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## **Challenges of Effective English Language Learning in Nigeria Secondary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper dwells on the factors that hamper the learning of the English language in Nigeria's secondary schools. The factors that influence the students' effective learning of the English Language as second language learners, the attitude of students towards the study of the English language, the nature of teacher/student interaction, the methods of teaching and the*

*availability of teaching aids in Nigeria secondary schools are looked into. Judging from the WAEC results of some secondary schools in Nigeria, it is observed that students have continually failed the English language. The percentage pass has always been below 40%. It is also observed that the English Language textbooks used have the majority of their stories for illustration embedded in foreign cultures. The researchers conclude that without adequate provision of human and material resources, the learner cannot effectively learn in a second language situation.*

**Key words:** Second language learner, percentage pass, methods of teaching, human and material resources, textbooks.

### **Background to the Study**

Nordquist defined English as a Second Language as ‘a traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers’. (Web) The colonial masters introduced the English language to Nigerians as they did not value the native languages. The English Language was considered as the only official means of instruction in training people to serve in the government and the only official means of communication.

The schools’ curricula were structured after the culture, education and history of the colonialists transmitted through the use of the English language; this gave the natives no other choice than to acquire the English language. Thus the English Language became Nigeria’s lingua franca. That is the language of ‘convenience’ for communicating with diverse ethnic groups being tutored and related in a common language.

The quality, efficiency and effectiveness of Nigeria’s education and educational curriculum relied on the English language as the lingua franca cum official language. This was as a result of prejudicial disposition of the colonialists to Nigerian languages. According to Omelewa, Rev. Metacalf Sunter, an inspector of schools, once dismissed the vernacular as “only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use to civilization” (7)

English became a second language in Nigeria due to the multi-lingual nature of the nation and it helped in the unification of the nation. In Nigerian homes, children were taught from the cradle to speak the English language as a language of communication. People speaking any of the Nigerian languages in environments where the English language would have been spoken are derogatorily considered as not to have arrived.

This derogation and relegation appeared to have found approval by the colonial masters who instituted laws to favour the English language above the native languages. Example is the Education ordinance of 1882 as stated by Tomori:

That the subjects taught shall be the reading and writing of the English Language, Arithmetic and in the case of females, plain Needlework. The Grammar of the English Language, English history and Geography, especially of the British Empire, may be taught or not, at the option of the teacher, provided that if taught, they shall be taught as class subject. The English Language being taught in the Nigerian secondary schools is taught as a second language (L2). (150-151)

The English Language became an indispensable tool for national unity, integration and global communication. Baldeh referred to it as “a window on the world” (7). Learning the English Language equips Nigerians to confidently meet other people from other English-speaking nations of the world for all transactions. Above all, students need to acquire a competence in the English Language in order to be fluent in it.

However, despite the use of the English language, the standard of the English language in Nigeria is gradually waning. This decrease in standard is a worry to many scholars in Nigeria.

Oluikpe asserts that:

it will be recalled that the proficiency level of English at all levels of our education system has become a matter of great concern to the educationist and education planner in Nigeria.(2)

The average Nigerian child still finds it overwhelmingly difficult in learning the skill of written and spoken English. This problem is unequivocally placed at the door step of teachers of English.

Ashby notes that:

The quality of English used in the classroom is such that all pupils are at a serious disadvantage. It cannot be doubted that thousands of the most gifted are unable to further their

education because they were not taught well the language in which they were examined (82)

Students of English as a second language always encounter problems in learning and using the target language because they have already attained communicative competence in their native language (NL). Baldeh supporting this assertion says that it is utterly naive to think that the child in a second language context learns language usage in the same way as the child in a native setting. According to the canons of the discipline of language pedagogy, the more the difference between the system of the target language (TL) the more difficult learning invariably becomes and the smaller the difference, the easier the learning. Lado affirms this observation thus:

The student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. (2)

Second language learners experience overwhelming challenges in learning the second language and these challenges are due to the differences between the forms and meanings of English and those of the native language.

Hindrances, technically called interlingual errors encountered from the native language are one of the causes of the difficulties experienced while learning a second language. The errors are usually pronounced in the areas of the learner's pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary.

Examples of some pronunciation errors found among some Igbo learners of English as a second Language are evident signs of these solecisms:

1. 'The rolyly is coming' for 'The lorry is coming'
2. 'I want you to major this piece of land' for 'I want you to measure this piece of land.'
3. 'The load is clear' for 'The road is clear.'

This is a problem of phoneme replacement, arising from non-existence of certain phonemes in certain dialect of Igbo.

One of the causes of these errors is the scarcity of English language teachers or specialists. Unlike in other school subjects, according to Adesina, English language faces the problem of 'shortage of teaching staff and concomitant

question of the quality of those in service' (6). Paul also observes that the absence of qualified teachers have influenced the use of various languages in Nigeria; and the teachers of English language being referred as teachers who can speak the received pronunciation and can write the standard English.(9) A teacher should be articulate and well-informed about the language he teaches. One cannot teach what one is not proficient in. A second language teacher must have thorough knowledge of his subject matter.

Another cause of this problem is the unofficial use of Pidgin in Nigeria. It distorts the right use of the English language. Pidgin is used in Imo and Cross River States as L2. It is used in Warri in Delta State as a mother tongue, that is, as Creole. It has found speakers in almost every area where communication is required. Pidgin is frequently used in the radio and television media in Nigeria. Students in both high schools and tertiary institutions in Nigeria love speaking Pidgin in order to relate with a particular class of such language users.

However, despite all these problems, learning English in Nigeria is imperative as English is a global language without which communication with the outside world will be impossible. Students must be assisted, encouraged and aided to learn the English language for their ultimate success in Nigeria and outside.

### **The Challenges Encountered in the Learning Process**

Poor results in the English language in West African School Certificates are an enduring problem. Among the factors that affect effective study of the English language are interference, inadequate use or non-use of teaching aids and qualifications and experience of English language teachers. These factors go hand in hand in hampering the effective study of the English language in our schools.

The problem of interference has to do with bringing Igbo speech patterns into English. Igbo, Yoruba and Nupe belong to the 'Kwa family.'

English and Igbo belong to different linguistic families, and so the rate of language interference is quite high. Interferences can occur in different levels of the language, for example in phonology and syntax. Igbo being a tonal language, an Igbo student, learning to speak English tends to mix Igbo language structures with English language patterns. There is therefore the tendency to speak in syllables, each of which is divided into tones, high or low. Folarin observed that the learner selects features of his own language

that approximates to that of the target language; hence many Igbo speakers tend to substitute tone pitch for English salience or stress pitch.

Another cause of interference is transliteration. This is because the English language and the Igbo language belong to different cultural backgrounds. When Igbo students speak Igbo, they try to convert their native experiences conceived in the Igbo language and culture into an experience in the second language. This leads to transliteration.

	Correct Forms	Transliterations
1.	The girl is menstruating.	Blood is coming from the girl's anus
2.	I perceive the smell of a perfume.	I hear the smell of a perfume.
3.	Pray for my success in my exams.	Put me in your prayers for my exams
4.	I understood all you wrote in your letter	I heard all you told me in your letter.

Another area of interference is the mixture of the mother tongue and the second language. Often one hears such expressions as these:

MIXTURE

ENGLISH

- |                            |                                   |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Anam akpo my friend.    | I am calling my friend.           |
| 2. Bia zaram ulo tomorrow. | Come and sweep my house tomorrow. |

Fries noted that individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their native languages and cultures both productively when attempting to speak in the language and when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by the natives.

The third factor that has been observed is the unavailability of teaching aids. This obstructs the successful teaching and learning of the English language. We can not underestimate the use of Information technology in teaching students. Audio-visual devices provide the teacher with materials for carrying out the study demanded by recent teaching and learning goals, though the cost implication of such state-of –the –art devices may not be affordable for some secondary schools.

Audio visual aids like tape recorders, television sets and teaching machines are necessary for effective language study, because they are powerful, interest-arousing devices.

The fourth factor is the qualification and experiences of the disseminators of knowledge- The teachers.

Freeman recommended that a good formal training of the teachers should be considered imperative and he maintained that at least fluency and correctness in the speaking of the language are definite 'Musts' for the teacher. Fafunwa agreed with Freeman. He stressed that in order for the teacher to do an effective job, he would need to be well-educated and adequately trained professionally in-order to train students that are knowledgeable in the English Language.

The fifth factor is the quality and types of textbooks used in teaching the English language in schools. These books are responsible for the poor quality of instruction and comprehension in the subject. Ubahakwe believed that the problem at present had not changed from what it had been when books used in African schools were those intended for English schools. He noted that the authors merely presented "Africa" in the title, exchanged African names for English ones. The students past experiences were never considered in structuring these textbooks or instructional materials.

The sixth factor that hinders the leaning of English is the students' attitude to the subject. The students do not display any desire to learn the English language ie the Arts, they are rather interested in studying other science subjects other than English because people believe that our world is a world of science and technology and there is no place for the Arts ie the English language. Science students believe that the world can exist without the Arts.

The seventh factor is the problem of the large class: There is no perfect solution to the large class except that of breaking it up into smaller classes. The success of the teaching and learning process depends largely on the quantity of students in each class. The number of students a teacher teaches determines the extent of the teacher's efficiency in teaching and assessing the performances of the students in the class, and the methods to be used in getting the desired results, the fewer students per teacher, the better.

The eighth is methodology. Wilkins defines a method as:

A set of materials organized into a fixed pedagogic sequence, requiring the use of classroom activities which embody a certain view of language learning. (57)

Teachers of English at times make use of wrong methods. Mackey believes that the method used is the cause of success or failure in language learning; as according to him it is the method that determines the worth of language instruction.

### **Teaching Methods Eclectically Used**

#### **1. The Grammar-Translation Method**

This is an archaic teaching method that involves the memorization of complex rules. Here pronunciation is not given adequate attention. The only advantage of this method is that highly intelligent students acquire the rigorous techniques of taking dictation and translation. The disadvantage is that there is a total neglect of communication skills. Concerning this method, Baldeh says:

There is little or no stress attached to accurate pronunciation and intonation. The student is nurtured on a diet of artificial forms of the Language-forms which are rare, old fashioned and of little practical use in most cases (54).

The method is not demanding on the teacher; the teacher is always passive. Rivers though, criticizes the method thus: 'The teacher does not need to show much imagination in planning his lessons, since he usually follows his textbook page by page, and exercise by exercise.'(17)

The student, therefore, cannot develop the communicative competence required in expressing himself in the target language because he cannot tap any new information from the teacher.

#### **2. The Audio-Lingual Method**

This is the most widely used foreign language method today. It has its roots in behaviorist psychology. It lays emphasis on speaking and writing. Brooks suggests that the label audio-lingual is less confusing than aural-oral. It also seems to be the dominant method on the Nigerian educational scheme.



### 3. The Direct Method

This method is a protest against the grammar translation method. Grammar was taught only at the advanced stage in the foreign language, the native language is not allowed to intrude. The aim is to make students develop ability to think in the foreign language. The disadvantage of this method is that students are forced to communicate haphazardly. This results in inaccurate fluency. The method did not take into consideration that a learner already possesses a language and he might transfer this native tongue habits into the foreign language. This method usually requires that a teacher be fluent in the target language.

The researchers suggest that the best of all the methods is the direct method as according to Rivers 'the direct method provides an exciting and interesting way of learning the foreign language (and) it proved to be successful in releasing students from the inhibitions all too often associated with speaking a foreign tongue, particularly at the early stages' (20)

#### **Educational Implications of Challenges of Effective English Language Learning In Nigeria**

##### **A. Implications For Teachers**

There is need to provide adequate human and material resources, organize refresher courses and workshops to equip teachers of the English language,

In-order to provide enough motivation for the students, the teachers should use the available teaching materials to make their lessons interesting. Teachers should also enrich their environment with materials to serve as teaching aids.

##### **B. Implications for State Education Commission**

The school board on the directive of the government recommends textbooks and allocates the time used in teaching the subjects. The textbooks are sometimes inadequate because they had been chosen without referring to the classroom teachers that actually make use of them in teaching the language.

The teaching loads also affect the effective performance of the teachers of English. If their teaching loads are much, they will not have time to prepare for their lessons and give assignments which they have to mark alongside with the essays.

Supervision of Classroom Teaching by Inspectors from the Board should be more often in order to enable the State Education Commission to be constantly aware of the effectiveness of some its policies. If there is a close link between the Commission and the schools, then unpopular policies could be changed without much damage and the students will benefit from all relevant policies that will encourage the students to learn the English language with ease.

### **C. Implication for Students**

Most students study under the handicap of not having textbooks. The result is that both the students and classroom teachers who teach them are placed in the impossible position of teaching and learning without textbooks.

Students should however endeavour to always make use of their school libraries, read all available materials on the relevant topics and where in difficulty consult the teacher for clarification.

### **D. Implication for Parents.**

Parents should strive to provide their wards with relevant textbooks for English language.

Parents should look into their childrens' class works and home works to scrutinize what the children do in school.

They should also encourage their wards to visit public libraries.

Finally, the institutions of higher learning should admit more candidates to read education/English language so as to fight the problem of inadequate human resources.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

In view of the above findings, the following are discernible facts to be considered and checked:

- Teaching Aids should be improvised by the teachers and the one which cannot be improvised should be purchased by the government or school authorities.
- Teachers should update themselves in modern teaching methods through reading journals. This should be a sort of supplement to their academic qualification.

- English language teachers should be allotted few teaching periods in a week, to enable them have time to prepare for their lessons and give assignments which they have to mark alongside with the essays.
- Some allowances should be given to English language teachers as a form of incentive for the numerous exercises they carry out.
- Teachers should be encouraged to attend refresher courses and workshops on the teaching of English language.
- A forum should be created by the government where research findings should be discussed by the researchers and teachers of the English Language in order to make them current in the field.
- Schools should have literary / writers club or at least a dramatic club where students should be involved in meaningful activities.
- More vacancies should be created to admit candidates to be trained as teachers of the English language, so as to produce more teachers to contend with the large population of students in our school.
- Library periods should be created in the timetable, for students to go to the library and consult reading materials.

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