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Reviving an English Language that is Comatose

Doyin Aguru

Introduction

The poor and lamentable state of written and spoken English language in Nigeria has continued to be a source of concern to an increasing number of people in academia, government, and public. Instructors at the three levels of education namely: primary, secondary, and tertiary have made attempts to correct and reposition the usage of this language. How to improve the state of the language in Nigeria is the concern of this article. It proposes among other things a review of strategies and techniques of teaching English. It recommends that greater emphasis should be placed on one of the basic language skills: reading. As Crump declares:

To live fully means to be continually disturbed, both intellectually and emotionally. Life may be described as long periods of dullness, performing the drudgery of routine, punctuated by ecstatic moments of delight. And, for most of us, the greater part of these moments comes from books... Read not to contradict and confute nor to believe and take for granted nor to find talk and discourse, but to weigh

and consider. Reading maketh a full man.
(11)

The English language seems to be in the throes of death in this country while it appears to be going from strength to strength in other parts of the world, buoyed, as it seems, by the steady currents of Internet connectivity. This development is unsurprising, given that English is basically the language of the Internet, while Nigeria is technologically underdeveloped: the grim circumstances of national life no longer encourage use of the euphemism and cliché, “developing” to describe the country.

English is no longer actively courted and mastered in this country, just as knowledge has ceased to be a prized commodity within and without the educational establishment. A society that is averse to knowledge will not read or go the extra mile in search of knowledge. Knowledge and mastery of any language involves knowledge and mastery of the literature of that language. This is an incontrovertible fact which is lost, amazingly, on several teachers and learners of English in recent times, with the result that English language usage has become shallow and ineffectual, and on the verge of death. Lack of grasp of language, indigenous and foreign, has become a reliable index of widespread illiteracy in the society.

Effective use of a second language in a multilingual nation like Nigeria is becoming a concern to more stakeholders in the nation. The problems the non-native speaker of English language encounters are hydra-headed; often there are problems at the spoken level, where there might be interference from the mother tongue (MT), and/or at the written level where many are

hampered by insufficient reading, and also from the point of exposure because many learn the wrong things or lack the opportunity to learn the language as they should.

The intellectual elite in Nigeria have watched with chagrin the continuous depreciation in the use of English. A number of these people were trained in the colonial and early post-colonial days. During this period language skills: grammar and structure were acquired with a high degree of competence. In a multilingual democratic setting like Nigeria, the government takes full responsibility for language planning and language policies in the country. Whether or not such policies are suitable and have the national interest at heart are issues that have consistently provoked research and polemics at government and linguistic levels.

The main culprits in the failure of English in Nigeria are the teachers and lecturers who are certified to teach this language. Chambers Dictionary of English defines a teacher as "a person whose profession, or whose talent is the ability to impart knowledge, practical skill or understanding".

In short supply are some of the personal, self-development projects that these privileged groups of people are expected to engage in, particularly activities that can sharpen their skills and teaching strategies. The least requirement for success in any field is continuous, constant and consistent learning. It is indeed myopic and unfortunate for a teacher, lecturer or indeed a professor to think he or she knows all there is to be known in a field or area of specialization.

It is also vital to emphasize that it is the upgrading of skills in a person's area of specialization that keeps such a one continuously improving and acquiring desired

results. Teachers in Nigeria need to be acquainted with the fact that their previously acquired skills and knowledge are fast becoming obsolete! Akeredolu-Ale describes language teaching methods at all levels. (154 – 155)

According to Culliney only two unique mammals, the elephant and the whale's brains exceed the human brain in size; the brain-size of these mammals makes it possible for them to acquire skills and perform certain tasks that other animals cannot. Studies further reveal that the human mind possesses the ability to learn whatever skill it needs for an individual to become productive and effective.

It is no longer unusual to see salesmen in various professions and other professionals pay huge sums of money to attend conventions, workshops, seminars, conferences and business meetings. This is in order for them to become super sales persons or for professionals to enhance their productivity and value to the organizations to which they belong. It therefore becomes imperative that the basic skills and strategies that elude a great number of those who teach English language as well as the appropriate attitude and motivation be acquired. This particularly applies to the university, a community that is often expected to be awash with these opportunities, one that affords the faculty openings to choose to become more knowledgeable and competent in his/her field.

Teachers as Builders

It is a known fact that great minds and erudite scholars have mentors. Professor Dapo Adelugba states categorically in a recent interview that the impact and the influence of his instructors were immense in his study,

and his attainment of success as a theatre critic and an intellectual:

I must tell you that I was extremely fortunate to have had a superbly gifted set of teachers of English and the Arts subjects; people like Phebean Ogundipe, one of the early graduates of St. Andrews, Scotland; Mrs. Hilton; Mrs. Matheissen, a good number of very devoted and gifted people. Mrs. Hilton was particularly keen on oral delivery of poetry and prose and we also had some very good drama teachers. (40)

The Penkelemes Years

This account portrays, to an extent, the relationship between these gifted teachers and the curriculum they taught. With what Adelugba refers to as their gift. This was also helped by their devotion to their profession. Professor Wole Soyinka, the first African to win the Nobel prize for literature, in a book titled *Ibadan: The Penkelemes Years* recalls with nostalgia the impact of some of his experiences in Government College, Ibadan.

He vividly remembers an invitation given to his class by the class teacher, who was scheduled to be away on a long leave of absence. Mr. Kaye announced to the class that he had some old books that his pupils might like to acquire. Maren, Soyinka's choice of name in *Ibadan*, arrived before anyone else and selected *Poems* by William Blake (150); *Two Famous Speeches in World History*; Oliver Cromwell's speech that dissolved a British parliament and America's Declaration of Independence (151); and *Euripides*, translated by Meredith (152).

Soyinka's experience after memorizing the speeches and reading the books culminated in a number of manifestations. He began to see himself quite differently, and could imagine Paul Robeson and William Blake in white uniforms as schoolboys like himself. It also boosted his self-image as he could now visualize himself as a writer. By the time Mr. Kaye returned from leave, the influence and illumination he received from these works inspired him to write a piece titled "*In Tribute of William Blake*". Soyinka describes his teacher's response to the piece:

Read it aloud Maren, it is good training to read one's poetic effusions aloud. One learns a lot. Maren; one learns a lot by listening carefully to one self be it in poetry or prose just as in answering questions in class. Read it aloud Master Maren. (155)

Resurrecting the Curriculum

The curriculum of each department as designed by the National Universities Commission (NUC) is to ensure that each student experiences in totality a wholesome package that eventually qualifies him for an award of a degree. Each instructor therefore ought to see him/herself, as a failure if, at the end of a semester, the aim and goal of a course assigned to him is not achieved.

Scholars who have monitored the growth of the English language have continuously decried the falling standards of English language. British and American critics are trying to proffer solutions to the falling standards of the English language. Woodbury in his essay titled "*The Decline of Grammar*" observes that English language decline is not only present in popular

writings but also in "advertisements, etc. scholarly papers, and most popular of all, memos from college deans." (47)

It is expected that a college's course description for general courses in the use of English should include the four basic language skills; namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Dairo (1997) classifies the four basic skills into the receptive and expressive skills;

The receptive skills (listening and reading) actively involve the user in receiving and interpreting messages... while the expressive skills (speaking and writing) the language user actively expresses himself in such a way that what he intends to communicate is accomplished (46).

Woodbury suggests that the acquisition and application of these skills to specific day-to-day situations should be regarded as acquiring linguistic manners, which should be a worthwhile endeavour for any individual in a community that employs this language. Acquiring "linguistic manners" he opines, ought to be perceived as a moral accomplishment, which ought to appeal to an individual's highest instinct.

To a certain extent, the prevailing attitude of English language teachers and students to receptive skills has increased the complexities of the usage of the language. Reading, which this article is about, is a linguistic tool for the enhancement of English usage. The fact that few people read to become knowledgeable has reduced the activity to sheer drudgery. What percentage of parents who desire that their children study hard and

become successful set such example for the child to see? It is very small, nowadays.

Instructors of English language ought to be aware that they are saddled with the responsibility of making the students see the need to acquire reading skills besides other skills. Recent recommendations from the NUC underscore the implications of the decline in reading culture. The regulating body advised departments of English language in Nigerian universities to evolve strategies that would involve rigorous and prolonged reading. It also requests the design of courses that would resuscitate the reading culture as well as programmes that would facilitate speedy reading. (NUC 4th August 2005). These strategies are expected to increase student's reading rate, in order to accelerate rate of acquisition and assimilation of information.

Woodbury posits categorically that the poor attitude to literature and the way it affects the thinking in and usage of the English language appears now irreversible:

In the first place, we have to recognize that literature has lost the kind of public importance it had in Johnson's or Arnold's day. Although more people than ever are functionally literate, few are literate in the high sense of the word and those who are can't expect others to be. There is no canon – no books that everyone expects everybody to have read, or to be able to pretend to have read – that can serve as a common reference point in discussion... of social values (58).

The works of writers like Addison, Swift and Johnson to Arnold, James, Shaw, Mancken and Orwell were used to teach choice of words and expression in the 18th century. The rudiments of English language use were taught through their essays, their great grammars, and their dictionaries (48).

Walmsley's popular grammar text: *A Modern English Course for Schools* (1955) teaches the importance of studying literature in the teaching of composition, in detecting faults in composition, and in evolving a standard style of writing:

When you are reading an essay with a view to studying the writer's style or attempting an appreciation of the essay, one of the first things you can look out for is the writer's use of similes and metaphor. A few great writers, it is true, like Swift succeed very well without the aid of either. You may read several pages of *Gulliver's Travels* and find hardly a single simile or metaphor. The success of writers like Swift should at least put you on your guard against misuse of metaphors (202).

Walmsley's teaching of compositional faults in relation to the use of figures of speech mentions other notable writers and the manner in which they make use of the English language. He cites as examples John Keats's response to the poetry of Homer; Thackeray's description of Brussels before the Battle of Waterloo; George Elliot's description of Dorlecotte Mill; and Robert Louis Stevenson's experience in France, the night he camped among the pines. These writings are discussed

with such casualness that it is evident that a high school student is expected to be familiar with them. Walmsley sums up his teaching illustrations in one statement:

When it becomes a habit to read with an eye alert to find good metaphors and similes, you will not only have found a new interest in your reading, but will also have learnt something of the art of essay writing. (204)

So much can be taught when a student is made to read or is engaged in active reading. Mastering skills like clause analysis, overcoming tautology and verbosity, composition, punctuation, speech training, vocabulary development, use of figurative language, can be learnt in the course of active and consistent reading. Another striking use of literature in teaching English language in the past is exemplified in a set of questions recommended for teaching in *English Today* Book 4:

(i) Who were these mythological characters?

Cerberus	Pegasus	Achilles
Cupid	Vulcan	Theseus

(ii) Who wrote these poems?

Hiawatha	Pied Piper of Hamelin
Cargoes	John Gilpin
Canterbury Tales	The Revenge: A Ballad of the Fleet

(iii) In what books do these appear?

Man Friday	David Balfour
The Lilliputians	Mr. Micawber
John Ridd	Synod Grass
Mrs. Malaprop	Denys and Gerard

(iv) What are the Christian names of these authors?

Bunyan	Dr. Johnson	Browning
Kipling	Doyle	Westerman
Tennyson	Austen	

(v) Who publishes?

The World Classics	The Thinker's Library
Everyman Library	Penguins
Britain in Pictures	Picture Post

(vi) As what are the following famous?

...Paul Robeson	Rembrandt
Tchaikovsky	Lenin
George Eliot	Tolstoy...

(vii) Explain these terms connected with books

The spine of a book	non-fiction
...a first edition	a bibliography
a publisher's blurb	Dewey's system
a publisher's list	fly leaf
dust cover	

(viii) Explain the following newspaper terms

...a scoop	features editor
a sub editor	our own correspondent

(Ridout, 82 – 84)

These examples have been cited to show the extent to which literature was depended upon and explored in the teaching of English language in the past. Woodbury's discoveries are pointers to the fact that the declining importance of literature is tied to the "changing role of written language as a medium of public information" (59). The eighteenth century grammarians insisted that "writing, not speech, must be the model for good usage (59) since written models reach a much larger public. The advent of television as a means of communication and indeed the most popular medium of the broadest public discussion, and a means of disseminating information to a large public, has de-emphasized the significance of reading and writing. Ogundipe in her dismay laments in an article titled "What do Your Children Read?":

... the present day electronic culture of video and indoor films will not assist us to move from our orality to literacy... for it is much easier to gape at screens than read print.

Bill Newman, in his homiletic approach, shares a similar opinion:

What are some of the things pressurizing our children today? There is total media exposure. The average child at the age of sixteen will have spent 17,500 hours in front of TV and only 15,200 hours in school (69).

Another survey revealed that about 130,000 children spend more than 30 hours per week watching

television, 50,000 spend more than 40 hours and 7,000 more than 60 hours before the television. This study also suggests that there are even more addicted parents than children (Ibid.)

Evolving a new strategy for English language teaching will involve contending fiercely with the social views and attitudes and replacing them with an instructive curriculum. Instructors of English language should take the lead in this re-structuring which will invariably affect all other disciplines. It is hoped that the inculcation of the National Universities Commission's proposal into the curriculum of universities will positively re-vitalize language teaching and other teaching processes. These include:

- Lecture methods that will ensure that students read widely even outside their field of study and setting examination questions in like manner.
- Vigorous research efforts by lecturers, which will invariably culminate in the writing of scholarly essays and reports.
- Involving students in encompassing study of literary texts, prose, poetry, drama, journal articles, newspaper articles, reference materials such as encyclopedias, dictionaries of terms, and so forth.

These amongst other strategies will ameliorate the misuse to which English language has been put. The current curriculum of English language and literature lacks the basic universality that is required of a language-learning curriculum. One ought to be concerned that quite a number of the graduates of English language end up as English language teachers at one level or the other and take up jobs through which the entire public is affected, especially the print and electronic media.

Taking the curriculum for English language in The American International University in London as an example, one finds that the list of courses for the degree programme in English cuts across topics such as Ways of Reading, Literature and History in England, English in Poetry of Renaissance, Atrocity and Modernism, Greek Myths and Legends, Contemporary World Writing in English. Interestingly, most of these courses have been designed to tackle issues of modern methods of literary and cultural analysis to help students develop a capacity for independent judgement. Names of great writers and movements such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Bryon, Shelley, Keats, Thackeray, Bronte, Hardy, Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Euripides, Campbell, Woolf, Joyce, Yeats, Bond, Boccaccio, Machiavelli, etc. are not merely mentioned but studied (Richmond, 134 – 136).

Faculties in the Humanities and Education should cringe at the thought of graduating students who have not read about or known a bit about these great writers and literary traditions. It is in preparing these ones that there will be an eventual change in the thought processes and language use of citizens in Nigeria. We ought to wean ourselves from the post slavery and postcolonial theories as well as age-long excuses that narrow our literary exposure to African writing only. Contemplations on New Englishes and the place of Nigerian English ought not to be the prevailing issues. We should follow the footprints of the Achebes, Adelugbas, Ogunbas, Adedeji's, Soyinkas, to mention a few, who had sufficient understanding of world literature and perfected the art and skills of English language on the standard model.

Conclusion

It is apparent from several findings that teachers who should nurture, motivate and cultivate students have lost track of the necessary skills needed for their professional success. The existentialist theory finds fulfilment in the lives of many as the daily routine and struggle for survival replace the joy and depth of fulfilment which the pursuit of knowledge and its effective dissemination impart. The effect of shifts in teaching paradigms in Nigeria, a nation where governance has been marked by instability and misplaced priority, is the current negative attitude to learning and the poorly state of English language. This is a clarion call to all to rise up and recover a reading culture and more informed study habits.

Language learning instructors in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions should no longer rely on routine classes, doling out old notes and study materials to their students, but adopt methods that emphasize knowledge. Also, merit should be restored as a standard measure for advancement through the academic ladder, not cheating. Instructors should adopt eclectic styles and approaches in classroom presentation – it takes only a little creativity, but a decent dose of wide reading to achieve. Apart from evolving unique styles of teaching, tutors should also be more adventurous in the selection of fictional works, critical texts and journal articles. These should not only engage student's attention and interest but also nourish the mind in a positive long-lasting way. Already comatose, English in this country needs drastic palliatives to drag it back to life. One such measure, as has been pointed out, is a return to a healthy reading culture, a return to literature.

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