

THE ROLES OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper describes the functions of English as a second language in Nigeria, revealing the necessity for effective teaching and learning of the English language at various levels of education in Nigeria. Among other things, English in Nigeria is useful in the educational and career development of the citizens and is a very important part of the country's development and national culture.

Introduction

What is meant by English as a second language in Nigeria is that in addition to the various mother tongues (first languages) of the Nigerian people, English is a necessary, other, 'second', language that must be learned by any Nigerian who wants to live a meaningful life in Nigeria. The use and spread of English among countries in the world is described in three major ways: English as a first language; English as a second language; and English as a third language. English is used as a first language in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. It functions as a second language in countries such as Bangladesh, Malaysia, India, Zambia, and Nigeria. In other countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Russia, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, English functions as a foreign language necessary for international communication. Le (2016), citing Kachru,

describes the places where English is used as a foreign language as an “expanding circle”; a circle much larger than other circles where English is used as a second or as a first language. Nigeria is one of such countries where English is used as a second language, and the functions of English as a second language in Nigeria are the concern of this paper.

Functions of English as a Second Language in Nigeria

The functions of English as a second language in Nigeria include:

1. English is the official language in Nigeria

The official language of a country is the language principally used in carrying out the functions of government in the country. The 1946 Constitution of the Nigerian Colonial Administration first made English language the official language of Nigeria and the language of the colonial administration (Adewunmi & Owoyemi, 2012). Since Nigeria gained political independence in 1960, the country has maintained the status of English as the official language of the country. The 1979 Constitution, for example, approves the use of English alongside any of the (major) Nigerian languages, in the National and State Houses of Assembly. The same Constitution approved English as the principal medium of instruction in the Nigerian schools. As an official language in Nigeria, English is not only the principal medium of government administration, but also the principal medium of the media, legal courts, aviation, trade, and churches in the country.

2. English is lingua franca in Nigeria

English language functions as a lingua franca in Nigeria, being a common code of communication amongst the various ethnic groups in the country. For this reason, the English language has become a very important part of the development and national culture of Nigeria – a binding factor in the diversity found in the country. Ogunmodimu (2015), for example, records over five hundred and twenty-one (521) ethnic groups and languages in Nigeria. Thus, English, an inherited colonial language, becomes the surest means of communication among the various groups in the country. Also, the minority ethnic groups have found in English a peculiar weapon with which to fight any form of ‘neocolonialism’ by the major ethnic groups in the country.

3. English is the medium of instruction in Nigeria

The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) states thus: “From the fourth year [of the primary school], English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects” (p. 16). This means that from mid-primary to the tertiary levels of education in Nigeria, all instructions, teaching/learning materials, textbooks, and examinations in all subject areas, with the exception of subjects in the mother tongues or foreign languages are done in English. Therefore, one cannot do well in any school subject, unless one develops a competency in English language. All these imply that one must compulsorily learn the English language, not only to understand the language, but also to use it to understand the other subjects one may be studying in school. For this reason, English language is a compulsory subject taught at all the levels of the Nigerian primary and secondary schools, and at the foundation levels of the tertiary education.

4. English is a global language

The global nature of English language guarantees mutual intelligibility among its users, wherever they may come from in the world. The estimation is that about one billion people use and speak the English language across the nations of the world and that English is the official language for more than 70 countries of the world (Otagburuagu, Anidi, Ogayi, Kadiri, Nnamani, et al, 2016). Otagburuagu et al. further argue that although Arabic, French, Chinese, Russian and Spanish are among the languages used in the affairs of the United Nations, the English language is regarded as the most international of all the languages. English language, according to them, is the information language of diplomacy, business, science technology, banking, computing, medicine, UN and NATO, armed forces, engineering, tourism, Hollywood films, and the electronic and internet world. Similarly, Adewunmi (2012), citing Asoba, observe that:

It is evident that one out of five of the world’s population speak English to some level of competence and the demand for the other four fifths is increasing on a daily basis as it is the language of books, newspapers, airports and air traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising. It is true that over two third of the world’s scientists read in English. Third quarter of the world’s mail is written in English; while 80% of the world’s electronically stored information is done in English. Of the estimated 40 million users of the internet, the majority of its users communicate in English, (Adewunmi, p. 294).

These assertions rightly indicate that learning and using the English language as a second language in Nigeria helps the citizenry in effective interaction not only in Nigeria but in the global world where English is used as a means of communication.

5. English is the language of the corporate world

English is the language used for transactions in most corporate organizations, not just in Nigeria, but around the world. Thus, proficiency in the English language is a fundamental requirement of the twenty-first century global work force. In this vein, Le (2016) points out that proficiency in English language is imperative for an individual's career growth and economic competitiveness in an increasingly globalized world. As English is an international language, used in most parts of the world, communication competency in the language is a most vital skill necessary for the 21st century workforce. Organizations seek people who can follow and give instructions, listen accurately, provide useful feedback, get along with coworkers and customers, network, provide serviceable information, work well in teams, and creatively, critically solve problems and present ideas in an understandable manner. This implies that the employability and career development of the Nigerian graduates is dependent on their ability to communicate effectively using the English language, the language used for most official transactions and businesses in Nigeria and around the world.

The above facts therefore indicate the necessity for Nigerians and other second language learners of English in other countries to develop competency in the English language to maintain a competitive advantage in career search and development.

Conclusion

Considering all the functions that English plays as a second language in Nigeria, a high premium is placed in the teaching and learning of this subject in the Nigerian schools. Presently, English language, as a school subject, is compulsory from the pre-primary education years, through the six years of primary education, the six years of junior and senior secondary education combined, and up until the completion of the first year of the tertiary education, and even after, depending on the discipline and the institution. The study of English language at the tertiary level of education in Nigeria is considered vital, because students require a high level of proficiency in the language to facilitate a successful mastery of their professional courses, the language of which is mostly technical in nature. English is the tool with which to navigate through their course lectures, textbooks and other materials, as well as communicate effectively in spoken and written exercises and discourses within and outside their lecture halls.

Thus, English language will continue to be one of the most relevant subjects in the Nigerian schools. Unfortunately, though, despite the importance of the English language in Nigeria, and the number of years spent in learning it in the Nigerian schools, it is generally reported that the greater percentage of Nigerian graduates still lack the basic communication skills in English language. There is need to continually seek for more effective methods of learning this important language in the Nigerian schools.

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