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DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH INDEPENDENT ENGLISH PHONOLOGY COURSES IN THE GENERAL STUDIES' PROGRAMME OF TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS.

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ABSTRACT:

Phonology features prominently in Nigerian primary and secondary school's English language curricula and in the training programmes of the Departments of English and Linguistics in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Due to some obstacles, this design has become inadequate for the development of effective oral communication skills in Nigerian students, especially undergraduates. Considering this problem, the paper sees the establishment of a mandatory and independent English phonology courses in the General Studies programmes of tertiary institutions as a practical panacea, and means of sustaining the teaching and development of oral communication skills in Nigeria. The paper critically analyzes the reasons for the recommendation and suggests strategies that will ensure workability and success of the programme.

INTRODUCTION

The phonology of the English language had, for some time, received some attention in Nigerian schools following the realization that methodical study of English phonology is indispensable for effective oral communication in English. Prior to 1988, oral English was not formally taught in primary schools. In the secondary schools it was taught as an alternative subject to written English. Then, oral English was dreaded by students and virtually none offered to study it in the few schools that had teachers to teach it.

Apart from the fear of failing in the subject in the School Certificate examinations, there were, obviously, other factors that militated against the formal teaching and learning of oral English in schools before 1988. Suffice it to say here that those factors resulted from the policy makers' ignorance of the place of phonology in the teaching and learning of a second language in a second language environment. This observation is not intended to give the impression that all the students and other educated Nigerians spoke unintelligible English then; rather, the students and the educated Nigerians unconsciously limited the speech habits of their teachers, who were native speakers of English, or were directly taught by the native speakers or taught by those who were themselves taught by the native speakers of English. Such a situation strongly indicates the possibility of imbibing oral English skills in a second language environment without formal classroom instruction. But this can only be very possible in an environment where parents, teachers and other adults have acquired the proper oral skills.

Despite the fact that the first-generation learned Nigerians spoke intelligible English, it became increasingly evident in the 70s that students, school leavers and undergraduates' oral performance in English was steadily degenerating. This accounted for the redesigning of the primary and secondary schools' English Curriculum in order to incorporate phonology. With the incorporation, oral English education became compulsory in both primary and secondary schools, and consequently formed an integral part of all terminal examinations.

To make the new curriculum practicable, the Test Development Division of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) organized a nationwide three-day training course for English language teachers and examiners from March 24 to 26, 1988. The WAEC offered explanations as to why the training course was organized and stated, among other things, that:

The aim of this course is to acquaint participants... with the techniques of teaching as well as testing oral English...
One of the basic assumptions for integrating oral English into the English

language test is that teachers will now have to teach the oral aspects of the language that have for long seemed to have been neglected mainly because oral English has been an optional paper in GCE O/Level examination syllabus.

This training course and others that followed it, including the new English language syllabus, became a great impetus to the teaching and learning of oral English, especially in secondary schools.

The oral English component of the syllabus encompasses all the aspects of phonology. They include the articulation and pronunciation of sounds and words, word and sentence stress, rhythm and intonation. Consequently, new oral English texts were revised to accommodate the oral component. All this brought oral English to the fore in schools, including primary schools where, at least it received some mention and was taught by the few teachers that had slight knowledge of it.

In tertiary institutions, oral English is studied but it is the exclusive reserve of only the students who are admitted to study the English language, linguistics, literature-in-English and other language related courses. At this level, the students are expected to gain indepth knowledge of English phonology by correcting, strengthening, and building upon the oral English skills acquired at the secondary school level. The rest of the students are supposed to remedy their deficiency in oral English in the Use of English course of the General Studies' programme.

The foregoing review show that some undeniably practical steps have been taken towards inculcating oral communication skills in Nigerian students at all levels of education. The singular action of making it a mandatory paper in the Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations makes its teaching and learning absolutely necessary and obligatory. However, a cursory review of the phonology curriculum and its implementation without an in-depth analysis might hoodwink one into believing that oral English education is thriving. On the contrary, a thorough examination will show that the whole design is rapidly collapsing and has become inadequate and ineffective for the development of oral communication skills in Nigerian students, especially undergraduates. As a result, there is the need to launch a radical remedial operation through the expansion of the teaching and learning of oral English in tertiary institutions. One effective way of effecting the expansion is by creating independent and compulsory oral English courses in the General Studies' programme of tertiary institutions in the country.

The Need for Independent Oral English Courses in the General Studies Programme

It is very necessary to redesign the Use of English Course in the General Studies' programme of tertiary institutions in order to accommodate independent courses in phonology. Some specific and pertinent considerations account for this proposal and they are examined below.

1. The Role of Oral English Skills in Oral Communication

The fundamental consideration upon which the proposal rests is that the knowledge of oral English is steadily dwindling among undergraduates and graduates of Nigerian Universities and Polytechnics, who are expected to man various sectors of the economy in future and interact with the rest of the world as private citizens or government officials. The importance of oral skills in this regard can never be stressed enough. It is obvious that diplomats and ministers for the purpose of interpersonal communication. Rather, they depend on speech whose effectiveness depends on proper articulation of sounds, on the stress patterns of words and sentences, and on the rhythm and intonation of sequences of utterance. It is only stress and intonation that can convey the attitudes and emotions of the speaker; written words cannot.

Considering the importance of oral skills, Mackey (1965: 235) asserts that "understanding the spoken forms" of a language "involves the recognition of the different relevant sounds of the language". This capacity to recognize the

relevant sounds of a language is not limited to language students and experts alone, as some linguistically weak-minded people know the mechanism of human speech. Halliday and others (1964: 57) succinctly summarize the importance of speech:

Speech events are real events of vital importance to society, ... to the communicator, the engineer, the psychologist, the speech therapist and the dentist, to say nothing of the descriptive linguist and many others, all need to be able to understand, for their own purposes, how the human speech works.

So, every Nigerian undergraduate needs to know and master, to a good extent, the sound system of English, since it is the tool he requires to interact well with other educated Nigerians and the rest of the educated world. To shun it deliberately will be detrimental to the education system. In a second language situation like ours, there is no real and better substitute to learning it consciously. Even the indigenous speakers too study it in schools so as to replace local speech peculiarities with the educated and standard accent that ensures mutual intelligibility. In view of the importance of oral communication, every effort should be made to acquire the skills.

This extra effort is not only desirable because of the importance of oral skills in communication but also because of the inherent difficulty in acquiring the skills in a second language environment, where interference problem, the learners' age and other problems adversely impinge upon the progress of learners. Continuous hard work is, therefore, indispensable in this regard. A professor of phonetics in the University of London, J.D. O'Connor (1980:3) rightly warns that it will be tantamount to "talking rubbish" for anyone to say that good pronunciation can be got without hard work, unless one happens to be "one of the very small number of lucky people to whom pronunciation comes fairly easily". The professor assures those who work hard at it that they "can improve even if they have no great talent for language". The independent phonology courses will, first, make the undergraduates realize the importance of oral communication skills and, secondly, provide them with the opportunity to work hard in order to improve their oral skills.

2. *The Present State of Oral English in the Schools*

The present situation of the study of oral English in Nigerian schools is not satisfactory. The great expectations and hope of rapid improvement in the knowledge of oral English that came in the wake of the incorporation of the oral skills into the primary and secondary school's English language curriculum have almost disappeared into the spectacle of nothingness. Some factors are responsible for this.

In the primary schools, the curriculum provisions for oral English have not been significantly implemented, especially in the rural school where next to nothing has been done so far. The main constraint to the implementation is the lack of competent teachers who can impart the oral skills to the pupils. As a result of poor training, the teachers are appallingly poor in English, and, therefore, teach their lessons in the vernacular of the local community in which their schools are situated. The use of the vernacular appears justified on the grounds that the National Policy on Education (1982) recommends its use in the first three years of a child's primary education. But it is regrettable that such a recommendation should be made; it completely negates the existence of a sensitive period for language acquisition, a period that spans from one to about five years, a period when a child can easily learn more than three languages simultaneously, if he is equally and adequately exposed to them. In recognition of this crucial stage of pronunciation acquisition, Bright and McGregor (1970:186) strongly assert that "work on the improvement of phonetic discrimination at secondary level comes at a wrong time and can be disappointing in terms of result". They maintain that the "proper place to work intensively on the improvement of pronunciation is the primary school and the training college". The

summary of the situation is that the greater majority of the pupils do not receive any systematic oral English teaching, and this has led to the pupils' ignorance of, and lack of interest in, good pronunciation, which they carry over to the secondary school.

The situation in the secondary schools is not better. Oral English no longer receives the same serious and enthusiastic attention that embraced it when it became compulsory in 1988. The momentum could not be sustained. The West African Examination Council (WAEC) is by and large to blame for it because it changed its pattern of setting oral English examination questions in an attempt to reduce the cost of organizing its examinations. When the oral test was first introduced in 1988, it had two parts: Listening comprehension test, tapes were used and the students' ability to recognize words and sentences, determine meaning from tone and intonation and from sentence stress was tested. In the oral production aspect, the students' ability to articulate sounds and pronounce words correctly, use intonation patterns aptly, stress sentences accurately, and read and speak fluently was tested. That test design virtually eliminated malpractice and really made teachers and students work hard. The present test design has no room for oral production nor for listening comprehension. Its major thrust is the recognition of the English phonetic alphabet and sounds contained in written words. The test can be described as a test of recognition of sound symbols. Thus, teachers have shifted emphasis far away from oral production and listening comprehension and they now teach the aspects that are set in examinations.

Apart from the problem of the new testing system in the secondary school, oral English education in Nigeria has other perennial problems. Such problems as were identified by Nwokolo and Okebalama (1989), include poor attitude of teachers towards oral English, teachers' ignorance of the proper methods of teaching oral English, and the lack of instructional materials. At present, those problems, including inadequate number of competent English teachers, are still persisting and appear to be worsening.

In view of the declining zeal and interest in oral English education in schools, the need for a radical rescue operation because inevitable in order to save the future leaders from the embarrassments that can result from poor oral communication.

3. *The Largeness of the Existing Use of English Courses*

A smart objection to this proposal to redesign the use of English courses would seek justification in the fact that oral communication skills are usually a part of the content of the Use of English courses in tertiary institutions. If that is the case, one could argue, it would be unnecessary trying to fashion independent phonology courses out of the existing Use of English courses.

A simple response to such an argument is that the oral English component of the Use of English courses in the General Studies' programme constitutes only a topic out of scores of others, which are crammed into a semester of about 14 weeks only. In this arrangement, it is usual to gloss over the oral aspect and concentrate on syntax, composition and other study skills. Time is never enough for intensive and extensive handling of even the preferred topics. Considering the importance of effective oral communication vis-a-vis the sad situation in our schools, it is improper for anyone to reconcile themselves to the status quo or to think that enough is being done. If oral English is taught independently, there will be enough time to expose the whole length and breadth of the course; there will be time too for adequate laboratory practice without which no real progress can be made in the study of oral communication skills. By this means the students' deficiency will be remedied and they will better appreciate English phonology.

4. *Adverse Influence of Teachers*

One must not have the impression that good pronunciation can be acquired by listening to, and practising with, only a specialist in phonetics and phonology. There are a number of lecturers in our universities whose pronunciation is eminently impeccable, even though they are not language specialists. The possible explanation is that those lecturers were taught by the native speakers of the language, or that they were taught by those who were taught by the native speakers, or that they once lived among the native speakers of the language. Such lecturers indirectly help to improve their students' oral communication skills.

If all the lecturers or the majority of them in our universities had sound English pronunciation, the problem of poor oral communication skills would not be as acute as it is presently. It is sad that even those lecturers who acquired good pronunciation informally are gradually but surely phasing out of the university classroom as a result of retirement

or appointment to higher administrative positions in the country. There is lean hope of replacement. Nowadays opportunities for studying among the native speaker of English very rarely exist. Consequently, the Nigerian university system is beginning to produce lecturers and professors who are trained in the so-called Nigerian English, that is, a type of English that is a bit substandard. It is these Nigerian English - made lecturers that adversely influence their students' pronunciation.

The work done by Bright and McGregor (1970:6) emphasizes the fact that other teachers, apart from those of English, represent a crucial factor in the acquisition of good pronunciation. They observe that as soon as students "spot that correctness and fluency in speech and writing matter only to the English teacher" and that other teachers do not care about grammar and pronunciation, "they will consciously practise correct language habits only" in English classes, and in a situation like this, they say, "the English teacher is practically wasting his time and theirs". It is, therefore, hoped that the independent courses in English phonology, made mandatory to all students, and studied intensively, will minimize the adverse effect of some lecturers' pronunciation on the students' and make the students appreciate and desire good pronunciation.

5. *Oral Communication Skills and National Development*

The immediate objective for advocating the expansion of the study and scope of oral English in the General Studies' programme of tertiary institutions is basically to equip Nigeria graduates, who will man the different sectors of the economy and occupy high positions of responsibility in future, with effective oral communication skills. These skills will not only facilitate communication among educated Nigerians, irrespective of ethnolinguistic groupings, and between educated Nigerians and their counterparts in the rest of the world, but will ultimately result in national development is a step towards realizing the connection.

The concept of development is, more or less, the concept of improvement, advancement and expansion. It refers to progressive positive change. It is, as Enuesike (1998: 55) puts it "a concept of change for the better". National development, according to Chukwumerije (1988: 76), is "a composite term that encompasses many variables: advancement in educational level, socio-economic status, media exposure, agricultural innovations, acquisition of technical know-how, mass production and culture awareness." It also encompasses the building or reputable national image and the presentation of such image to the world.

How then does the knowledge of oral English contribute to national development? It is a fact that communication, especially oral communication, is the foundation of all human development. It should be regarded as a leaven of all development without which there will be lack of personal and development. The variety of English spoken in Nigeria has been responsible for the continued existence of the country and for all the advancements made in different sectors of the economy. Granted that this variety enables educated Nigerians to understand one another, but the level of development already attained in the country could not have been possible without the effective interaction between Nigerian leaders and the rest of the world.

To ensure sustained development, the propective leaders need to be trained in the art of effective oral communication, knowing full well that English is steadily and inevitably assuming a global tongue. If the leaders could communicate with their counterparts all over the world, they would build bridges of mutual trust and understanding between Nigeria and other parts of the world. All this would result in increased foreign investment and great respect for the country. The country will be the case when the leaders communicate poorly. In fact, an incomprehensible speech or a speech full of mispronounced words and wrong intonation patterns sours the mind of the audience, presents the speaker in a bad light and instills into the speaker a feeling of inferiority complex. Therefore, there is no justification whatsoever for any Nigerian leader to present a poor speech in any international forum where his counterparts from English -as-a-second-language background have presented impressive speeches.

Another way in which oral English contributes to national development is by promoting intellectual development. The distinct forty-four sounds of English, the stress and intonation patterns, the tone and rhythm of the language are abstract and intricately related elements. The ability to master, manipulate and co-ordinate them intelligibly is a sure sign of high intellectual ability. The conscious process of internalizing the phonological system stimulates and enlarges

the cognitive faculty of the learner. All modern languages have this capacity to stimulate the intellect, and this also accounts for their inclusion in the school curriculum all over the world. So, an undergraduate who undergoes the rigours of imbibing the sound system of English will also have his intellectual ability increased by leaps and bounds. With sound and high-level intellect, the undergraduate leaves the university well-equipped to take up relevant positions in several sectors of the economy.

RECOMMENDED PHONOLOGY COURSES AND REQUIREMENTS

In order to achieve good results, there should be two oral English courses. The first should be devoted to the teaching of the forty-four sounds of English. Students should be taught to recognize and articulate these sounds in word and sentence contexts. To make the courses more beneficial to students, teachers should catalogue the general words which are often mispronounced, including technical words in the students' area of specialization, and teach the correct pronunciation of these words. The cataloguing of the technical words should be comprehensive. Transcription should be widely practised, for it is in the mastery of transcription that the possibility of self-instruction in word pronunciation lies. The second course should concentrate on word and sentence stress, phrasing, rhythm and intonation. These elements, as Hill and Dobbyn (1979: 40) rightly point out, are highly important for making a person's English intelligible and are more important than accurate pronunciation of vowels and consonants". The objective here should be fluency and the recognition of attitudes. Much laboratory work is indeed required for results to be achieved.'

Two other vital requirements needed for success, apart from hard work, are trained staff and instructional materials. Undoubtedly, more staff will be needed for effective tutorials and for close monitoring of the students progress in the practical. The success of instruction in these courses will depend largely on the adequacy and competence of the staff. As for instructional materials, a language laboratory should be provided.

"Basically, the language laboratory is a separate or special room equipped with mechanical and electronic devices by means of which the students can hear and repeat recorded material in the foreign language (Huebena, 1960). Its importance and advantages in second and foreign language learning cannot be stressed enough. Vernon (1973: 22) maintains that "the learner must be given the opportunity to hear the authentic foreign speech" In a situation "where a native speaker is not available". He doubts the possibility of any teacher producing "genuine foreign language intonation patterns and speech habits in the stultifying conditions" in the classrooms. However, it should be pointed out that the laboratory is a mere tool, though essential, whose effectiveness depends on the "teachers' attitude, knowledge, skill and imagination" (Vernon 1973: 64).

The type of laboratory to be installed should be a broadcast language laboratory which has booths with individual tape decks. This means that there should be a console from which the teacher will broadcast lectures to the students in the booths; and that the booths should also be fully equipped to enable students to engage in private study after lectures, without recourse to the console. This type of laboratory appears to be the most suitable in our circumstance. The laboratory should have the capacity to accommodate between thirty and fifty students at a time.

CONCLUSION

It is baffling that most educated Nigerians only cringe and blush when they notice syntactic errors in speeches but remain placid when grave violence is done to the authentic sound system of English, including the type spoken in West Africa, are recognized and appreciated, but it is the standard variety that all educated people use in international fora. The future leaders of the nation must correct the local speech peculiarities and make them conform to the generally acceptable standard variety. To relapse into a standard that lacks wide acceptability can surely serve local communication needs, but it is an ugly sign of linguistic laziness and intellectual mediocrity. Young Nigerians can learn any of the standards that enjoy wide acceptability - the British and American national standards - if they are properly and adequately exposed to any of them.

Since the initial momentum gained in 1988 in the study of oral English is dangerously waning, it is imperative to initiate fresh strategies in order to stem the trend and improve oral English education. This will result in effective

interaction between Nigeria and the educated global community, which will ultimately lead to sustained national development. The most strategic measure now is to make the oral English courses should not be to produce graduates who will speak English exactly like the English men (that is impossible in second language environment with adult learners) but the attainment of articulateness and intelligibility, which will ensure that other speakers of English all over the world will understand them without difficulty. This goal is attainable if effective study materials and adequate and trained manpower are provided.

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