



Relevance of the Teaching and Learning of English Language in Nigerian Polytechnics: A Study of Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This research investigated relevance of the English language teaching and learning in Nigerian Polytechnics, spotlighting Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Unwana. The study adopted survey research design method, and utilized validated questionnaire as instrument for data collection. Three research questions guided the study. 410 copies of the questionnaire were administered on the students randomly selected from the six schools of the institution, using balloting technique without replacement. 400 copies of the questionnaire were returned in usable form. Data collected were analyzed using tables and mean statistics. 2.50 mean benchmark was chosen for the study. Findings revealed that English language teaching and learning is relevant in Nigerian Polytechnic education. It was also found out that Polytechnic students have interest in the teaching and learning of English language. The study further revealed that many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language as a result of their poor background in the language, frequent use of Pidgin English; inability to understand English language lectures; inability to engage in extensive reading, and lack of interest in reading literary texts. The work, therefore, recommended, among others, that effort should be intensified in teaching English language courses in Nigerian Polytechnics, using appropriate teaching methodology and facilities, and the use of Pidgin English among students within the campus officially bound, while the study of Literature in English should be made compulsory each semester from ND1 to HND11.



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Introduction

The English Language has unarguably continued to become part and parcel of Nigeria right from the time Western education and Christian religion were introduced to the people. It was the vehicle for their propagation as well as the tool for colonial political administration. In the contemporary time, English is not only an official language in Nigeria but also a unifying language in the absence of an indigenous Lingual Franca, enabling the people to break their

ethno-linguistic and cultural barriers. Owing to the indispensability of English Language in Nigeria, it is a medium of academic instruction from senior primary to tertiary level of the education system. Furthermore, it is a core subject required for certification at the secondary level; for admission into all tertiary institutions and for occupation and employment in the wider world of work (Ike, 2007; Azikiwe, 2007; Nwaiwu, 2010).

In the Nigerian educational institutions, English occupies a prime position in the academic pursuit of every learner whether science or arts incline. This has indeed necessitated the need for an appreciable level of competence among students at various levels for a successful carrier. But it has become obvious that most Nigerian students over the years have continued to perform below average in the language as their spoken and written English deteriorate in quality as the years go by (Jowitt, 2012; Ogbuagu, 2011). In a bid to arrest the ugly trend, various tertiary institutions in the country are mandated to teach English language as a general course to all undergraduates across the country.

It is, however, disheartening that the objectives of teaching English language as a general course to tertiary students have not been realized as undergraduates continue to demonstrate high degree of incompetence in the language. The polytechnic students are no exception in this circumstance as they perform abysmally in the language. In the polytechnic system, English is the medium of instruction, and it is also taught alongside Communication and Literature in English. The objective is to empower the students with the required skills in English language for better performance in their respective disciplines (Osakinle and Okafor, 2012). According to Olasehinde (2015), the English Language component of the General Studies Curriculum of the Nigerian Polytechnics is adequate. But he further observed that it, however, appears that their linguistic needs are been partially met considering their dwindling performances in the language.

There is no doubt that Polytechnic students require English language to excel in their technical fields because English is the language of science and technology. Therefore, the students must have quality English if they must be relevant in their disciplines and in society where knowledge of English is a sine-qua-non (Onjewu, 2015, Ugwu, 2006). But current reality shows that substantial number of the students' competence and performance in the language leave much to be desired as evidenced in their oral and written discourses. Furthermore, observation has revealed that some are just comfortable with their mother tongues, and as Ugwu (2006:19) carefully observed, in Polytechnics sited in metropolitan towns, Pidgin English is the lingual Franca. It is against this background that it has become expedient to find out the students' perception of the relevance of English language teaching and learning in the Nigerian polytechnics and why the ugly situation has persisted over the years.

State of the Problem

The relevance and functions of English language in Nigeria are multifaceted and glaringly indispensable in the peoples' personal and national affairs that its mastery is a sine-qua-non for a successful living. This, therefore, underscores the need why its teaching and learning have always been accorded a serious priority. It is regrettable, however, that in spite of the intensification of the teaching of the language at all levels of the education system, the performance in the spoken and written English of most Nigerian students have remained grossly inadequate. This worrisome situation necessitated the establishment of the English language arm of the General Studies programme in Nigerian higher institutions to address students' poverty in English language. This development has become even more

advantageous in the polytechnic system where English language is primarily used to create, express, interpret and transmit technology (Nwaizu, 2010). Notwithstanding the essence of the language and all efforts made to impart its knowledge to the students, observation has shown that most students in tertiary institution are yet to master the use of the language.

With their poor knowledge of the English Language, according to Ugwu (2006), many polytechnic students in Nigeria content with increasing “use of bad English” whose reverberating consequences negatively affects their general academic performances. This is inevitably so because English language in Nigerian Polytechnics is intended to improve students’ knowledge of English language and communication for better performance in their fields and better performance in the Nigerian society (Adeyemi, 2011; Osakinle & Okafo, 2012). As a result of the foregoing, several studies have been carried out on various aspects of General English teaching and learning in the Nigerian Polytechnic system but no attention has been paid to ascertain students’ perception of the relevance of English language teaching and learning in Nigerian Polytechnics with a view to addressing the root cause of the continued abysmal performance in the language. It is this crucial gap that necessitates the present study.

Purpose of the Study

- (i) To ascertain whether English language teaching and learning is relevant in Nigerian polytechnic education.
- (ii) To find out whether polytechnic students have interest in the teaching and learning of English language.
- (iii) To identify reasons why many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language.

Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

- (i) Is English language teaching and learning relevant in Nigerian Polytechnic education?
- (ii) Do polytechnic students have interest in English language teaching and learning?
- (iii) Why do many polytechnic students perform poorly in English language?

Review of Relevant Literature

The English Language is indisputably one of the most enduring legacies banqueted to the Nigerian society by the colonial Masters. It was introduced in Nigeria in 1842 by the first batch of European Missionaries who first arrived at Badagary to evangelize and educate the people (Azikiwe, 2007). As a result of the need for the mastery of the language which was then a significant determinant of success, coupled with the multiethnic and heterogeneous nature of Nigeria, English Language gained wide acceptance in the Nigeria society. Today, its pertinent roles in the nation’s life have even become more profound that it is hardly construed as a colonial language. This is predicated on the fact that despite the people’s proficiency in their native languages, their letters, memos, notes, diaries, messages and so on are [almost exclusively] written and received in the English Language (Ogbuagu, 2011; Azikiwe, 2007).

In the contemporary Nigeria, English has become a unifying language in the absence of an indigenous lingual Franca. It is currently the language of administration, education, commerce, politics, religion, mass media and other socio-economic and cultural

engagements. According to Attaman (2008) English is the major language of communication and a learning tool in Nigeria; the access or window for development in the world, be it economic, social, political or technological. To this end, any nation that wants to be relevant in the continuously changing world of science and technology must have her citizens have the facility in the language through teaching and learning. It is perhaps as a result of the foregoing that English is officially made a medium of instruction from elementary four to the tertiary level in Nigeria (National Policy on Education, 2004). In the higher institutions, it is mainly taught to students generally to enhance their performances in their various fields, coordinated by the department of General Studies. This is because, according to Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun (2013), students who have difficulties with communication skills in English would certainly not function effectively in their respective academic fields.

A pertinent question to ask at this juncture is: should English language teaching and learning be accorded a priority in Nigerian Polytechnic system? The polytechnic education under the guidance of the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) is mandated, among other things, to produce technical and professionally skilled middle level manpower to sustain the national economy (NBTE, 2011). In order to fulfill this mandate, teaching and learning must take place compulsorily in English since it is the only medium of academic instruction in Nigeria. Besides, English is primarily used across Anglophone countries and other parts of the world to “create, express, interpret and transmit technology” (Nwizu, 2010).

In the Nigerian Polytechnic education, English is taught as a General course alongside communication studies. While the use of English courses are meant to expose students to the nature and structure of language, the communication course are geared towards exposing them to the broad-based education designed to sharpen their communication skills to cope with their studies and with the demands of oral and written communication in the wider society (Osakinle & Okafor, 2012; Nwizu, 2010 citing NBTE, 1999; Aina, Ogundele & Olanipekun, 2012). Consequently, it is offered by all students both at ND and HND levels to address their deficiencies in the use of the language. It was generally taught with emphasis on the General English until 2010 when NBTE issued a revised curriculum which emphasized a more concern for the teaching of Technical English (English for specific purpose). Regrettably, this recent focus in the teaching of the language has not yielded the desired result as Polytechnic students continue to perform poorly in English Language (Babatunde, 2013, Nwizu, 2010, Osakinle & Okafor, 2012). The abysmal incompetence demonstrated by Nigerian tertiary students may not be attributable to the nature of English they are being taught. A number of militating factors come into play -- mother tongue interference, increasing use of Pidgin English, social media influence, laxity on the part of the learners, dwindling reading culture and so on. According to Aleburu (2006) citing Iyang (2005), the National University-wide communication skills project sometime ago introduced English for specific purpose as an alternative to the use of English course, yet, unfortunately, research evidence still showed that even English for specific purpose has failed to provide the enablement needed by the tertiary students.

The foregoing is undeniably the same situation in the Polytechnic system where the low level of competence demonstrated by the students in English Language has continued to worsen despite the recent intensification in its teaching and learning. This portends danger in the system in that research findings (Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun, 2013, Onjewu, 2015) have indicated that competency in English significantly determines performances in intelligence test in science and technical education involving laboratory and workshop practical skills acquisition. Furthermore, the knowledge of English, as corroborated by Adeyemi's

(2011:49) findings, especially in the areas of grammar, punctuation marks, spelling, word usage and sentence structure are strong determinant factors of success in student's performance in shorthand, a problematic course in Office Technology and Management.. These, no doubt, underscore the need why no effort should be spared in finding lasting solution to the ugly trend. But the search for a remedy must begin with a vigorous campaign in support of the teaching and learning of the language in our various Polytechnics in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted survey research design method, and utilized questionnaire for data collection. All the polytechnics in Nigeria constituted the population, while Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic Unwana was chosen as the study area. 410 students from the study area (ND and HND students) were randomly sampled from the six schools in the institution, using balloting techniques without replacement. 400 copies of the distributed questionnaire were returned in usable form. Data collected were analyzed using mean statistics. 2.50 mean benchmark was chosen for the study.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Research Question 1: Is English language teaching and learning relevant in Nigerian Polytechnics?

Table 1: Mean responses of students on the relevance or otherwise of English language teaching and learning in Nigerian Polytechnics

S/n	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
1.	All courses in the Polytechnics are taught using the English Language.	272	128	-	-	3.68	Accept
2.	Knowledge of English Language is indispensable for the understanding of other courses.	232	112	56	-	3.44	Accept
3.	Mathematics, and Engineering calculations, figures, charts, plans and graphs rely on English Language for their expressions and understanding.	216	136	48	-	3.42	Accept
4.	All assignments, tests, examinations and projects are set and written in the English Language.	272	88	24	16	3.54	Accept
5.	Lessons on parts of speech and syntactic arrangements aid students to Master good sentence construction.	264	136	-	-	3.66	Accept
6.	Knowledge of mechanics of writing, lexis and structure help students to produce varied error-free sentences	192	160	48	-	3.36	Accept
7..	Studying comprehension and summary enable students to understand written discourses and precision of expression	176	192	32	-	3.36	Accept
8	Lessons on correspondences would assist students on graduation to be able	256	136	8	-	3.62	Accept

	to write memos, letters, queries, editorials, columns and so on.						
9	Knowledge of essay and technical report writings would enable learners on graduation to be able to write articles, reports, marketing plans, feasibility studies and so on.	248	144	8	-	3.6	Accept
10.	Oral English lessons help to shape students' oral skills for effective communication.	240	144	16	-	3.56	Accept
11.	The study of public speaking aids students to develop skills to effectively express themselves in public fora.	256	136	8	-	3.62	Accept
12.	Lessons on literature in English expose students to understand their society well and people around them.	224	136	16	24	3.4	Accept
13.	Lessons on communication assist students to cope with the demands of oral and written communication.	232	152	8	8	2.52	Accept
	Grand mean (X)					3.44	Accept

The table above clearly shows that all the respondents concur that the teaching and learning of English in Nigerian Polytechnics is relevant. All the mean responses being above 2.50 benchmark earlier chosen, and the grand mean being so high (3.44) apparently indicate a strong acceptance that English is relevant in the Polytechnic system.

Question Two: Do Polytechnic students have interest in English language teaching and learning?

Table II: Mean responses of students on their interest in English Language learning

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	X	DECISION
14.	Polytechnic students attend their English language lectures regularly as scheduled.	184	112	72	32	3.12	Accept
15.	Polytechnic students attend their English language lectures punctually	120	184	88	8	3.04	Accept
16.	Polytechnic students participate actively during teaching and learning encounters	168	152	72	8	3.2	Accept
17.	Polytechnic students usually purchase their recommended text-books on English language	224	136	40	-	3.66	Accept
18.	Polytechnic students borrow English language and Literature in English books from the school library.	168	128	56	48	3.04	Accept
	Grand Mean (x)					3.21	Accept

Source: field survey, 2024

From the table above, it is obvious that there is a consensus agreement among the respondents that Polytechnic students have interest in English language teaching and learning

as all the variables/items are above the mean benchmark. The students attend their lectures (3.12), participate actively in class (3.2), buy their recommended text-books (3.66) and equally borrow books from the library (3.04) for their study and so on. These indicate their interest in English language learning.

Question Three: Why do many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language?

Table III: Mean responses of students on why many of them perform poorly in English language

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	X	Decision
19.	Many Polytechnic students have poor background in English language	160	128	48	64	2.95	Accept
20.	Many of the students do not communicate often in English language while on campus	192	168	24	16	3.34	Accept
21.	The students' regular communication in Pidgin English adversely affects their performance in standard English usage.	216	152	32	-	3.46	Accept
22.	Many of the students do not usually read books on Literature in English	192	176	24	8	3.38	Accept
23.	Many of the students do not understand English language lectures	120	104	152	24	2.86	Accept
24.	Many of the students do not read widely	216	160	16	8	3.46	Accept
	Grand Mean (X)					3.24	Accept

Source: field survey, 2024

An analysis of the above table shows that all the respondents, as indicated by the grand mean (3.24), accepted that many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language. This is because of their poor background in the language (2.95), constant use of Pidgin English (3.46), not reading widely (3.46), their lack of interest in reading literary texts (3.38) as well as not being able to understand English language lectures (2.86).

Discussion

The analysis of the result as indicated in table1 revealed that majority of the respondents agreed that English language is relevant in Nigerian Polytechnics. It was almost a unanimous acceptance among the respondents that Polytechnic students cannot do without the teaching and learning of English language as indicated by the high grand mean (3.44) obtained from the result of the analysis. This is corroborated by the finding of Ugwu (2006) that Polytechnic students must have the knowledge of English if they must be relevant in their disciples and in the society.

The findings in table 2 indicated that Polytechnic students really have interest in the teaching and learning of English language. This is authenticated by the fact that all the variables in the table as it concerns attendance to lectures, purchase of textbooks, participation in class activities and so on were accepted. This finding is consistent with the finding of Osakinle and Okafor (2012) that majority of Nigerian undergraduates have interest in the learning of English language and communication. According to them, the students exhibit such interest because they know that the knowledge of English is essential for their better functioning in

their respective professional fields and for public communication in the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment.

Furthermore, a striking revelation of this research is that many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language. The finding revealed that the inability of the students to speak Standard English often on campus, constant use of Pidgin English, their poor background in the language and lack of interest in reading literary works significantly contribute to their poor performance in the language. Besides, the finding revealed that many of the students do not optimally understand English language lectures they attend. The finding confirms Ojewu's (2015) and Alaburu's (2006) findings that students' poor background and poor use of English are responsible for their inability to understand English language lectures. However, the finding contradicts the finding of Osakinle and Okafor (2012) that the majority of Nigerian students understand English language and communication lectures despite the large class that often ranges from 50 to 100 students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The preoccupation of the present study is to examine, through empirical study/analysis, the relevance or otherwise of the teaching and learning of English language in Nigerian Polytechnics. Indubitably, the role of English Language in Nigeria is too profound and indispensable to attract any contention. But because most Polytechnic students study technical based courses that majorly deal with practical demonstrations, this research sought to know whether English is relevant to the students' academic pursuit; whether the students have interest in studying the language, and why many of them perform poorly in the use of the language. The result of the investigation has revealed that English language is relevant in Nigerian Polytechnics. It was also found out that students have interest in learning the language. Moreover, the research has identified several reasons why many Polytechnic students perform poorly in English language with reckless abandon. In view of the foregoing findings, it is, therefore, recommended that:

1. The teaching of English language in Nigerian Polytechnics should be strengthened by relevant authorities.
2. Teachers of the language should devote extra time and energy to teach the course, using appropriate teaching methodologies and facilities to enhance easy understanding.
3. The study of Literature in English should be made mandatory each semester from NDI to HNDII.
4. The use of Pidgin English by students within the campus should be strictly bound by various Polytechnic authorities/ managements.
5. The English language segment of the Polytechnic aptitude test should be more standardized and allocated the highest marks so as to admit only good quality students.

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