

A Review of the Status of English Language in the Nigerian School System

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ABSTRACT: *The paper reviews the status of English language in Nigerian school system. Various roles of English in Nigerian societies were observed before the status of the language in the primary, secondary and post-secondary school levels were observed. While English language is a subject in some societies at the lower primary level (following the NPE provision for language in the curriculum), it is a subject and the medium of instruction in the upper primary and secondary level. In the post-secondary school level, English is the medium of instruction while General English is introduced to students as a subject in the first and second year respectively. Owing to the significant roles the English language plays in Nigeria educational system, the writer recommended that students' attitude to the language should change for better. Teachers of English were also advised to improve on their teaching methods, while the government should ensure that qualified hands are employed in the schools. Curriculum planners were also encouraged to review the curriculum on English to harmonize the culture and indigenous languages of the learners since language and culture are two sides of a coin.*

KEY WORDS: English, status, primary, secondary and tertiary level

INTRODUCTION

Bamgbose (1971), Adegbija (1989), Williams (1990), Jegede (1990), Alebiosu (1991), Lawal (1995), Adegbite and Akindele (1999), Makinde (2001), Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012), Danladi (2013), Ola-Busari (2014) and Olorunsogo (2019) had stressed the roles and importance of English language in Nigeria as a whole, especially as a language of education. English Language came to Nigeria through the activities of Christian missionaries and colonial masters. However, it can no longer be considered as a foreign language in Nigeria. The language, according to Akindele and Adegbite (1999), had been cultivated, redomesticated and indiginized in a socio-cultural milieu. Alebiosu (1991) and Akere (1995) observed the impact of English language right from the pre-colonial era. According to them, the Educational Ordinance of 1882 and 1926 elevated English language to an enviable position. Since then, English language has dominated every aspect of Nigeria live. By a means of generalization, English is the official language in Nigeria, it is the language of law; commerce and business; language of religion, advertisement and so on. Danladi (2013) opined that no indigenous language can play these vital roles played by English in Nigeria. Nigeria, according to Olorunsogo (2019), is a multilingual nation with over two-hundred and fifty languages. Therefore, according to him, English language plays a unifying role. Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012) is of the opinion that English language is the only road to achieving development in Nigeria. Ola-Busari (2014) submitted that English language plays a prominent role in education delivery in

Nigeria and Namibia. Hoang (2020) discussed the roles and status of English in present day Vietnam and the entire world. No wonder, Adegbiya (1989) affirmed that English is the linguistic alpha and omega in Nigeria. Williams (1990) stated that English does not only serve the national purpose in Nigeria but an international one also, since it is the language Nigeria uses in communicating with the outside world. The roles of English language then, according to Makinde (2001) justified its being introduced into the school curriculum at all levels of education in Nigeria.

English at the Primary School

At the primary school level, many researchers, including Fafunwa, Macauley and Sokoya (1989), Akinbote, Oduolowu and Ogunsanwo (2003) emphasized the importance of indigenous languages, especially, the child's mother tongue as a medium of instruction in schools. However, English language has become the major medium of instruction, especially in the private primary schools. This is in contrary to the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1998) as declared by the Nigerian Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) that:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall be progressively used as a medium of instruction ... (p.14).

From the above declaration, it is clear that the mother tongue (MT), or the language of the immediate community (LIC) is expected to be the medium of communication in the pre-primary and junior primary level, while English language is expected to be taught as a subject. English language is expected to be introduced as a medium of instruction to pupils in the upper primary level, and at the same time be taught as a subject. However, in schools today, especially in private schools, English is introduced to the pupils right from kindergarten level.

English at the Secondary School

At the secondary school, English language plays a dominant role in the education delivery at the level. The medium of instruction right from JS1 to SS3 is English. English is not only a compulsory subject that a student must register for at Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE); it is a compulsory subject that must be passed.

Literature-in-English is introduced to students in the junior secondary schools. However, in some primary schools, especially the private schools, students are introduced to literature-in-English. Literature-in-English is not a compulsory subject like English language. English language dominates almost every activity that takes place in the secondary schools. It is a subject on the curriculum; it is the major medium of instruction. Textbooks are written in English language; assessment and evaluations are conducted in English. Inter-school debates and other academic competitions are organized in English.

Parents often employ the services of private English teachers for their children. A good mastery of English language at this level is believed to be a ticket to greatness in life as observed by Adegbija (1994) that:

The learning of English is one of the major reasons why most people send their children to school and that this should not be delayed. Its delay could be interpreted as an attempt of government to hold back their children from legitimate advance in civilization (p.32).

In summary, the National Primary Education (NPE) provision for language in the curriculum clearly gives special recognition to the English language in Nigeria education system, especially in the primary and secondary schools. The table below can be used to explain this:

Table 1: Roles of English Language in Nigerian Schools

Education level	Languages	Language Role/Status
Pre-primary	1. Mother Tongue (MT) 2. Language of Immediate Community (LIC)	Medium Medium
Primary	1. MT/LIC Yrs 1-3 2. English Yrs 4-6 Yrs 1-6	Medium Medium Subject
JSS	1. English 2. MNL (2) 3. Arabic/French	Medium /Subject ** Subject ** Subject *
SSS	1. English 2. MNL (1) as L2	Medium/ Subject Subject**

Source: Akere (1995) p.185.

key

** Compulsory

*Elective

MT- Mother Tongue

LIC- Language of the Immediate Community

MNL- Major Nigerian Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba)

The above table describes the important roles English plays in the education system in Nigeria, especially at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels. Pupils are expected to be introduced to English language in the junior primary school as a subject. This is done in order to prepare them ahead of the time when the language will be the medium of instruction. During this preparatory stage, English language appears every day on the school timetable. Later, in the upper primary level, a child in most schools is forbidden to express himself/herself in the mother tongue, which some teachers often ignorantly tagged “vernacular”. In the secondary school, a child is expected to pass English language in the JSS examination before he can move to the next level, that is,

senior school. Any child who fails English at the junior school in most states would be asked to re-sit or repeat the examination as the case may be. When a child re-sits an examination, he or she re-takes the paper (s) within a short organized period of time. However, when a child repeats in JS3 class, he or she is not allowed to move to SS1 class with his or her mates. He or she repeats all the papers taken in JS3 examination.

In the senior secondary school, a student who demonstrated a good mastery of English or who performs brilliantly in English language is usually selected to represent his/her school in inter-school academic debates and competition. Any school that records 50% or above credit pass in English language in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination is considered a good school and it is ascribed special prestige. A student who passed all other subjects but failed English language cannot be regarded as a successful student because admission to higher institutions is usually based on a credit pass in English language, irrespective of course of study or discipline applied for. That is why the record of mass failure, according to Oladunjoye (2005), had always been a major concern to educators such as Ubahakwe (1979,1991), Obemeata (1995) and Kolawole (1998). This is because, according to Adegbite (2005):

The mastery of English holds high hopes for the individual Nigerian learner in his own social advancement and the socio-politic-economic growth of the nation. To function effectively as a fully integrated member of the society, the Nigerian learner requires an appreciable degree of competence, that is almost comparable to the native speaker's in the language ... (p.111).

Afolayan (1995) also discussed extensively the ineffectiveness in the presentation of English in Nigeria. Most educators and writers are concerned about students' achievement and effectiveness in English in the secondary school because it is in the secondary school where students can be developed for future challenges that await them in higher institutions.

Various writers have expressed their concerns over students' attitudes to English language, which eventually affect their achievement in it. Most students' attitude to English language right from secondary school is negative. According to Oladunjoye (2005), poor learners of English pervade all segments of Nigerian society and there are abundant indicators that if problems associated with the teaching and learning of English are not adequately addressed, there will be serious implications. Also, majority of students perceived English as a difficult subject; they learn the subject because they have no option.

English at the Post-Secondary School Level

At the post-secondary school level, the dominant medium of instruction is English language. Higher institutions give admission to only students who made credit a credit pass in English at O' level. The assumption is that a student who has not made a credit pass in English may not be effective in its usage and may not be able to cope with challenges that may arise from it.

Apart from that, the official language of communication on Nigerian campuses is English. Textbooks are written in English language. Continuous Assessment tests and examinations are conducted in the language. Papers are presented at conferences, seminars and workshops in English language. No wonder, Akere (1995) argued that English retains its dominant position in education delivery system in Nigeria even till today. Adeyanju and Egwuogu (2003) observed that effective English usage is a crucial need for students in tertiary institutions who must perform a variety of academic tasks through the instrumentality of the English language. A proper mastery of language skills, according to them, equips students with necessary ability with which to perform requisite academic tasks in their respective disciplines. This is in consonance with the view of Jegede (1990) who declared that the lifeblood of the country's educational system is English. According to him, students' ability to undertake higher education in any discipline depends on their achievement in English.

It is widely believed that most students who cannot cope with higher education are usually deficient in English language. Students' ability to express themselves clearly in an examination will determine whether they have mastered certain concepts they were taught or not. However, when a student finds it difficult to express himself or herself in English during an examination, the examiner may erroneously conclude that he or she is poor, and that he or she has not mastered what has been taught in the class during the teaching-learning process.

English language takes prominent position in Nigeria education system right from primary, secondary to tertiary level. Students' academic performance at various levels in English has always been a major concern to various stakeholders. Lawal (1995) described English in the curriculum unique because it serves dual roles: one, as a means, and two, as an end in itself. Therefore, language curriculum is subject to various forms of modification day-in-day-out in order to give room for improvement. English is the lingua franca in Nigeria; the only language that unites the multilingual nation called Nigeria. As long as any of the indigenous language cannot be elevated as lingua franca in Nigeria owing to mutual suspicion among other indigenous languages, English shall continue to play a dominant role in the educational delivery process in Nigeria and its teaching and learning at various levels of education in Nigeria shall always be given due recognition

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper reviewed the status of English language in Nigerian schools. It stressed various roles English language plays in Nigerian school system. It also observed opinions of experts on the feed on reasons why students' poor performance in the language is on the increase. Therefore, the following recommendations were put forth:

1. Students' attitude to English language should change since English is the official language in Nigeria and the major medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. Students should develop interest in the language. Students should be happy whenever they have English classes.

2. Conscious efforts should be made by teachers to improve students' attitudes to English. They should make their classes interesting. Their teaching methodology should be improved. They should be conscious that a method of teaching adopted in a situation successfully may not be suitable in another situation.

3. Government should ensure that adequate qualified teachers are employed in schools. This will automatically improve the teaching quality of the subject.

4. Curriculum planners should also review the curriculum on English to harmonize the culture and indigenous languages of the learners as a means of enhancing learners' understanding of the subject.

If all the above steps are taken, learners' attitude to English and their performance in the language shall improve. The learners will agree with Adegbija (1994) that English is the linguistic Alpha and Omega in Nigeria if they critically examine the roles and status of the language in the country.

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