



NEED OF TEACHING ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN NIGERIAN POLYTECHNICS : A CRITICAL OUTLOOK

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Abstract

For the last few decades, the system of teaching English language course at the Diploma level, specifically in Polytechnics of Nigeria has been receiving rigorous criticism. Implementation of curriculum objectives, particularly oral communication skills part has become a highly challenging task for language teachers. Several attempts have been made to reform the system at this level, but achieved limited success in its execution. In this connection the present paper is aimed at the need of teaching oral communication skills at the Nigerian Polytechnics, factors involved in teaching/learning spoken skills, difficulties in its implementation and evaluation patterns. Further, it provides a good number of critical observations and possible suggestions for immediate action.

Keywords: *Communication, Technical Colleges, Spoken skills, Implementation, Evaluation*

Introduction:

Before the last decade, the core objective of teaching English as a second language in Nigeria was to improve the linguistic skills of Reading and Writing. In those days, the English language was a popular library language in Nigeria. Except on paper and in meetings, there was no priority to spoken skills at tertiary level in any Polytechnics of Nigeria. On the other hand, the modern developments all over the world made English language as a major lingua Franca and it is essential to develop skills like listening and speaking on the learner's side. Peter Mac Carthy rightly said the changes in the use of the English language in 1932 i.e. "Today high standards of spoken performance in English are sought [...] the climate of opinion today generally, and in educational circles in particular is moving strongly in the

direction of stressing the importance of developing the ability to handle spoken language, alongside other forms of linguistic competence". Irrespective of preferences, spoken skills in technical institutes should not be ignored today. Hence, there is an immediate need to promote a globally understandable standard of spoken English.

Though English is a mandatory subject since childhood and a technical student has been learning English for the last couple of years, the standards of language exposure are inadequate. Despite the fact that the teachers and learners are held responsible, this really made everybody to questions about the way teachers taught and even to re-examine the entire teaching and learning system. However, speaking and listening skills are not being emphasized properly in all Nigerian Polytechnics. This is one of the major problems from the teacher's side. The focus on teaching and learning good pronunciation must be laid since school level. Even the colleges have to take their responsibility in this issue as the learner spends two to four crucial years at tertiary level. Most appreciably, these colleges will train the learners to become tomorrow's teachers and other officials in various fields. Hence, it is said that colleges/technical institutes have the chief responsibility to teach oral communication skills to their students.

English Language Course in Technical Institutes

English language is being played many essential roles in technical colleges, nevertheless there are only a couple of institutes or bodies that can develop a perfect action plan to recognize the success of these roles. And these bodies are strengthening the professional courses in the national system of education. They are: National board of technical education (NBTE) and National Policy of Education (NPE) which laid emphasis on English language and other international studies. At present English as a subject is being studied in first year as both theory and laboratory and again in second year (except in some polytechnics and autonomous institutions) in all Polytechnics of Nigeria. Though NBTE, the major body which is monitoring the technical education in Nigeria has given an extensive importance to various disciplines (such as Engineering, Agriculture, Pharmacy etc....) Surprisingly, very little significance has been given to the English language which is, now, a language of communication in the entire universal set-up.

Role of Oral Communication and Complexities Involved

For successful communication, students require more than the formal ability to present well and a range of formulaic expressions. Successful

communication is context dependent and therefore embedded in its particular discourse community (Bizzell, 1989). In the process of learning English language, though it is too complex in its phonology and grammar, Nigeria speakers/learner have still great handicap in transferring their habits of mother tongue into English language. As the Brown and Yule mentioned, “Learning to talk in a foreign language is often considered one of the most difficult aspects of language teaching, for the teacher to help the students with”. In this globalized world, oral communication is becoming a key element for every technical student to survive in the educational and professional settings. It really covers a broad range of area starting from formal presentations to active participation in various teams and meetings of organizational contexts. Moreover, this is a sign of relentless and authoritative role of language and communication in the entire human world. In these days, teaching spoken English is more or less teaching pronunciation. Most of the faculty is trying to adopt native-like pronunciation which is unachievable. While executing the curriculum objectives in the classroom, there is a greater failure in implementation of task-based performances which helps for effective language use and the acquisition of a second language. And the most important difficulty is an influence of the mother tongue (MTI).

Mother Tongue Influence in Teaching and Learning Spoken English

The foremost obstruction of learning and teaching of the English language is the sound system of Nigeria (the native languages of Nigeria) which is quite dissimilar from that of English. R.K. Bansal, a researcher on the features of spoken English in Nigeria has rightly said that “Different languages have different voice quality settings, which contribute to our perception of the language’s overall auditory character [...]. This perception is usually a learner’s first conscious contact with the phonology of the second language”. Generally Nigerian languages sounds which are similar in sound are becoming an alternative to English sounds. Hence the speech of the learner is significantly spoiled with some serious errors in stress, pronunciation, rhythm etc.

Further, as English is being used as a second language in everyday’s life, so it gets some flavor of mother tongue in daily conversations. Consequently, a considerable section of both students and faculty are in the wrong notion of speaking English quite well. As a matter of fact, they are all producing the

closest corresponding sounds of their mother tongue. In the case of making a comment on a variety of English language, it is good to remember the words of Edward Sapir: “Speech is a human activity that varies without assignable limit as we pass from social group to social group because it is a purely historical heritage of the group, the product of the long continued social usage. It varies as all creative effort varies – not as consciously, perhaps, but nonetheless as truly as do the religious, the beliefs, the customs and the arts of different peoples... speech is a non-instinctive, acquired “cultural” function.

Characteristics that differentiate spoken English from speaking Nigerian local languages.

It is well known that the sounds of English (phonemes) are different from the sounds of Nigerian local languages(phonemes). And English is completely dissimilar from Nigerian languages in its phonology, vocabulary and grammar. So, sometimes there is a chance to substitute the English sounds with the sounds of their mother tongue. This affects the remaining phonological features of stress, rhythm, intonation and to some extent inflectional or derivational suffixes. Besides the above mentioned characteristics the following are some of the features which vary the English of Nigerian students. The students of Nigeria are frequently facing difficulty with the English phonological system (related to the word - accent of native English) as it is significantly varied from the phonological system of Nigerian languages.

- 1) It can be noticed that, in Nigeria stress is located consistently on the syllables of a polysyllabic word. And the prominent syllables in Nigeria are the syllables which have paired with consonants and retroflex sounds, but not with vowel sounds like in English.
- 2) Based on the ‘stress’, (but not spelling) certain words in English are found different. For example, conduct (Noun) and conduct (Verb)

Habitually, without aware of stress, intonation and accent in individual words and sentences, the students use accentual patterns of English in terms of certain tendencies rather than exact patterns. Nigerian student’s patterns of accentuation are quite different from the patterns of native English. Because in Nigerian, content words and form words are given equal prominence in connected speech. The distinct type of intonation utterances

is made by the intonation patterns of English. Besides the grammatical patterns of such utterances, it helps students to distinguish between questions, statements, commands, orders, requests etc.

Negligence on Oral Communication

As a matter of fact, the Nigerian learners are articulating English words almost correctly. Still, several factors are involved in failing to articulate well. As Mac Carthy rightly said “A student may be able to make all the English sounds quite well, how are we to know which ones to use in any given word or sentence? The trouble is, as we know, that English spelling is a most unreliable guide in this matter. If the student goes by spelling, he is bound in very many cases to make mistakes of pronunciation – mistakes involving not faulty articulations, but the use of inappropriate sounds even if they are English ones”. On the other hand, many teachers do not aware of the importance of spoken communication in each stage. Hence their English is a domestic variety of English in which there is no chance of global intelligibility.

Consequently, learners require a model of the target language to reproduce, a kind of Standard English, which is systematic in training. Teachers with such good model, play an essential role in teaching right pronunciation. The more a teacher cares his own pronunciation the better a learner cares and learn it. They will automatically improve their own pronunciation at the college level if they get a chance to listen to it regularly in the classrooms. And many teachers are well known that their spoken English is not closer to a global model. Further, an interesting thing is the teachers who trained in teaching pronunciation theoretically are getting failed in real practice. This breakdown to bridge the gap between theory and practice is probably due to the following reasons:

1. Many teachers are not good at theoretical knowledge even. Though they know nothing about phonetics and method of teaching, they could able to get impressive practical results sometimes; this is only because of applying common sense principles, due to natural teaching ability and using the method of trial and error.
2. Mistreating the theoretical knowledge, having a wrong notion that their students are extremely interested in phonetic theory.
3. Using the accepted methods while dealing with the question of pronunciation with an intention to correct their student’s errors. But

due to the lack of co-ordination between student's errors and teacher's identification they are still failing to apply such methods successfully.

These factors suggest that theoretical knowledge alone may not make one confident and capable in oral communication. It required an effective practical training. In this regard Gethin and Gunn mark have clearly written: Studying the phonetics is an academic and theoretical approach that simply does not work in practice. Even among people who have made a special study of phonetics, only a few pronounce foreign languages fairly well, and some are hopeless. Among those who have not studied phonetics, a few pronounce foreign languages very well and some are hopeless.

Evaluation of Oral Skills

Another shortfall of spoken skill is Evaluation Pattern. In most of the Technical Institutes the abilities of student's spoken skills are not being evaluated sincerely. Surprisingly, in some private institutions, though the syllabus is envisaged with useful spoken communication, evaluation is not even a part of educational assessment. Testing spoken skills has become a difficult task in most of the educational settings due to the over dependence on written tests about which they feel a motivation factor for all end results. There is no serious attempt to improve spoken communication at any point of the course. As Gilliam Brown and George Gule have rightly said, "The assessment of the spoken language has traditionally been a headache for the English teacher. Many well established tests do not even have an oral component, since grammatical accuracy and vocabulary can be assessed quite adequately; it seems in the written mode". As far as the English teachers are concerned, the evaluation/correction of spoken skill is a tough task. Even the question of spoken evaluation is rarely arises to the English teachers as they get limited occasions of listening to the learners spoken English. The present teaching methodology will not allow teachers to interact with the students in the target language. Hence today's need is as Geoffrey Broughton et al have precisely mentioned: "The teacher must understand the way sounds of English are systematically used within the sound structure of English, not in order to explain this to the students, so that he can clarify his own objectives in pronunciation teaching".

Suggestions for Immediate Action

Initially, teachers must have complete awareness on teaching spoken skills especially knowledge on language syntax, segmental and supra-segmental features of pronunciation, English grammar, gradation etc. Most immediate thing that teacher should do is adopting present technology in their classrooms. The systematic and creative use of electronic devices for listening, recorded speech by well trained professional readers and a wide range of available material in internet could make their work easier and effective in teaching both listening and speaking skills. As far as speaking skill is concerned, teacher should give the speech training to learners in small suitable groups which are valuable and useful. They must concentrate on word stress, sentence stress, pauses and intonation patterns. Such significant areas of teaching/learning English as a language of extensive communication which have been neglecting for a long time must not be continued. And the first and foremost thing is the performance of a language teacher, ability to express spoken skills, his articulation, and fluency in speaking etc. A teacher must be as perfect as a model that can encourage the learner's capacity of imitation. Hence this is high time to realize the existing situation and the things of near future, and find solutions to such terrible problems.

Conclusions

Teaching spoken communication is greatly potential, but to taste the accomplishment particularly in the field of second language instruction, one has to go long way. The success of teaching/learning English language in Nigerian Polytechnics generally involved a broad range of environments, activities and considerations. Hence it is thought that emphasis on spoken communication is imperative at National diploma level as English is a language for all round development of an individual. And it is language teacher's duty to shift the focus of English from library language to language for effective communication.

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