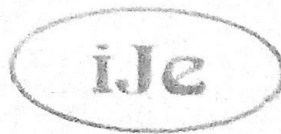


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THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IN  
IMPROVING THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH  
IN THE NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL.

BY

OLAJIDE, STEPHEN BILLY

ABSTRACT

*The primary school pupil begins to learn English Language, from an early part of his programme. This is because the language is very important in Nigeria's life. But there have not been evidences that the learner is proficient in the language, even at the end of his programme. Many factors are responsible for the non-proficiency. How the primary school teacher can become most relevant to the learning of English language at that level therefore constitutes the thrust of this paper.*

INTRODUCTION.

English has acquired immense importance in Nigeria. It is the language of commerce, mass communication, law, religion and education (Bamigbose, 1967, Lawal, 1990). According to Lawal (1990:5), 'the role of English as an international language is no longer in doubt'. The language is so pervasive that pupils are allowed to be trained in indigenous languages in the country only in their first few years in the primary (FGN, 1981). After this, the learner has to learn to use the language throughout his/her academic career. Thus the primary school is where most learners first encounter the language, which means that the foundation in English for the Nigerian learners should be from this important educational stage (Ubahakwe & Obi, 1979). Unfortunately, evidence from the performances of pupils at the post primary level have not pointed to that efficient foundation has been laid in English at

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the Primary level (Omene 1988). The results of learners in the Senior School-Certificate Examinations have been decried from time to time. Failure among candidates in the Examinations had affected their careers adversely and Nigeria's place of advancement had consequently been slowed considerably. Many factors are responsible for this deplorable state. But the primary school teacher's role in solving the problem is great. He should be put in a position where he could play the role most actively.

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation. There are well over two hundred languages in the country, although Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are major among the languages (Bamigbose, 1967). The National Policy on Education (FGN, 1981) recommends that the three major indigenous languages be used to teach learners in the primary schools in their first three years.

This means that the pupils first master the sounds and letters of their mothertongues before encountering English that now comes as a second language. By the time they begin to learn English, they move from the sounds to the letters of alphabet, then to words, phrases, clauses and sentences. By the end of their primary school programme, the pupils would have been able to read and write larger units of discourse, paragraphs and entire stories, no matter how imperfectly. English is the language of instruction throughout the post-primary and tertiary levels of education in Nigeria. It is used in teaching, conducting debates, scholarly discussions, reporting research findings and other endeavours. The language of most text-books after the primary school is also English. In mass communication, English is the predominant language. News reports, jingles, drama, news analyses and personality programmes are conducted largely in English. Newspapers and magazines are equally written mainly in the language.

Also, legal proceedings are reported in English. The use of interpreters is permitted in certain courts. The law school conducts its programmes in English mainly. Moreover, in business circles, English is a prominent means of communication. Business conferences and seminars are conducted in English. Most of the items of trade bear English-oriented trade marks or are accompanied by manuals that are written in English. And it is the first language of international sports (Lawal, 1990). Thus, the primary school learner has extensive tasks ahead of him/her to conduct in English. At the higher level of learning, the language



dominates the environment. Lessons are conducted in English, just as textbooks are written in the language. The indigenous languages are more often than not taught in English.

### **PROBLEMS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT THE PRIMARY SCHOOL**

Crucial as English appears to be in Nigeria's national life, the problems of poor performance in the language are quite obvious among primary school learners. The problems are psychological, social, political, economic and instructional. The question of educational standard in Nigeria may equally have explanation in inadequate language skills of the products of the school system (Lawal, 1990) although Ubahakwe & Obi (1979) object to the view that the standard of English language is falling in Nigerian Primary Schools. They observe that there could be a gap between a primary school teacher's favoured method of teaching and his actual method of teaching English language. They therefore recommend that the entire process of teaching/learning the language in the primary school be examined before observers pronounce on performance standard.

#### **a. Political Problems:**

In schools that are set up to promote anti-English values, learners may not be given access to English. Although the language may appear on the curricula of such schools, adequate emphasis is never placed on it. In-experienced teachers may be recruited while grossly inadequate periods are allocated to English on the time table. A different language may be enforced for communication as long as the school is in session. When learners in such schools complete their programmes, they may not be proficient enough in the language. Communicating with products of other orientations might be difficult, and the English language expert may have huge tasks remediating these problems. Moreover, government policy on education affects the teaching and learning of English in the primary school. Where teachers are transferred to satisfy political desires of individuals and communities, the motivational levels of the learners and teachers of English may be affected. Inordinate transfers adversely affect the professional practices of teachers generally. Also, if a government does not encourage the use of English or it is hard on English-oriented primary schools, the attitude of learners and the teacher of the subject could become negative.

Again, the economic situation of a school, as well as the financial states of parents could predetermine how effectively English and other subjects in the primary school curriculum are learnt. Unless school administrations sufficiently allocate funds to English, and unless parents give financial backing to their children, the facilities needed for English language practices are never available. Which means that the learners cannot contact the experiences necessary to make them proficient in the language.

Besides, except there is adequate funding for the teachers of English to participate in seminars, workshops and refresher courses, and undertake undergraduate and postgraduate studies, they would not be abreast of the current English language teaching techniques. As such, the performance of their learners remains weak, with the secondary schools being fed by products that lack the tool (English) which they need for effective learning.

b. Psychological Problems:

Primary school learners are no doubt at their formative age. They have the linguistic advantage that they are capable of learning any language. But one of their greatest disadvantages is that they have to learn English from second position. Their mothertongues have had considerable influence on them, and the learners now overgeneralize and substitute sounds and structures in English.

Then, majority of the learners do not possess relevant experiential backgrounds. They are from homes that do not reinforce the English language experiences of the learners. Such homes hardly have radio and television sets by which the learners can have access to English language and literature in English programmes mounted by the media to broaden learner's knowledge of English. Even if there are radio and television sets, and the learners would love to benefit from the programmes, many parents saddle the pupils with tasks that hamper the learners.

c. Social Problems:

Inadequate psychological support leads to social insecurity and poor performance in English in the primary school. A pupil with inadequate exposure would not want to mix with other learners. If a pupil's parents are separated or he has been brought to ridicule in the presence of staff and fellow pupils, the learner may be reticent and self-conceited. This does not help the acquisition of proficiency in



English language. Language learning involves imitation and practice which are effected not only within the classroom. By mixing with other learners, the learner acquires greater courage and opportunity to use English. As other learners communicate with him on self-selected topics and ideas (which induces the learner to behave in language most naturally), the learner is drawn from his shell, and he responds. On their own, learners may choose to go to aspects of a school compound that fascinate them to observe and comment, based on their on-the-spot experiences. It must be realized that English, like any other language, is a product of socio-cultural agreement.

d. Instructional Problems:

With instructional problems, teachers of English are not able to achieve their objectives of making learners perform well in the language. If the teacher's knowledge of the language is inadequate, learners' skills in English cannot be more than superficial. Where the necessary facilities are not available, the teachers cannot function effectively. With all infrastructural facilities available, the teachers of English language deserve proper encouragement to make such infrastructure work.

### THE TEACHER'S ROLE AS SOLUTION.

Now that we have recognized the place of English language in Nigeria generally, and in education specifically, and we have identified the overlapping problems that confront the teaching and learning of English at the primary school level in our country, let us examine the role of the teacher in finding solutions to such problems.

The learners come from different homes and suffer varying language deficiencies. Some stammer and cannot pronounce words correctly or produce sentences smoothly. The teacher must patiently teach English at a speed that allows the different categories of learners to learn, without boring those learners that are fast. Learners with emotional problems due to family or other forms of social problems should be referred to counselling units for appropriate handling. The teacher must know his pupil inside-out.

If the teacher observes that the learners are fond of particular tasks outside the classroom e.g. dancing, selling, constructing things, he should create a classroom that would enable the learners use English to act along such desirable directions.

Also, the teacher should be familiar with the country's



Nigeria wants learners who would be developed enough to be useful to themselves and the society (FGN, 1981).

Thus the teacher should select English language experiences that would adequately task the three Domains-cognitive, psychomotoric and effective, of every learner. In other words, the English language teacher should make his lesson attract every learner, no matter his/her individual difference.

This implies that within the lesson in English, the learners are allowed to interact with one another freely as they use the language; this prepares them for communication tasks in real life, situations.

Therefore, the English language teacher must have a good command of the language. He should know how to impart and evaluate the four skills of English-writing, reading, speaking and listening. Evaluation should be done at every stage of teaching, and it should be in form of questions that make learners behave quantitatively, e.g. 'Sola, identify any four nouns from this paragraph'. This kind of question also helps the teacher to convince his learners that he knows them by names, thereby motivating them.

The teacher of English at the primary school should know, at least, a bit of the learners' mothertongue, so that he can anticipate the problems that such learners may have in English spelling, pronunciation, grammar and punctuation. His lessons must be prepared to allow learners gradually overcome these linguistic problems. He must ensure that enough periods are allocated to the language on the time table.

Another task for the English language teacher is to select texts and design instructional aids that relate to the cultural backgrounds of the learners. The texts should contain familiar names, ideas and concepts. And audio-visuals can be developed using such local materials as leaves, woods, clay, pots, bones of animals, feathers, pictures and calendars.

The teacher should use colours to appeal to the learners in the materials he designs. Learners should be encouraged to read graphs, charts, diagrams and maps.

The good teacher of English is able to ascertain the level of difficulty of the texts he is going to implement on his learners. The text with many multi-syllabic words will not yield to the interpretation by an

average learner in the primary school.

Texts with tiny or funny prints can detract the learners. In the words of Lawal (1990:51) 'The primary school teacher would thus need to go beyond a single textbook to incorporate materials and new trends in planning and teaching English lessons'.

English Language teachers are expected to combine some human relations with their tasks in the primary school. They should carry other teachers along in the efforts of making the learners perform well. All staff should be encouraged to speak English with the learners at all times. Attempts should be courteously made to correct grammatical errors instantly among learners.

Those who perform outstandingly well in English language examinations and extra-curricular activities should be rewarded, although poor performance need not necessarily be punished.

Therefore, English language teachers can organize excursions, debates, quizzes, drama shows and group discussions within their schools and among other schools. These will allow for further language use and induce co-operative spirit among the learners. Games and songs enhance language learning (Lawal, 1991). Also, the teacher of English should make authorities fund the subject effectively, no matter how much competitions teachers of other subjects may put up for small available resources. He should use grants judiciously and be extremely innovative. He must be able to convince school and government that most subjects depend on sound knowledge of English and that the latter must be aggressively developed, if the former should thrive.

In the process, English language teachers should have a way of linking with the parents, so as to make them support the government and school authorities in the struggle to develop English language at the primary level. The teacher should show appreciation to any parents or members of the public who donate towards the improvement of English language.

He may create a small library in the class where he could put books donated by learners, parents and social organizations, and mount a list of donors for all pupils to see. This may spur the learners. The development of ~~English~~ primary school concerns all segments of the society.



### CONCLUDING REMARKS.

Thus English is quite important in Nigeria and its development through education should be intensified right from the primary school level. English faces serious problems at the level; some of the problems relate to government, parents and the school management, the others derive from the learners and the teachers themselves. Most of these problems can be eliminated by the teacher, if he knows his learners, recognizes society's expectations and the capabilities that English offers and promotes. He should enjoy the goodwill of school administrators, and bring in the relevant members of the society. English language experts should be allowed to teach the subject right from the primary school.

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