning of English language in Nigeria should be emphasised and improved so that all Nigerians will learn and understand the language.
- * For the sake of unity and development of Nigeria, English language should be maintained as official language of communication in Nigeria.

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