

THE PLACE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA'S TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper identified the English language as the most valuable legacy bequeathed to Nigeria by the Colonial Administration. It acknowledged the fact that language generally, is one factor that has enhanced the advanced state of man's mental development, but singled out English as one language that is fundamental in the technological advancement of Nigeria which the paper opined, is an index of how mentally developed a nation is. It argued that if the present economic development of Nigeria is traceable to the influx of science and technology, then the English language which is used to create, express, interpret and transmit technology needed to be accorded serious priority. The paper finally concluded on the importance of English in our technological advancement and recommended for a result oriented English language teaching for our Polytechnics and related technological institutions.

Introduction

It is a known fact that English language plays a very important role in the field of science and technology. A number of people who learn the language today do so not necessarily to have access to English literature or to understand more about the cultural life of the English speaking people, but simply because it is the avenue through which the desired information about Western Technology could be reached. As a world language, English stands in a better position, more than any other language, to give meaning to the nation's much talked about technological transfer and advancement because of its official place as the language of education, commerce, politics, judiciary and the like.

According to Bell (1981), Language is a tool for the exploration and analyses of one's conceptual process. On the other hand, the survival of any nation can be linked to the nation's technology aggressiveness. Therefore, language, a means of communication, is fundamental to human transaction in general and technology transfer and advancement in particular. A nation that is isolated technologically can hardly achieve significantly on the technological sphere. This is all the more reason why we need a language (not just any language) that cuts across the nation and which is understood worldwide if we must achieve our targeted technological goal. In addition, it is only the English language that we can be sure to overcome the language barrier that slows down the rate of technological transfer. The rest of this paper will attempt to show the strategic place, which the English language occupies in the promotion of technology in the country.

The Place of Technology in Our Society

Technology as a concept has been defined by different people in different ways. Okorie (1997:50) sees it as a concept that involves the use of tools to aid human efforts in solving a specific human problem. In Okorie (1997:50), Jackson (1997:3) defined technology as the process of applying scientific principle to the achievement of defined objectives. Olafihihan E. (1996) defines it as a positive and practical application of science in the service of man, that is the development of scientific concepts, skills, devices, tools and implements for application of labour in the process of production of the material need of society.

The needs of developing countries require a strong emphasis on this aspect of science to reduce their dependence on developed countries (Berluti A, 1989). For the under-developed people to advance technologically; they must see technological advancement as a struggle.

Many reasons have been put forward for promoting technology education in developing countries like ours. It is believed that this aspect of science is essential for the advancement of our society because of the contribution it makes to the economic status of this nation by providing future technologists. However, there should be other reasons for giving it a pride of place in our society.

Anne Qualtes et al (1996) observe that technology permeates almost every aspect of our daily lives. Each of us needs to be able to bring a technological approach to bear on the political, social, economic and political issues of modern life. More so, the need for technologically literate society has been evident as we are bombarded through the media, on a daily basis with the issues related to scientific and technological improvement.

In most countries of the world, developed or under-developed, it is generally accepted that any development technologically, lies on the proper acquisition and application of the technology knowledge acquired. Technology has become a critical factor of development in every ramification of human life as it is through its applications that the natural resources of any country would be transformed into goods and services for better quality of life of the majority of the country's citizens.

Advances in technology have assured man of comfortable living, improved his thinking processes and very importantly, conserved his energy for other activities. It is also assumed that the economic development of a nation is dependent, to a large extent, on the advancement of its technology. Adaptation of technology in nation's life marks the difference between development or under-development which is the basis of the classification of countries into developed and under-developed nations.

The development of technology through schools has witnessed drastic changes since 1960. Government's efforts in establishing technology conscious nation is demonstrated in the knowledge and thinking of people whose focused are on popularizing technology through polytechnics, colleges of technology, research institutes and industries. Ekoko (1996) asserts that technology advancement has witnessed three major emphases. The first is the invention and production of new equipment needed to explore man's environment, in the second, emphasis is on finding new resources of energy as was in the first industrial revolution of early 19th century. The third which is currently passing through, as very rapid phase of development is the information based on the COMPUTER.

Computer is one of the greatest inventions of the 20th century which has contributed tremendously to the service of humanity through its capacity to automate the highly needed repetitive calculation which earlier inventions have necessitated.

Odubela (1996) observes that in spite of all these efforts, the rate of technology development in Nigeria, has not been quite satisfactory. At this juncture, it is essential to examine what has been the relationship between language and technology and what role English language can play in the transfer and advancement of technology in the Nigeria of today.

The Relationship between Language and Technology

Language is perhaps seldom seen as having any relationship with technology. Idowu (1996:61) maintains that Science and technology are created, expressed, interpreted and transmitted through language. This paper still establishes the relationship between language and technology. The two concepts are interwoven and interrelated. Without language, technology cannot function and without technology, language cannot be learnt or studies the way it should.

Equally, the aspects that deal with the production and distribution of technology knowledge need the use of language. Uche B. (1994) observed that the technologist makes use of his verbal reasoning, he thinks and in any technological procedures or experiments, action verbs and verbs of change e.g. mix purify, boil, control, change, expand, dissolve are generally and widely used. This shows that without language technology cannot thrive. In teaching and learning of technology, there must be the ability to acquire and use certain language registers, many of which can pose problems for the learners because of

the second language situation of English to Nigerian users of the language. The problem of understanding sentence structures with such technical words or terms is a task for both the language teacher and technology teachers.

It is therefore essential that English teachers should give the required basic language education needed for the study of technology. On the other hand, the impact of technology on language cannot be over-emphasized particularly the aspects of phonetics and linguistics which is defined as the scientific way of studying language (Trask, R. 1997). Uche B. (1994) points out that linguistics and science/technology are similar in observing events before setting up of hypothesis, followed by systematic investigation through experimentation before a theory is finally developed. This is also the concern of linguistics as in other sciences. Also, some of the instructional materials and techniques employed in teaching phonetics and phonology of language are the products of technology. Thus, technology and language are interdependent, interrelated and interwoven.

Developing Language Skills in Technology Students

Language is not just one of the subjects in the curriculum. It is an essential vehicle for learning all other subjects. Thus, the subject of language teaching-learning improvement should be of great interest to all those who are concerned with the educational processes, particularly education planners, administrators and language teachers so that the language needs of the people in different professions will be met, most especially the technology students and the technologists.

For the teaching and learning processes to be meaningful, resourceful and productive, the language teachers should understand the language or communicative needs of their technology students. By doing this, they would know what to teach and how to teach it.

Language teachers should know that these students need English not only to perform well in their subjects across the curriculum but also to express their feelings and experiences in a way that is intelligible and convincing.

This is the reason why priority should be given to oral language. It is upon this foundation that reading and writing skills are built. However, the four basic skills of language should be employed to meet the language needs of these students.

Before the students leave secondary schools, they must have acquired some basic knowledge at different levels of language descriptions i.e, grammar, phonology, semantics and lexis. When they get to tertiary institutions, they need to be taught how these sentence structures they have learned, can be used to perform different communicative functions. In essence, technology students need English to help them define concepts, describe substances, objects, locations, processes and to carry out experimental instructions.

Technology students need listening skill because their experimental instructions may be transmitted orally which require the students to carry out specific actions. Without good listenings there will be no perfect understanding of the instructions to be carried out and the resultant actions will not be the accurate representations of what is required. Technology students need listening skills to be able to cope with their lessons or lectures so that they will be able to understand and follow the logical presentation of technical materials presented by their teachers.

As there is the rapid growth of literature in technology, it is therefore, imperative to inculcate in them reading skills. Reading is one area that is particularly problematic for students find reading frustrating and uninteresting. Therefore, a lot of academic failure results from this. Technology students need to collect information from books, reference books and encyclopedia. In doing this, they will come across technical vocabulary, sentences that are long and complex, blending and compounding of words which usually make reading and understanding difficult and complex in technical writings. If the technology students are taught in proper ways of reading in the language, then these problems of reading will be minimized. The students, therefore, need to be trained so that they will find reading a pleasant and an interesting activity.

Their writing skills also need to be developed so that they will be able to interpret and express their technical processes not only in spoken form but also in written form. By doing this, their creative senses will be developed and geared towards writing meaningful texts such as descriptive and informative pieces. It is essential to encourage this type of writing as it plays a crucial role in the students' literary development. They do not need to be concerned only with diagrams, charts, plans, etc. They also need to produce them in written form for others to read and appreciate or criticize.

Apart from learning language for academic work, proficiency in language is essential for active participation in various communicative activities, especially in their professional discussions. They must have to preside over meetings, write memo, report or any formal letter. All these require proficiency both in written and spoken forms of the language.

Technology students need to be trained so that they will be able to perform effectively in their communication tasks i.e report writing, speech making, delivery of lectures or keynote addresses, etc.

The Teaching of English to the Technology Students

The need to improve the English proficiency of the technology students has become very crucial. Major deficiencies in the communicative skills are quite obvious in the written and spoken English of the technology students both in secondary and tertiary institutions. Since English is the language of academic expression it is often claimed that part of the poor academic performance in their courses of study is traceable to their poor proficiency in English (Funso, A. 1998).

Students who are admitted to technology institutions are generally indifferent to their English studies right from their secondary schools. Hence, they find it difficult to cope with the enormous demand on their use of English for academic purposes. They encounter great difficulties in following the substance of class lectures, in taking down notes and in writing out their class assignments.

Conclusion/Recommendations

From the foregoing, it has been noted that English language plays a very crucial role in the transfer and advancement of technology. Without language, technology cannot thrive. The ball is now in the court of all the participants in English and technical education processes i.e. the government, language teachers, technology teachers and the students to ensure that priority attention is given to English language by taking the teaching and learning of the language more seriously and making sure that instructional materials needed are readily available so that there would be rapid development in the sphere of technology in the country. Consequently, the economic, political, social and educational life of this nation would be positively affected and the country will move from the present underdeveloped to developed country. It is in the light of the above that the following recommendations are made.

- a. Government of the day should ensure that the teaching of English in our technological oriented schools is properly encouraged.
- b. English should remain the only official language in the country considering its place as a world language.
- c. The recent move to make French a second foreign official language should be discouraged because of the negative effect it is likely to have on our technological advancement.
- d. Teaching of English in technological institutions should be restricted to teachers with bias in English for specific purposes (ESP) who can effectively teach English for Science and Technology (EST).

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