Institute JOURNAL of Studies in EDUCATION

Vol. 3, NOS. 3 & 4
SEPTEMBER, 2011 / SEPTEMBER, 2012

Published by
INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

FUNCTIONAL LITERACY AS GOAL OF THE USE OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA'S HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Deriving from the fact that the Use of English is a compulsory programme of study among every tertiary institutions in Nigeria and the oft~ recurring search for means of making the educational system rise up to the challenges of nation building through adequate understanding and application of knowledge-functional literacy; these have become more pressing in the light of the ongoing transformative mission in the education sector. An attempt has been made in this paper not only to explain what constitute the Use of English, functional literacy and Nigeria as a nation that attained independence 51 years ago, but to as well highlight the inseparable connection among the concepts. These concepts are taken as highly required to attain genuine transformation that transcends mere campaign mantra. Some strategies are as well suggested on how the current Use of English programme can truly transit to functional literacy and national development.

Introduction

Functional literacy is an all-encompassing concept that aptly refers to holistic understanding of self and discovery of place for individual potential in the complex world. A description of literacy education programme that is targeted at providing access to scientific, technological, humanities and cross-cultural facets of knowledge as well as interaction (Kachru, 1986). UNESCO (1965) sees functional literacy as a deliberate way of making the individual ready for social, economic and civic roles particularly at a level above the emergent literacy training of reading and writing. A form of literacy education that covers general knowledge for work,

increased productivity, a greater participation in civic life, better understanding of the surrounding... and ultimately openness to basic human culture (p.3).

The English language is a providential colonial linguistic legacy in Nigeria. Its position is such a ubiquitous one that almost every human pursuit beyond the self requires the use of English in a sense. English language serves as the tool of the entire system of education, the learning of English was one of the cardinal points why most parents register their children in school. Venturing on a discourse in functional literacy particularly in English becomes quite germane going by the position of the language in our context that scholars (Jegede, 1990, Adegbija 1994 and Lawal, 1995) have variously described as the life blood of the nations school system; a basis for pupils' enlistment in school, and as a means, and an end in itself respectively. The teaching of the Use of English, Iliyas (2006) posits, was informed by the desire to harmonize human knowledge and enhance the level of communication among people and the urge to sufficiently groom students to participate, sensibly in discussions on a wide range of disciplines. The philosophy of this language learning programme could be described as emanating from such feelings as canvassed by Aboderin (1983) that from the various levels of competence in the English language which the students bring into the tertiary institutions, a good number of these students need to be updated and exposed to the diverse English usage so as to bring them up to the level at which they can function adequately in a society that attaches great importance to ability to use the English language.

Reflecting on Nigeria's transformational bid at fifty one years of post-independence nationhood, the urge hinges on the level of the country's sustainable development, per capital income and ensuring well-being for the greater proportion of the population. Underscoring the unique place of functional efficient language mastery otherwise called instrumental or functional literacy, Jomtien declaration-and framework for action on education for all (1990) sets the goals of basic education to include: the consolidation of literacy and numeracy; the acquisition of basic life skills; and laying a foundation for continuous learning. It is apparently evident that language remains the only means of attaining literacy, hence the ubiquitous relevance of the Use of English to all categories of tertiary students.

For a country that regrettably pride in 50-60% illiterate citizens (Akinpelu, 1992), little surprise that Nigeria's now transformational pursuit may be mere media hype, which may not have significant positive effects as all indices of under-development manifest like bugs.

The Nexus among the Use of English, Functional Literacy and Development

The provision of unit teaching different nomenclatures of general English, Use of English, English and Communication Skills, or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) was informed by the desire to harmonize human's knowledge and enhance the level of communication among people. Lawal (1995) views this provision for the Use of English in the curriculum of tertiary institutions as hinging on a model that assumes a wide range of communication competence on which specialized knowledge of reading and writing related to academic or professional pursuit can be built.

Olugbodi (1995) submits that the Use of English programme of tertiary institutions of learning would enable leavers of higher institutions to give simple and correct reports, clear directions and instructions, describe a process, argue a point of view and read aloud. She further submits that the students would be able to participate in discussions and decision making which is only possible with competence in English language. Iliyas (2006) infers from the study of Adewumi (1988), Lawal (1995) and Oniemayin (1997) to underscore the utility of Use of English to students of tertiary institutions thus, English is not just a tool subject, but a study of what it means to be a contributory human being (p.24). Oluikpe and William (1976) had earlier highlighted the philosophy of the Use of English to include:

> To equip the students with the tools of effective communication so that on his own essay writing and public speaking, he will use appropriate and exact words, construct correct and meaningful sentence and organize his thoughts into effective paragraph units... (p.257).

Oluikpe and William (1976) further added that this teaching programme should encompass the ability to extract major information and take notes from lectures and books. They as well state that the programme is designed to instill in learners appropriate linguistic consciousness to understand and use different styles as fitting particular situations; to harness the potential in learners to express native sensibilities even to native speakers of English.

It can therefore be inferred that two skills seem to be the focus of the Use of English programme. They are that of communication and research. The communication desire would cover what it takes to meet social-, interpersonal and out-of-school general communication needs of students, while the research goal covers the heuristic, linguistic and advanced search for solutions to contemporary challenges of humanity-essence of education.

Etim (1989) reflects on the pre-eminent place of the Use of English in the curriculum of tertiary institutions by reviewing the English language curriculum specialist panel report. The panel views the status of English in the country as the official language, language of education and language of development in all spheres; it then concludes that English plays important role in the development of Nigeria.

Nevertheless, scholars have submitted treatise on the pre-eminent influence of functional literacy on the well-being and peaceful co-existence of any human community and invariably the nation. Bhola (1990) for instance, asserts that functional literacy makes the individual to be in touch with contemporary scientific, technological and other knowledge which is preserved in print. Oyedeji (1997) states that functional literacy reduces instances of maternal and infant mortality; improves personal hygiene, facilitates poverty reduction drives and engenders good governance. In the same connection, Lawal (2004) is of the view that functional literacy opens access to interact with nature. He adds that the interaction enables the individual to ramify, reflect and recite; and affords the learners the unique opportunity to understand, appreciate and attune oneself with the supernatural as enjoined in the divine (Quranic) order of 'read' for the sake of uplifting humanity.

Appraising these informed submissions on functional literacy, it is manifestly clear that the key to changing the world is through the word. So, applicable linguistic competence that lends to adaptable meaning in every facet of knowledge is the most veritable tool for human emancipation and national development. As a way of foregrounding the implications of lack of functional literacy among vast majority of Nigerians, it can be observed that in violence disturbances, personal accounts of victims and arrests made by security agencies have consistently showed perpetrators of civil strives to be citizens who lack basic knowledge and rudimentary understanding to earn legitimate living. This again goes to show the inter-connection between functional literacy and socio-economic development. Owoeye (2005) chronicles a list of nationally reported civil strife between 1999-2002. He identified 45 deadly civil crises in Nigeria within the period and pointed out that the army or perpetrators in each case were people who do not posses the basic functional literacy skills. On the political turf, Olaofe (1997) aptly describes deficient functional literacy as processes that culminate in the fostering of rulers on the nation instead of leaders. He as well traces causes of the many intractable violence in the nation to illiteracy that Fagbemi (1977) opines is having a network of perpetrating exploitation of individual that the series of violence are.

However, Babatunde (1997) remarks that to be functionally literate is to be a potential occupier of the highest rung on the social ladder. A situation, he adds, would make no one to be available to be used by patrons of crisis. Also, in the view of Lawal (2004), functional literacy liberates the man (for good), while lack of it domesticates him (for evil). As such when a general programme of study in tertiary institutions like the irreplaceable Use of English is tailored towards instilling the skills of functional literacy, basis would be laid to genuinely kick start for once virile transformation where every privileged higher college graduate can truly contribute towards the greatness of a country of good people, great nation - Nigeria.

Strategies for Engendering Functional Literacy in the Use of English

Below are a few suggestions on how to make existing Use of English programme in higher institutions imbue students with required functional literacy skills:

a. A thorough revamp of the current Use of English curriculum in Nigeria's institutions of higher learning to include specific task based components while in school. This can be done inform of practicum where students can consciously bring knowledge of language to accomplish task in related discipline and ensuring that linguistic knowledge for communication and research is also evaluated directly in such schemes like the Students Industrial Works Experience (SIWES), teaching practice, industrial attachments and so on. When this is done, products of the programme would be inspired to apply the experience/knowledge gained to confront challenges relating to their livelihood.

b. Management of tertiary institutions should challenge and support collaborative academic works among lecturers of different disciplines in form of workshops, conferences and authorship of scholarly publications as a way of cutting down erroneous barriers among disciplines. This would no doubt serve as catalyst for positive

search into other disciplines through language which would yield more understanding and benefit among academia in this era of multi-disciplinary approach to knowledge, a yardstick for all-round attainment of sustainable transformation for national development.

c. It is strongly suggested that each tertiary institution should make adequate provision in terms of human and materials for the implementation of the Use of English programme. This is necessary so that the abnormally high ratio of hundreds to one (students-teacher ratio) can be reduced in every sense. This would make the Use of English lectures more meaningful and rewarding.

d. A pass requirement in Use of English as graduation requirement should be further consolidated in the country's higher institutions of learning. This can be done by way of appropriating students' performance with relevant grade point and make the grade point to reflect in final student's certificate. This would make relevant stakeholders see competency in English as ancillary but not auxiliary to other areas of studies. In a way, it would inform employers of labour extent to which the candidate is sufficiently equipped for out-of-school relevance to vocational challenges and national growth.

e. A continuous overhaul of the contents of the Use of English programme of the different strata of tertiary institutions in Nigeria is canvassed. This is very necessary to keep with the dynamic nature of knowledge and the constantly changing nature of national challenges. As a result, all domains of the English language-grammar, vocabulary, phonology, literature and so on that have relevance to general communicative needs and specific discipline language demands; and such that would enable the all-round use of language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing are constantly featured and periodically reviewed.

Conclusion

In recognition of the dual roles of English language in the country's educational system as a means to many ends (instrumental) and an end itself, the seeming disconnect between Nigerian's level of education and development attainment, a way out of the wood would become most desirable. Functional literacy appears the most apposite. To this end concerted efforts has to be made to ensure that the Use of English programme is geared towards problem solving and consist of adaptable skills which is a steady way of making the school have social relevance. This purposeful task requires the joint efforts of students, teachers, institution administrators and employers of labour among several others. This transformation of the Use of English itself must be geared towards addressing emerging national demand (transformational agenda).

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