



## DIFFICULTIES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES IN NIGERIA

**Dr (Mrs) Joy Aladi Obara**

*Department Of Arts Education, Prince Abubakar Audu University,*

*Anyigba Nigeria*

*Phone – 08032901455*

*Email [Joyobera147@gmail.com](mailto:Joyobera147@gmail.com)*

### **Abstract**

Language has always performed vital roles on a daily basis in the life of human beings. It has been a major instrument of communication and development in every era of civilization. In recent times language has best been regarded as a tool for creation and reconstruction of every society. One of the languages that perform these roles is the English language, as it is the most widely spoken across the continents of the world. Therefore, much importance has been placed on its teaching and learning towards re-inventing the public mission of higher education. The paper discussed the difficulties of English language teaching among students 100 and 200 levels of English language in the department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education of Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State, towards achieving the functional goals of language education. It equally highlighted the difficulties encountered in the teaching process and offered suggestions towards improving the teaching and learning of the English Language in Nigeria. Some of the suggestions are; always make sure the students are effective in the use of the rules of grammar taught in the class and that they use them in appropriate communicate contexts or situations, periodic evaluation of the pedagogy process must be undertaken using both achievement and diagnostic tests. This is to monitor both the teachers' and the students' progress in the teaching/learning of the English language, practical and theoretical teachers of phonology must be done by making phonemic distinctions through drilling exercises and listening to tapes from good models to stem phonological interference in the students' oral English.

**Key words: Language, Education, difficulties, English, Re-inventing.**

### **Introduction**

Most definitions used to describe language have always pointed to it as instrument used to achieve some tasks. For example, such expressions as medium of expression; tool for construction and reconstruction (Andrew, 2018) are the roles of language in human activities. It is noteworthy to observe that the definition and description of language have progressed



overtime from abstract conceptions to functional perceptions. It is defined as the dress of thought. Andrienne, (1995) states 'language is power' because it can be used as a means of changing reality And Sapir states that language is purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols, (Aliyu, 2005). To compare Chomsky's (1957) definition with Aliyu's (2005), while Chomsky avers that language is an innate capacity possessed by native speakers which is employed in the processing and production of language forms, Aliyu remarks that language from the teacher's perspective is seen as the set of skills that can be acquired through training or developed through growth.

Language has progressively been realized as a set of skills, a tool, and instrument employed in accomplishing tasks. Consequently, modern functions of language include: tool function (Uchedu, Agbedo&Okorji 2015; Andrew, 2018), negotiative or help function (Douglas, 2007)). It has instrumental function and creative function as well as instrument for context creation. Currently, the descriptions of language as tool, instrument or skill form part of the major criteria for the assessment of the value of language to the users.

Drawing from the communicative and exclusion role of language in the society, it is obvious that language is a tool through which people naturally or socially express their ideas about the world around them; there is the need for its effective teaching and learning in most universities in Nigeria. This paper explores the difficulties involved in its pedagogy especially in the area of the learners' grammatical competence among other areas.

### **The position of English Language in Nigeria**

The English language has assumed the number one position in Nigeria. It is Nigeria's potent means of gaining access to the world of scholarship such as science, technology, arts, literature, mass media, commerce, to mention but a few. In Nigeria, it is the medium of acquiring formal education which enhances the social and economic status of individuals and consequently the Nigerian nation. English has served and is still serving as the only language that cuts across all ethnic boundaries in Nigeria. It behooves on the teachers of English language to do everything possible for their students to attain a high level of proficiency in both oral and written communication skills, so that they are not excluded from the cream of the world's scholarship. A lot of issues have stood the way of the teachers. This paper, therefore, examines some current thorny issues in the teaching/learning of English as a second language in universities in Nigeria, with focus on students 100 and 200 levels of English language in the department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education of Prince



Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State and recommends viable strategies to stem the tide.

An assessment of the historical, socio-cultural and geo-political characters of Nigeria as a nation shows that English is used as a second language. English as a second Language (ESL) is a situation where users have their own indigenous languages but use English as a mandatory means of communication in official and public life. This is because of the existence of many apparently unrelated languages in Nigeria. English Language is regarded as a second language because it is an alternative to the mother tongue in a country with multiplicity of indigenous languages. The role of English language in administration, education, law, mass media, international commerce, and diplomacy and in all other official situations has placed the kind of attention given to it in most school curriculum in Nigeria. The indigenous languages operate alongside English, especially in the private sector. (Rogina, 2015).

Nigerians learn English through formal education as a second language. The English as second language occupies a pride of place in the Nigerian educational system, apart from being a distinctive subject in the curriculum. It is also the medium of instruction through which other subjects from primary school to all levels of tertiary institutions are taught. No other subject serves such a dual purpose; this makes the English language unique in Nigeria. For entry into tertiary institutions, a credit pass in English language in the students' Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE), National Business and Technical Education Board (NABTEB), Nigeria Examinations Council (NECO), General Certificate Examination (GCE) O'level, is a compulsory pre-requisite. Where candidates fail to make this grade, they are admitted into pre NCE, pre-ND, pre-degree or remedial class, depending on the tertiary institutions concerned, where they spend one year to make the grade which qualifies them to proceed to the normal programme. Thus, the schools, colleges of education, polytechnics and universities remained the unrivalled agents of the teaching and learning of English language.

It is apparent that English language has assumed an excellent academic pedigree in the Nigeria educational system that no indigenous language is in the position to rival it in the near future. Achebe (1975), a resourceful user of English, hammers on this point when he maintains that only one language is enjoying national currency in Nigeria and concludes that "today for good or ill, that language is English. Tomorrow may be something else, although, I very much doubt it." This means functionally that, English is more important for now than any of the ethnic languages in Nigeria as it cuts across all the ethnic boundaries.



Despite the special pride of the place of English as a second language in the Nigeria educational system, the general performance of university students has been found to be poor. The errors in the students' spoken as well as written English are not only alarming but profoundly nauseating. Grammatical errors corrected by the stroke of red pen are often repeated. Apparently, this is partly responsible for the poor academic performance in Nigeria. This is very disheartening and it constitutes a great source of headache to the B.Ed. / B.A.(Ed) English language teachers as it disturb them in the face. The researcher, therefore, seek to examine some current thorny issues in the teaching/learning of English as a second language in the department of Arts Education, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba, Kogi State as public university in Nigeria.

### **The Teaching/Learning of English Language in Nigeria**

The teaching of English language (Education) in the departments of Arts Education in faculties of Education in universities of Nigeria is basically to improve the students' oral and written communication skills, since English is the medium of communication through which other courses are taught. But the question is, have these objectives been achieved over the years? This question can rightly be answered by examining and explicating some aspects that are easily noticed in the teaching and learning of English language in the university system in Nigeria.

One of the aspects in the teaching and learning of English is poor linguistic foundation of the students. The English language learners in the universities have poor foundation as far as the use of English is concerned. A survey by Aiyewumi , Ruth , Stephen and Olorunleke (2001), show that about 81% of Kaduna State students had their first English lesson at school. Most of these students are not exposed to the standard varieties and the basic grammatical structures at their early learning stage. Learning a language is fostered when a learner begins with spoken variety. This variety carries all the emotional and cultural nuances of the language and makes creativity in written language easier.

A second problem is that of great linguistic challenges of the school environment which is different from that of home. Consequently, all the varieties the student comes in contact with sometimes coalesce in his/her spoken and written task, producing a home variety called "Nigerian English". The university English language learners imposed the lexical items and syntactic structures of their indigenous languages on English as a result of ignorance of the rules of usage. Below are some few cases of substandard usage by the English language learners. (The asterisks represent the substandard usages):



- ❖ Don't put your mouth into this matter.  
Don't interfere in this matter.
- ❖ I will follow you to Sabongari.  
I want to accompany you to Sabongari.
- ❖ He is a big man.  
He is an affluent/rich man.
- ❖ Leave the chair at the door mouth.  
Leave the chair by the doorway.
- ❖ If you enter my mind.  
If you guess, what I have in mind.
- ❖ The food is sweet.  
The food is delicious.
- ❖ To hear smell.  
To perceive a smell
- ❖ He ate our money.  
He embezzled public fund.
- ❖ She is our first born in the family.  
She is the eldest child of the family.
- ❖ If you want to become somebody.  
If you, want to be successful

Banjo (1989) defines this brand of English as a brand that is socially accepted in Nigeria and internationally intelligible. But Oji (1997) debunks this assertion and cautions that "The strongest reason against the introduction of a Nigerian version of English in this country is that it will smack off unprecedented chaos in the teaching/learning of English language as a second Language". The introduction of foreign elements into the more highly structured domain of language such as the bulk of the phonemic system, a large part of the morphology and syntax has an adverse effect on the intelligibility of the second language because it could smack off an unprecedented welter in teaching and learning of English. Harmer (2012), in his review of other 'Englishes', asserts that "we get unsuccessful learning where there is wide spread of deviation from the standard."

The British standard variety of English has a pride of place in the Nigerian university Education which cannot be compromised with any non-native English like standard because of its adverse effect on the public universities. As Banjo (1989) clearly states "...success at each level of the Nigeria educational system depends largely on competence in English". This means that the university students need to really work hard towards enhancing their grammatical competence since it is upon it that everything depends in their academic pursuits.



Furthermore, the nonchalant attitude of students is a serious issue. Most B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) students erroneously believe that the major courses or their areas of specialization are more relevant than courses outside their department. Consequently, they develop apathy towards borrowed courses from other departments, especially general English. This negatively affects their communication skills. This apathy affects their competence in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The attitude of B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) 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 the world of technology. These students sometimes make cynical comments like; “I am a technologist and not a student of the English language.” This comment obviously reveals the students disaffection with English language and probably their English language teachers. Teachers of other subjects or courses do not help matters. They also have negative feelings toward English and therefore regard it as not necessary.

Although some of these students have very good grades in their O’ Level English, personal experience has revealed that they are still very deficient in spoken and written communication. The nonchalant attitude and erroneous belief of the B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) students must be changed if they are to benefit from the teaching of English as a second language.

The nature of English is another issue in the learning and teaching of English. This is as a result of the idiosyncrasies of English. The idiosyncrasies of English pose a great threat to the teaching/learning of English as a second language. The English language learners sometimes hardly know which is which in a given situation. This confusion is normally found in English words that have the same sounds but different spellings and meanings (Homophones). Below are some few cases:

A	Aloud/allowed	Aloud (not silent) as in He spoke aloud. Allowed (permit) as in He allowed me to slap him.
B	Court/Caught	Court (a place for trying offences) as in The magistrate is sitting in the court. Caught (Past tense of catch) as in We chased the t and caught one of them.
C	Write/Right	Write (make letters with pen, etc) as in I will write a letter to you. Right (correct) as in - The answer is right.
D	Fare/Fair	Fare (Money charged for a journey) as in the driver asked for his fare. Fair (Just) as in It is not fair to condemn him for the crime he did not commit.

The consistent rule in the formation of English plurals is another major area of confusion to the English language learners. Generally, the ESL learners have the notion that all nouns that end with s are plurals. However, nouns like politics, linguistics, mathematics, phonetics, news, etc. are plural in





form but take a singular verb because they are singular in content. There are also situations where these types of noun that end with "s" take a plural verb because they refer to things in group. For example: -

- The pants are too short.
- These scissors cut everything.

Again, the contrastive consonant and vowel systems of English are also aspects of English that create some difficulties to learners of English as they are not found in the mother tongue. Consequently, learners of English at B.Ed. / B.A.(Ed.) level interchange the English consonants and vowels with what is available in their mother tongues 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 ways into the writing process of learners of English in university education.

These idiosyncrasies of English and inappropriate learning and application of rules have posed great challenges to the learners of English in public universities who therefore have to work harder towards grammatical competence. This also means that teachers of English in universities have to intensify efforts towards the mastery of grammatical rules.

Another thorny issue that engaged the attention of this study is the nonchalant attitude of teachers of English at this level. To hold a degree in English is one thing but to teach it effectively is another. Most teachers of English do not encourage the students to master basic rules of grammar as they themselves do not apply the rules in communicating with their students outside the classroom situation. Consequently, the students get used to erroneous and ungrammatical expressions. Bright and McGregor (1970) emphasize the need for intelligibility and grammatical accuracy on the part of learners of English. This means hard work and dedication on the part of English teachers in teaching rules and principles of grammar in the universities for the attainment of communicative competence. Ogbazi, Osakwe and Ekpunobi (2003) lend credence to this when they add that; "Those who have taught in real L2 situations and still insist on simple communication ability failed to acknowledge the ridicule poor user of L2 grammar is exposed to.

The attitude of lecturers and other members of staff who are not teachers of English is also one of the thorny issues. In public universities in Nigeria, most of the staff who are not teachers of English misconceived teacher made materials like textbooks provided by the English language teachers to students as a means of extorting money from the students so as to increase the English teacher's earning power. Such teachers discourage their wards or children from buying those teacher-made materials especially



prepared to deal with the students' identified grammatical problems. Some of them also see the English language as a complete distraction of the students from concentrating on their areas of specialization. After all, these students are trained as technologists and are basically concerned with practical work and not necessarily with communicative skills. Against this backdrop, they ask embarrassing questions such as "if a student has met the admission requirement in English, why does he have to take English? Why don't we allow these students to concentrate on their areas of specialization instead of bothering them with foreign language?" in as much as it is true that some teachers extort, it is not all. This can be properly handled by the system and adequate agreement can be made to assist students when necessary. This is because even as it is true that a technologist only needs his hands in doing his job without communicating, if what is said by the technologist does not correspond with what is meant, work cannot be done properly by only his hands? This prevailing attitude of the non-teachers of English make teaching of English in the public universities in Nigeria an arduous task as it does a lot of harm to the concerted effort of the teachers of English in universities and some hardworking teachers of English.

### **Conclusion**

The millennium technological development which teachers of English language from the public universities in Nigeria through communication skills will continue to be a mirage if the thorny issues identified in the teaching/learning of English in this paper are not properly handled. Until the B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) English language learners attain a high level of proficiency in English, they are on the verge of being excluded from the world's scholarship and national technological and development-oriented education. It is against this background that some Nigerian linguist suggested that for a development-oriented education to take place in Nigeria there should be the assignment of a new development-oriented role of English language within the educational programme of the nation. (Eyisi, 2012, Ogunwale, 2013 ).

The plans for development-oriented education in the public universities in Nigeria through the main medium of education have great prospects for improvement. Thus, it is imperative for both the English language teachers and the English language learners in the public universities in Nigeria to gear their efforts towards the acquisition of a brand of English that will expedite successful transfer of knowledge in all spheres of life. Otherwise, the B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) students would receive a B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) Certificate. Consequently, they cannot achieve the highest expectations in their respective fields. A generation of students who are mediocre could be dangerous as a vacuum would be created in the transfer of knowledge because of their lack of





confidence and grammatical skills needed in using the main medium of education, the English language. This paper has, therefore, discussed the problems of the teaching and learning of the English language and suggestions have also been made towards re-inventing the public mission for higher education with focus on the public universities in Nigeria.

### **Recommendations**

Beside the few suggestions on the way forward after each issue discussed above, as a matter of practical solution to the thorny issues in the teaching and learning of the English language, teachers of English at B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) level need to be pedagogic in the teaching/learning of grammar. This is to build up communicative competence in the use of English in the public universities in Nigeria, as communicative competence is predicated upon grammatical competence. If the B.Ed. /B.A. (Ed.) students are expected to abide by the rules and principles underlying the use of English, it, then, become imperative for the teachers of English in public universities in Nigeria to do the following:

- Always make sure the students communicate and master the rules of grammar taught in the class and that they use them in any appropriate contexts or situations.
- Periodic evaluation of the teaching/learning process must be undertaken using both achievement and diagnostic test. This is to monitor both the teachers' and the students' progress in the teaching/learning of the English language.
- Practical and theoretical teaching of phonology must be done by making phonemic distinctions through drilling exercises and listening to tapes from good models to stem phonological interference in the students' oral English.
- Cloze tests should be employed so as to thoroughly drill the students on vocabulary building.
- More time should be devoted to the teaching of concord problems in English because of its significance to the concepts of syntax as a whole.
- Modify teaching methods to encourage specialization and discourage practice where a lecturer is assigned to teach all aspects of English.
- There should be general overhauling of the attitude of both learners and others towards the teaching and learning of English in the public universities in Nigeria. This means that to attain communicative



competence of the B.Ed. /B.A.(Ed.) English teachers need to be diligent in their duties.

## References

- Achebe, C. (1975). The African Writer and English Language in *Monitoring Yet on Creation Day*. Heinemann.
- Andrew, D. (2018). Writing: The re-construction of Language. *Language Sciences*. 72 (1) Doi: 10. /016/j.langsci. 2018. 09-004.
- Aiyewumi, M., Ruth A. and Stephen, O. Olorunleke, A. (2001). *Hints for the Teachers. Remedial English for Professional Students*. Lantern Printers Limited Ltd.
- Aliyu, A. (2005). Communicative competence acquisition in learning. In Gbamgbose, A., Banjo, A. and Thamos, A. (eds), *New Englishes*. Mosuro
- Andrienne R. (1995). In the intricacies of language lie powerful secrets of the culture. [www.azquotes.com](http://www.azquotes.com). Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2022.
- Banjo, A. (1989). The Status and Roles of English as a Second Language in Nigeria. Educational Forum.
- Bright, J. A. and McGregor, C. P (1970). *Teaching English as a Second language*. Longman.
- Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures. The Hague: Mouton, Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge Mass: M.IT Press.
- Eyisi, J. (2012). The English language in multilingual Nigeria. Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> October, 2022 from [joyeyisi.com%3Fq%3Dnode/15](http://joyeyisi.com%3Fq%3Dnode/15)
- Harmer, J. (2012). "Varieties of the Language" In *English Today*. No.1 January, 1985), pp.43-45.
- Hutchon, T. and Waters A.(1987). *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Douglas, H.O. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Pearson, Longman.
- Ogbazi, I. Osakwe, N.N. and Ekpunobi, D.C. (2003). *English for communicative Competence*. John Jacobs Publishers.
- Ogunwale, J. O. (2013). Harnessing multilingualism in Nigeria for development: Challenges and Strategies. *International Journal of English and Literature*. IJEL 14 (8), 367-374.
- Oji,N. (1997). English Language Studies in Higher Education: Problems and Suggestions for Improvement. LARES, Dept. of English, University of Lagos, 16-28.
- Rogina, G. (2015). Social interaction in context of Multilingualism on from theory to practice. Sustainable multilingualism. Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2022 from <http://dix.doi.org/co.pg>. 90-108



ISSN:2992 - 5649

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ARTS, COMMUNICATION AND PEDAGOGY (IJACOP)

Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, International Journal

Volume 2, Issue 1, November, 2023 <https://ijacop.org.ng>



Uchedu, A.G, Agbedo C. U. &Okorji, R.I. (2015). English pronunciation difficulties among Inyi speakers of English language. *Nsukka Working Papers in Language, Linguistics, And Literature* (NWPLLL) 3, 33- 42.