

Challenges in the Teaching of use of English Language in Nigerian Institutions: The Polytechnic Experience

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Abstract

The teacher of English Language is faced with a lot of challenges in the process of doing his or her job. The study looked at the place of English Language in Nigeria Tertiary Institutions, the place of English Language in the 21st Century. The study is narrowed to challenges in the Polytechnic Education where the challenges faced by both the teacher and learner are looked at. Useful recommendations are made and the researcher concludes that the teacher as a major factor in the process should make extra efforts in overcoming the challenges.

Introduction

Communicative skill and technical competence of the polytechnic products are critical to their success in both aptitude test and oral interview in recruitment process. Communicative competence is one's capacity to use language effectively and appropriately.

According to Jen and Adakonye (76:2016) Communicative competence linguistically refers to user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and semantics as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately in the language. This is also the speaker's knowledge both of grammatical rules for appropriate use in social contexts.

With the English language as a major medium for communication across borders globally, the lack of its skills may be a barrier in personal and professional development of polytechnic products. It has been observed that polytechnic products face many problems at times of recruitment as a result of their deficiency in written and oral communication skills to express the knowledge gained. Despite graduating with Distinction and upper credit in their respective fields of study the same student encounter problems during job selection procedures as a result of lack of communication skills and technical communication skills and technical competence.

The fact remains that the polytechnic student of twenty first century requires far more than subject knowledge or technical skills to get a job or perform effectively in a work place. This is mainly because of the complex life and work environment that they have to navigate. It is obvious that professional success in the globalized world is linked with the general awareness of the world we live in. Therefore, the arbitrariness in use of words by students' should not for any reason be tolerated. Eyisi (2003) lends credence to this when she asserts that:

If the language is not correct, then what is said is not what it meant, if what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remain undone, if this remains undone, morals and art will deteriorate, justice goes astray, if justice goes astray the people will stand about in helpless confusion in what is said.

It is not unusual to hear expressions such as; my names are “, “I submitted binded copies of my project”, I came to your office but I met your absent”, “I have went there several times”, etc. These vague and nauseating expressions of our students' call for a declaration of a state of emergency in the polytechnic sector as Nigeria cannot afford to be left out in the globalization process. Joshua's (2009:3) pertinent questions are worth quoting:

“Do the polytechnics teach the kind of English they ought to teach?”

“Are our products able to apply appropriately the English we teach them?”

“Are we as teachers of English in the right models for ESL learners?”

“If we are not succeeding in the teaching and learning of English, what then are the challenges and how do we overcome them?”.

The fact is does the English we teach our students guarantee their communicative and technical competence? These incisive questions necessitate emergent evolution in the teaching and learning of use of English in the polytechnic. The role of English teachers becomes crucial and challenging. It is against this backdrop that this paper articulates the challenges facing both the lecturers and polytechnic ESL learners in achieving the main goals and objectives of teaching and learning of use of English in the polytechnic.

The Place of English Language in Nigeria Tertiary Institutions

According to Ugwuanyi, (2013:37); “use of English program has been established in our tertiary institutions to improve the status of the language in the country.” It is obvious that the place of English in Nigeria tertiary institution is second to none. Achebe (1975) one of the resourceful users of English language lends credence to this when he affirms that; “it gave the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual groups in Africa, today where you could abolish the language of erstwhile colonial powers and still retain the facility for mutual communication.” Today, it is a one year course in most Nigeria Universities. In the polytechnic the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) curriculum provides for the Use of English and Communication Skills as a course to be studied all through the duration of National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) as: GNS 101,201,301,401 for first semester and GNS 102,202,302,402 for the second semester. This is to enable the polytechnic ESL learners acquire necessary communicative competence and proficiency in the use of English language for specific purpose (ESP). The purpose is basically to enhance the polytechnic products' interaction and functionality within the global world. The issue is, are these aims and objectives been achieved? It is in lieu of this that Joshua (2009:4) also observe that:

- ❖ Is it of any consequence if technologist (polytechnic graduates) do not speak the standard variety of English?
- ❖ Do we need to graduate products from the polytechnic system who are flawless in their expressions?
- ❖ Is it indeed necessary for our graduates to be master speakers and users of the language?
- ❖ Does the ability or inability of a mechanic or technologist to use or speak the best standard of English affect his output in any way?

The issues are if what the technologist said does not correspond with what it meant; can the technologist do his or her work efficiently? The truth is one cannot underestimate the importance of communicative ability of the student as his or her inability to express his or herself coherently and adequately would mar his or her potentials.

The Place of English Language in the Twenty-First Century

Charles (2006:260-282). Asserts that; “common is the interest mainly in English, making English and data personal development and normal living...”presently the role and status of English are risking very fast worldwide. Kelly (2000) asserts that; in central Europe, the dominance of English is reinforced as more countries are itching to join the European union (EU) in this instance, Nigeria cannot afford to be left behind and the technologist proficiency in English language cannot be an issue to take for granted, as it is an integral part of technical education in Nigeria and being also an international and global language. Lazero and Medulla (2004) lend credence to this; “English in this era of globalization will increase the capacity of people to communicate and exchange ideas and goods across the borders. The English language skill has become a necessity for establishing linkages with the rest of the world in international trade, economic development even in the use of new technology.” Power (2005) also sees; “English as a turban engine of globalization”. Crystal (1997:106) affirms that; “most of the scientific, technology and academic information in the world is expressed in English and over 80% of all information stored in electronic retrieval system is in English”.

There is no doubt that English is a global language looking at its function all over the world. It is in lieu of this that Leiper (1998) affirms that:

A language that most people will acknowledge is Sweeping the planet's physical economic, culture and cyber space... it's a language the young in the developing world, the formal world, and the world yearning for democracy feel compelled to learn. Unlike others in history English is an increasingly classless language. Perhaps, it is because it is the language of digital world. In any case English encompass more than just a convenient means of communication among the global citizens. It is an ideological movement-even by accident.

Ugwuanyi, (2013:37) lends credence to this, when she asserts that:

...To participates in the global world nations, institutions, groups and individuals have to prove that quality. And the competence in English language and other criteria like requisite training and information and communication Technology (ICT) literacy are somewhat kind to English proficiency. It is important to be proficient in it in order to meet up with the demands. It requires achieving only aims in life...

This explains the importance of English language in the current worldwide globalization process. It also implies that without communication skills, the polytechnic products have no place in the globalization process. No upward looking society would undermine the students' communication and technical ability as these are critical to his/her success. This necessitates the sustainable shift action in the teaching and learning of use of English in the Nigerian polytechnic education as no forward looking nation would afford to be left behind. The role of the teacher becomes crucial and challenging in the teaching of the use of English in the polytechnic education.

Challenges in the Teaching and Learning of use of English in the Polytechnic Education

The fact remains that the aims and objectives of teaching and learning of use of English in the polytechnic education have not been achieved as a result of some challenges facing teachers and students. Consequently, this paper articulates the challenges of the teachers as well as that of the learners. It identifies time factor, absence of English laboratory, crowded classes, and teacher's personal inadequacy in teaching effectively, inappropriate use of text books, lack of good text

books, attitude of non-teachers of English, teaching heterogeneous classes etc., as challenges facing the teachers in the teaching of use of English in the polytechnic while the decline in reading culture, foundational problems, idiosyncratic nature of English, lack of adequate attention, lack of text books, lack of experts in the course, socio-economic status of learners etc. are difficulties the students face in learning English.

Challenges Facing the Students

It is unarguable that the difference between two equally good graduates usually boils down to their articulation ability. One of the challenges the polytechnic English learning student is faced with in the qualitative learning of use English is foundational. They have poor English language foundation right from their primary through secondary school education. A survey by Elegba (2012:3) shows that:

Many polytechnic students lack proper foundation in English Language. They have neither learnt nor mastered the basic grammatical structures and their rules at the primary and secondary levels. This affects their knowledge of grammar, lexis, phonology, semantics, spelling and punctuation marks to the extent that some students do not know the symbols of some punctuations talk more of how or when to use them in writing.

The truth is that most of the polytechnic students are not exposed to the standard varieties during early learning stage. According to Obiegbu, (2016:2) "... so standard British English is scarcely the norm. Habit is resistance to change...." Jen and Adakonye, (2016:77) "... Learning a language is fostered when a learner begins with spoken variety as this variety carries all the emotional and cultural nuances of the language which makes creativity in written language easier." It becomes a challenge to the students to learn by internally determined order as opposed to the one determined externally by the teacher.

The student is also faced with the problem of the interlingua challenges as the first language (L1) mother tongue (MT) interfere with English the second language (L2) which has its own distinctive features or characteristics. Second language according to Onuigbo & Eyisi, (2009) "is a technical representation of the functional position of that language rather than its position in sequential order of acquisition." Consequently, the learners impose the Lexico-Syntactic structure of their indigenous language on English as a result of ignorance of the rules of English Language. For examples one would hear expression like: "He is a big man in place of, He is an/a affluent/rich man. The food is sweet in place of – the food is delicious, to hear smell – To perceive a smell, He ate our money-He embezzled public fund etc.

The decline in reading culture is another serious challenge the learner faces in the learning of use of English. The fact is, reading acquaints the learner with correct spellings, punctuations and other basic grammatical mechanics. Douglas (1997:20) affirms that; "every child must become fully competent in reading to succeed in school and discharge responsibilities as a citizen of a democratic society. Sadly, the present wave and overzealous quest for information communication and technology (ICT) has gripped the younger generation in a tenacious and fascinating manner. Instead of making maximum use of the internet facilities to enhance learning they are only engaged in making calls, browsing all day, sending text messages with deviant structures and using the media for scam and other criminal activities than to exert their energy on reading. With this, they are only exposed to listening which is one aspect of language learning. Consequently, we have

products that are not able to speak well, understand simple instruction and get frustrated when faced with challenges of other skills of language.

Lack of adequate attention by the learner is another area of challenge as the student is faced with the issue of no enough sitting space inside the class room as a result of over –populated class room. Sadly, some of those learners may not get sitting space in the class room during lectures, in such conditions, it is near impossible for the student to concentrate and learn effectively.

Furthermore, the students' nonchalant attitude and ignorance is also a challenge to the learner. Most polytechnic students' erroneously believe that the major courses of their areas of specialty are more relevant than they require elective courses from in general studies consequently, they develop apathy towards borrowed courses from other departments especially English. This negatively affects their interest in communication skills. As a result they develop poor reading habits and only a few of them bother to buy relevant available teaching materials or look up words and their meanings in a dictionary thus, resulting to poor vocabulary and diction. The apathy affects their competence in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In fact, the attitude of polytechnic students' has shown that they do not appreciate the significance of the English language and communication as a means of gaining access to their academic pursuit and word of technology. sometimes, these students make cynical comment like, “I am a technologist and not a student of English language”. This comment obviously reveals the students' disaffection for English language and probably their English language teachers. Again, the contrastive consonant and the vowel systems of English are also aspects of English that create some difficulties to ESL learners in a polytechnic as they are not found in their mother tongue. These idiosyncrasies of English pose great challenges to the polytechnic ESL learners. Consequently, ESL learners interchange the English consonant and vowels with what is available in the mother tongue resulting in wrong pronunciation of English words. The fatality of phonological interference phenomenon is that intelligibility is lost and sometimes these faulty pronunciations find their way in to the polytechnics ESL learners speaking and writing process as reflected in most of their works.

Challenges facing the lecturers

Lack of motivational incentives is a challenge which the lecturer face in the teaching of use of English language. The lecturers are not encouraged to put in their best where the system has the tendency to frustrate honest efforts. The teachers are rarely encouraged to go for in-services training or conferences as funding has been the lecturer s big challenge.

Lack of appropriate teaching methods is one of the challenges faced by lecturers. According to Jen and Adakonye (2016:80) “to hold a degree in English language is one thing but to teach it effectively is another” Most teachers have problem of teaching English language. Among the difficulties encountered by the teachers is the teaching of some critical areas of grammar. For example, the ineffective teaching of concord i.e. agreement of subjects and verb can be traced to the facts that the teachers themselves do not apply the rules taught in communicating with the students' outside the class room situation. Consequently, the student gets used to vague and ungrammatical expressions.

Time factor is another challenge the teacher faces in teaching the use of English. Presently, the curriculum introduced by the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) for some departments deprive them of taking English for full duration of their programmes for no cogent reason. Hence, some are taught in just a semester what was meant for two semesters there by making the curriculum cumbersome and tasking for the teacher and the student. The issue is, if students' who take English throughout the duration of their programmes are still deficient in both spoken and written communication, is one semester enough to make those deprived proficient enough in the use of English as second language? can the teacher achieve the objectives of the curriculum?

Again the unethical attitude of the teacher is also a challenge. Some teachers abuse the available teaching aids by recommending books for the mercantile purpose not minding whether they are relevant or not. This gives the general public a wrong impression about the teacher- made materials. Consequently, they perceived that any text –book genuinely recommended by lecturers is for their financial benefit.

The attitude of non –English lecturers and other members of staff is also a challenge to the teachers as most of them misconceive the teachers made instructional material like; text book provided by the English language lecturer as a means of extorting money from the students. Such people discourage their wards or children from buying those teacher- made materials specially those prepared to deal with the students identified grammatical problems. Some of them erroneously see English language as complete distraction to student's area of specialty. This is seen in the way and manner use of English is fixed on the departmental time –table at odd or ungodly hours. They also perceive that the students are trained as technologist and are basically concerned with practical work and not necessarily with communicative skills.

Lack of basics facilities is another challenge of teaching the use of English. The English language laboratory is not included in the polytechnic courses. So there is no space for the teacher to take practical sessions thus the teacher is left with teaching theory. More so, many polytechnics lack the large halls to accommodate the large number of students and the classes have no projector or screen to enhance teaching. The teaching becomes onerous and a rather frustrating task to the lecturer who would shout himself hoarse in the bid to reach out to the entire class.

Conclusion

In view of this analysis, it is unarguable that the teacher is the major factor in the teaching and learning of Use of English in spite of those challenges. Consequently, his role becomes more crucial in overcoming the difficulties faced by the students. It is also the students' onus as well as that of management to make conscientious efforts towards overcoming the challenges facing the teaching of Use of English. Until this is done, the possibility of Nigerian Polytechnic products' accessing the current globalization process will continue to be a mirage since English Language remains the gate-way to establishing linkage with the rest of the world in international trade, economic development and new technology.

Recommendations

Having looked at the challenges of both teachers and students', the study recommends the following:

- ❖ The Polytechnic student should be given orientation on the need to be more serious and strive to improve on their spoken and written English through the Use of English as it will make them develop the right attitude to this course.
- ❖ The NBTE needs to look critically at some of the recently designed curriculum in Use of English and its adverse effects on the Polytechnic student.
- ❖ The Polytechnic management should give all the necessary resources and incentives required to enhance effective teaching and learning of Use of English and also emphasized on it needs in the students' respective careers.
- ❖ The Polytechnic teacher of English should make it a point of duty to attend Academic Conferences in order to be exposed to new teaching techniques, become more academically sound and better equipped to face those challenges.
- ❖ The Polytechnic teacher of English need to be pedagogic in the teaching and learning of grammar. Practical approach on teaching Use of English should be emphasized to build the communicative competence of the students.

Despite the crowded lecture halls, the teacher needs to give some degree of individual attention to every student. According to Aiyewumi, et al (2001:121) “one minute given to a student in a particular need is worth more than one hour of class of mass students. Thus, class- size consideration should be a criterion in the teaching and learning of English Language at all levels.

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