

## **THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND MULTICULTURALISM: THE CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD**

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### **Abstract**

The English Language has become a working language used for intra national and international communication in many parts of the region. Millions of people from diverse linguistic communities speak English for various purposes thereby giving rise to different varieties of English. The implication is that the existence of such varieties of English poses difficulty to the second/foreign language learner. This paper therefore x-rays the linguistic roles of the English language vis –a- vis its prevalent challenges in a multicultural world. Challenges abound in the area of education, political and social spheres of life. There are cases of confused linguistic allegiance and interference phenomenon which occur as a result of the indigenous languages that must co-exist with English. Worthy of mention is the fact that no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers. Therefore in the case of English, we should take cognizance of the fact that there is always much room left for the non-native speakers to exploit it in the unique form of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically and pragmatically.

**Keywords:** Biculturalism, linguistic allegiance, communicative competence

### **Introduction**

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. 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. In fact, it has been demonstrated that the child's cognitive development as well as his affective characteristics is a function of language, and the cultural implication of this in the prominence of English in education calls for attention in an era of multicultural emphasis.

### **Language and Culture**

Language could be defined as a system of sounds or vocal symbols by which human beings communicate experience. It is a veritable means of communication and it is a special attribute which differentiates man from other animals. It is a human phenomenon that has form which can be described in terms of the units of sounds (phonemes), words, morphemes, phrases, sentences and paragraph or discourse. According to Gatherer (1977), we think in language and effective thinking is not possible unless we possess linguistic competence adequate enough to realize and express our ideas. Language and culture are closely related, while culture is simply the way of life of a people or society. 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, hate or anger etc 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. It 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. Language is not innate or inborn. That is, no human being is born with a language but every human being has an innate tendency to acquire a language, hence it is a bridge to access knowledge, skills and attitudes within and across cultural/political boundaries. Language is the major vehicle of expression, for instance Nigeria has about 400 spoken languages which accounts for about 25% of all languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa. With the multiplicity of Nigerian languages, complex problems are created with regard to making a categorical policy on language for education, official business, government and legislative functions.

### **Global Implication of the English Language**

It is very well known that over many centuries there has been a progressive expansion of "the speech community of speech fellowship" of the English language. It was initially England; it later became Great Britain. It then grew to include North America, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia and parts of Africa. It is today virtually the entire world. The advent of the English language in Africa cannot be dissociated from colonialism as a factor which was initiated under the disguise of missionary activities, trade and commerce, and borderline areas are other means of transportation of the language into the continent. It is plausible to say that the factor of colonialism is the channel of English in Anglophone East African countries comprising Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc and West African countries comprising Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Gambia etc.

English has become an international language means for multinational and multicultural communication with numerous indigenous languages and a multiplicity of the culture of the different peoples of the world that speak English. There are now many forms of the English language which are identifiably different from each other like American English, British English, Indian English, West African English, Singapore English, and Australian English etc. This trend has led to the use of a new plural 'English'/world English to refer to the different forms and varieties of the language.

Because English is so widely spoken, it has often been referred to as a "global language"- the lingua franca of the modern era. While English is not an official language in many countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a second language around the world. Because of that global spread, English has developed a host of English dialects and a host of English-based Creole languages and Pidgins. Dialects means varieties of a language defined in terms of its users, since the users of a language constitute the members of a speech community. The existence of different varieties of English could therefore be attributed to the multiplicity of the culture of the different peoples of the world that speak English. Examples are Cockney slang with British English, New Foundland English, and the English spoken by Anglo Quebecers within Canadian English and African American vernacular English and Southern America English with American English. Although no variety is clearly considered the only standard, there are a number of accents considered as more formal, such as Received Pronunciation in Britain or the Bostonian dialect in the United States of America. In his word, B.B. Kachru (1977) has advised that for any variety to be regarded as standard, that variety should be assessed from the point of view of what he called 'relevant factors of appropriateness, acceptance and intelligibility' It must be stressed that language in contact are bound to develop variations and mutations. This is because such languages are forced to accommodate the variations of locality. Since English is the language of the world, it is no longer the possession of the British, and a non-native speaker is not subject to English assumptions of correctness. As the spread of English progresses, English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures since no language is used to its fullest extend by its native speakers; there is always much room left for the non-native speakers to exploit it in the unique form of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically and pragmatically. Varieties of English occur as a result of such factors as cultural, political, economical etc. The implication is that the existence of such varieties of English poses difficulty to the second language learner, but when learned, it enhances his effective use of the language.

Again, as a result of the afore-mentioned factors, there have been cases of confused linguistic allegiance and the interference phenomena. In terms of the first, a second language learner is faced with the task of acquiring competence in a language that belongs to a totally different family and culture. Here, if the learner comes from a "well educated" family, he misses out completely the emotional make-up in the mother tongue. There are reported cases of the interference of the mother tongue on English which could be phonological, lexical and syntactical. The interference of mother tongue affects the learner's performance in the target language. This is one of the problems Nigerians are facing because of mother tongue intruding into that of the target language.

### **Different Perceptions of English Usage**

Since English is a global language, it becomes pertinent that one examines the general perceptions of the use of English worldwide in order to see how each country fits into the schema. The use of English can be classified into the following categories of users:

#### **I. English as a mother tongue (EMT)**

A mother tongue is the only language of a monolingual person which is acquired naturally in his native environment which meets all his linguistic needs. English being a world language serves as the first language or MT in some countries like Britain, USA, Australia, New Zealand, British settlers in South Africa, Blacks in USA, West Indies, Liberated slaves settlers in Liberia, Sierra Leone etc. It has been estimated that about 250 million people use English as a mother tongue/first language.

## II. English as a foreign language (EFL)

This is a situation where the users learn English as an additional language and use it voluntarily when necessary, especially outside their countries. Such countries include China, Japan, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Spain.

## III. English as a second language (ESL)

In a country where English is used as a second language, that country has its indigenous languages but use English compulsorily in official and public affairs hence English performs two different roles, primary language: and secondary language. Those for whom English is their primary language are referred to as "native speakers" (NS) while the non-native speakers are those for whom English is a secondary language (NNS)

### **The Challenges of Bilingual Education in a Multicultural Society**

The issue of Bilingualism is raised here because a careful study of bilingualism is a sine qua non for the study of multilingualism and multiculturalism. It is necessary for textbook writers to dwell exhaustively on the subject of bilingualism for effective mastery and achievement of intelligibility and comprehensibility in the second language. Bilingualism means the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or a speech community. Uriel Weinreich offers a short definition of bilingualism. According to him, bilingualism is the practice of alternately using two languages and the person involved is called a bilingual (5). We can also explain the term bilingualism as dual language performance by an individual or individuals covering all stages starting from Bloomfieldian native-like control of two languages and the minimal knowledge of a second language Each of these languages has its own distinct phonological, lexical, grammatical and discourse rules. Nigeria is an example of a bilingual community. In Nigeria therefore, there are individual bilinguals- people who speak only Igbo and English, Hausa and English, Yoruba and English, Efik and English. It has been stressed that bilingualism was and still is the explanation for the failure of certain group of children. It has been argued that bilingualism is counterproductive to the child's welfare to develop and maintain proficiency in more than one language. Many people now recognize that these ideas are based on questionable assumptions about language proficiency: how it is measured and how bilingualism affects academic development. There are a number of hypotheses about influence on children's achievement in school. They are as follows: Bilingualism itself, lack of exposure to the school language, linguistic mismatch between home and school, cultural mismatch between home and school, inferior quality of education provided to minority students, and factors associated with social-economic status, etc Some linguists are of the view that bilingualism is one of the causes of poor achievement in schools. For example, the Toronto Board of Education in 1969 and 1975 showed that students of non-English-speaking background who immigrated to Canada performed worse academically and were in lower academic streams than those in Canada. Again, not too long ago, minority children in countries like Australia, the United States, Britain and Scandinavia were subjected to physical violence in school for speaking their home language. In most cases, the education of these children entailed removing them from the parents and their own cultural group. These children are taken to where they would learn not only the dominant language, but would do so in an environment where their culture was seen as barbaric.

The primary role of the mother tongue in bilingual education cannot be overemphasized. Experiments conducted have shown that pupils will learn and comprehend their subjects better in their mother tongues, especially if they are allowed to mature in them. At the secondary school, the policy lists one indigenous language and English as part of the core subjects and does not list any indigenous language as an elective. Taking cognizance of the fact the face of education is now situated in a multi – cultural global society, we cannot avoid contact with others from different cultures and societies.

In the past, educational theory and thought were influenced and ruled by dominant western values and culture but in the present day society, educational theory and classroom practice must now change to meet the educational demands of a global society. Bilingual Education should be dominant by numerous theories concerning the development of language. Issues like how individuals develop and learn languages should be addressed. The different functions of the organs that are employed during language learning and acquisition should be examined. The different schools of thought viz: formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and applied linguistics are theories that need to be understood in bilingual education. The importance of the knowledge of these theories cannot be over emphasized. For instance, the knowledge of the meaning of linguistics makes us to know that a linguist is not an individual who speaks many languages but one who studies the grammar, the social and psychological aspects of language use, and the relationships among languages. The goal of this field of study is to explain the uniformity of language acquisition among humans despite differences in native language. There are other challenges of bilingual education that need to be considered. These are ESL or resource model, structural immersion model of instruction, transitional or early exit bilingual education,

maintenance or late exit or developmental bilingual education and bilingual immersion or two way bilingual or dual language education. Students in developmental bilingual education classes receive instruction in the 1st and 2nd language throughout their period of schooling. Thus, instructions are taught through the two languages with much regard to multicultural perspective. If bilingual education is to succeed, then the bilingual educator must be willing to accommodate the beliefs, attitudes and teaching strategies for the benefits of their bilingual students and bilingual community. The bilingual educators need to make bilingual education meaningful to themselves, their school, community and their students. It is also advised that education and educators in particular should recognize values other than their own when educating the global children of today. Educators must move outside their dominant local views and recognize values other than their own. More so, this type of bilingual reform also calls for administrators to develop, plan, provide and finance bilingual education reform that focuses on willingness to change. Again, in the application of bilingual education, the educators must not forget that there is every tendency for the second language learner to code mix or code switch during the teaching and learning process. Indigenous languages as well as the various Pidgins and Creoles should be consciously promoted as an essential part of national culture. The educators therefore, should not fail to realize that the consequences of bilingualism are observed through the features of code switching, borrowing, interference and biculturalism. It is quite interesting to know that when learners are given the opportunity to use both 1.1 and 1.2 in their academic studies, they do not experience difficulty in developing L2 proficiency. This is because the previously acquired knowledge and skills are now automatically transferred to the new language. While this subject is gaining interest in the linguistic community, it is my feeling that the broader peace education community can contribute to the reformation of second language acquisition as an international medium to promote peace and global responsibility.

### **Findings of the Study**

There is a great diversity of varieties and functions of English in Nigeria precisely, and the world at large. English is used extensively in both the electronic and the print media, in the judiciary, the police, the armed forces, the legislative, etc and as a lingua franca in political mobilization, ethical orientation and population education. Little wonder English serves as the dominant/ official language of Nigeria. English is used for diverse purposes. In some countries, it serves as the first language; some use it as the second language, whereas in some countries, it is their foreign language. The problem however concerns the quality of English that is taught and used in the school system. The concern being expressed in informed educational circles is the extent to which the variety and quality of English being learned and used in the school system can serve in achieving Nigeria's educational goals and the objectives. It must be stressed that as the global curriculum expands and re-focuses the challenges and possibilities of multicultural education, teachers, schools, and communities are challenged to re-examine the traditional English curriculum and articulate rationales for change. The existence of different varieties of English is as a result of the diverse cultures that have come to bear on the language.

There are also reported cases of confused linguistic allegiance, the interference phenomenon which could be phonological, syntactical and lexical and these in no small measure affect the learner's performances in the target language. The spread of English as a language for multinational and multicultural communication utilized by an enormous number of non-native speakers shows that English is becoming more and more de-Anglo Americanized in many regions of the world. This creates a new role that English can play in the contemporary world. Because of the global status of the English language, and the cultural and linguistic qualities of English literature, English teachers are usually at the fulcrum of educational debate. To this end, it is suggested that decisive strategies should be adopted in order to surmount the difficulties/the challenges facing multilingualism and bilingualism.

### **English Language Teaching In Nigeria**

Nigeria as a multilingual nation has many indigenous languages through which the local linguistic interaction is accomplished. This is to say that the English Language came to Nigeria to interact with hundreds of indigenous languages at the economic, political and educational levels. Therefore, the aim of teaching English in Nigeria is to develop a working command of this global language and nurture international and intercultural awareness on the part of our students. Apparently, ELT for this goal is composed of three important elements: (1) understanding other cultures, (2) explaining our own culture, and (3) teaching English as an international language, not as an American or a British language. One of the challenges which a second language learner faces is the herculean task of acquiring communicative competence in a language that belongs to a totally different family and culture. In the educational system in the Nigerian context, there is the use of two modes of communication viz: the English language and the mother tongue (Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba or any other Nigerian Language) which supposedly enhance the acquisition of the necessary skills involved in education. The implication is that the second language learner invariably becomes a bilingual. However, the two languages in

the learner's speech repertoire may come in contact thereby resulting in a substantial number of persistent mistakes made by students/speakers of the two languages.

### **Conclusion**

The concept of English as a multicultural language is based on the fact that English has come to stay as an indispensable language for intra-national and/or international communication in Nigeria and other parts of the world. Suffice it to say that English is a global/world language which serves as the first language, second language or foreign language of the different peoples of the world. It is therefore, the lingua franca of the modern era. The role of the English language in the face of global multicultural emphasis should not be undervalued. The teaching of English should therefore be carried out within a truly bilingual system. Since language is culture-bound, English must be able to coexist with the indigenous languages both in the curriculum and in the world outside education.

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