

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN A MULTI CULTURAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF NIGERIA

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## **Abstract**

*The National Policy on Education for Nigeria stresses the place of language teaching in Nigeria. This paper explores the challenges facing English Language teaching in a multicultural society like Nigeria. Both the National Policy on Education as well as the cultural policy for Nigeria all point to the very important position of language in culture and in Education. Using the theory of cultural relativism, this paper agrees that the English culture (EC) as well as the indigenous (IC) are equally important and none is superior to the other. It further notes that the Target language (TL) should take into cognizance the culture of the local populace and proceed to incorporate it into the language teaching classrooms. It should form part of what has been referred to as Standard Nigerian English.*

## **Introduction**

Language and culture are inseparable as it is language that distinguishes various societies into the categories of multi—ethnic, multi-cultural or multi—lingual. Language is the single most important factor that distinguishes human beings from other creatures of the earth. In a multi-ethnic society like Nigeria, there are bound to be diverse cultures and several languages. The diversity of cultures has various implications for national development, national cohesion and national consciousness. This imperatively necessitates a second language which will link up or bridge the communication gap in a heterogeneous society. In Nigeria, such a role falls on English Language to become a mediator. To mediate effectively, English has to be taught and developed. This paper examines the pros and cons of teaching English in a multi-cultural society like Nigeria. The paper further proffers solutions to the challenges confronting the teaching/learning of English language in Nigeria. The paper would address certain issues like (i) What exactly is culture in language teaching and learning (ii) How does culture affect language teaching etc.

### **Theory of Cultural and Linguistic Relativism**

One of the theories concerning the existence of man and his experiences is the theory of cultural relativism. This theory shows that the norms and values of each culture have their own validity and cannot be used as a standard for evaluating other cultures. What is weighty in one society may be considered trivial in another and that each trait has full validity within its own cultural environment (Okafor and Emeka 2004). In Nigeria with hundreds of ethnic groups, the force of this theory in building harmony and understanding is welcome and applaudable. In the same vein, the theory of linguistic relativism states that linguistic habits are only evidence of cultural reality. According to Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1967) as cited in Uriel (2007:152) 'Man's perception of his environment is built upon the linguistic habits of the community in which he lives'. The implication of this theory is that an individual's thoughts, feelings and actions are determined or influenced by the structure of his native language because man's cultural ways of life is expressed in his language. So, bilinguals or multi-linguals who speak different languages are said to be operating from several cultural points due to the multiple languages which carry the world views of their different communities (Uriel 2007:152). So to apply this theory to the Nigerian context, it follows that Nigerians who also use English language to express their ideas, thoughts and feelings are likely to do so within the confines and dictates of their mother tongue. This happens because the way human beings perceive their environment and interpret their experiences depends to a large extent on the socio-cultural and linguistic habits of the community.

So, in Nigeria's diverse landscape, all peoples cling to their own language groups (Emenanjo, 2002). So, cultural relativism gives room for varieties, tolerance and respect for the ways of life of others.

### **The Theory of Inter-Language**

The theory of inter-language by Selinker (1972) as modified by Jowitt (1991:52), states that the Nigerian learners' inter-language is characterized by the elaboration or complexification of his internalized grammar, and by the expansion of his vocabulary through the learning of new words and their meanings. This implies that the Nigerian second language learner is strategically located for both languages that he cannot avoid any. His performance in English will certainly be seriously affected by his indigenous language (L1). The resultant admixture of the two languages will be embellished with structural, linguistic and cultural elements which may produce a quaintness resulting in poor intelligibility and lack of equivalent forms in English language (Ajibola 2012).



## **Multi-Culturalism and the Nigerian Environment**

Culture is the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any abilities acquired by man. Culture, therefore encompasses those conventional understandings and practices which give a people their uniqueness and thus render such a people distinct from all others. This definition means that every culture is subject to the process of change. Cultural interactions and contacts could easily result in mutual cultural influences which could in turn result in the assimilations, adaptation and accommodation of aspects of other people's culture. The end product could be cultural refinement, advancement or integration. Contact between communities of different cultural backgrounds has always been the most active agent of change. Such is the case in Nigeria when there was contact with the Europeans/colonial masters who now introduced a new language into the Nigeria's heterogeneous, linguistic environment.

## **Concept of Culture and Language**

Ashworth (1990: 5) defines an indigenous language as the language of the people considered to be the original inhabitants of the area. Bamgbose (1971: 36) puts the number of such languages in Nigeria at about 400. This situation clearly sets the country on the multi-cultural and multilingual map. Multilingualism is defined by Richards (1985: 85 as cited in Otagburuagu 2012) "as the use of three or more languages by an individual or group" So there is the presence of many language codes in Nigeria. These languages often compete for roles within the macro-Nigerian culture. In the face of the multiplicity of cultures, English language plays the role of a mediator while the local languages still function at their different levels depending on the type and level of information involved.

Language is the lubricant of culture. Without language a culture ceases to exist. Nigeria as a multi-cultural nation makes it the home of many indigenous cultures and languages. Culture is central to the life of the individual within the group as well as of the group itself, both in a spiritual and intellectual sense. Okafor & Emeka (2004).

A Cultural Policy for Nigeria, (1988), defined culture as: the totality of the ways of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, which gives order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and modes of organization thus distinguishing a people from their neighbours (FGN 2004).

## **Cultural Policy for Nigeria**

In 1988, the Federal Government promulgated a Cultural Policy for Nigeria, which provides that the culture of Nigeria shall have a direct influence on and be

the basis for education, industry, tourism, and technology. The Policy, inter alia, declares as follows:

1. The policy shall serve to mobilize and motivate the people by dissemination and propagating of ideas which promote national pride, solidarity and consciousness.
2. Promote an educational system that motivates and stimulates creativity and draws largely on the tradition and values, namely: respect for humanity and dignity of labour, and respect for positive Nigerian moral and religious values.
3. The policy shall promote creativity in the fields of Arts, Science and technology; ensure the continuity of traditional skills and sports and their progressive updating to serve modern development needs as our contributions to world growth of culture and ideas.
4. The policy shall seek to enhance the efficient management of national resources through the transformation of indigenous technology, design, resources and skills.
5. The policy shall enhance national self-sufficiency, and reflect our cultural heritage and national aspiration in the process of industrialization (FGN1988:6).

Emenanjo, et al (2002) indicated that the Nigerian Language policy has assigned explicit roles to the different languages in the country. Some which they have indicated as follows:

- i. Mother tongue and the languages of the immediate community should be the languages of the initial literacy and of adult and non-formal education.
- ii. The three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be the languages of national culture and integration.
- iii. English is the official language to be used in formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher education etc.
- iv. Selected foreign languages specifically French and Arabic together with English are to be the languages of international communication and discourse.

The implementation of these specifications has not been easy. A number of constraints which range from inadequate personnel, non-availability of literature, orthography, negative attitude, have been pointed out about the teaching of mother-tongue for literacy. Consequently, one finds that the role assigned to the English language by the National Language Policy overlaps with those of the mother tongue. The implication is that a confused state exist which has a negative effect on the roles of the languages.

So English becomes the second language with a special statute in Nigeria as a medium of instruction in sectors of the educational system and as official



language in various arms and levels of government. This situation has considerable effect on the attitudes of teachers and learners. Since English is now the language of instruction in schools, therefore through English the Nigerian child learns all the subjects in the school curriculum. However from the cultural standpoint, the Nigerian child is not divested of his cultural background. Therefore second language teaching and learning methodologies should be tied to the ferments and structures used in learning the mother –tongue which should have been mastered first. (Oduşina,1989). The practice of incorporating culture as part of the language teaching curriculum should be upheld. As Byram and Morgan cited in Agbedo (2015) put it knowledge of the grammatical system of a language has to be complemented by understanding of culture-specific meanings (communicative and cultural competence). Today there is a paradigm shift in language teaching methodologies from the era of formalism (linguistic competence) premised on the Saussurean *Lange-parole* classical distinction, followed by Chomsky's competence-performance, when language was conceived in terms of a mere code or a compendium of rules and strings of words and sentences to the current era of communicative competence, which directs interest in the study of language in relation to the society.

Kramşch (1993:1) in Agbedo (2015) underscores the wisdom of the paradigm shift when he states as follows:

Culture in language learning is not an expendable fifth skill, tacked on, so to speak, to the teaching of speaking, listening, reading and writing. It is always in the background, right from day one, ready to unsettle the good language learners when they expect it least, making evident the limitations of their hard won communicative competence, challenging their ability to make sense of the world around them.

Other researchers corroborate this view that a second language must reflect the cultural values of the society in which the language is spoken, failing which the learners cannot achieve communicative competence. Krasner in Ajibola (2012), notes that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a second language to be competent in that language. In other words language teachers and learners must be aware of the culturally appropriate ways of addressing people, expressing gratitude, making requests, agreeing or disagreeing with someone. They should be able to understand and teach that behaviours and intonations patterns that are appropriate in the second language speech community may be perceived differently by members of the target language speech community. They should understand that successful communication must incorporate culturally appropriate behavior. So to foster proper teaching and ing of English in Nigeria, there is need to take into account the different and perspectives of the different ethnic groups and streamline them

possibly into what is now considered as Nigerian English. Poltizer in Agbede (2015:9) warned that 'if we teach language without teaching at the same time the culture in which it operates, we are teaching meaningless symbols or symbols to which the student attaches the wrong meaning.' The best option is for second language teaching and learning to incorporate the target culture as well as the indigenous culture for as Liddicoat in Agbede (2015) avers 'the target for the language learner is to develop an intercultural perspective in which the native culture and language are made apparent alongside the target culture'. The learner should develop an intercultural position which can form a basis for on-going development of intercultural communicative skills so as to see culture as a core component of language education.

### **Culture in Relation to Language Teaching**

Language instruction is built on certain hierarchical procedures which involve theories, approaches, methods and techniques (Richards and Rodgers, 1989). The contact will result in change. In his contribution Adegbite (2013:94) says: English as a second language should be planned as a subject and as a medium of instruction in complimentary with the indigenous languages. In terms of objectives, the discipline should be developed as in (i) a means of inculcating the spirit of nationalism in the learners (ii) a means of gaining access to modernism (iii) a tool of internationalism.

### **Challenges**

The challenge demands the identification of the differences between the English Language and the indigenous languages and cultures which could pose problems in the English language teaching and learning process. For example, stative verbs are a common feature of the English language verb family. This is not applicable in Nigeria's indigenous languages and this can inhibit the teaching and learning of English language.

The study of literature in a first or second language helps the student with the various operations of language and the need to elucidate its meaning. Since literature organizes languages in the most exemplary fashion, the second language learner must be aware of the importance of applying the language of literature as a model for his own use. The teaching of literature has the practical value of enabling the student to learn about the second language as well as use it to enhance the cultural ways of life of the people. This will throw more light on why Achebe in his books tried to represent the social, cultural and political life of the people. Teaching and learning starts from known to unknown. If the learner can use English in their own cultural context to express their feeling, thoughts ideas and actions, that means an attempt to indigenize the language to serve their local



purposes. It is pertinent to note that ideal language instruction does not take place in a vacuum. It is human action in a human society and therefore it is influenced directly or indirectly by the socio-cultural as well as socio-political climate of the society. Therefore while we like to recognize that multi-culturalism and multilingualism do pose challenges for English language teaching and learning in Nigeria, English language should take into consideration the cultural connotations of words which may not tally with its general linguistic meanings.

### Some Specific Cultural Concerns

Teaching of English implicates the knowledge of cultures as indicated earlier. Since the appropriateness or otherwise of an utterance depends mainly on the culture of the people. Of course the Nigerian speaker of English sees the world and interprets experiences through the indigenous Nigerian language which tends to reflect the Nigerian culture. However it is important to note that several grammatically wrong sentences should not be ignored or condoned by the English Language teacher even in the light of the so-called Nigerian English. Some may be culturally induced while others are outright departures from target norms of good usages and so constitute errors that can derail the process of intelligibility or acceptability to both native users and Nigerian users of the standard forms. Laments that these non-standard usage which he refers to as 'deviance' reflects the users 'ignorance of the rules of collocation or colligation or failure in the application of the rules.'

So the English language teacher in Nigeria should be very competent and proficient to be able to appreciate the distinction between right and wrong usages.

Some areas of concern include what Okoro (2004:174 in Ajibola (2012) called (i) Peculiar Nigerianisms and (ii) Characteristic breaches of the code. They include:

- (i) *Reduplication/Redundancies*: This refers to unnecessary repetitions of lexical items that belong to the same semantic fields or the superfluous modifiers e.g. include: Bending corner, extreme end, and return back, repeat again, frying pan etc.
- (ii) *Coinages/Analogous creations*: such as senior sister, junior brother, melon soup, cow meat etc.

There are issues to consider where the second language has no lexical equivalent. Sometimes there are concepts that may not have an equivalent and even a near equivalent will not have the same cultural nuances.

1. For instance, when Ezeulu addresses the people:

*Umaro kwenu! Umuaro Kwenu!!, Umuaro Kwezuenu !!!*

And the people answer *Hem!*

It cannot in any way have equivalent impact with *hello! Hi!*. The *kwenu/hem* carry in it the strength of the people, one voice indicative of their unison, and pride which awakens the national consciousness of the group gathered there, (Achebe 1974).

2. When Ezeulu says to the son Oduche, 'I want you to go and be my eye there.' It was culturally more expedient than to say 'go and represent me' because 'to be my eye' means to 're-duplicate me.' That is to say that if you are there, I am there, and not that somebody is standing in for another.

The implication is that the second language teacher may use some transliteration techniques/methods to enhance the learners' understanding of the cultural nuances of certain usages. The teacher should equally encourage the learners to read voraciously in the literatures of the local culture written in English that depict the cultures of the indigenous communities. Many African writers, novelists, dramatists and poets such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ola Rotimi, Gabriel Okara, Zaynab Alkali, to mention but a few have used their works in the promotion of Nigerian cultures. Their works have indigenous setting, exposing local flora and fauna and exhibiting thoughts, reasoning, feelings, and expressing the indigenous ways of life. This will help learners appreciate the various ethnic and cultural groups in Nigeria in order to nurture mutual tolerance and acceptance and in addition promote communicative competence. So English Language teaching/learning may involve transliteration or vernacularization.

So the teaching and learning of English language and literature should help to promote cultural integration with a view to making the society better. Unoh (1986) summarized it thus: Through dramaturgy and drama in English, Nigerian creative artistes, have succeeded in bringing about a fruitful integration, intermixture and integration of European, American and African or Nigerian cultures, to the mutual interest and benefit of an integrated world culture.

### 3. *Phonology:*

There are disparities in the intonation patterns, word or syllable stress, vowel and consonant contrasts in many local languages and these may be causing confusion between the English language and indigenous language as they may not dovetail properly. The English language teacher should identify such areas and drill out those aspects not acceptable e.g. absence of some sounds, like 'h' in Yoruba language e.g. 'as' in place of 'has' th -'s', 'f' for 'p' in Hausa language or 'n' in place of 'r' in Igbo. Through practice and exercises, the



teacher must need and use reinforcement to correct some phonological abnormalities.

4. *Consonant clusters:*

In Igbo language, there are no consonant clusters e.g. sukulu for school, kilasi for class. Fetifulu for faithful

The English Language teacher must endeavour to drill out such phonetic disparities.

5. *African Time:*

There is a problem of timing in Nigeria referred to as African Time. This does not exist in English. In English culture, if it is 9am it is specific and exact but in our culture timing is ambiguous e.g. by the cock crow at dawn, when the sun comes up, by the new moon etc. This has led to African time making people lose sense of time and thereby affecting their sense of responsibility. It should be taken care of during teaching and learning.

6. *Kingship*

Kingship and official relationship is not properly spelt out in our native culture e.g. Showing respect by adding honorific epithets e.g. . Mr., Mrs. This is not existent in some local languages like Igbo.

## **The Way Forward**

Studying English is advantageous because of its value academically, socially, politically, economically, culturally etc. English is a unifying agent in a multi-lingual Nigeria. English becomes indispensable for any Nigerian who wishes to interact and communicate within and outside the country freely.

Teachers of English have a lot to do in teaching and learning process.

## **Conclusion**

English language instruction has helped to mitigate the effects of multiculturalism and multilingualism in Nigeria. As the language among other domains, its teaching and learning has promoted growth and development in the country. We need to use the English language as an instrument of inclusion rather than exclusion by making its teaching and learning incorporate the Nigerian culture. To do this, more intimate collaboration is needed with instructors of indigenous Nigerian languages and English language teachers. It is likely that if this is done, multiculturalism will not reduce the effectiveness of English language teaching and learning.

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