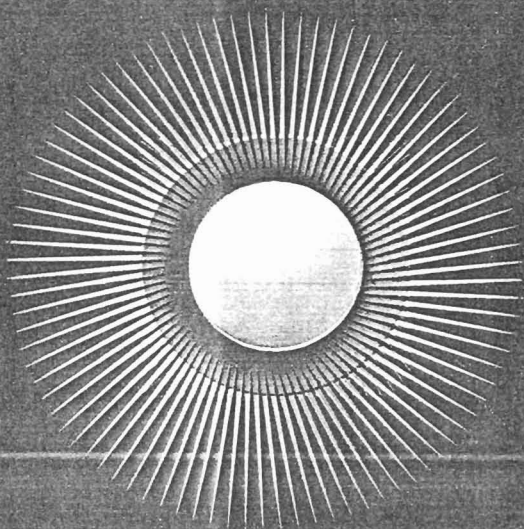


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CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND ENGLISH STUDIES IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

This study points out some inadequacies in the English studies programme in secondary schools and suggests ways to correct them. The paper observes that in spite of the vital role that English plays in the lives of Nigerians, learners have not been able to use the language to communicate as effectively as they should. One reason for this is that there is yet to be a viable curriculum of English studies in the schools. Since the bulk of English learning takes place in school, it becomes essential to improve on the curriculum by identifying its inadequacies and suggesting ways of correcting them. The inadequacies pointed out in the work are mainly in respect of the syllabus and teaching methods. Suggestions are given in respect of the rectification of these and some other problems of the English studies curriculum in Nigerian secondary schools.

Introduction

The mastery of English holds high hopes for the individual Nigerian learner in his own social advancement and the socio-politic-economic growth of the nation. To function effectively as a fully integrated member of the society, the Nigerian learner requires an appreciable degree of competence, that is almost comparable to the native speaker's in the language (Adegbite 1995). But as experience and research findings have shown (cf. Afolayan 1968; Ayodele 1984a), it can hardly be said that English has yet provided an effective means of communication for its Nigerian learners/users. In spite of the vital role that the language plays in the lives of the people, it has been very difficult for them to learn it with an appreciable degree of success. This problem, of course, has been a source of concern to language scholars in the country who have been attempting to investigate the reasons for it.

Quite expectedly, most of the problems of learning English in Nigeria have been blamed on the inadequacy of the policy, its content and presentation in the educational system in the country (Ubahakwe 1979; Afolayan 1995). This blame cannot be refuted since the bulk of English takes place in school. Indeed a lot of studies (see, for example, Ayodele 1984b) have further confirmed this opinion by tracing the sources of most of these problems to the school, especially the secondary school where the foundations of English learning for communicative purposes are supposed to be laid. Without any doubt, the secondary school is a crucial level for education English language learning in Nigeria, hence it has continued to receive much attention even while other problems of the language are being investigated. This study observes some of the problems of English studies in Nigerian secondary schools and makes recommendations based on the findings.

The State of English studies in Nigerian Secondary Schools

There is a clear indication that all is not well with English Studies

in Nigerian secondary schools as regards the development, implementation and evaluation of the curriculum. Over the years, the Chief Examiners of the West African Examinations Council have always reported poor performance of students in school certificate examinations. The poor performance is of great concern to everybody as it negates the aspirations of the students themselves as well as the principle of secondary education. Without merit passes in the relevant subjects there is no hope of candidates getting admitted into post-secondary institutions or being gainfully employed anywhere. How then can those pupils who have failed English be expected to live a useful life in the society? Alternatively, how then can we prevent pupils' mass failure in English in order to make them contribute more meaningfully to the society? A positive answer can be found to the latter question. But the solution lies partly in the enrichment of the language resources and experience of learners at school, to enhance their level of communicative competence and increase their chances of passing English Examinations. A move towards the enrichment of pupils' linguistic experience is made in this study by identifying the principles and components of the content of English Studies and suggesting the priorities to be given to the components in a full, rich English Studies curriculum.

The English Studies Programme in Nigerian Secondary School

THE PRINCIPLES OF ENGLISH STUDIES

The broad aims of secondary education in Nigeria, as contained in Section 14: 17 (1,2) of the *National Policy on Education* are two, namely, to prepare the students for useful living in the society and to prepare them for higher education.

To achieve the above aims, two requirements are set for English studies at the level, viz.:

- (i) learners should be able to understand as well as converse effectively in spoken English in order to have successfully undergone the course; and

- (ii) learners should be able to efficiently read, *comprehend critically*, as well as engage efficiently in expressive and creative writing.

To fulfill the above requirements in an ESL situation, the design and implementation of the curriculum should take cognizance of learners' needs and plan the utilization of available resources in the English as a Second Language (ESL) community (cf. Ellis and Tomlinson 1980; Akintola 1984.) to achieve the best results. Although certain principles and methods of the teaching of English as Mother Tongue (EMT) can inform that of ESL, it is essential to remember that TESL differs from the former in content and focus, for as Mittins (1959:87) explains:

Most EMT pupils start school with facility of a kind in oral skills of speaking and listening to English. And the teacher initiates the further processes of reading and writing

However, it is in the school system that most ESL pupils have their first contact with learning the language. Thus the teachers do not only need to properly identify the needs of their pupils and the essential components to teach, they also need to develop and acquire appropriate methods and skills to teach them. The relevant components of English Studies in secondary education are thus identified below.

The Components of English Studies

In line with the principles of English learning in an ESL situation, Afolayan (1979) identifies three components of an English Studies programme in an African University thus:

- i. the "practice" or "Use of English" components, comprising the acquisition of the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing;
- ii. the English language component, concerned with the description of structures and theories about language;

- iii. and the literature in English component, comprising English, African and other non-African literature in language.

These three components are also relevant for the secondary school curriculum of English Studies, with few modifications in their application. For while there could be a strong basis for having the above as separate components in the University, there is no basis at all for such a separation in the secondary school level. The Literature-in-English component, for example, ought to be integrated into the practice of English skills rather than function as a separate subject in the curriculum, so that in the end the two major components can be identified with the English programme in theoretical and practical perspectives. The components of English Studies in secondary schools in Nigeria can then be stated as follows:

- (i) the practice of English components as already stated above but now subsuming literature in English; and
- (ii) the description of English structures.

The priorities and methods of teaching these two components and their sub-parts are discussed below.

The Practice of English Skills

Four sub-components are identified for discussion here, namely, (i) listening, (ii) speaking, (iii) reading, and (iv) writing. In the discussion below, listening and speaking are taken together while the other two skills are treated separately.

Listening and Speaking

The Grieve Report of 1964, which radically revised English examining in West Africa, had stated that written English should be de-emphasized to accommodate the teaching of oral English in examinations. The report undoubtedly underscored the

primacy of speech in communication (see also Banjo 1976) and noted the inadequacies of a syllabus that does not make provisions for it. In another report by Alan Davies in 1968, it was suggested that oral English be examined at 'O' Level and consequently taught in schools. Since then, many other studies have been carried out which have suggested the importance of teaching oral English, or listening and speaking skills, to pupils in order to develop their efficiency in the use of language (see Atoye 1994). However, in spite of all these suggestions that scholars have made, it is only recently that a bold step has been taken to correct a major anomaly in oral English teaching.

Until the last decade of the 20th century, oral English used to be optional in the school syllabus, so that not all pupils benefited from the course. Thus, despite the fact that various English course books in the secondary schools have columns for speech work, most teachers never bothered to teach this aspect of English to pupils because they are not compelled to do so.

Even now that the school syllabus has mandated all schools to teach oral English and all pupils to learn and be examined in it (SSCE syllabus 1991-1993), many teachers are still at a loss about how to teach it. Their inability is further compounded by the absence of essential equipment, materials and infrastructure to enhance the teaching and improve their listening and speech skills. But this step is just the beginning of efforts that should be made to solve the problems of oral English teaching in Nigeria. Therefore, the problems that need to be tackled in this respect include making adequate provisions for well-trained English teachers to teach English in the schools, making adequate provisions for essential equipment, materials and infrastructure and preparing a reliable and valid means of testing speech skills in the school curriculum. These, no doubt, call for the urgent attention of planners, developers, and implementers of the English studies programme.

Now, going to the English classroom, it should be understood that the purpose of teaching speaking is to enable learners acquire good pronouncing habits as well as efficient conversational

abilities. Both of these will improve if their teachers can do without their old methods of emphasizing drab and repetitive drills of isolated sound units that do not represent the realities of speech productions. Oral English should be taught mainly in connected speech based on the communicative use of language; isolated sounds should only be taught when necessary, with appropriate focus on the suprasegmentals as much as the segmental sounds.

In a well-conceived oral English programme, both intensive and extensive listening should be taught. While *intensive listening* requires learning the rudiments of listening, *extensive listening* requires listening to real communication in English in a genuine natural environment (Broughton, et al. 1978; Harmer 1997). Materials for extensive listening can be brought to ESL learners through recordings of English conversations, news broadcasts, sports commentaries, films and plays (preferably educated ESL users' or native speakers') on a tape recorder to provide essential aural stimuli for pupils. This latter type of listening no doubt exposes pupils to language used in diverse contexts and for different purposes, which is very essential to the development of their communicative competence.

Reading

In addition to the oral skills discussed above, the literacy skill of reading has also been identified as vital to an English Studies programme (Longe 1979, Isiugo-Abanihe 1989). Unlike listening and speaking, reading has always been tested in the 'O' Level English language paper; thus, it is rigorously attended to in the English class, albeit in a wrong manner. Thus, in spite of the rigorous teaching being done, pupils' reading performance continues to be consistently poor because of the wrong conception and approach to its teaching.

Reading has been misunderstood in the secondary school classroom as a skill learnt by mere intensive individual work in which textual passages are read orally or silently by pupils and

mainly literal questions are thrust upon them to test their oral reading and comprehension. Consequently, the development of pupils' skills has been restricted to what scholars refer to as critical intensive reading (Ellis 1980). In order to properly develop the reading ability of learners, the reading skill ought to be properly conceived by the teacher, not only in intensive terms but also in terms of 'extensive' and 'critical' reading (Brown and Uno 1976; Ellis and Tomlinson 1980). The importance of critical intensive reading and extensive leisure reading should be realized and reflected in the English curriculum.

Intensive Reading

Normally, English reading lessons should be divided between intensive and extensive reading classroom sessions. *Intensive reading* may extend over two-thirds of the entire reading schedule during which time lessons are intended to develop (i) pupils' reading efficiency and comprehension skills; and (ii) pupils' knowledge of literary criticism and appreciation. The lessons can be made very interesting through teachers' selection of (a) a wide range of passages from non-literary texts, including textbooks, newspaper editorials, articles and magazines, etc. for the class to read and digest, and (b) a small number of literary texts recommended for criticism and appreciation in the syllabus.

Extensive Reading

One third of the reading time should be devoted to *extensive reading* during which pupils will be encouraged to discuss generally different literary texts on diverse cultures African, Caribbean, English, etc., which they must have read at their leisure. They should be ready to answer general questions, which must be asked on extensive reading in the English examination.

The problems with the Literature-in-English studies at present are two. The first is the unproductive dichotomy made between the language and literature aspects of the English curriculum at the Senior Secondary School, which is not conducive to proper

learning of the language (Orisawayi 1984). Situations whereby Literature-in-English is treated in isolation from English language and as an optional subject in the curriculum at this level (see NPE 1981, Section 4: 19(6)) does not truly reflect the learning objectives as well. Literature is an embodiment of language and should serve to make teaching of English more realistic and interesting and expose students to the beauty and potentials of language (Cullinan 1992, Onukaogu and Ohia 1997). In addition, as NERC (1978) has pointed out, "— language without the accompanying literature is like studying musical notes on paper without hearing the piece performed".

Learners can thus derive much benefit from literature if the subject is integrated into language under the practice of reading skill in the English Studies programme.

The other problem observed in the study of literature now is the improper evaluation of the subject in the literature examination. The syllabus gives the impression that many books should be read to ensure wider reading by pupils, but the questions set in the course are restricted to a few of these books, a situation which teachers exploit by spoon-feeding their students to pass the examination after reading a few texts. This lapse in the syllabus has, consequently, set an undesirable pattern for English reading by emphasizing intensive literary appreciation and criticism to the detriment of extensive literary reading. It is not surprising, therefore, that students reading literature in higher institutions find it very difficult to cope with the usual sizeable number of texts they have to read in their first year at school.

Writing

If there is any practical skill that is well created in the English language syllabus and classroom teaching, it is writing. But surprisingly, this skill is yet to be developed to the required standard in learners (Ayodele 1984a), the poor performance of pupils in writing cannot be attributed to any lapse in the

examination syllabus per se, but certain lapses in the methodology of teaching the skill such as:

- (i) overemphasizing mechanical problems of writing and the accuracy of decontextualized grammar and lexis;
- (ii) neglecting the relation of writing to demands of particular situations, thus reinforcing writing as a formal rather than a communicative skill;
- (iii) and experiencing the "backwash" effects of pupils' poor listening and reading habits.

There has to be a re-orientation of teaching writing in the English curriculum in such a way that the ability to use the language to perform tasks in communicative settings will be emphasized more than the knowledge of its formal rules.

The Descriptive Component of English Studies

The fostering of ESL in Nigerian secondary schools requires that learners do not have only a knowledge of English but also some knowledge of the descriptive rules and theories of the language. To be fully literate in a language, learners need to have a bit of understanding of its theory and how it works. In this respect, Quirk's remark (1959:11) about the importance of grammatical training in English in an EMT situation is equally relevant to the ESL situation, especially when the training will enable the learner to know more about the language and, even more about his mother tongue during or after his education.

Although the SSCE/GCE 'O' Level English syllabus duly recognizes the importance of the knowledge of rules of vocabulary and grammar in the overall learning of English at the secondary school, the manner of presenting the rules to learners has been faulty. Grammatical rules should not be taught in isolation from natural speech and communication situation. This apart, the teaching of such rules should receive considerably less attention than the practice of English skills, especially in the Junior Secondary School.

Priorities for Components of English Studies

In suggesting priorities for teaching the components of English Studies in secondary schools, we shall consider the allocation of periods to the components within the present time schedule of the programme. While not denying the possibility, indeed, the necessity, of integrating components or sub-components of the course during presentation (Howe and Tomori 1980), it is still significant to consider their relative importance at different levels of secondary education.

The discussion below is based on a seven-periods per week suggestion of an English Studies programme. As already suggested in this paper, the seven hours mentioned integrate the former five-and two-period per week lessons of English language and Literature-in-English in the proposed curriculum.

In both the Junior and Senior Secondary Schools, the practice skills of English ought to be given far greater priority than the component of English description and theory. While the former takes six lessons out of seven (86%), the latter should take the remaining one lesson (14%). Note that the normal learning sequence expects pupils to know how to use the language properly before they know how to describe it.

The practice skills of English incorporate listening, speaking, reading and writing as sub-components. The priority given to these sub-components are observed as follows:

- (i) reading should have the largest allocation (58%) among the four skills, and this allocation should cater for both intensive (35%) and extensive (23%) reading;
- (ii) the receptive skills (listening and reading) should be emphasized (68%) more than the productive skills (28%) in the Junior Secondary School.
- (iii) in the Senior Secondary School, the literacy skills (reading and writing) should be emphasized (50.5%) more than the oral skills (35.5%).

The suggestions above are summarized in the table below:

Table 1: A Representation of the Components of English Studies in Nigerian Secondary Schools

	Practice Skills of English		English Description/ Reading Writing		Total no/% of Lessons Theory Per Week	
No of less. per week	5				2	7
Junior Sec. Lessons	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	1	7
% of lessons	29	14	29	14	14	100
Junior Sec. lessons	1	1½	2	1	1½	7
% of lessons	14	21.5	29	21.5	14	100
Total No. of lessons per week	3	2½	4	2½	2	100
Average % of lessons	43	35.5	58	35.5	28	100

Conclusion

We have maintained in this paper that certain planning requirements and methodological defects are responsible for the poor state of English Studies in Nigerian secondary schools. And we have suggested three ways in which these problems can be remedied so that the subject is effectively taught to learners.

First, we welcomed the decision of education planners to make oral English compulsory for all pupils in the schools. While we observe the importance of this move in the promotion of an efficient programme of English Studies, we, however noted that

some other problems also have to be tackled to achieve such efficiency. Some of these problems include adequate provision of qualified teachers to handle both oral and written English, adequate provision of essential equipment, materials and infrastructure, and the preparation of reliable and valid means of testing the course in the SSCE examinations.

Second, we observed that most teachers do not pay adequate attention to the essential components to be taught in the English course. Our suggestion in this respect has been that due recognition must be given to all components in the programme according to their importance at different levels of secondary education.

Finally we opposed the dichotomy between language and literature components of English studies at the Senior Secondary School, which has created the unhealthy situation whereby one component is made compulsory and the other made optional for learners. Our view is that both components should be fully integrated so that literature forms a major sub-part of English studies, which should serve to link the language learning with social experience. It is also our view that all pupils in the secondary schools should participate actively and thus benefit from learning all the items slated on the programme for the subject.

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