

ESL Curriculum in Secondary Schools in Nigeria: Issues and Challenges Towards Communicative Competence.

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Abstract

Determining the success or otherwise of the English curriculum aims, goals, objectives, methods and materials, which bother on the mass and accumulation of the four language skills [listening, speaking, reading and writing] as well as different language levels [phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, lexis and semantics] is an inevitable task. Most ESL curriculum reforms over the years have sought to strike meaningful balance between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Contrary to this expectation, communicative competence is regrettably lacking in several students that pass through the Nigerian secondary schools annually. ESL coursebooks, methods and contents are often mentioned as the most sources of the problems for unachieved ESL curriculum aims, goals and objectives at the secondary school level in Nigeria. This paper, therefore, critically looks at some issues and challenges in ESL curriculum towards achieving communicative competence and come up with a recommendation of providing enrichment materials, which newspapers and other media resources can suitably provide.

Introduction

Most curriculum reforms over the years have sought to make a thorough re-examination of the aims, goals, objectives, methods, and materials involved in the effective implementation of the English curriculum. One school of curriculum theory, in fact, states that the achieved curriculum is the effective one. However, before this feat in curriculum is achieved, there are two other perspectives from which curriculum could be looked at: prescription (intended curriculum) and practice (implemented curriculum).

According to Obanya (2002:204), “in ideal situations there would be a perfect match between what is prescribed, what is practiced, and consequently what is achieved (outcome)”. One would expect English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in the Nigerian context after nine (or twelve years for those who opt for “going straight for English”) solid years of learning English and using it for instruction at the primary and secondary levels to be academically, linguistically and communicatively competent in social contexts beyond the school system, which is the ultimate goal of the prescribed English Language curriculum at the secondary school level. The socio-linguistic realities, according to Obanya (2002:207), are however different in that English is really a restricted code language in the Nigerian setting, even in

school premises. Therefore, the challenge posed in this situation has become one of the greatest areas of concern in our educational system in recent times, particularly in secondary and tertiary institutions, which witness remarkable decline in both communicative and linguistic competence of the learners of English. The situation at the secondary school level is that in which the motivation is to *pass* English and not to *master* it. However, in the real sense of communicative situation, the ability to understand a language and to produce it in actual communication is not the same as meeting a descriptive standard which examination-oriented English curriculum emphasizes. This is because actual language use involves many varieties of knowledge, which no one has ever attempted to squeeze into textbooks or grammars.

Obanya (2002:208) says that interaction, which should be in form of multi-way and multi-media exchanges (verbal and non-verbal) in the conduct of classroom teaching and learning activities, is significantly absent. He concludes that what obtains in the classroom English language teaching and learning process, according to research and anecdotal evidence, is frontal teaching characterized by:

- a heavy reliance on the textbook as the exclusive teaching learning materials;
- reading aloud by the teacher followed by recitation and imitation reading round the class by pupils (learners);
- very little respect accorded to the primacy of oracy in language teaching and learning;
- an undue rush to finish the textbooks, a sign of also “covering the syllabus”; and
- devotion of a considerable amount of time to practicing exam –type skill

The situation that arises from the problems above is inimical to the perceived or intended curriculum outcome of ESL in Nigerian secondary schools and even beyond the academic purpose in the larger society. Curriculum materials have to be perceived for what they really are, not just textbooks because communicative skills are not acquired through textbooks but in “a natural (special) activity and it is better taught and learned in that context” (Obanya, 2002:212). The challenges of this paper therefore are in agreement with some views of Obanya (2002:213):

- building up English language skills and acquisition of communicative competence in secondary schools;
- enriching ESL learners’ performance through newspapers;
- turning the textbook into genuine curriculum materials and not as a sacrosanct text to be used for English language curriculum;

- creating an enabling environment within the school premises for the promotion of language learning: the provision of libraries and promotion of activities in and outside the school in order to reinforce the normal efforts of teachers;
- taking a more holistic view of a language as an audio-oral–syntactico-lexical complex and so paying greater attention to the teaching and examination of English language in use as opposed to the restricted code English language extracted from the larger corpus for examination purposes only.

The challenges above are identified in order to help achieve the general aims of secondary school education in Nigeria as provided in Section 14:17(1,2) of the National Policy on Education, which are:

- to prepare the students for useful living in the society; and
- to prepare them for higher education.

In order to meet the requirements above, the following goals, according to Adegbite (2005:112-113), must be put in focus:

- learners should be able to understand as well as converse effectively in spoken English in order to have successfully undergone the course; and
- learners should be able to effectively read, comprehend critically as well as engage efficiently in expressive and creative writing.

The English language curriculum and the nature of communication skills in Nigerian schools

Learners' needs are theoretically of great importance in current learner-centered approaches in teaching generally and language teaching in particular. Needs analysis is very fundamental to the planning of an effective language education programme (Richards, 1990 cited in Jibowo, 2005:174-175). While the selection and presentation of the ESL curriculum are for academic and communicative purposes, only little emphasis is placed on communicative skills in the social contexts within and outside school premises. In other words, although linguistic and communicative contents in the curriculum are intended to promote communicative competence, they are not explicitly or vigorously pursued judging by the credit passes learners obtain annually without proficiency in real communication situations.

Apart from examination purposes, curriculum issues arising from the *National Policy on Education* (NPE), among others, include appreciating language as a means of promoting social interactions, natural cohesion and preservation of culture (local languages).

Consequently, the English Curriculum does not only provide contents but also allow ESL teachers to apply necessary linguistic insights and to develop necessary activities that will help their students (ESL learners) to acquire the basic language skills. Thus, linguistic insights help ESL teachers to interpret and characterize language learning in terms of productive and receptive skills both of which are needed for linguistic competence and communicative competence.

Looking at the goals, objectives, methods and materials upon which English curriculum is planned as well as the freedom of formulating achievable classroom objectives, organization and presentation of contents and activities, and evaluation by ESL teachers, it is safe to say that the over-reliance of textbooks, whose treatment of the curriculum contents is not adequate, should be discouraged. Therefore, communicative interaction should be in form of multi-way and multi-media exchanges (verbal and non-verbal) in the classroom teaching and learning process. This claim is supported by Obanya (2002:208) who says that communicative skills are not acquired through textbooks but in “a natural (social) activity and it is better taught and learned in that context”

The English curriculum in senior secondary schools in Nigeria is poised to find out how well the school has prepared learning for life outside school. According to Banjo et al (1997:1), the questions begging for answers through WAEC designed curriculum are:

- how well the learner can understand spoken English;
- the extent to which the learner’s spoken English can be easily understood (when he / she speaks to people);
- how well the learner can comprehend what he/she reads, i.e. how much meaning he/she can draw from the sentences or passages he/she reads; and finally
- how effectively the learner can write for others to understand.

Communicative competence and methodology have been advocated by linguists like Widdowson (1986), Littlewood (1981), Brumfit (1984), Williams (1990) and others as a way out of the defects of the structural methods which had failed to make the learners of English as a second language competent enough to use the English language for academic purposes. Also, Nwoke (1987:11) posits that:

The overall aim of language teaching is to create in the learner a capacity to communicate in the target languages. Regrettably, a number of language activities in our language textbooks carried out by English language teachers and students do not conform to the true nature of communication.

In communicative methodology, attempts are made to give learners of English as a second language the natural setting for them to grapple with communicative activities (Ellis, 1984). This will enable the learners to try from the very beginning not only to understand the message produced by other speakers but also to produce their own utterances in the L2, expressing their own ideas and meaning (Marton, 1950).

Apparently, there are inadequacies in the teacher's method against the learner-oriented methods. Some of the factors responsible for these shortcomings are overcrowded classes, the pressure to cover the course contents with a limited time frame, lack of instructional materials and lack of motivation for teachers to do their best. Thus, English teachers teach English mechanically and students learn mechanically too without meaningfully involved in the generation of their own knowledge. In this way, the teaching and learning activities become teacher-centred and dominance of cognitive learning outcomes, rather than effective communicative and linguistic competence.

Most language teachers are skeptical of communicative method for the fear of inaccurate and ill-formed sentences which communicative activities either spontaneous or guided learning should inspire with propensity of acquiring communicative skills. Their fear of fossilization or pidginization of the target language (English) should not be the reason for avoiding the exploration of the use of the communicative methodology.

It is very important to get learners use the English language for the purpose of true communication as against the teacher's self-made examples and the imposition of grammatical structures and meanings abstracted from their social contexts or situations. This implies that English teachers have to plan purposeful activities (lessons with enrichment activities), which will allow learners to be actively involved in the learning activities taking place in the classroom. In view of this, a dozen of language education experts say that task-based learning does not assume that language should be atomized and practiced in small segments, but that language is learnt when learners are placed in a position where they have to use any or all of the linguistic resources available to them in order to achieve meaningful communication. Olabisi (2002:30-

38) therefore observes that the teaching of the English language does not provide enough opportunities for the learners to develop communication skills.

Most of the teachers in secondary schools are more concerned with disseminating facts, information and principles on how to do this or that in language classroom than teaching language skills or allowing students to do and learn, practice and engage in language activities aimed at acquiring communicative skills or competence.

Over-reliance on ESL course books in the English language curriculum

The over-reliance on ESL course books in teaching and learning situations in Nigerian secondary schools is clearly stated, according to Ohia and Adeosun (2002:217), as follows:

It is not uncommon among teachers to get into the class and ask the students to ‘open to pageof...text and rely entirely on the text throughout the duration of the lesson.

Apart from over-reliance, ESL coursebooks also exhibit a characteristic of over-emphasis and superiority of a particular teaching method over the other(s), forgetting, according to language experts, that there is no best way of learning and that learners learn best when different learning methods and approaches/strategies are used. ESL course book writers should shed their preference to particular method(s) and employ what Rivers (1964) calls *informed eclecticism*, which is a combination of teaching methods/approaches designed to strike a balance between linguistic competence and communicative competence. Teachers should remember that language production and comprehension are normally carried out in varieties of knowledge: conscious knowledge acquired from other people, from books, mass media, at school etc, and tacit knowledge, which is unconscious and cannot normally be verbalized but forms the basis of many skills, including verbal ones (Klein, 1986:40-41). According to him, much of our language proficiency is of tacit form (i.e. the rules that define word order in a sentence, or the use of the article in English). He further says that “this tacit knowledge can under certain circumstances be made conscious, and many textbooks, including the grammars used in language teaching do just this”. In our use of language however, non-verbal knowledge is also available and this includes pictures, charts, mass media, illustrations, diagrams etc. Also, the grammatical or linguistic knowledge of phonemes, morphology, syntax, lexis, and semantics as well as the communicative knowledge of the speaker, situation and reference or social context of usage are very important to the understanding, response and communicative skills. The above should form

the core and supplementary contents of the English curriculum, taking into consideration the goals, objectives, needs and interests, methods and instructional materials in implementing ESL curriculum in secondary schools.

Ndahi (1977) writing on suitability of textbooks in meeting the dictates of English curriculum says that a lot of textbooks in use are poorly organized. According to her, materials to be taught are not usually arranged in order of difficulty and topics grouped together are unrelated and materials are somehow irrelevant to the communicative needs, interests and environment of learners.

The *National Policy on Education* (NPE, 1981) also says:

Most of our textbooks at present are unsuitable, inadequate or expensive. New curricular call for appropriate textbooks and reference books.

In spite of the centrality of textbooks in the teaching and learning activities, Johnson, C.H. cited by Aboderin (1987) says that teachers should not enslave themselves to particular textbooks or a set of materials. He further says that teachers must understand and use the freedom that they have to adapt and to supplement the materials to conform to the needs and interests of the learners.

In the classroom situations, teachers, not only do not heed to the pedagogical advice and their professional training but also ignore the inadequacy of the English syllabus and unsuitable presentation of contents in the English course- books. Whatever goes on in the classroom with the English course books, Oyetunji's (1971) observation that it is extremely difficult to get a book that is satisfactory in most aspects of teaching English still holds today. According to Ohia and Adeosun (2002:217), "even the good textbooks on modern English methodology do not contain sample lessons to illustrate in concrete form, the modern views on techniques in language teaching". Williams (1990) also notes that no single textbook can equally satisfy the needs of a class of students from varied language backgrounds and this makes the preparation of textbooks and syllabus materials a special kind of problem in a multilingual situation where both English and mother tongues are languages of instructions.

Ubahakwe (1979) describes as pedagogically defective the over-reliance on the authority of the printed text where language texts are not properly examined, analyzed and evaluated before selection for use in the classroom. Allen (1984), therefore, posits that a language classroom must have at its base a consideration of what learners need to learn, their interests and

the goals of the target language in order to bring the best out of the learners' linguistic tendencies. The affective and intellectual resources of learners are necessary in language teaching. ESL teachers should, therefore, endeavour to exploit these resources and link them to the experience of learners. This pedagogical enrichment principle is necessary for the selection of and presentation of English language contents and classroom activities, which must be learner-centred. Ohia and Adeosun (2002:226) state that:

A single coursebook cannot meet the needs of learners from varied language backgrounds. Since no single coursebook can equally satisfy the needs of a class of learners... students should be exposed to as many texts as possible.

Every stakeholder in language teaching, especially English, who realizes the potentialities of a language (English) in contributing to the growth of individuals and the nation should realize that the attainment of the educational goals of ESL in Nigeria must be a paramount concern to him or her. This is because the status of English in Nigeria is not controversial, hence teachers and coursebook writers should endeavour to create the enabling resourceful and effective contents and adequate exercises as well as appropriate methods aimed at developing the learners beyond school. This challenge requires the use of, according to Obanya (2002:208), "multi-way and multi-media exchanges [verbal and non-verbal] between teacher and learners as well as among learners in the conduct of classroom lessons". Also, the lessons and learning even outside the classroom must be activity-based.

Recommendation of enrichment materials (newspapers/magazines) as supplementary texts to textbooks

Discussions and debates often characterize the low level of communicative skills of Nigerian students across levels of our educational system. Many scholars, linguists and curriculum planners have identified a lot of factors responsible for these ugly and disappointing situations despite the huge investment on education by individuals, parents, government and groups or societies. Adekunle (1970:274) attributes this unabated problem to "the absence of a well-defined objective, the dearth of trained language teachers, the lack of adequate teaching materials and the use of strangely unrealistic syllabuses and testing devices". His findings are based essentially on examination-oriented English language curriculum, which has

communicative abilities or potentialities as undertones in order to make students functional beyond the academic purposes.

Ajayi (2002:229) adds to the variables of the poor performance in English among the secondary school students, the seeming absence of enrichment materials in the schools nowadays. This claim reinforces Allen's (1984) view that teachers and language coursebooks must look beyond the confines of the classroom into the outer worlds, focusing attention on the use which an individual will make of what he/she has learned in a situation which is not primarily a learning situation. Therefore, language teaching experts in recent times subscribe to the selection of English language curriculum contents, teaching approaches and methods that agree with the learners' linguistic, cultural and geographical environment, their needs and interests as well as the goals of the target language in order to inspire, promote and bring out the learners' linguistic and communicative tendencies. One of the problems facing the communicative competence in our secondary schools today is the teachers' inability to improvise the necessary enrichment materials that can stimulate the desired intellectual development and communicative competence in the English language.

In the 60s and 70s many secondary schools had native-speakers of English as teachers who taught, encouraged and developed communicative tendencies in learners and even created an enabling English language speaking environment through discipline and hard work in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This development was supported with libraries stocked with good reading materials. Ajayi (2002:229) says:

At present, however, many schools do not have libraries, and those who have could not afford the high cost of novels and even where novels are available, they are too few to cope with the ever-increasing student enrolment due to population explosion in school. Sadly, some of the most fascinating teaching materials such as the newspapers have largely been ignored in the teaching and learning in secondary schools.

When we talk of enrichment materials and activities, we mean initiatives either recommended or provided or improvised to support and facilitate robust academic activities in order to achieve desirable educational goals or objectives even beyond school. Such enrichment materials or activities include supplementary textbooks and other instructional materials such as tape-reorder, video tape, camera, pictures, charts, diagrams, discussions, debates, excursions, radio, resource persons, newspapers, magazines, maps, globes, projectors, films etc.

Ajayi (2002:230) says:

More than any other sources, the newspaper is highly rich in terms of information, covering local, national and international affairs, up-to-date information on political, health, music, sports, entertainment, arts, fashion, law, economics, medicine, science and technology.

Language teaching materials draw their contents from many academic disciplines and utilize teaching strategies which reflect philosophies of various schools of thought on the nature of language learning such as highlighted by Ajayi (although the list is not exhausted). In terms of contents, English language curriculum provides for language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is expected to have materials on speech, language structures, reading comprehension, language and vocabulary development and composition. Garrett (1993:4) notes:

Newspapers are among the most relevant texts available for the classroom. Students like them because they can always find something they can care about inside the newspaper.

Ajayi (2002:230) opines that:

The newspaper can be a great language enrichment material, particularly in ESL writing/reading classroom. For instance, it is easy to adopt, it can be marked, cut, pasted, coloured and discarded easily and new issues appear daily. Finally, photographs, paintings, drawings, graphics, maps, cartoons and sketches serve as comprehension aids because they provide context clues working with the newspaper.

Emphasizing the importance of newspapers/magazines as enrichment materials in schools, Roe et al cited in Umoh (1991:84) say that: “Newspapers and magazines are excellent media for reading instruction ... they treat a wide variety of subject matters. They are interesting to students who have been turned off by formal reading materials”

Umoh (1991), therefore, provides differences between a novel (or English textbook) and a newspaper/magazine in terms of volume cost, production, readership, care and handling and contents. It is clearly indicated that the cost of newspapers and magazines is lower than novels or English textbooks. Also, while the production of textbooks is at one time or reproduced (reprinted) after sometimes, newspapers and magazines are produced daily, weekly or monthly. In terms of utilization or readership, newspapers and magazines satisfy the academic and life beyond school purposes. Students, semi-literate people and workers provide readership for these

printed media while students, educated people and very few workers read textbooks. Ajayi (2002: 230) says that:

The contents of the newspaper/magazine are always current (textbooks treat modified events in society). As a result of this currency, students develop language and academic skills within a real and relevant content. Due also to its immediacy, students easily relate what they read in the newspaper with what goes on in the society. In this way, the content of learning is within the learner's experience. This invariably motivates and develops students' interest.

Although newspapers and magazines are carelessly handled once read, the experiences gained could be communicatively permanent and rewarding. The carefulness on handling textbooks makes them to be locked in shelves and kept out of reach of children and visitors. When it comes to the educational advantages and communication skills, newspapers can function as effective language enrichment materials. They can be used to teach essay and letter writing, reading comprehension, lexis and structures, vocabulary development, and above all, communicative skills (oracy and literacy). In fact, they provide for activity-based teaching and learning situations, self-instruction, and freedom and learner-centeredness. These enrichment materials will expose learners to intensive reading of letters to the editor, interviews, feature articles, editorial comments and news stories. All these desks cover all disciplines in our society and provide real life situations of acquiring and using English as a communication tool effectively. However, newspapers and magazines are not to be used as substitutes to textbooks, they are recommended for enrichment materials in the ESL curriculum in the secondary schools in Nigeria. Therefore, teachers should be careful in the use of them.

It is recommended that a critical re-appraisal of the curriculum should be done, especially in the aspects of contents, textbooks and methodology of achieving communicative competence, which the current English curriculum has failed to achieve. Therefore, enrichment materials that will not necessarily expand or bring about curriculum overload are suggested in form of newspapers/magazines. It is the position of this paper that communicative skills are better achieved in a natural (social) setting and that English is better taught and learned in that context as opposed to the over-reliance and centrality of textbooks. Therefore, eclectic teaching methods anchored on multi-media exchanges [verbal and non-verbal] should replace the teacher and textbook-centredness. Newspapers/magazines provide current reading contents in editorial

comments, news reports, feature articles, sports, science and technology, law, medicine, education, music, and art etc.

In fact they treat a wide variety of subject matters that are interesting to students who have been bored with formal and routine textbook reading materials. If well-utilized, newspapers/magazines will provide learning activities that will engineer learning activities, which will take care of the interests, needs and familiar environmental experiences of the learners in order to make educational aims, goals and curriculum objectives achievable even beyond the school.

Therefore, the following should be attended to:

- (i) The present situation at the secondary level where reading is perceived as the core of the school curriculum (see Bright and MicGregor, 1982) should be reviewed.
- (ii) Also, the language skill most tested in terms of papers 1-3 or test formats is reading. This situation requires a critical re-examination by curriculum planners, language experts, and teachers and ministry of education:

Paper I: Essay, comprehension and Summary

Paper II: Lexis and structure and grammar and guided rational close passages.

Paper III: Test of orals: pronunciation –segmentals and suprasegmentals

- (iii) Curriculum designers should take advantage of the inherent potentials of newspapers in preparing teaching materials for reading comprehension, registers, language structures composition (essay and letter writing) and vocabulary development at the secondary school level.
- (iv) Textbooks can be designed in such a way that certain features of the newspapers are integrated in the learning activities in the classroom
- (v) Secondary schools should be provided with functional libraries or e-libraries with current information.
- (vi) A relatively recent language learning method called “whole language” should be adopted in teaching and learning classroom situations by teachers
- (vii) Learners’ interests, needs, cultural and environmental factors should be considered in the experiences organized or exposed to students

Conclusion

In real communication situation, language is naturally acquired in its social contexts through interaction in the family and larger society. But in schools, language is acquired essentially through a lot of reading. In fact, reading occupies a central position in language learning at school. As important as reading is, learners do not normally read and when they do, they do not understand in most cases. In fact, linguistic competence is learnt in school through reading more than communicative skills and since there is a link between linguistic competence and communicative competence, learners often fall short of communicative competence. Therefore, there is a big problem in the school system. Curriculum planners, teachers, and linguists, therefore, seek to re-examine the aims, goals, objectives, methods and learning materials (contents and instructional materials) in order to make the curriculum outcome a reality.

This paper is also aimed at these variables with the main thrust of providing solutions to the seeming unfulfilled English language curriculum in terms of achieving communication goal at the secondary schools level in Nigeria.

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