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THE USE OF ENGLISH PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: A Consideration of The Course Content

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Abstract

This paper comments on the nature and components of the Use of English programme in Nigerian tertiary institutions and suggests a course content that will enhance the effectiveness of the programme. The paper opines that the Use of English is based on an awareness of the English language deficiency of Nigerian students and the need for them to have communicative competence in the language to perform academic tasks. It then suggests that higher institutions should design this programme to promote the teaching of compulsory Remedial and Developmental English courses, which would complement the amount of General English taught earlier in the primary and secondary schools.

Introduction:

Many of the problems militating against an efficient Use of English programme in Nigerian tertiary institutions have been documented by scholars (Afolayan 1984, Tinuoye 1990, Ubahakwe 1991, Okereke 1992). Suggestions have also been made in various respects in order to tackle some of these problems, particularly those which pertain to inappropriate course design, improper organization of syllabus, non-provision of materials, equipment and infrastructure, learners' negative attitude and teachers' inefficiency (Aborisade 1984, Afolayan 1984, Okezie-Ugbo 1984). However, whether such suggestions have been put into use and have benefitted the programme or not is an issue that can be considered after a successful evaluation of the programme has been done. The reliability of some of the suggestions may also have to be examined, especially as scholars hold diverse opinions on such crucial issues as the nature of Use of English and its components. When one realises the fact that the opinions of scholars on the issues above form the bases of their suggestions on the programme, there should then be a pressing need to consider some of these issues and put them in a proper perspective in order to have a viable programme.

Owing to the vast amount of work that has been done in respect of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), General English (GE) and English for Special Purposes (ESP) a lot of insight has been gained about English Languages Teaching (ELT). But, also, a lot of confusion has been created because of the unsuitability of the approaches for different linguo-cultural environments, particularly the ESL environment. For example, there have been diverse opinions among scholars in Nigeria as to whether the special programme of ELT in Nigerian tertiary institutions, viz Use of English (UOE), should be taught as a discipline specific or vocational programme or whether it should serve a wider academic purpose or, even, whether it should serve both academic and occupational purposes.

This paper contributes to this on-going debate by claiming that the main objective of the UOE is to enhance communicative competence in the students' English to enable them learn their courses very well and also be communicatively competent in diverse social situations. In view of this

claim, the work suggests that the GE subject taught in the secondary schools should be augmented by teaching some ESP-based courses in the tertiary institutions. It believes that a learner who has a good foundation in GE would require only a developmental English course to further enhance his efficiency in fulfilling the communication requirements of his academic and social tasks. The paper contends that the vocational (or occupational) English course may be appropriate for English as foreign language students, but it would be redundant to teach it in Nigerian tertiary institutions where English is conceived as a second language.

2. The Orientation for ELT in Nigeria:

When one looks at the term 'communicative competence' in its broadest sense of a speaker's ability to speak or write appropriately in different social contexts (cf. Pride and Holmes, 1972:10), one will expect its teaching to be concerned with the imparting of language skills for their effective use in diverse social contexts. Such expectation will sustain the opinion that for a language teaching programme to be successful, it has to relate adequately to the learners' personal and/or social needs. These needs are often associated with linguo-cultural communities to which learners belong, e.g. English as Mother Tongue (EMT), English as Second Language (ESL) and English as Foreign Language (EFL).

The English requirements of an EMT and ESL learner are almost the same, except that the latter, unlike the former, shares the language with his mother tongue in which he had greater linguistic facility and intuitive knowledge (cf. Afolayan, 1987:15). Both learners require English to serve their personal and social needs. They require a mastery of its to function maximally in contributing to the affairs of their respective nations. However, in spite of the needs which these learners share, it is pertinent to note that they cannot both benefit in a similar manner from the same ELT programme because of the differences in their social experiences and learning situations. For example, while the EMT learner has little difficulty in acquiring the language, even without going to school, the ESL learner will have a lot of difficulties because of the far from favourable learning conditions in his own non-native English community. Yet, ironically, it is the ESL learner who needs the language more than his counterpart because he has to learn to use the language to express and understand both the English culture as well as his own native culture. Meanwhile, the English demands of an EFL speaker are not as wide as those already mentioned. All this learner needs is the ability to use the language to serve some specific and often very immediate needs, thus he would most welcome a programme of English that is tailored for these specific needs.

Nigeria is obviously an ESL community, hence it will require an ELT orientation that is most suitable for ESL learners'. Such an orientation has to consider five important factors, which are:

- (a) that English should play a vital role at all levels of the country's educational system;
- (b) that there should be a General English (GE) course at the primary and secondary levels of education which all students must pass as a prerequisite for admission into the country's tertiary institutions of learning;
- (c) that there should also be a special English programme designed at the tertiary level of education to improve the often inadequate secondary school experience in the language;
- (d) that the special English programme mentioned in 'c' above should have a Remedial English component (RE), which will enable students improve their skills and knowledge of the language, and it should also have a Developmental English component (DE) which can further enhance their efficiency in its application to various academic disciplines in tertiary institutions;
- (e) and lastly, that the DE course mentioned in 'd' above should be oriented towards the

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- (c) that there should also be a special English programme designed at the tertiary level of education to improve the often inadequate secondary school experience in the language;
- (d) that the special English programme mentioned in 'c' above should have a Remedial English component (RE), which will enable students improve their skills and knowledge of the language, and it should also have a Developmental English component (DE) which can further enhance their efficiency in its application to various academic disciplines in tertiary institutions;
- (e) and lastly, that the DE course mentioned in 'd' above should be oriented toward the

domain of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) within ESP.

The discussion below identifies the status of the special English programme, or the UOE, referred to above and also specifies broadly the content of the components of the programme.

3.The Status of UOE in ELT:

The designing of a UOE programme is usually predicated on the assumption that students already have undergone a GE course. The minimum of a pass in this GE is normally regarded as a basic condition for admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions, which presupposes that successful candidates already must have got some knowledge of the language - the basic skills, its structures and the use of such structures in diverse fields of experience (see WAEC syllabus 1987 - 88). Despite this condition, there seems to be the assumption that students' experience after High School still falls short of the language requirements of tertiary education. Hence, their limited knowledge in the language is augmented by the UOE to prepare them fully for the academic tasks at this level. The components of the UOE programme have already been mentioned in this paper, but their major concerns in the programme have not. These concerns are the subject of the discussion below.

3.1 The Concerns of RE in the UOE Programme:

The poor standard of English of Nigerian learners at the secondary school level has been attributed to several problems ranging from inadequate exposure to raw linguistic data, poor methods of teaching, lack of effective coverage of the syllabus content, shortage of teaching materials, wrong modes of testing and examining the subject, constraints from the mother tongue and students' laziness or poor attitude to work (of Ayodele, 1984). A fundamental problem pertaining to course content here is that the contents of the subject are almost always not adequately covered. While essential topics are not often treated in depth, or sometimes not taught at all, some others are taught in abstraction, without the necessary relation to situational demands.

The RE course may hopefully help to remedy the effects of many of the problems raised above for several reasons. The conditions of learning English in a tertiary institution are of course more favourable than those in the secondary school. There are better qualified teachers, and, also, the students are expected to be better motivated towards learning as they grow older. A further advantage is that the teachers may not have to teach as much content as has been taught in the secondary school. They only need to select and concentrate on those essential aspects of the GE syllabus where students have defects. A useful hint about students' defects in this regard is given by Opata (1984) in his identification of written English language errors of Nigerian undergraduates.

The error patterns identified by Opata (1984:66) can be listed as follows:

- (i) literal translations
- (ii) unacceptable neologisms
- (iii) ambiguity
- (iv) errors of agreement
- (v) flowery style
- (vi) wrong use of tenses.
- (vii) spelling errors
- (viii) sentence fragments
- (ix) dangling modifiers
- (x) faulty comparisons
- (xi) faulty parallelism

- (xii) use of double contrastives - Although...but
- (xiii) comma splice
- (xiv) confusion in the use of homonyms
- (xv) misuse of words and fixed English expressions
- (xvi) wrong use of question form/mark
- (xvii) use of colloquial expressions in formal writing
- (xviii) wrong pluralisation of words.

The teacher can make a decision on whether to present these errors to pupils under the above headings, and supplement the presentation with Akere's suggestions of communicative tasks performed through speech (e.g. command, instruct, request, invite, etc), or integrate both Opatu and Akere's findings with such widely recognised headings as are presented below:

(a) Reading/listening efficiency:

This unit should improve students' concentration on materials being read or listened to. It should also enable them to recognize materials meant for different purposes and adjust their reading speeds to them.

(b) Reading comprehension:

This unit should aim at making students able to recognise meaning signals in passages, including the recognition of important details and main ideas.

(c) Writing efficiency:

This unit may be divided into two sections. While the first section may discuss topics pertaining to the basic mechanics of writing such as punctuation, spelling, use of abbreviations and capital letters, etc., the second section may correct anomalies which pertain to essay and creative writing as well as writing correspondences.

(d) Speaking efficiency:

The speaking ability of students may be enhanced by engaging them in both individual and group oral discussions.

(e) Grammatical and vocabulary:

This unit may concentrate on topics like word formation, word meaning, sentence construction and paragraph development. Its essence is to enable students have the ability to compose linguistic units to perform different communicative tasks; e.g. expressing or requesting information, giving instructions and directives, expressing emotions, creating jokes, expressing politeness or greetings, etc.

Although we frown against laying much emphasis on academic English grammar in this course, as Okezie-Ugbor (1984) does, we recognise the fact that some grammar has to be functionally taught for students to internalize certain essential rules of the language. Meanwhile, teachers are expected to utilize their experience and methodological skills in deciding the selection, arrangement and mode of presentation of relevant specific items in the above units to students.

3.2 The Concerns of DE in the UOE Programme:

The developmental English course, according to Banjo and Bisong (1985) seeks to cater for the demands made on the English language as a medium of instruction at the tertiary level. Such demands require that the level of students' sophistication in English be raised to an appreciable standard that will enable them "engage gainfully in the activity of reading, attending lectures and

tutorials and writing essays." The developmental course falls in line with the requirements of EAP. And an explicit statement of the requirements can be seen in an unpaginated brochure of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne Language Centre, quoted thus:

---This involves more than just knowing English Grammar and vocabulary. You need to be able to ask questions and to argue points in discussion on academic topics, as well as to understand lectures delivered at normal speed on your academic subject. You will also need to be able to write essays, dissertations and theses in good English in an academic style, and be able to present the results of your project work clearly and precisely. Reading academic articles and books quickly in your chosen specialism is also very important. Moreover, you will, of course, need to be able to talk to the people you meet socially in the university.

Some very useful books abound on EAP which give vital information about aspects of the programme (of British Council, 1975) or serve as textbooks for it. The textbooks either focus a single skill (e.g. Nuttall, 1982) or as many skills as are practicable to teach (see e.g. The Use of English 1975, Williams 1982, Afolayan and Newsum 1983, Banjo and Bisong 1985). Although most of these works claim to present developmental English, much of their content has been reflected in the remedial English course content above. The content which, however, relates most to developmental English, as far as this paper is concerned, is presented in the discussion below.

The primary aim of a DE course is to promote an understanding of the application of those basic study skills taught in GE and RE to major academic demands. What could be taught here are study skills, advanced activities of listening, reading, writing and speaking; certain analytical techniques; and the use of reference materials. Below are a few suggestions of topics.

A. Study Skills

Information should be provided on study conditions (home, school, individual, group, etc), study purposes (leisure, examinations, personal development, etc), study strategies, etc.

B. Speech-making

Speaking skills needed for arguments, analytical thinking, debates, discussions can be taught.

C. Note-taking:

Taking notes from lectures and written texts, methods of note-taking and strategies. (cf. Oyerokun 1984)

D. Outlining

The concepts, form and content can be taught. Students may have to write outlines for written texts or write out essays in an outline form.

E. Summarization:

Identifying main ideas and summarizing paragraphs and texts.

F. Other Writing Activities:

Writing skills needed for scientific/technical reports, speeches, term papers, articles, editorials, dissertations and theses.

G. Expository Analytical/Techniques:

Argument, critique, classification, definition, tabulation, comparison and contrast, generalization and qualification, cause and effect, etc. (of Jordan 1980).

H. Reference Materials:

The use of reference materials could be taught, e.g. dictionaries, catalogues, encyclopedias, directories, etc.

If the essential areas of the content specified here can be taught effectively, with adequate illustrations drawn from diverse materials from different academic areas (science, technology, arts, social science, law, medicine, etc.), there is no doubt that the learners will be able to perform the general academic tasks required of them efficiently. Not only this, since it is believed in most language circles that individual vocational subjects or duties performed in English share some core features, and differ only in some minor respects, a learner who has communicative competence in English should be able to adapt himself quickly to whatever language needs he may further require in performing specific occupational tasks.

4. Implementation of the UOE Programme:

It has already been suggested that the UOE programme should consist of two major components RE and DE. The reasons for this suggestion have already been stated, but nothing yet has been said about the programme can be successfully implemented. Some brief remarks on this are made in the next few paragraphs.

On a general note, the successful implementation of this programme requires that adequate funding, qualified and dedicated personnel, infrastructural facilities and other essential materials be provided for it. It must be understood that language success is learning success; thus for effective learning of UOE to take place at all in Nigerian tertiary institutions, UOE should be duly recognized as a compulsory academic course for students (rather than an extra course for them) and be implemented as such.

Two possibilities arise as regards the location of the UOE programme. The first possibility arises in institutions where UOE forms a part of a wider General Studies programme located in a school or institute. UOE would then exist in a department where coordinators are appointed to oversee the different parts of the programme. The other possibility arises in institutions where there is an autonomous department of a specialists' English course. Here, both UOE and the specialists' programmes could run concurrently in a single English department with coordinators appointed for different UOE courses. Otherwise, both programmes could exist as cognate departments in a school/institute of English studies.

In the UOE programme, the RE course must be offered and passed by all new entrants into a higher institution in the first year. The DE course is to be offered in their second year. In order to motivate students to pass these courses very well, the courses must carry sufficient units and students' performances in them should be reflected in their overall results.

5. Conclusion:

This paper has observed the position and relevance of UOE programmes in ELT in Nigerian tertiary institutions. It has recognised the major roles which the programme can play in increasing the efficiency of English usage in these institutions. And it has also discussed the content design of the components of the programme. The components of UOE have been identified with two compulsory courses the remedial and developmental English courses. These courses the remedial and developmental English courses. These courses have been conceived within the framework of existing ELT approaches, viz GE, ESP and EAP and their contents described accordingly. The paper also emphasizes that adequate funding, infrastructural facilities, qualified and dedicated personnel and relevant materials should be provided to support the programme, and that institutes

of English language studies should be established for its effective functioning.

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