

SOCIO-CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON EFFECTIVE ENGLISH COMMUNICATION OF NIGERIAN UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

The paper explores the socio-cultural factors affecting the English language use in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Socio-cultural factors have come to bear heavily on effective English use of most Nigerian undergraduates. Consequently, challenges abound in the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria. This paper draws attention to such influences and elements affecting the communication process. The researcher emphasizes the interconnectedness of language and culture and their impact on communication especially in the present era of digitization. Some of the issues highlighted in the paper are: The interconnectedness of language & culture, use of English in tertiary institutions in contemporary Nigeria, the influence of socio-cultural factors on communication in English and strategies for improvement.

Key Words: Language, Digitization, Culture, and Communication

Introduction

English today is a unique language, functionally and structurally quite different from other languages of the world. English has been accepted as a second language in Nigeria, right from the time the country was colonized by Britain. Nigerians have shown much prominence in all academic pursuits. The English Language has been a crucial issue in the Nigerian education system. This is particularly so because it is an official means by which a child receives instruction in other subjects of the curriculum. It is equally the means through which a child appropriates and synthesizes the knowledge transmitted to him by the teacher. The status of English as the official language in Nigeria contributes to the promotion of the language in Nigeria. As with most teachers of language arts, English teachers face growing pressures to meet the needs of increasingly diverse learners, both in terms of ethnicity and language and also in terms of economic and social circumstances. According to Brown (2005), the goal of the language learners is to make sure that they can communicate what they have in mind effectively; they have to be understood when they are uttering the words. For effective communication in English, the writer considers it pertinent to examine exhaustively socio-cultural factors that influence effective communication in English especially as it relates to the Nigerian undergraduates.

Statement of Problem

Socio-cultural factors have come to bear heavily on effective English use of most Nigerian undergraduates. Consequently, challenges abound in the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria. This paper draws attention to such influences and elements affecting the communication process. The aim is to help students speak intelligible and comprehensible English.

Purpose of study:

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To ascertain the level to which English is used in Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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2. To discover the extent to which socio-cultural factors affect learning of the English language.
3. To determine strategies for achieving effective communication in English.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do students use the English language in Nigerian universities?
2. To what extent do socio-cultural factors affect the learning of the English language?
3. Does the socio-cultural background of the student have any influence on his/her English language learning and competence?
4. What are the strategies for effective communication in English?

Significance of the study

1. The study will bring to the limelight socio-cultural factors that affect effective communication in English.
2. It will guide educators especially language teachers in teaching, monitoring, and evaluation of students' performances.
3. The study will highlight the need for an integrative approach in English language learning.

Study Area:

The study was carried out in three Nigerian tertiary institutions located in Anambra state. The institutions were randomly selected as a representative of three categories of Nigerian universities. These categories are: Federal, State, and Private Universities. The researcher chose one federal university, one state university and one private university. A total of 90 students of the following schools were used:

- (i) Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Federal)
- (ii) Imo State University, Owerri (State)
- (iii) Tansian University, Umunya (Private)

The Predominant Role of English in Nigeria

Language is one of the wonderful gifts given by God to humanity. It is with the help of language that man is able to communicate and solve a number of his problems and has been able to make a lot of achievements in life. If there has been no language, it would have been difficult for man to communicate his views to fellow human beings. The English Language is an indispensable tool for national unity, integration and global communication. Baldeh referred to it as "a window on the world" (7). English became a second language in Nigeria due to the multi-lingual nature of the nation and it performs a unifying role in the Nigerian context. English language serves as a national official language, a language for general and specialized education, a language for assimilation and a language for integration.

In Nigeria, English has acquired the status of a second language to many, while to some others it is their first language. It plays a significant role in almost all spheres of human endeavour, be it in education, politics, the judiciary, administration, economics, religion, government, business and legislation. Consequently, the English Language has become a working language used for intra national and international communication in many parts of the region.

The Interconnectedness of Language & Culture

English learning and culture are inseparable; Language and culture are closely related. Culture is simply the way of life of a people or society. The relationship between language and culture is important in a consideration of effective English communication especially in the Nigerian context. The reason is that the use of English in Nigeria cuts across ethnic boundaries as each of the ethnic groups has distinct traditional languages and ethnic traditions. Language is not only used as a means of communication, but also as a marker or indicator to the speaker's cultural identity. The identity is communicated through a particular language use during interaction (discourse markers). Certain types of expressions are used to express belonging to a group, but likewise they are sometimes used to exclude, separate or discriminate. According to Gudykunst & Kim, it is argued that:

Our cultures influence our behavior directly through the norms and rules we use to guide our behavior when we interact with others. Our cultures also indirectly affect our communication through individual characteristics. We learn when we are socialized into our cultures. (16).

Language either in its spoken or written form is the medium through which culture is expressed, transmitted from one generation to the other, or reserved for present and future generations. The dressing patterns, habits, different types of food and their modes of preparation, expressing joy or sorrow, hatred or anger, among others, are transmitted through the language of the group. We have to point out that the richer the culture, the richer the language that expresses that culture. Again, language is man's most prized possession. It is his major vehicle for self expression and a mark of his personal and group identity. Language is an integral component and at the same time a product of culture, like culture itself, it is learned behaviour which can be facilitated or enhanced through direct or indirect context and acculturation.

Learning and Use of English in Nigerian Universities

As rightly pointed out, the English language occupies a unique position in Nigeria's educational sector. English remains the language of education, mass media, business and communication. In fact, a credit in English remains a prerequisite for securing admission into Nigerian universities. Again, it remains the only language of instruction in all university courses except when teaching other languages. Therefore, proficiency in English is a yardstick for measuring people's educational attainment. In Nigerian universities, English is offered as a general studies' course aimed at helping students attain a reasonable degree of competence in the language. Surprisingly, there have been arguments as to whether undergraduates could attain a native-like competence in English in the Nigerian context in view of socio-cultural constraints. According to Ayodabo and Acheoah (2013), Nigerians who learn English in ESL contexts cannot achieve the level of competence which the English exhibit at the phonological level due to socio-cultural and environmental constraints. However, it is advised that students of tertiary institutions should strive to achieve communicative competence in English. In fact, the General Studies Unit of Nigerian universities has been helping Nigerian undergraduates to have an appreciable competence in English. But, it is disheartening that students' poor attitude towards use of English (GS 101 & 102) and even to other GS courses has been a major setback.

The study revealed that Nigerian Universities offer English as a General Studies' course for all newly admitted students (year one course). The course runs concurrently for two semesters: Use of English 1 & 2 for both first and second semesters. However, the majority of

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the students interviewed and studied expressed that they mostly prefer the use of pidgin/slang in unofficial matters especially in informal conversations. They however, confessed that such affect their English language use both within and outside the university environment.

**Theoretical Framework
Communicative Competence**

The theoretical framework for this study is communicative competence. The term is often used instead of language proficiency to emphasize the idea that proficient language use extends beyond grammatical forms to include language functions and the social conventions of language to achieve communication (Canale and Swain, 1980). This theory is adopted because the present research centers on socio-cultural influence on English of undergraduates. The use of socio-culture typifies the beliefs, vision and aspirations of the society in which the learner grows up. Within the socio-cultural environs are variables such as the teachers’ attitudes to teaching, the family, community, and the academic achievements of the schools(from the basic to the secondary and consequently, to the university). It is thus, the influences from the environment that have entrenched themselves in the domain of the student as far as English language learning is concerned.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents

SEX	NUMBER	% PARTICIPATION
Males	80	30
Females	120	60
Total	200	90

Table 2: To what extent do University undergraduates use the English Language?

Serial No	Tertiary Institutions	Languages in Use	Percentage
1	Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Federal)	English	85
2	Imo State University, Owerri (State)	English	50
3	Tansian University, Umunya	English	70

Serial No	Tertiary Institutions	Other Languages in Use	Percentage
1	Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka (Federal)	Vernacular/ pidgin/slang	65
2	Imo State University, Owerri (State)	Vernacular/ pidgin/slang	88
3	Tansian University, Umunya	Vernacular/ pidgin/slang	67.78

The table showed that students from Nigerian universities use the English language in addition to pidgin, slang expressions and the indigenous languages. The students in the various universities gave their reasons for such use. For instance, the indigenous language vis-a-vis pidgin and slang are predominantly used in informal interactions. However, the English language is also used in informal settings but is predominantly used for official purposes such as during lectures, term paper presentations and seminar presentations. The above table indicates that

English use in some Nigerian federal institutions is 85%, 50% in state universities and 70% in private Nigerian tertiary institutions. The predominant use of the vernacular cum pidgin/slang could be attributed to certain variables such as locality, attitude of students, socio-cultural backgrounds, and other socio-cultural factors. The use of such codes is for self identity and recognition. The percentage of vernacular/pidgin/slang use depicts 65%, 88% and 67.78% respectively for the three universities. The tremendous use of such codes was a factor to students' inability to perform effectively in the English language. There is need for students to use the English language above any other code since English now serves as a national and internal language. On the other hand, students should be encouraged to use the native language strategically. Again, the use of English classes (GS 101 & 102) was discovered to play integral roles in language education of the undergraduates.

Research Question 2

To what extent do socio-cultural factors affect the learning of the English language?

The study revealed that certain cultural and social factors affect effective communication of most Nigerian undergraduates. There are factors such as:

➤ First Language Influence

In contemporary Nigerian society, the English language co-exists with the indigenous languages such as Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and other minority languages. In fact, a typical Nigerian uses the English language vis-à-vis the local language in which he/she has attained a reasonable degree of proficiency. Consequently, some elements from the first language (in this case, the indigenous language) are transferred into the second language. Such influences have brought about direct translations/transliterations. We must point out that certain phonologically, semantically and syntactically based errors that abound in the use of English emanate from such translations. There are cases of Errors in the use of articles, incorrect case forms, errors in the use of prepositions, comparative / superlative forms, errors in sentence fragments, errors in syntax (incorrect sentence structures), errors in word choice, errors in punctuation, and errors in spelling.

Again, we must point out that in the learning of a second language, some elements from the first language are brought into the second language consciously or unconsciously. If such a situation occurs, we can vividly say that there is interference. Interference therefore, is a psycholinguistic concept which has become a reality in language learning. According to Akindele and Adegbite, interference is defined as:

a situation whereby two different languages overlap. In such a situation, the linguistic systems of one of the languages are transferred into the other in the process of producing the latter which is the second or target language (39)

Interference could be negative or positive. Negative transfer has to do with difficulties in using the target language which are mainly attributed to mother tongue interference. Positive transfer refers to the ease or facilitation in learning the (L2) resulting from the similarities between first language (L1) and second language. For instance, the consonant sounds /b/, and /d/ which occur in most Nigerian languages help in the acquisition of similar sounds in English phonology. While certain English sounds like /θ/, /ð/ that do not have Igbo equivalents often pose problems to students.

➤ **The Nature of the English Language**

Language is an arbitrary system. Every language is the product and relation of a society and culture. It has meaning only when it has strong link to that society and culture. Therefore, no two languages have exactly equal words or way of arranging words together. There is no one to one correspondence between English spelling and pronunciation. Such discrepancy poses a problem to language learners. Effective teaching of a language will depend on proper understanding of the nature of language and how it is learnt. The knowledge of nature of language is learnt through drill, practice and repetition and not through translation. In Nigerian primary schools, pupils are usually taught through translation method. Consequently, university undergraduate erroneously try to follow the same structure in English. They failed to understand that two languages differ in structure. Therefore, the knowledge of nature of language helps both the English teacher and English learners in avoiding the use of literal translation. Since every language is unique because it has its own style of functioning, learners of English should learn to think in English and avoid translations.

➤ **Poor Socio-Economic Background of English Users/Learners**

Some Nigerian undergraduates come from a poor socio-economic background. In fact, the poor economic situation in Nigeria drastically affects some families in such a way that they become incapacitated in catering for their wards at school. (Tomori 1974) pointed out that such inability to equip the child makes the child to ‘lack the neurophysical coordination necessary for learning’. Even in this digital age, some students are not computer literate. Thanks to Joint Admissions Matriculation Board which has made Jamb examinations in Nigeria computer based. It then becomes imperative for candidates to write Jamb examinations with the computer system.

➤ **Lackadaisical Attitude of Undergraduates towards English Learning**

Most Nigerian undergraduates especially those who were not admitted to study English do not map out time to study the English language. The culture is that once a student passes use of English 1 and 11, that student is free from all hurdles that relate to English. Such students fail to realize that English occupies a unique position since it functions as an international language; the lingua franca of the modern era. In addition, lack of motivation to learn English in addition to one’s course of study has also negatively affected effective communication in the English language. It is advised that lecturers of Nigerian universities irrespective of their areas of specialty should encourage their students to attain a reasonable degree of competence in English.

Research Question 3

Does the socio-cultural background of the student have any influence on his/her English language learning and competence?

Ultimately, the socio-cultural background of the students has influence on the students’ performance in English language learning and competence. There are issues of interference, low and high contextual factors and these affect students’ performance in English, and such equally affect their overall academic growth and performance. The interference phenomenon affects the students in areas of grammar, phonology, semantics, and spellings. Again, cases of concord incongruity abound in students’ oral speech and writing. There are cases of omission of determiners and wrong use of certain parts of speech. Students with English language background tend to use the English language better than their counterparts without such

background. However, such language background does not guarantee proficiency in areas of writing and spelling.

Research Question 4

What are the strategies for effective communication in English?

For effective communication in the English Language, the researcher proffers these solutions:

(i) Creating Cultural Awareness

It is important that educators especially language teachers have a clear understanding of the role cultural factors play in the learning process so that they may utilize that knowledge to create a culturally responsive learning environment that supports the success and achievement of all students.

(ii) Multilingual/Multicultural Creativity

Some English language learners/students are a highly heterogeneous and complex group of students with diverse gifts, educational needs, backgrounds, languages and goals. Some come from homes in which no English is spoken, while some come a home where English serves as the major language. It becomes pertinent that students should be encouraged to use native language strategically, and will be motivated by student centered activities. Because English language learning is a recursive process, educators should integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills into instruction.

(iii) Digitizing the English language Instruction an aid to Nigerian Undergraduates

Computers have been playing an important role for educational use, specifically in second and foreign language education. Teachers and parents understand the importance of technology in language education and love to use computers to enlighten children. The use of computers in tertiary education is to infuse and inject efficiency and effectiveness especially in second language learning. Given the technological advancement of Nigeria and awareness in the use of computer to enhance teaching and learning generally, many tertiary institutions procured computers for use in teaching but failed to utilize it in English language teaching.

Computers should be used in classrooms for instruction in composition, literature, decoding, reading comprehension, spelling, vocabulary, grammar, usage, punctuation, capitalization, brainstorming, planning, reasoning, outlining, reference use, study skills, rhetoric, handwriting, drama, and virtually every other area of language arts. In fact, language programs should be specifically designed to meet the varying/diverse needs of our undergraduates.

Conclusion

Effective communication could be attained if the attending socio-cultural factors are fully analyzed. Teachers and learners of English should grapple with the challenges that impede effective mastery of the language. In fact, educators especially teachers of English should always realize that it is quite impossible for one to teach the English language without teaching its culture. Again, we must always remember that the learner's first language (indigenous language) greatly influences the target language. In view of this, it is advocated that a complete mastery of one's indigenous language is necessary for an ultimate performance in the second language. Teachers of English must be considerate of the students' culture and as such, inform the students of cultural differences thereby promoting understanding and effective use of English. In addition,

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Language policy must reflect both the target language culture as well as the students` culture so as to avoid any cultural cum language misinterpretations. In conclusion, the researcher recommends that educators especially language teachers should embark on teaching, monitoring, and evaluation of students` performances. Again, the study equally highlights the need for an integrative approach to teaching and learning of the English language.

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