CHALLENGES OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING THE NEW NORMAL ERA IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the challenges of English Language teaching and learning in the new normal era in Nigeria. The concept of COVID -19 was captured as well as its challenges to English Language teaching and learning in Nigeria. It also covers the nature, characteristics and functions of language along with a brief overview of English Language, its functions, teaching and learning in Nigeria. The dreadful challenges of teaching and learning English Language during covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria has been discussed and possible solutions to those challenges have been proffered.

Keywords: English Language, Covd-19, new normal.

Introduction

Foreign language teaching and learning is a backbreaking enterprise which calls for an active involvement of the teacher and the learners for any fruitful outcome. Language teachers' consciousness of the fact that students come from various and diverse sociolinguistic backgrounds should spur them to put in their best to ameliorate their students' language problems. In the light of the above, a face to face or direct interaction which requires the teachers' input or effort to match the students' output or products, anything short of the above will be counterproductive and would not be of benefit to the education sector. The world witnessed an unprecedented event in recent time when the novel Corona Virus called COVID 19 and its attendant pandemic was announced by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). The fast spread of the virus across borders led to an abrupt lock down of almost all parts of the world. Following the discovery of COVID 19 Virus in Wuhan, China in December, 2019 and its outbreak in some countries in January, 2020, the world order has been affected in all aspects of

human life, the field of education inclusive. In Nigeria, for instance, the first case was confirmed on 28th February, 2020 (Eze 2021). This situation warranted schools and higher institutions of education all over the globe ending face – face education and resorting to online teaching and learning and that has affected all stakeholders like teachers, students, parents and administrators (Erarslan, 2021). Again Nigeria is also part of this new normal global change. Nlebem (2020) reports that on the 19th of March, 2020, the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria approved the closure of all schools and higher institutions, apparently due to the outbreak of COVID 19 Pandemic.

The yearly result of Secondary School Students' Performance in External English language Examination is a worrisome scenario. It has been a situation of massive failure and the trend keeps escalating by the day. The NBS (National Bureau of Statistics) 2019 reported the following result for 2016 – 2018 Senor Secondary Certificate Examination conducted by the West African Examination Council: When a total of 1,543,974 candidates sat for WAEC Examinations in English Language, 967,829 passed; out of 1,558,452 candidates who wrote, 964,760 passed; and from a pool of1, 571,536 candidates 849,069 passed in 2016, 2017 and 2018 respectively. The above statistics is not quit impressive for the education sector of a growing economy like that of Nigeria given the fact that a credit pass is a requirement for admission into any constitution of higher learning in Nigeria irrespective of a candidate's course of study. This situation no doubt, poses a great challenge to the teacher of English language in Nigeria. Following the onset of COVID – 19 Pandemic in almost all the nations of the world, the problem would invariably increase due to the lockdown of schools which prevented physical contacts between teachers and students, especially in Nigeria.

Virtual classes would have come handy for Nigeria if the nation's educational sector had set machinery in motion for it. According to the following scholars (Che Masa, Azmen & koo, 2012; Yadov, Guptok & Khertrapal, 2018, Adnan, A., Ahmad, m., Yusof, A.,Mohd Kamal, M., &Mustapha Kamal, N. 2019, Patil 2020), online classrooms or virtual learning are inevitable options in difficult and unanticipated situations like the COVID – 19 Pandemic. It is obvious that Nigerian educational sector is ill – prepared for E – learning strategies. The need to switch over to the system has brought to the limelight the weakness of the handlers of the education sector in Nigeria because facilities have not been put in place in that regard, (especially in Nigerian

Public Schools). Worse still, majority of Nigerian parents do not have the financial muscle to shoulder the cost of the gadgets require for virtual learning.

This paper therefore harps the need to identify some of the challenges facing the teachers and learners of English language in Nigeria in the light of the New Normal or COVID – 19 Pandemic.

English Language Teaching and Learning in Nigeria

Language: nature, characteristics and functions

Language is basically the most important human attribute that differentiates man from other lower beings. Language is a vehicle through which ideas, thoughts and feelings are passed across to other people. Language also serves as a means of transferring the norms, values, customs, traditions, culture and identity of a group of people in any society from one generation to another.

Different people look at language from different perspectives, depending on who is looking at it and from which angle such a person is looking at it. Thomas (1999:5) sees language as an organized way of putting smaller units together into larger units for the purpose of communication. This allows one to combine the sounds of one's language to form words in line with the "rules" of the language or languages one speaks.

Abererombie (1967:16), on his own part defines language in functional terms. He sees languages as a system of conventional signs used for the purpose of communication by a whole community. He sees the connection here to include sounds units, inflection and arrangement and association of meaning with words. This means that the definition covers phonetics and phonology, as well as syntax and semantics.

According to Lawal (2015), it is possible to see language as a means, system of sharing ideas, thoughts and feelings, experience and so on, using sounds, signs and symbols. He concludes that language can therefore be seen as a means of communicating with other people irrespective of age, sex, education, social status and cultural background. The foregoing discourses point to the fact that the nature of language has to do with communication and interaction in any given human society, especially in a country like Nigeria with its multi-ethnics, multi-cultural, and multi-linguistic nature. Lawal (2015) has listed some attributes of language to include;

- Language is conventional and arbitrary: This means that there is not concrete relationship between words and what they represent. In other words, there is no tangible relationship between the signified and signifier.

- Language is systematic: This is to say that there is a system of rulers that guide the combination of sounds to form words. This is to say that phonemes are naturally meaningless, but can be combined to form or produce meaningful units of grammar.

- Another attribute of language is resourcefulness: this means that language can be utilized to express any object, phenomenon, event, idea and incidence. Language can handle both imaginative and factual expressions and statements.

- Others are dynamism, uniqueness and symbolism: The dynamism of language indicates that everything about language change just like man. Symbolically, language is a means of representation while in terms of uniqueness language stands out clearly as an indisputable entity.

Language performs the following crucial functions to man and his society. Language is a tool of interaction or communication. This implies that language serves to convey ideas, thoughts, feelings and concepts among other functions like giving and gaining information. Language accomplishes goals and maintains unity in a society. Language is important in learning and instruction and also passes across knowledge (Lawal, 2015).

Language, according to Lawal (2015) is used for teaching and learning the medium of language. It is a tool for human thinking and reasoning. It facilitates the exchange of ideas between human beings. Language is used to organize society into manageable units. So, language is an instrument that can be used to associate or dissociate with individuals or groups. Language can be used to maneuver the human environment which can lead to particular situations, like learning or a change in behavior.

He states further that language can be employed to control events like rejection, approval and suspension. Language serves representational functions like presenting facts, figures & observations and making a statement. Language keeps communication water tight by maintaining relationships among human beings. It delivers jokes, enhances mastery of special expressions and idioms used by interactants in particular conversation thereby, serving interactional function. Language also serves analytical functions by being deployed to acquire knowledge in order to be familiar with the environment. For example, to come to understand an

unfamiliar event, language is employed to make inquiries. Language expresses emotions, feelings and personalities as a personalized linguistic function. Language mirrors individuals, nations, tribes and races and projects us in real light.

According to Rabiah (2012), Language enables us to project our views, our perspective of a matter, our personality, and character, the origin of the nation, our educational level, state and culture. In view of the above assertion, it can be said that language serves as a mirror of us.

English Language and Nigeria

The English Language is the mother tongue of the English people, who ruled about three quarters of the countries of the world via the instrumentality of colonialism, neo – colonialism and imperialism. English is used as the official or second language on most of the countries formerly ruled by Britain under the patronage or aegis of Common Wealth of Nations. It serves as the language of politics, education, commerce, trade, religion and sports in the countries mentioned before (Onoja, 2015).

The need for every nation to develop is a global concern. To achieve any meaningful development in the present world requires development of science and technology. One way to achieve this is through the language in which the concepts of science and technology are expressed. English language therefore comes handy for the attainment of this goal. English language is not indigenous to Nigeria but has since come to stay as an indigenous language in Nigeria due to the multi-cultural and multi-linguistic nature of the Nigerian society. Nigeria is said to have over five hundred languages spread across the six geographical zones in Nigeria-''though the dominant languages officially recognized by the (Nigerian) government remain English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba'' (Balogun, 2013).

The roles of English language in Nigeria as captured by Atama and Shein (2015), (Akinsowon and Adeyera, (2011) in Onoja, (2015) include the following roles among others.

i.   A national language, English language serves both as a national language and official language for now. It is also the language of government administration. It is used in offices across the nation for conducting government business on daily basis. Textbooks used in Nigerian Schools are written in English language for easy teaching and learning of all school subjects from the lowest rung of our school system to the highest level. This is to keep faith with global standard.

ii.   English language is a criterion for considering anybody as being literate across the sub regions of Africa and beyond. This is because mastery of English is required for anyone to benefit from any national and international discourse.

iii. It is the language of law and constitution in Nigeria with the exception of customary courts designated for illiterates and less serious cases, other court proceedings are relayed in English language. The business of indictments and exonerations are conducted in English language.

iv.   English language is the language of politics and governance. Military and political governments use English language at government and executive meetings. The activities of ministries and parastatals are all carried out through the medium of English language on daily basis. Political campaign talks are done in English language at local, states and national levels.

v.   It is used to maintain international contact among countries or nations of the world on peace and resolution of conflicts. The print and electronic media use English language as medium of reporting events within and outside the country to achieve a wider coverage on daily basis.

vi.   The heterogeneous nature of Nigeria makes English language come handy for communication among and even within people that speak the same language both from different dialects and those of different languages.

vii. English language enhances one's chance of getting good jobs and better remunerations which can improve one's social status in Nigeria. It elevates one's social status and commands respect from mates and society at large.

viii. English language serves as a unifying factor as it is the only language that unites the over five hundred Nigerian languages and the various cultural affinities found in Nigeria. Without the English language, it is difficult to interact with people of other ethnic groups in Nigeria. Without interaction, there can be no peace and understanding among any given group in the society.

ix.   English language is the language of commerce and international relations. It is the language of both local and international trade. It opens the way for Nigeria to interact with the international community for economic, social and political development.

Atama and Shein (2015) maintain that the functions of English language in Nigeria include being used for governance, education, commerce and industry, international communication and as a language of the media.

Challenges Posed by COVID-19 to English Language Classroom

English language pedagogy encountered a myriad of challenges during the Covid – 19 pandemic eras – worldwide and in Nigeria:

Jegede (2020) corroborates the views of Khatoony & Nezhadmehr (2020) by maintaining that there exists a significant relationship between COVID – 19 Pandemic and the shift in the academic calendar of educational institutions in Nigeria with the federal Capital Territory (FCT) as an index. Mustapha & Kurt (2021) and Erastan (2021) have listed some of the challenges of teaching and learning of English language during the COVID – 19 Pandemic to include

(i)   Socio – demographic data. The way various stakeholders in their fields perceive issues that they see or encounter in search of their career are a result of the variation in rural – urban setting and family background.

(ii) The issue of computer illiteracy and technical issues connected to online teaching in their environments.

(iii) Learners showed negative attitudes towards English language because of the teaching methodology designed in the system for lesson delivery. Lack of a conducive learning environment which did not encourage the learners was another problem.

(iv) Lack of proper feedback hindered the learner's chances of practicing English in the same way lack of resources did. Other factors are age, class level, home setting and economic status.

(v)   Eraslan, (2021) posits that ''access to the internet and computers or smart phones constituted a great challenge in effective English courses delivery online." This, he believes is due to inequalities between countries and societies which in turn created challenges in access to relevant infrastructure by students to access online courses and this makes teachers' efforts in teaching the students a failure. These situations of unequal contextual conditions invariably pose difficulties for an effective and efficient dispensation of English courses online, even in the Post

Covid era. Just as rightly observed by Erarslan, this situation has not changed in Nigeria till date.

(vi)   "Pedagogical issues like lack of preparation, planning, and educational policies for emergency cases and teachers' insufficient technological and pedagogical content knowledge." Atomejo & Nugroho (2020) in Erarslan (2021) lend their voices in support of this view by stating that some teachers of English language were ill – equipped in knowledge and skills to teach English online because they lacked advertence of the difference between face – to – face and online teaching.

(vii)   Eze, (2021) says learners generally face the problems of hampered communication, distraction, technical issues and examination malpractice (viii) some students saw the new online learning as an impediment to learning as it lacked eye contact and physical presence of the teacher which serves as great motivation for learning. (ix) Feedback from the teacher is also an issue.

(viii) A typical online class is bereft of a reliable feedback to the teacher who should evaluate the students after each lesson to aggregate the students' performance. Evaluating students at the end of a lesson is vital to give feedback on their understanding of the lesson after a lesson. This was impossible during online teaching and learning.

(ix)   Another challenge faced by teachers and students of English language during the pandemic era was lack of proper concentration during online classes. Students found themselves in unconducive environments like their homes, and public places where family members, friends and environmental noise caused them distractions and reduced effective learning.

(x)   Internet networking disruptions was another major challenge of e-learning of English language during the Covid – 19 Pandemic era. Learners in rural areas were affected by this factor because; services were fluctuated by networks because of distance to the booster stations of such networks.

Way forward /Solutions

In view of the challenges faced by teachers and learners of English language during the COVID – 19 Pandemic Era, the following recommendations are made to stem such a situation in future, in case of another emergency, like the pandemic era.

- Government should train all language teachers at all tiers of education to be excellently ready to facilitate teaching technically at all times to avoid failure in times of emergencies like covid 19. English language plays a very vital role in communication world – wide and should be given the priority of place it deserves in our educational system.

- All communities need to enjoy internet facilities to aid the process of teaching and learning of English Language.

- Policy makers and teacher training programmes need to equip teachers with the required pedagogical knowledge on the use of modern technology in teaching ahead of any emergencies. Moser, K. M., Wei, T. and Brener, D. (2021) assert that ''because few teachers and students had experience of online teaching and learning, both parties could not adapt properly to the new conditions and their new roles'' in a pandemic situation that warranted a total or partial lockdown of the world.

- Students should be exposed to adequate training on the use of computers and other technological facilities across primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria to prepare learners for any eventuality.

- Parents should support learners by creating a conducive environment for online learning and providing funds within their reach for data and gadgets during emergency situations or periods.

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