

Closing the Gap in the Use of English Course in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions through ESP

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Abstract: To some undergraduates, the Use of English course is a distraction from the core courses they have enrolled for at the university. To others, it is just a means of securing high grades that would boost their cumulative grade point average (CGPA). But the major aim of the Use of English course is to equip students with the proficiency they require to pursue successfully, their courses of study as well as handle effectively, academic, non-academic and professional discourses in the English language after they had left school. The written and spoken English of the majority of the undergraduates in Nigerian universities indicate that the aim is far from being achieved. This study argues that the Use of English course would become more effective if students perceive the course material as having been designed to meet their immediate academic and professional needs, and not just a continuation of the general English language they were taught in the primary and secondary schools. To this end, it proposes the incorporation of faculty based ESP courses in the second segment of the course to motivate students to acquire the level of proficiency necessary for optimal success in their academic and professional life.

Key words: ESP, Use of English, proficiency, undergraduates, cumulative grade point average

1.0 Introduction

Presently, English is the most widely spoken language in the globe. In many countries of the world, it is spoken as a first, second or foreign language. Verghese (1981, p. 1) estimates that “one person out of four on earth can be reached through English”. Media giants like the Cable News Network (CNN), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Aljazeera, Channels, NTAi, all broadcast in the English Language. English is the language of world trade, science and technology, as well as one of the major languages of deliberations at the United Nations and her many organs. Broughton et al observe that:

Besides being a major vehicle of debate at the United Nations, and the language of command for NATO, it is the official language of international aviation, and unofficially, is the first language of international sports and the pop scene... indeed more than 60 percent of the world’s radio programmes are broadcast in English and it is also the language of 70 percent of the world mail. (1980, p. 1)

Over two decades later, Onuigbo and Eyisi affirm that:

It is a medium of international science and technology, a medium of international law, diplomacy and literature. More than fifty percent of the world’s scientific literature and journals, are published in English, and one needs the knowledge of this language for access to computer technology to reach the rich wealth of world information...In the area of international sales and advertisement, English remains a universal medium even in Germany, Japan and other emerging great manufacturers of the world. It is also that language through which overwhelming percentage of the world’s mail and broadcasts are carried. For these reasons, it can be safely said that English is technically the world’s lingua franca (2009, p. 40-41).

The functional load of the English language in the modern world makes it imperative for everyone who wants to keep abreast with developments, innovations and issues of the contemporary world to achieve a high degree of proficiency in it.

The language is of no less importance in Nigeria due to her multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural character. In fact, Nigeria can only exist as one united nation in the English Language; the language of its originators. Though a colonial legacy, English

serves as a linguistic bridge which unites the disparate peoples of Nigeria. In 2000, Osakwe states that “the English language in Nigeria serves as a common medium of communication. This is an essential service because languages in Nigeria would have created communication barriers, thus making it impossible for the country to unite economically, socially and politically” (p. 144). Consequently it is her official and second language used in law courts, administration, education, commerce, legislation, and so forth. In recognition of the multilingual nature of the country and the role English has to play in her national development and national integration, the government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria promulgated the National Policy on Education (NPE) in 1977 (revised in 1981). It stipulates in section 3 (4) that “government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment and at a later stage English”. English is, thus, the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools from the upper primary school to the tertiary level. It is also a compulsory school subject at the primary and secondary levels and has the highest number of hours allotted to it in the school timetable. At the tertiary level, it is taught as Use of English, General English, Basic English or Communicative Skills by different institutions. The Use of English course is targeted at fortifying freshmen at the university with the language skills they require for a successful university education.

This researcher is of the view that this course has not fully realized this objective since many of the students who had already participated in it are still poor users of the language. A good number of them seek people to write job application for them, and where they do it themselves, they are poorly written. Consequently, she proposes a methodological restructuring of the course to ensure that students acquire the required competence to conduct meaningful spoken and written communications in their chosen fields of endeavours.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

2.1 The English Language in the Nigerian School System

Since education is the bedrock of sustainable development, adequate attention should be paid to the language through which it is acquired. English is undoubtedly learnt as a second language in Nigerian schools and the teachers themselves, undoubtedly, were trained by non native speakers of English. In essence, both the teachers and the learners learnt the language from non experts in the language, and against the background of their native languages. So, they are bound to experience interference in their English language usages. Unlike native speakers of English who underwent the natural process of acquiring their language in the linear and natural order of listening, speaking, reading and writing, Nigerian students, especially in many of the public schools are directly plunged into the learning of reading and writing, when they have not acquired the skills of listening and speaking – a lopsided arrangement. This, and myriads of other problems of lack of adequately trained personnel, poor learning conditions, lack of motivation, unavailability of educational materials, poverty, government’s unwillingly to invest on language, and so forth have bedeviled the learning of the English language in Nigerian schools. These problems have continued to deteriorate on daily basis. Consequently, there is a significant failure in the spoken and written English of the products of Nigerian schools and a steady failure in the general standard of education in the country. Scholars have established that poor knowledge of the language of instruction culminates in academic failures and subsequently, fallen standard of education (Tinonye 1991, Ewer and Lattore 1969, Umolu 1989). Many of the graduates of Nigerian universities nowadays cannot compete favourably in the use of the English language with products of Standard Six Certificate of the 1940’s and 50’s, yet the world is moving towards more scientific and technological innovations and discoveries that involve more complex and systematic discourse.

It is expected that after exposure to English language classes for twelve years in the primary and secondary schools, students entering the university would have been equipped with the right knowledge of the language for academic activities. Banjo, Brann and Evans cite the Grieve report on the level of competence expected from School Certificate Examination candidates as:

1. Ability to speak fluent and acceptable English.
2. Ability to understand simple conversational English spoken at normal speed.
3. Ability to comprehend contemporary written English of a level appropriate to the candidate’s age and required level of attainment.
4. Ability to write clear, acceptable English on such topics as prescribed. (1981, p. 12).

These have remained a far cry as products of our secondary schools, some of whom may be proficient in spoken English due to their family background, have remained poor writers of the language. Oluikpe (1981: vii) stipulates that “it is generally agreed, as it is now, that freshmen enter the university too poorly equipped to use and understand English adequately for the purposes of university work”. In 1990, Banjo reaffirms that “the communicative competence and performance with which the freshmen arrive at the university is in most cases inadequate for the purposes of university work” (2). Atanda and Jaiyeoba confirm that “the achievement of students in the subject most especially in external examination has been a source of concern to parents, teachers, educators and researchers” (2011, p. 93). They conducted an appraisal of the West African School Certificate Examinations results of Nigerian

students from 1996-2006, and discovered that the highest percentage of passes in English and other four subjects stood at 32.48 percent in 2006, and had fallen as low as 6.5 percent in 1997 (p. 94). These affirm that at the point of entry to the university, a good number of the students are not proficient enough in the English language.

2.2 The Use of English

Use of English is a compulsory English language course done by students in Nigerian institutions of higher learning. It was introduced into her educational system at the inception of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1961-62 session as one of the General Studies courses. Its sole aim is to make “the student a more affective communicator in English” (Otagburuagu 2001, p. 10). It is “designed to equip participating students with the language skills required for excellent communication in all fields of human behaviour” (Nnamdi Azikiwe University School of General Studies Handbook 2015/2016, p. 14).

From UNN, it was adopted in all institutions of higher learning in Nigeria under different titles and with each school responsible for its course code, course title, teaching methods and course materials. At the university level, which is the focus of this study, it is restricted to the first year, spanning the two semesters, but at the polytechnics it extends beyond the first year in both the Ordinary National Diploma and Higher National Diploma. In some of these institutions, it is designed to serve a remedial or developmental function or both (Maisamari 2001). In Nnamdi Azikiwe University, it is both remedial and developmental. Use of English is remedial when it is designed to remedy the lapses perceived in students’ knowledge of English, and developmental when it is designed to improve on whatever level of competence they might have already achieved at the point of entry to the institution. Where it is regarded as developmental, a credit pass in English is considered inadequate for students’ linguistic needs at that level. Whether the course is formulated as remedial or developmental, it is evident that the English language Nigerian students are taught in the primary and secondary school levels do not adequately equip them to pursue a higher degree (Oluikpe 1989, Banjo 1990). It has also been established that since students come from different social-economic backgrounds, they have quite different language needs (Olaofe 1989). Some are already proficient in spoken English, some are better in written than they are in spoken, while some know next to nothing in both spoken and written English. Since students arrive at the university with obvious deficiencies in their knowledge of the English language, these deficiencies should be tackled first before attempts are made to improve on the level of linguistic knowledge they need for a successful university education.

Thus, the Use of English course is expected to fix students’ linguistic deficiencies in the language, and at the same time expose them to the level of language proficiency they need to succeed academically and professionally. Accordingly, the language learning needs of students participating in the course range from the need for the acquisition of the general language skills to that of the acquisition of specific communication needs of the students’ discipline.

2.3 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

“Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the kind of English you need (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987, p. 9).

English for specific purposes is an approach to foreign and second language learning that gives priority to equipping learners with the proficiency they need to function in the target situation. The ESP specialist analyzes the linguistic requirements of the learners target situation through needs analysis, and design the course that will meet the specific goal. Unlike the general English course that concentrates on the rudiments of the language, ESP explores the linguistic demands of specific fields and make them the target of the language learning. Proponents of ESP maintain that the general English course has been grossly inadequate to meet the communication needs of learners who need to use the language for special purposes.

ESP developed from a number of converging trends – the need for an international language, a revolution in linguistics and a discovery in educational psychology (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). The end of the Second World War ushered in an era of massive global expansion in science, technology and trade. This orchestrated a need for an international language to unify the the people brought together by the world trend. The role fell on the English language probably because it is the language of the United States which dominated the economic world at that time. It is also the language of Britain which had the penchant for colonization and plantation of their mother tongue in their numerous colonized territories. A group of people who needed to be relevant in a world driven by technology and commerce arose and needed special knowledge of English to achieve it. So, they knew exactly why they needed English; to gain access to the wealth of scientific and technological literature available mainly in the English language; to read manuals, and to access information in journals of economic and related matters. Consequently, they sought after the language skills

that would enable them achieve their aims. Teachers of English braced for the provision of this special teaching with time limit and cost implications. They designed short termed English courses based on the communication need of learners' target situations.

At the same time the need for an international language was agog, there was an ongoing revolution in linguistics based on the findings that sociolinguistic variables such as age, sex, setting, topic, social status, level of exposure, academic standing, medium, influence language use. In essence, context plays a major role in shaping what people say and write, forcing them to speak or write in certain ways in certain situations. This implies that the English language used in the social sciences (English for Social Sciences (ESS) is significantly different from the English language used in law (English for Legal Studies (ELS) and different from the English used in business studies (English for Business Studies (EBS) and English used in science and technology (English for Science and Technology (EST), even though they all draw from the common core of the language. If different fields of studies require different kinds of English, then it becomes relevant that student should be taught the kind of English they need to conduct communications in their different fields.

Simultaneously, a discovery in educational psychology that learning becomes effective when learners are placed at the centre of the learning emerged. Hutchinson and Waters in 1987 assert that "learners were seen to have different needs and interests, which would have an important influence on their motivation to learn and therefore on the effectiveness of the learning" (8). This implies that English language course material for learners should be designed from their specific fields of studies; medical texts for medical students, engineering texts for engineering students. It is believed that designing course material with texts taken from learners discipline would motivate them and make learning effective. Meanwhile, the research conducted by Mead (1980) in a university in the Middle East showed that localizing language course material in the students' discipline cannot motivate learners who enroll in courses they are compelled by circumstances to do. It can only motivate students who are at home with the courses they have enrolled for.

ESP courses, whether they are EST, ELS, ESS, are designed to cater for the communication needs of students in their academic pursuit (English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or occupational pursuit (English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Since all those involved in ESP programme - students, teachers and sponsors, have a specific target, needs are prioritized and the course content and course material are designed to reflect these needs. Through a rigorous and systematic needs analysis, the language requirements of learners' target situation are discovered and through a diagnostic (error analysis) test their current level of achievement in the language is ascertained. What they need to perform in the target situation comprises the necessities, while the gap between the necessities and what they have already achieved is the lack. Error analysis has to reveal the lack. Once the lack has been identified, it becomes the learners learning needs and is made the focus of the course. Course material are then designed to provide instructions on them.

Needs analysis involves asking series of questions on the learners target situation (what the learner needs the language for; why they need it; where they will use it; with whom they will use it; how they will use it, and so forth) and their learning situations (for what reason(s) are the learners learning; when will the course be learnt; what are the resources available for the course and so forth (Hutchinson and Waters (1989). Responses to these questions are often gathered through interviews, questionnaires, observations in which learners, teachers of content areas and sponsors are involved.

3.0 Discussion

3.1 The Use of English Course in Nnamdi Azikiwe University

Studies have shown that Use of English has failed to accomplish its objective (Ugwuanyi and Omeje 2013, Babatunde 2009, Maisamari 1999). This failure has been attributed to factors like inadequacy of the course content; use of loan lecturers, neglect of the teaching of listening skill, use of poorly articulated course textbooks, unmanageable large class size, neglect of grammar in the course textbooks, lack of seriousness in handling the course, using only young and inexperienced lecturers to teach the course, and so forth.

In some Nigerian universities, the School of General Studies has its own staff with their offices located at the school. At Nnamdi Azikiwe University and many other Nigerian Universities the school loans lecturers from departments. Use of English in Nnamdi Azikiwe University is taught by lecturers of the Department of English Language and Literature. This does not seem to hamper the teaching of the course since both lectures and lecturers are formally monitored during the lecture hours to ensure effectiveness.

The course material currently in use is entitled Functional English for Academic Purposes volumes 1 and 2 and are used in the first and second semesters respectively. They were written by lecturers of the Department of English for the School of General Studies. So, there is no case of recommending and sale of private reading material by any of the lecturers. Below is the breakdown of the contents of the course material:

Vol 1 is divided into five parts as follows:

Part 1: Sounds

Part 2: Words (Vocabulary Development and Registers, Major parts of speech, minor parts of speech, Effective use of the Dictionary, and Idioms and clichés)

Part 3: Grammar (The English number system, concord/agreement, Tense aspect and mood, passivization, Direct and indirect speech, Phrases and clauses, The sentence, sentence types and sentence varieties, Common errors in the Use of English, and Communicative grammar)

Part 4: Literary Studies (Figurative language and literary studies, literary genres-prose)

Part 5: The library and the new media (E-library and search engines)

Vol 2 contains the following:

Part 1: Language skills (contains chapters on developing the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing)

Part 2: (writing for academic purposes (contains chapters on Note making, paragraphing and letter writing)

Part 3: Mechanics (contains chapters on punctuation and spelling)

Part 4: Technical and academic writing (contains chapters on report writing, planning of research and documentation styles)

Part 5: Appreciating literary works (contains chapters on Poetry and drama).

An English course material that contains these could be adjudged comprehensive in terms of its coverage of the rudiments of the English language, having paid attention to pronunciation, grammar, development of the four language skills, literary studies, as well as research techniques. Most of the chapters contain exercises to help students get a better grasp of the contents, though most of them do not contain answers to the questions. The chapter on sounds (the English sound system in vol 1) contains pronunciation tasks to drill students' in the pronunciation of the sounds of the RP English in the classroom. In some of the chapters, especially the ones on Vocabulary Development, Word Building and Registers (Vol 1) and Note Taking, Note making and Summary Writing (Vol 2) the authors incorporated registers (of medicine, law, politics, and technology) and passages (from engineering, broadcasting, literature, sociology and the sciences) to reflect the diversity in the students' fields of study. Incorporating all these in the English course material is to make students appreciate the relevance of English in their chosen disciplines so as to ignite their interest in learning the language. The intention is good, but lumping items from different disciplines in the same course material will rather create boredom especially if the students do not find the items from disciplines other than theirs interesting. In all, the course material can be said to be rich enough to impart in the students the required level of proficiency in the English language, but the problem is that the knowledge of English students require is a specialized kind of knowledge.

Also, the University currently pays adequate attention to the School of General Studies. For instance, class size could be said to be manageable especially as public address systems are provided in all the lecture venues, and projectors, projector screens and standby generators have been procured for all the venues to enable lecturers use power point to deliver lectures on Use of English and other General studies lectures. The lecturers are a blend of senior and junior academics who hold degrees in English and Literary studies, and they all take their turns to teach different topics to all the students. Examinations are now computer based tests (CBT) closely monitored by a group of computer experts, and results are released promptly to students barely 24 hours after the examinations through SMS. Also, students access the School of General Studies website for information and updates. These innovations have assisted students who are ready to study to make good grades, but there has not been a remarkable improvement in the spoken and written English of the participating students. This confirms the view of Olaofe (1989) that exposure to the Use of English course has not solved the problem of lack of lack of proficiency in the English language. This author is also of the view that

the problem of incompetence in the English language among Nigerian students can be solved through a thorough adjustment in the course material.

3.2 A Learner Based Use of English

The Use of English course taught in many Nigerian universities has been a general English course, but the participants have always been learners with special language needs. They need specific language skills to be able to conduct meaningful and successful communication in different areas of specializations. Students of Medicine, for instance, have distinct English language needs from students of Law and from students of Accountancy because they do different things with the language. These distinct English language needs of students are not heeded to when the course material is designed. Nobody asks them or seeks to find out from their learning situation what they actually need to learn. The course is simply designed in a vacuum, and without recourse to the participant's learning needs. It merely contains what the course designers deem necessary. The outcome is that participants are given equal exposure to English language instructions irrespective of the fact that certain language skills are better given prominence in some departments than in others. Since Maisamari (1999, p. 4) asserts that 'the language and communicative skill requirements of students vary from one area of specialization to another', the Use of English course design should be made to reflect this. Students of Law, for instance, should be made to study the content area by participating in Use of English classes. The Use of English lecturer/course designer can achieve this by collaborating with Law lecturers to gain adequate knowledge of the content area, and using the knowledge to design the course relying heavily on texts taken from the field. If students discover that paying attention to Use of English class will simultaneously improve their proficiency in the language and expose them to knowledge of Law, they will definitely be more attentive in classroom activities. They will see it as another opportunity to be learn the content area by another lecturer whose concern is to teach language using texts drawn from law. This will definitely ignite their interests in learning.

This is very essential especially as science based students see the Use of English course as essentially belonging to the Arts, and as such of little relevance to them. They aspire to make A's and B's in it, and seem not to perceive that it is actually meant to boost their communication abilities. It is therefore reasonable to redesign the course so that the language and communication needs of students from different fields of studies are adequately catered for. Once this is done, the course will become relevant, appropriate and authentic, all of which characterize an ESP course. When students become conscious of the fact that the Use of English course is instrumental to their success in the courses they have enrolled for and will be beneficial to them in their professional life afterwards, learning will be optimized.

3.3 Problems of Teaching Use of English as ESP in Nigerian Universities

ESP is an approach to language teaching and learning with its own peculiarities and technicalities. As such, teaching Use of English as an ESP course is saddled with the following problems:

- a. Lack of adequately trained ESP teachers: ESP courses can only be handled by trained personnel. Trained ESP teachers know there is a clear difference between ESP and general English course and bend down to business. They conduct an elaborate needs analysis to detect exactly what learners' learning needs are, design material that reflect them by using texts from learners' field of study, teach and evaluate both learners and the course to ensure effectiveness. Most of the Use of English lecturers in Nigerian universities are not trained to handle ESP courses and cannot dabble into it because it is not an all comers' field.
- b. Class size: Most Use of English classes in Nigerian universities are characterized by large class sizes grouped along faculty lines. As such, venues for Use of English classes are normally large halls that can accommodate students in their hundreds, not conventional classroom. Such class sizes are not ideal for ESP classes. ESP courses require small class size of not more than fifty to afford the teacher the opportunity to monitor the learners and the learning.
- c. Inadequate funding: Funding is one of the major handicap in converting Use of English courses to ESP in developing countries of Africa and Asia. Conducting needs analysis and designing of course materials, for instance, are quite costly ventures. ESP is quite costly to run and cannot be supported by poor and inadequate funding as obtainable in Nigerian universities.

4.0 Recommendations

- a. Some Use of English lecturers may be selected and sent to train as ESP specialists. At the completion of their programme, they can conduct in-service training for many others. Such an arrangement can help save cost and also ensure the same goal is achieved.

- b. Universities should build many more classrooms to help in use of English lectures.
- c. Since ESP approach to Use of English teaching and learning seems the only way to remedy the failure in spoken and written English among Nigerian undergraduates, governments and proprietors of universities in Nigeria should invest in this move to restore the glory of university education in Nigeria. A truly educated person is one who is competent in the language of instruction in schools.

5.0 Conclusion

Proficiency in spoken and written English language is the hallmark of an educated person in Nigeria. In recent years, the rate of failure associated with Use of English course in Nigerian universities calls for urgent attention. Many graduates of her universities no longer use the English language impressively, and this casts doubts on the quality of education offered in the country. Since, the extension of general English course to the university has not solved the problem of failure in the Use of English course, there is a need to make it an ESP course. If the learning needs of freshmen in their various fields of studies are ascertained and made the focus of language learning, learners would pay attention to their learning.

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