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Constraints Of English Language Teaching And Learning In Benue State Secondary Schools

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The poor performance of secondary school students in English language has necessitated this study. Solutions to the problems of teaching can only be proffered when the problems are known. This survey research was therefore carried out to investigate the actual constraints of teaching and learning of English in secondary schools in order to proffer solutions. The study involved one hundred and ten (110) teachers of English who attended a re-training of secondary school teachers' workshop in Benue State. The teachers were among other teachers who participated in the workshop from the three political zones of Benue State. They were asked to write at least five (5) problems of teaching and learning of English they have encountered in the course of teaching the subject. More than thirty responses were selected and these were grouped into two: (i) Teachers and school related problems and (ii) students related problems. They were also asked to suggest five solutions to problems. These responses were discussed and appropriate recommendations were made.

Key words: Teaching, secondary schools, English language teachers, secondary Students, students' performance in English, retraining of teachers

1.Introduction

Nigeria as a multilingual country has about two hundred and fifty thousand (250,000) ethnic groups, four hundred and fifty (450) languages and about four thousand (4,000) different dialects. Communication among these linguistic groups is not an easy task without a common language that can be spoken and understood by all. English, a colonial language, has adopted it as a lingua franca since it was. It is the language of instruction in schools, vehicle of communication in government, the judiciary, the media and other aspects where a unified language is required. English language must be taught and mastered properly if it must be used appropriately. The language is taught in primary (upper primary in government schools and all through in private schools), secondary schools and as a GST course in a tertiary institution. However, evidence abounds that some students at different levels of education do not possess a good mastery of the language. The failure rate in public examination like National Examination Council (NECO) and Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) for secondary school students is alarming.

The secondary school level is the focus of this study because students at this level need to pass the subject before they are given admission to read any course in any institution of higher learning. Though it is compulsory to pass English at this level, the students are demonstrating incompetence in using the language. The communicative competence of most students at this level is below average. What exactly is responsible for this? Most times students are often blamed for this failure rate. They are seen as the architects of their own misfortunes as if there are no other factors that militate against students' poor performance especially in English Language which is not the first language of the learners in Nigeria.

Most researchers that have examined the problems of language learning in secondary schools do not teach at that level and probably not conversant with what goes on in our secondary schools. This prompted this researcher to find out the real problems from those that are actually teaching these students - the secondary school teachers who know where "the shoe pinches". It is believed that they should be able to give first-hand information that would be useful to diagnose the problems of teaching and learning English in secondary schools so as to proffer solutions.

2.Statement Of The Problem

No matter how simple or complex a problem is, an individual's desire is to find a solution to it. The source of the problem should be identified and analysed in order to achieve a lasting solution to the problem. The failure rate of English language among secondary

school students is alarming. Sofenwa (cited in Adelabu 1999) comments “ the general impression is that by and large the standard of spoken and written English among the current generation of Nigeria students is lower than it was perhaps twenty years ago.” The standard is now worse than what it was at the time Sofenwa made this statement. This shows that there must be constraints confronting teaching and learning of this subject. The study therefore intends to identify these constraints in order to suggest solutions.

3.Objective

The study was carried out to identify the constraints of teaching and learning English in secondary schools in Benue State and to suggest solutions to the identified problems

4.Research Questions

Two research questions were raised as listed below

- What are the problems of teaching and learning English as perceived by secondary school teachers of English
- What are the solutions to the problems highlighted?

5.Respondents

One hundred and ten (110) respondents consisting secondary school teachers of English drawn from the three political zones of Benue State were used for the study. The study was carried out in Oturkpo, Katsina-Ala and Makurdi which represented the three zones in the state. These respondents were selected from the three zones to participate in the training workshop for secondary school teachers organised by the Benue State Government in collaboration with TERDAN. The table below shows the number of the respondents from each zone.

Zones	Males	Females	Total
A (Katsina-Ala)	26	08	34
B (Makurdi)	17	12	29
C (Oturkpo)	30	17	47
TOTAL	73	37	110

Table 1: Number And Sex Of Respondents

6.Method Of Data Collection

The respondents were asked to write, based on their experience, five problems associated with the teaching and learning of English. Enough time was given to them to think about what they perceived as problems responsible for the poor performance of their students in English language. They were also asked to list five suggestions to problems of teaching and learning English at secondary school level. The solution could be for the identified problems as well as those not listed. They were only asked to list the constraints and their suggestions and not to discuss them.

7.The Result

Various problems of teaching and learning of English were identified by the respondents and thirty (30) of them were selected by the researcher for discussion. These responses were categorised into two (2).

- Teachers and school related problems:
 - Too much workload
 - Teachers' low morale
 - Lack of instructional material
 - Lack of effective method of teaching
 - Lack of time for thorough teaching
 - Teachers are deficient
 - Large classes
 - Un-cooperative attitude of principals
 - Lack of competent teachers
 - Unplanned time-table
 - Arbitrary admission of students
 - Imposition of texts on teachers and students
 - Constant change of syllabus
 - Lack of facilities.
 - Exam malpractice

- Students related problems
 - Lack of interest
 - Truancy
 - Poverty
 - Peer group pressure
 - Immaturity
 - Poor background
 - Lack of reading culture
 - Lack of relevant materials
 - Un-seriousness
 - Environment
 - Interference of mother tongue
 - Examination malpractice.
 - 13 Migration to miracle centre
 - Hatred for the subject
 - Wrong perception.
- The respondents also listed twelve suggested solutions to the problem of teaching and learning of English.
 - Reduce class size
 - School to provide instructional material
 - Remedial teaching to upgrade reading skills
 - Students should not be sent out of school
 - Parents to provide transport money
 - Early exposure of students to literary materials
 - Students should be motivated.
 - PTA should be informed to take appropriate measure
 - Buy books for students
 - Retrain the teachers

This study shows that teachers themselves know that there are problems confronting both learners and teachers of English and that some of these problems can actually be traced to them or that they have a role to play in the negative performance of their students in English. The suggestions they listed however did not reflect what they, as teachers should do to help these students.

The responses also indicate that teachers, students, the school administration, government and parents have to share in the blame for the poor performance of secondary school students in English Language

8. Discussion Of Results

This section discusses some of the problems highlighted by the respondents in order to provide in depth knowledge of them to the reader of this paper and hopefully see the need to avoid them as they teach English at different levels of education especially those who train teachers of English. Due to the nature of this paper, recommendations are offered alongside the discussion of the points.

8.1. Teacher Or School Related Problems

8.1.1. Ignorance Or Ineffective Method Of Teaching

In a recent study conducted by Adelabu & Nder (2012), it was discovered that many secondary school teachers are not aware of some methods of teaching not to talk about using them to teach. Majority (88.2%) of these teachers confirmed that they use text book method mostly. Ironically the same teachers claimed that most of their students did not have textbooks. One wonders what they are using to teach with the text book method they are fond of. There are many methods teachers can use – discovery, team-teaching, demonstration, field trip, vee-mapping, etc. Haggai (2004) declares that college students are generally active, sensitive, visual and sequential learners and that there is a mismatch between teaching methods and learning styles of the students. When teachers do not vary their teaching methods, the situation can be likened to teaching the blind with pictures or the deaf without pictures. Unfortunately this is what is obtained in most public schools. If secondary school students are active, visual and sequential learners, teachers should vary their methods and combine methods when necessary. No method is superior to other but methods that are activity-oriented or task-based will certainly help students to learn better and faster.

Teacher educators should expose trainees to various methods of teaching and their applications to classroom situations. The teachers should learn from their colleagues and read about these methods in order to make their lesson interesting to students.

8.1.2. Lack Of Instructional Material

English Language teaching today has suffered a great deal as a result of lack of instructional materials in the school. Schools are not ready to provide and teachers do not consider it necessary to do so or even improvise. Ogguniyi & Famuyiwa (2010), observed that teachers did not use other instructional material apart from textbook and chalk. This is the scenario in most schools.

Instructional materials aid teaching because it makes teaching real. Even when the teachers in this study agreed that lack of instructional materials poses problem to teaching and learning of English, they were not willing to heed to the counsel of the facilitators to use their money or improvise when the school administration can not provide

The National Teacher Institute (2007) highlights the functions of instructional materials which include the following:-

- Help the teacher by providing the means of widening their pupils leaning experiences.
- Increase the efficiency of the teacher by providing tutorials and response guidance for individual pupils and smaller groups.
- Provide the teacher with a means of exposing the pupils to a wide range of learning activities.
- Allow members of a group or a class to share equally from the same teaching experience.
- Instructional materials provide increased interest in learning, hold learners And supply concrete basis for conceptual thinking.
- They provide the learner with opportunities of interacting with their social and physical environments.
- They offer learners opportunities for independent and individualized learning.
- They promote the acquisition and longer retention of knowledge.

Instructional materials have a lot of advantages and teachers of English should make use of them for effective teaching and better performance of students in English. Where they are not available, they can improvise. The students can be asked to bring some, like flowers, containers etc and materials that can be used and returned after use.

8.1.3. Too Much Work-Load, Lack Of Experience Teachers And Large Class

The three problems are related. When there are no experienced teachers as a result of not employing them by the government, two things happen. First any available teacher is asked to teach English even though such a teacher did not study English. There are cases of Geography teachers teaching English. In a particular university where this researcher did her sabbatical in 2010, a lecturer who specialised in History was asked to teach English "since it is a general course". The assumption that anybody can teach English if he or she is a graduate is wrong and this is affecting teaching and learning of English.

Secondly, the few that are employed are over worked. It is common in Nigeria secondary schools that there are only two or three English language teachers and these teachers will teach JSS classes 1-3 and SSS classes 1-3 which may have about three or four streams. Going through these classes everyday is cumbersome and wear English teachers out. In order to 'help' these teachers, the school administration puts the students together. Where there should be two or three streams, they are put together in one class. Most classes have 80 – 120. Meaningful teaching can hardly take place in such environment. Olaitan (cited in Akuto & Wever 2010) declare that effective communication implies effective communication. When the class is large, communication between the teachers and the students is hindered and teaching becomes ineffective. Under this situation, a teacher of English according to NTI (2007) may almost want to give up because listening to individual students and correcting their attempts would be impossible, getting pupils to practice structures would be hampered and marking written work would become almost an impossible task.

These problems could be addressed by employing enough teachers, building enough classrooms and reducing the number of enrolments of students- which is one of the problems cited by the respondents. When these have not been achievable and the school resorts to putting too many students in one class, then the teacher should find a way of making his teaching effective all the same.

One of the things a teacher should do is to divide the students into smaller group of five to seven. Each group must have a group leader. Grouping helps students to participate fully in the class and when assignments are given. Teaching through these groups demand a lot of skills by the teacher but it is rewarding as learning becomes more interesting to students. It gives each student sense of belonging.

8.1.4. Imposition Of Text Books On Teachers And Students

In most cases, teachers do not choose the text books students will use. The publishers meet with the principals of the schools and the principals decide to pick those books they consider best for students' use even when they know next to nothing about English probably because they stand to benefit monetarily from the transaction. Teachers know the problem so they should be allowed to recommend or at least have a say in deciding the books their students should use.

The books should be checked properly by the teachers or whoever is making the selection. Some publishers do not have idea of what the students need; they are after the profit from the sales of text-books. According to Ubahakwe (cited in Adelabu, 1991), textbooks should adapt to the peculiar needs of Nigerian students. Textbooks' writers need to review and modify their books. Provision should be made for spiral curriculum in English textbooks. The person making the selection should check for these criteria before recommending textbooks.

8.1.5.Unplanned Time-Table

The time table is either not planned or not being followed as a result of other extra curricular activities. English language should be on the time table everyday and should be taught in the morning when the students have not been involved in so many activities that would have bored them.

8.1.6.Constant Change Of Syllabus

This attests to the situation in the country. The syllabus is changed irrationally at times due to change in government. Though change is inevitable, the syllabus should not be changed arbitrarily and when it is necessary to do so, the teachers should be involved or have recommended it.

8.1.7.Lack Of Facilities

This is actually a fact. According to Olaofe (2011), there are primary and secondary schools without baseline educational resource materials. He confirms that in such primary or secondary schools, ‘there are no baseline teaching or- learning facilities such as pieces of chalk and dusters, desks, chairs, textbooks, exercise books and writing materials. Lessons are taking in dilapidated classrooms...’ Olaofe (2011) confirms that under resourcefulness is a crime in a country with abundant natural resources. According to him, under-resourceful teaching and learning environments are man-made and can be reversed by man. As a matter of urgency the situation has to be reversed in order to have quality education without which there can be no meaningful socio-economic and political development. If we are really concerned about the dwindling standard of education in Nigeria, all hands must be on deck to provide the necessary facilities in our secondary schools.

8.1.8.Teachers’ Low Morale

Teachers are expected to be motivated and encouraged. Teachers’ rewards should not be delayed until they get to heaven. They should be able to compete with their counterparts in the civil service. Their morale is low because they are not paid on time and are treated like second class citizens. As a result of this many people would not want to choose this noble profession. According to Olaofe (2011), “no amount of resources driven into education system can supersede the role of the teacher. Without properly prepared, resourceful and motivated teachers, we can never expect much from the system.” As declared by the Federal Government in National Policy on Education (2004), no educational system can rise above its teachers. Therefore teachers, especially teachers of English, should be treated fairly.

8.2.Students Related Problems

Most of the student-related problems highlighted by the respondents can be alleviated if the teachers- related problems are solved. Problems like truancy, lack of interest, hatred for the subject and others can be arrested if teachers vary their methods of teaching, use instructional materials, motivate the students, give assignments, group students and do other things to facilitate learning. Similarly if parents buy books and monitor the progress of their children, students will stay in school and learn. If the government makes the school attractive enough by providing the facility needed in school, students may prefer school to being lured away from schools by their friends. However, the issue of examination malpractice and migration to miracle centres by students should be our concern.

8.3.Examination Malpractice

Onokerhoye (cited in Oyetunde 2004) defines examination malpractice as any act or arrangement from which an examinee is programmed to derive illegal or illicit advantage over and above other candidates in respect of some given examination. This suggests that examination malpractice is any dishonest effort on the part of candidates and other collaborating parties aimed at ensuring success. In Nigeria, it is a serious social problem as well as a criminal offence. Even with the stringent penalty attached to this offence, some secondary school students are involved. To worsen the situation, parents, teachers and public examination officials aid and abet this crime. Some schools in the rural areas tagged their schools ‘miracle centres’ because in most cases they write answers for the students and bribe the invigilators in order to compromise. Students therefore depend on this and no longer pay attention to learning, play truancy and become anxious. They regard staying school as a waste of time.

Oyetunde (2004) declares that it is an evil that must be stamped out at all cost in order to assure the future of our educational system and of our development aspirations as a nation. He therefore recommends attitudinal change towards examination, liberalizing and proper handling of examinations. The teachers and the invigilators that are involved should be punished. Similarly, teaching and learning environment should be made conducive for both students and teachers.

The activities of the miracle centres should be investigated and such schools should be closed down while the principals of such schools be jailed.

9.Summary And Recommendation

This paper has highlighted the problems of teaching and learning of English language in Benue State as identified by Secondary school teachers in the three political zones of the state. This was done so as to suggest possible solutions to the problems. The implication of this study is that there are problems confronting both teachers and learners of English language. Through the study, it was discovered that students alone should not be blamed for their poor performance in English internal or external examinations.

Teachers, parents, school administrators, government and even the society are responsible for the plight of these students. Therefore it is the joint responsibility of all stakeholders in the educational sector to play their roles for positive result. We should remember that the issue of quality education is multidimensional and as Oyetunde (2004) declares “not just the parents, but also the government, employers of labour, civil societies, religious bodies and ... local communities and teachers must arise and play positive roles that would guarantee this nation’s qualitative educational processes.”

The teachers who were the respondents in this study suggested what should be done. Their suggestions are quite relevant even though they failed to suggest what they should do on their own part to help the students. They suggested that parents should buy books for their wards and check the assignments given to them. This researcher is of the opinion that if parents should do so, the students would be serious with their academics.

The respondents also suggested retraining and workshops for teachers, an indication that they benefitted immensely from the retraining they had from which this paper emerged. Workshops and retraining should be organised for the teachers regularly. This will expose them to various and new methods of teaching. Other states should emulate Benue State who took the initiative to organize this retraining. Retraining of teachers may be costly, but then it is worthwhile.

The teachers that have benefitted from such training should pass the experience on to other teachers. The experience should not die in their hands. The government should send those that are still young in the profession and still have longer time to spend in the service and not those that are at the edge of retirement.

10. Conclusion

The problem highlighted in this paper may not be exhaustive but they show the sincerity of these teachers and confirmed that there are problems indeed. In order to alleviate these problems and others not mentioned in this study, all stakeholders in the educational sector should arise and play positive roles in order to improve the quality of education and English in particular. The teachers who are charged with this responsibility should stop apportioning blame to others but do whatever that is within their power to make English learning more effective, interesting and rewarding.

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