

Full Length Research

Elucidation of the importance of the English Language in Post-Independence Nigeria

***Mr. Ifediora Okiche and ¹Dr. Francis Njoku**

*Department of Languages and Linguistics, Arthur Jarvis University, Akpabuyo, Cross River.

E-mail: diora4life@gmail.com (Corresponding author)

¹National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

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The paper examines the use of the English language in Post-Independence Nigeria and further illuminates the importance of the English language in various sectors and government establishments. Finally, the English language has been the major unifying form of communication among the inhabitants of multi-ethnic Nigeria and has also significantly contributed to an increase in employment in the country.

Keywords: English Language, Nigeria, Unity, Communication

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INTRODUCTION

The English Language has contributed to bridging communication gaps and unifying Nigeria. Almost all the important sectors of the Nigerian society make use of the English language and they include schools, offices, various arms of government and other institutions. Nigeria should strive to continue to invest massively in English language as a result of numerous employment opportunities. English is indeed an important international language and it is spoken by about 1.75 billion people. It is indeed one of the languages of science, diplomacy and business. In addition, the activities of Christian missionaries especially from England though their conversion of Africans in Nigeria helped in the spread of the English language rapidly. Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012) did mention in an earlier study that "The (British) merchants taught the middle men at the coastlines the English language so that they could keep simple records while the missionaries introduced the formal school system when they discovered their converts would be

better if they can read and write" (p. 2). Although we have different varieties of English language spoken presently in Nigeria, English is important in trade, academia and dialogue. An increasing number of multinational companies are looking forward to employing qualified and capable graduates who can communicate effectively in the English language. Those in the academia are not left behind as a result of the fact that many reputable academic journals are published in English.

Moreover, English language is an important part of our communication with other countries of the world. People tend to network better in our society when they have a good command of the English language. There is also an increase in demand for teachers who are qualified to teach the English language. In our society, for one to have a successful professional career, English is vital as it plays an important role during communication which could be written or verbal. English has a large vibrant economic importance for the Nigerian society as trade

and exports across the various continents are most times achieved through the use of the English language. The importance of the English language in the country especially in the 21st century cannot be over emphasized.

English Language and the Nigerian Society

English language is one of the predominant languages spoken by Nigerians: the various kinds of English spoken by Nigerians include Pidgin, Broken and Standard English. Furthermore, some Nigerians are bi-lingual while others are multi-lingual meaning they can speak more than two languages including English which is the official or national language spoken in Nigeria. The school and our home play an important role in our ability to learn how to speak and write the English Language effectively. Although some factors militates against children learning English language effectively. Obayan, et al (1991) discovered that “the first problem which faces the Nigerian child learning English for the first time at the primary school level is how to adjust the mouth and ears to the new language which is very different from most Nigerian languages”

Children whose parents are multilingual teach them how to communicate in English Language. Most schools in Nigeria make use of English as a medium of instruction/teaching excluding Islamic schools which make use of Arabic as the medium of communication and teaching. In an earlier study by Lado, (1964) he states that; “Language is intimately tied to man’s feelings and activity, it is bound up with nationality, religion, and the feelings of self. It is used for work, worship and play by everyone.” In Nigeria, we have come to the realization that many parents communicate with their children using English and sometimes their various local languages.

English is a second and national language spoken in Nigeria. Irrespective of the fact that English language has its roots in British colonial rule in Nigeria, it is indeed now a language that distinguishes a person’s social status and the class he/she belongs in the society. In an earlier study by Christopher (n.d), she states that:

Those who speak English are perceived as learned and vice versa; Nigerians want to be seen as learned or urbane. More important, attaining proficiency in the English language is imperative for those who want to advance educationally, since they must pass the English subject, and use it as the medium for learning other subjects. (p. 87-88).

It is important to note that there is an increase in demand for qualified people seeking various job opportunities in our society. The symbolic implication is that prospective employers of labour are looking for people who can communicate effectively using the English language which is the official language in Nigeria.

A person’s ability to speak the English language fluently especially in our society places him/her in a better position to meet new people, get a job, travel to English speaking countries and may become an academic. Like we noted earlier that there are various kinds of English spoken in our society; they are all used as a means of communication. For instance, if you travel to a place like Benin City, you will notice that majority of the inhabitants of the city speak English but not the Standard English. They speak Pidgin English (creole) which has become the major language used in communication, trade and other social interactions in the city. Furthermore, most Nigerians know how to communicate in various kinds of English, although Pidgin English is generally spoken by majority of Nigerian which is easy to comprehend and less complicated like Standard English.

Over the years, we have come to observe that many young Nigerians prefer to communicate in English; this could be as a result of their view that English language is sophisticated and a language for the elite. The English language is indeed instrumental to the development of Nigeria. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009) postulates that “the English language will continue to be the centre of Nigerian development because there is no immediate alternative among the various indigenous languages”(p.49). In the university environment such as the University of Calabar, there is a high demand in the usage of the English language as a result of the fact that it is the language of instruction. English is used for official academic interactions and other various activities on campus such as religious and social activities.

As a result of the bilingual and multilingual nature of the Nigerian society, there is a tendency for people to code-mix and code-switch from English to their mother tongue. For instance semi-literate people such as the market women and traders in our society, since they may not be able to communicate effectively speaking Standard English, they seem to prefer making use of Pidgin English as a form of communication in order to sell their products and services.

In addition, people are motivated to learning English language as a result of the fact that they might have better opportunities to be gainfully employed by a prospective employer or travel abroad to teach English since there is a high demand of qualified teachers (English language) in some Asian countries. Prospective university students’ are expected to have at list a credit pass in the English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) in order for them to be admitted into the various universities and other institutions in Nigeria. Adedeji, (1984) postulates that: “A science student needs language for acquiring and communicating knowledge and skills in science and technology. He needs language to help him define concepts and describe substances, objects, locations and processes, report facts, draw inferences, make

conclusions, classify items and make generalizations” The symbolic implication of failing to pass this subject is that prospective students will not be able to gain admission into the universities of their choice. Christopher (n.d) therefore stresses the importance of English language once again when she notes that:

Thus, proficiency in the English language today in Nigeria is increasingly becoming the privilege of the minorities whose parents are educated and can afford the cost of private education for their children. (p. 90)

Through the effective use of multimedia aids such as television, computers and smart phones, the learning of English language has increased tremendously. Indeed, there are more people that are able to communicate (written and oral) in the English language now than in the past three decades in Nigeria.

English Language and Government Establishments

Nigeria is the most populated black country in the world and as such an important country in Africa and the world at large. After she gained her independence in October 1st 1960, she had encountered pyramids of economic and political problems. However, the English language remains the language used in various government establishments in Nigeria. For instances, the activities of the three arms of government which include, legislative, executive and the judiciary which is often referred to as the last hope of the common man are conducted using the English language. It would have been difficult to conduct the activities of various government establishments/institutions without the use of English since Nigeria is a multiethnic country.

Olusoji (2012) is of the view that:

With English language, the number of problems usually posed by lack of a common language in heterogeneous communities such as Nigeria became suppressed and the language (English) has remained one of the strongest instruments of unity and development for the people of the country. (p. 134)

The prominence of the English language especially in the administration of various government establishments cannot be over emphasized. As a result of the multiplicity of the numerous languages in our society and the difficulty in adopting an ethnic language as the national language of Nigeria, English therefore becomes the language adopted to be used in all government establishments. The activities of the senate are conducted using the English language since most of the members of the National Assembly come from different geo-political regions of Nigeria. It will be difficult to

conduct the activities of the senate using a local language as it might bring about division and lack of trust especially for members who do not understand the language. Activities of other government establishments such as the Nigeria police, army, customs, immigration and other paramilitary groups are in English.

The activities of government establishments such as committees that investigate the misappropriation of government funds by past administrations were conducted in English. Most reports presented are usually in English languages. In the health care sector which is another important government establishment, Federal Teaching Hospitals and other medical centers in the country ensure that they make use of the English language. It is also important to note that all government establishments across the various geo-political regions of Nigeria conduct their activities in English. Vital documents are written in English for clarity purpose, since there are about hundred and fifty languages or more spoken by the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. In order to avoid confusion, the activities of numerous government establishments are document using the English language.

From the foregoing, we have been able to illustrate the importance of the use of the English language in the various government establishments in the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

English language, National Unity and Development

The English language has contributed significantly in uniting citizens of Africa’s most populated country. It is pivotal to state that Nigeria has an enormous population of millions of people from various ethnic backgrounds, the use of English as the national language of Nigeria is indeed a good development. The English language in Nigeria is now the language of commerce, education, politics and the various mass media outlet. This is largely as a result of ‘British colonial conquest of Africa and Nigeria in particular. As a result of the above, it has brought about national unity and English called “Nigeria English”. In an earlier study by Aremu (2014), he points that:

The blending of the socio cultural ethos and norms of Nigerian multicultural and multilingual contexts with the standard British variety of English has led to a new tongue of the language called “Nigeria English” (p. 58)

As a result of the multi ethnic nature of the Nigeria state, Nigerians had to result to establishment of our own kind of English which has help in the fostering of unity and national development in the country. Furthermore, Ike (2001, p. 013) asserts that the English language is “a

unifying force among Nigeria's over 500 groups each of which speaks and understands no other ethnic language than theirs".

In the information technology sector in Nigeria, the use of English has contributed to information dissemination especially on social medial platforms across the country. Although the English spoken in Nigeria today is hybridize in the sense that there is a fusion of western and Nigeria concepts, views, ideologies in the spoken and written English adopted by a large percentage of Nigerians today. Aremu (2014) further states that English language is employed "through Facebook, LinkedIn, 2go and other digital tools in engaging in virtual interactive discourse" (p. 59).

The various ethnic groups living in Nigeria may take pride in using their various languages as the national language in Nigeria but for the fact that other ethnic nationalities may tend to disagree led to the adoption of the English language as a national language in the country. Obiegbu (2015)states that:

The use of English as the official language in Nigeria defuses ethnic conflicts and yet questions the authenticity and identities of the users. This has always resulted in arguments about the choice of indigenous languages for official and national purposes because the use of English as our official language strikes at the root of national pride since English is a colonial language (p. 83).

The relative unity in the Nigeria National Assembly and State House of Assembly may be linked to the use of the English language in the conduct of the affairs of the National Assembly. This might be as a result of the fact that no ethnic group will be happy if another ethnic group language is adopted in the daily affairs of the country. Since the various languages spoken in Nigeria have geographical limitations/boundaries, it will be unwise to make use of a local language in order to avoid disunity across other various ethnic groups in the country. In addition, Obiegbu (2015) notes that:

The government takes account of sustainable development as a part of how it develops its policies, how it runs its buildings and how it buys it goods and services. All departments are responsible for making sure that their own policies and activities contribute to sustainable development. The English language forms a key factor to sustainable development in Nigeria. (p. 83-84).

Since English language is the medium of education in our schools, it is important to state that without proper educated people who can communicate effectively using the English language, it will be impossible for Nigeria to develop rapidly. The English language is the language

used by researchers in Nigerian Universities. International business transaction is largely done through the use of the English language especially is a large scale. English language be it Standard, Pidgin or Broken English is understood by millions of Nigerians living in the country and aboard. To bring about national unity and development, the English language is the language used in the writing of the countries National Anthem and other monuments in the country.

CONCLUSION

We have been able to illustrate the importance of the English language in Nigeria and how it has been able to bridge various communication gaps in post-independence Nigeria. The language has helped in the unity of Nigeria through various government establishments use of the language for written and oral communication. Since it is also a medium of education in our various institutions, it has contributed to the production of effective and efficient graduates who are qualified to contribute to the growth and development of Nigeria. Finally, the English language has contributed to information dissemination and effective communication among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

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