

TOWARD A NEW ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

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Atoye in this paper draws attention to the primacy of speech in language learning and use. He however regrets that in Nigerian education, the written form of language is given more emphasis. He draws attention to the inherent danger in giving primacy to the written instead of the spoken medium of language.

Atoye also examines the status of English in Nigeria, especially as postulated by the National Policy on Education (NPE). Based on the observed defect of the NPE, he advocates an English language programme which he feels should reflect the status of English as an alternative language used by a large number of Nigerians for conducting their everyday activities. If his position is accepted, more attention will be given to the learning of spoken English in the curriculum.

1. Introduction

Language is primarily speech. All the other media of language such as the visual (written) and tactile (e.g. Braille) ones, are constructed on the basis of the system of aural medium. As Abercrombie (1967:4) observes, the spoken word was the only medium of language available to mankind for a very long time. Past and on-going reforms of the orthographies of many languages, to make them adequately reflect their spoken forms, provide ample testimony for the supremacy of the aural medium.

Even in this ultimate decade of the twentieth century, scores of millions of people all over the world, many of them bilingual and multilingual, still use language in its natural spoken form. Literacy figures for the human race, if accurately computed, would probably show that millions of the world's population can neither read nor write, all the education-as-right slogan of the United Nations Organisation and the various national Governments notwithstanding. In fact, there are several human languages and dialects not yet reduced to writing that are used by their speakers in the spoken form alone. The importance of the spoken form of language is also borne out by the fact that, even in the most literate speech communities of the world, a child in learning its mother tongue, normally acquires a considerable degree of aural competence before embarking on its first literacy lessons.

Amongst peoples of the world generally, the spoken word is more frequently employed than any other medium, especially in face-to-face communicative settings. Even in non-face-to-face settings as in long-distance international and intercontinental contacts, the spoken medium is more often used courtesy of modern electronic devices such as the telephone and very lately, the videophone.

In summary, the aural medium is the oldest, the most natural and the most widely and often used medium of language. As once observed by Professor Adetugbo of the University of Lagos (Adetugbo, 1984) the average human being, even when he is literate, may not have cause to write in one week but can hardly do without speaking in one hour. The primacy of the aural medium of language is, indeed, beyond questioning.

2. The Neglect of Spoken English in Nigerian Education

In spite of the recognition of speech as the basic form of language, emphasis has traditionally been placed on the acquisition of writing rather than of speaking skills in the teaching of English in Nigerian schools. The misplacement of emphasis on the teaching of writing rather than on speaking skills can be attributed to many factors.

Historically, English was formally introduced to Nigerian schools as a written rather than a spoken language. As Spencer (1971) explains, the aim of the missionary founding fathers and the colonial administration was to produce writers to serve as the administrative clerks and readers of the holy scriptures, rather than speakers of the language. The notion of language teaching as essentially the teaching of literacy led to the recognition of the trio, notoriously known as the 'Three Rs' with Reading and 'Riting as language skills complemented by 'Rithmetic' as the third member. Admittedly, reading, especially when it is aloud or vocalized, involves speaking, but the speaking of a written text bears little semblance to the spontaneous use of language in actual day to day verbal interaction.

The relegation of speaking skills in English to the background from the inception of formal education in Nigeria is also partly linkable to the British colonial policy of domination as opposed to the French colonial policy of assimilation. Since the British did not intend to make Englishmen of Nigerians and their other African subjects, the need for any extensive or large-scale verbal communication between Nigerians and the British citizens was neither envisaged nor encouraged. The imperial representatives therefore integrated themselves more into the Nigerian cultures by learning the native languages or the English-based Pidgin required for limited verbal interaction with their Nigerian servants. English was therefore, virtually a foreign language to the Nigerian who used it at that time.

Another factor that was responsible for the neglect of speaking skills in early Nigerian education is that large-scale inter-ethnic verbal interaction amongst Nigerians was never part of the colonial administration's scheme. The imperial strategy of 'Divide and Rule' which the British coloniser adopted paid

of handsomely especially in Nigeria. Rather than encourage the spread of spoken English for interethnic communication and cultural diffusion, the colonial administration encouraged the separateness of the diverse Nigerian ethnic cultures and languages for easier domination, and, when necessary, for generating inter-ethnic feuds, or, as they were readily tagged, inter-tribal wars. The success of that linguistic aspect of the colonial Divide and Rule policy in Nigeria is clearly seen in the refusal of Nigerians today, in the face of compelling political, social and practical economic evidence, to accept English as the lingua franca of Nigeria and to continue to argue about the adoption of Nigerian language as the country's lingua franca or official language as is evident in the trilingual National Policy on Education of 1977 (revised in 1981) which requires a child to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages other than his own in addition to English, all in the vain hope of realizing, at a later date, the adoption of a Nigerian language as the nation's official language as provided for in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979) which states that English or any of the three major Nigerian languages shall be adopted at the national assembly.

There is however a very practical reason why, even today, some twenty years after independence, English is still taught more as a written language than as a spoken language in our schools - the certification system. Success or failure at the end of a school programme in the Nigerian education system is determined by performance in written examinations. The emphasis is even greater in English in which a pass in the written examination is usually considered a prerequisite for gaining a useful certificate, either for employment purposes or for further studies.

Apart from that, the examinations in most other non-language subjects are also written in English. In the English language lesson itself, oral exercises are perceived merely as drills to master the grammar of English as a preparatory step towards good written English. Since the emphasis in such lessons is exclusively on grammatical accuracy, the practice structures are, as pointed out by Akere (1979), sentence tokens rather than utterance tokens. They lack any communicative value.

At the higher levels of the education system, such as the University, the emphasis on writing skills is even more important as indicated by the following excerpt from the preamble of the 'Use of English' of the Department of English of the University of Ife.

Practical considerations have led to putting little or no emphasis on the oral media and concentrating, instead on the written language to which reading is closely related.

The importance of writing skills for students is seen in the fact that most language demands which have a bearing on their qualification and certification are in writing. (pg. 50)

Even though the teaching of spoken English has received some attention resulting in the introduction of 'Oral English' at the West African Senior School Certificate and Teachers' final examinations, that paper accounts for only 20% of the total marks for English and is avoided by many candidates because they can still pass the English paper without doing the 'Oral' component.

One consequence of the neglect of the teaching of spoken English in Nigerian schools is that the pupils tend to avoid speaking in English for fear of exposing their incompetence through grammatical errors and inadequate or inappropriate vocabulary. Even teachers are known to resort to the use of the native language to explain concepts, even in English language lessons.

On very formal occasions when English has to be employed in verbal interaction, the type of English used is closely patterned on the grammatical and highly formal register described by Ubahakwe (1974) as 'bookish English'.

The poor communicative ability of the products of the Nigerian education system, arising from the neglect of speaking skills in the teaching of English, is lamented by Stevenson (1974) in the following passage:

It is in speaking that many Nigerians make their least effective use of English. One has to sit through a few meetings, even in the university, to discover that people, particularly younger people, who can express themselves adequately, even eloquently, on paper cannot stand on their feet and talk effectively in English...

Remarks such as Stevenson's quoted above, indicate the need for a change in policy aimed at placing greater emphasis on the teaching of English speech in Nigerian schools. That change is particularly necessary because of the status which the English language has acquired in the Nigerian community today.

3. The Status of English in Nigeria today

The need for greater emphasis on the teaching of spoken English arises from certain fundamental changes that have gradually taken place in the interactional pattern amongst Nigerians over the years. The changes have led

to the increased use of English in its spoken form by Nigerians, both for domestic and external purposes and in increasingly non-formal settings.

Political, social, economic and technological changes have over the years led to greater verbal interaction (on a scale never envisaged or desired by the colonial administration) amongst Nigerians from various parts of the country.

In a linguistically heterogeneous situation, such as ours, where English remains the most widely acceptable and the most easily available language for inter-ethnic communication, most of that communication necessarily takes place in English. Increased transportation, urbanisation and improved inter-ethnic tolerance have all contributed to the increased inter-ethnic social and commercial interaction amongst Nigerians and the consequent increased use of English in its spoken form.

In the political domain, the attainment of independence in 1960 and the taking over of governing and civil service functions by Nigerians in large numbers have also aided the increased use of English in its spoken form. One consequence of the use of English as the official language as well as the *lingua franca* in Nigeria is that it has gradually become a Second Language for a large number of Nigerians.

By a second language here is meant, in a purely technical sense, an alternative code for expressing almost all the spheres of bilingual person's experience. The communicative skills required in it by the bilingual persons' and the degrees to which they are required are therefore very similar to those required in the person's own mother tongue (MT). Afolayan (1987), in a seven-point characterization of a Second language, lists two (the third and sixth) features of such a language as follows:

A language in which a bi- or multi-lingual person conducts his everyday activities but shares this role with another language in which the speaker has greater linguistic facility and intuitive knowledge.

The target skills of its teaching within the formal educational system should include all four basic English language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

That English has become an alternative language for many Nigerians is underscored by the fact that two Nigerians from the same MT background nowadays use the English language in casual non-formal verbal interaction,

regardless of the topic, or switch from the use of their Nigerian MT to English and vice-versa in the course of a single conversation. It might not even be too wild to guess that some Nigerians do have greater intuitive knowledge in English than in their apparent MTs.

The practical need for verbal proficiency, in addition to or instead of fluency on paper in English, is now exerting considerable pressure on the average Nigerian. Clear evidence of that pressure is seen in the fact that many illiterate Nigerian market women, shopkeepers, food vendors, canteen owners and soft drink kiosk attendants now find it necessary to learn to speak English in one form or another in order to cope with their increasingly cosmopolitan body of customers. A visit to any Nigerian open city, or roadside market, will indicate vividly that any person from any part of the world - Europe, the U.S.A., India, Latin America, or Asia will easily get by with a working knowledge of English since majority of the vendors are able to engage in restricted dialogue using such English cleft structures as "look good tomato", "Customer, buy fish" and the like, and to haggle and bargain, successfully, albeit mostly in ungrammatical English.

Even the village farmer, apart from picking up some English phrases from the radio or television, often has to interact with civil servants from various government agencies in some form of English. Surprisingly, in such verbal encounters, it is the supposed illiterate person who often demonstrates an overeagerness to prove that he can speak, at least a few words of English, obviously because of the social prestige attached to the ability to speak English.

The extent to which the mixing of English words features in conversation in Nigerian languages (see for example, Goke-Pariola, 1983) provides strong evidence that the functions of English have, for a great number of Nigerians become so similar to those of the MT that the two can be confused. This merging of the diglossic borders between English and the Nigerian MTs shows that English is no more only a written or a school language but has become, for a large number of bilingual Nigerians, a language for informal and formal verbal communication as well.

Further evidence that English has become an alternative language in Nigeria is provided by the fact that it is used in the nation's major legislative assemblies. Though the 1979 Nigerian Constitution (Article 51) and the 1989 Constitution (article 53) declared the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in addition to English, the official languages of the National Assembly, only English has always actually been used in the Legislative Houses, especially at the state or federal levels, thereby indicating that the

In the last three years of the primary School (the Senior Primary school or SPS), English would be introduced as a written language. Much greater emphasis would, however, still be placed on the acquisition of speaking skills in that language while the MT would continue to be the language of instruction.

By the time the pupils begin to read/write in English at this stage they would be attempting to read/write what they already speak instead of the current practice whereby pupils are confronted with the multiple tasks of learning to read, write and speak in a new language, all at the same time. Learning to speak English for three whole years before learning to write it, as proposed in the new programme would be in accordance with the natural sequence of native language acquisition in which a child first learns to speak in his MT before learning, if opportuned, to read/write in it.

At this stage, English would be seen, first as a language spoken for natural communication, and then as a language to be read or written. Examinations at the end of the Primary School would be conducted in the child's MT which has all along been the language of instruction. As was hinted at above, there would not be any need to examine spoken English at the end of the educational system. This would help teachers to avoid formalizing the teaching of spoken English or making it examination-oriented while the pupils would enjoy it the more.

In any case, no examination can adequately test the wide range of productive and receptive skills required for the effective communicative use of any language considering the fact that a person's linguistic behaviour is, under normal conditions, in response to verbal or other types of stimuli, and varies according to variations in those stimuli in terms of situation, topic, and listeners (Ervin-Tripp, 1973). Whatever result one hopes to achieve from the teaching of English as a spoken language is similar to the expected achievement of a child in its MTs - the development of natural speaking habits for practical communication needs rather than for the examinations.

At the Junior Secondary School (JSS) level, equal emphasis would be placed on the teaching of speaking and writing English. The learners' perceptive and production skills in spoken English would be adequate to enable them learn other subjects in English at that stage. English would therefore become the language of instruction for the relevant school subjects, and this would further re-inforce the acquired skills in the language. Other avenues for improving the pupils' spoken English would include class and school debates, short plays and drama as well as social activities involving the spontaneous use of the language in simulated natural settings. No examination would be needed

since the learners' proficiency level would be easily monitored through their performance in the informal activities referred to above.

At the Senior Secondary School (SSS), greater attention would now be paid to the teaching of reading and writing in English. By this time, the learners would have attained a good degree of verbal proficiency in English which would form a solid basis for accelerating the pace of their reading and writing work in the language. By the end of the SSS, the learners would have a sound footing in all the necessary language skills in their MT as well as in English. They would therefore be able to use any of the two languages in its spoken or written form with acceptable ease and fluency.

At the post-secondary level, candidates would be sharpening and enriching their spoken English through more advanced social activities organised in the school. Such activities include union activities, school clubs and societies. The use of English for instruction in school subjects would also greatly enrich their use of the language. Since their interaction with people from outside their MT background would become wider in scope and more varied in style and register at this stage, learners would naturally be using English a lot more than before in natural situations. Their performance in such situation would be the real test of their communicative competence in the language. Nor would their reading/writing habits suffer at this stage since they would now have a lot of reading and writing work to do in English which they would be using for all other non-language subjects such as Geography, Chemistry, Economics and so forth. Their speaking and writing vocabulary would be getting highly enriched through their exposure to new ideas in those other subjects.

To further enhance the aural performance of those learners who intend to specialize in English or teach it at a later date, the systematic analysis of the sound pattern of English would be taught to them at this stage. Such analysis would include the production of the vowels, consonants, and the suprasegmentals of syllable, stress, rhythm and intonation. The formal lessons in these aspects of the pronunciation of English would be complemented by actual practice in using them in a language laboratory which every Department of English in all institutions of higher learning would be required to maintain.

The aim of this analytic-cum-practical course is twofold. First, it would aim at refining the spoken English of the candidates to an internationally intelligible level through a fair knowledge of English phonetics and phonology and guided practice in its use through laboratory exercises. Secondly it would aim at equipping them to pass on to their pupils, should they become teachers, and to serve as acceptable models of English speech to the general public. They

would therefore form the vanguard through which a standard Nigerian accent of English can evolve.

In short, a distinction is made, in the proposed programme, between the teaching of spoken English and its analysis. The former is for those who wish merely to communicate fluently in the language - in the same way that many native speakers of English speak it without being able to analyze it. The latter is for those who wish to teach the language or elevate their accent to an internationally intelligible form. The failure to make this vital distinction in the existing programme, is partly responsible for the attempt to formally test 'Oral English', which, as argued above, imposes a very great limitation on its chances of success, as reflected in the poor performance of the products of the school system complained about by Ubahakwe and Stevenson cited earlier in this paper.

6. Conclusion

The proposed English language programme outlined in this essay recognizes four major language learning tasks for the Nigerian school child as follows:

1. Learning to speak his MT.
2. Learning to speak English.
3. Learning to write his MT.
4. Learning to write English.

The first task begins soon after birth when the child starts to speak. The second, in many cases begins when the child starts to attend the Pre-primary school, or if he does not have that opportunity, when he starts going to the Primary school. In many cases, however, it begins right at home almost simultaneously with the learning of the MT or even, in rare cases, before that.

The third one, learning to write MT, begins when he goes to the Primary school, by the time he has become a linguistic adult in the verbal communicative use of his MT. Similarly the fourth task, learning to write English, in the fourth year of the Primary school, by which time the child has attained a fair degree of verbal competence in English during three years of learning to use it for oral communication in the Junior Primary school (JPS).

The programme therefore spaces out the four different tasks to ensure that the learner masters one task before he is confronted with another.

In addition, it recognizes the status of English in Nigeria as an alternative language in which verbal communicative proficiency, as is the case in the MT, is needed much more than literacy and has to be very stable before literacy is introduced.

Furthermore, by teaching learners how to use English for verbal communication long before introducing them to its written form, the new programme obeys the natural order of language acquisition by the native speakers of any known human language.

Finally, the proposed programme asserts the superiority of the child's MT by requiring him to be orally proficient and literate in it before acquiring such skills in English. This is in sharp contrast to the current practice in which many children are made to attempt literacy in English without prior oral proficiency in English or in their MT. The result is not only poor oral performance in English as observed by Stevenson (1974) but the lack of any reasonable command of their native languages by many a Nigerian child, whether in its oral or written form - a situation that is now compounded by the learners' poor literacy level in English language too.

It might be feared that the introduction of written English and reading relatively late and its non-use as the language of instruction in the primary school would negatively affect the pupils' performance in writing and reading English at a later stage or even retard their ability to cope with lessons given in English at the Secondary school level. Any such fear is however unfounded. Findings from the SYPP (Six Year Primary Project) show that the non-use of English as a language of instruction throughout the Primary school, rather than retard, tends to enhance the English proficiency of the pupils in the experimental classes whose English is reportedly "better and richer" (Afolayan, 1979; Awoniyi, 1980) than that of those in the control classes. In like manner, the concentration on the oral use of English for three whole years in the JPS would enhance the learners' verbal proficiency in English. Similarly, the delayed introduction of reading/writing in English (till the Senior Primary School) would accelerate their acquisition of literacy in the language because of their prior familiarity with it in its spoken form.

The proposed programme resembles the SYPP in the non-use of English as language of instruction in the primary school. It however differs from the former in its restriction, to speaking only, of lessons in English in the first three years of the primary school, its specification of the roles to be played by each language and the relative degree of emphasis to be placed on each of the language skills at every stage of the learning school education.

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