

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ORAL ENGLISH IN A NIGERIAN NON-CONVENTIONAL UNIVERSITY: A TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Speaking is a very important skill in communication. It is the next logical step to listening in any language acquisition process. It has been said that effective speaking is the key to success in life. In other words, an effective speaker triumphs in other communication skills. It is, however, saddening that this all-important skill has not received adequate interest and attention in the teaching of the English language from students, school authorities, and the government. The English language which is the official medium of instruction and communication in these institutions has not enjoyed much acceptance from the people. This makes it difficult for the teacher to impart the basic tools needed for effective communications in these communities. The experience of the writer shows that the neglect of the speaking skill affects the students such that after having spent four or five years in the university, little or no impact is made on the student's spoken English. This is worse in non-conventional universities where the students see no need for the *Use of English* course. The various forms of challenges the teacher of Oral English faces are the focus of this paper. Some recommendations which would help alleviate these problems are given.

INTRODUCTION

The English language, without doubt, has come to stay in Nigeria. It has received the legal status of language of education, administration, legislation, commerce, technology and international communication. In fact, it has been described as 'the world's lingua franca' (Conrad, 1996:2). Fishman (1996: 628) says:

The world of large scale commerce, industry, technology and banking, like the world of certain human sciences and professions, is an international world and it is linguistically dominated by English almost

everywhere, regardless of how well established and well – protected local cultures, languages, and identities may otherwise be.

In other words, competence in the English language is very important for one to fit into the global economy, technology and even communication. It is a must-get for every Nigerian student as it is needed in almost every sphere of his life. It is the medium of instruction from senior primary to the University level in the Nigerian schools (FGN, 1981). It is one of the entry requirements into higher institutions. Even

while in the tertiary institution, a study of English is compulsory to a certain level in order to assist in the understanding and mastery of other subjects. This accounts for the importance students ought to place on *Use of English*, a course designed to improve students' competence in the English language in higher institutions. On the contrary, most students feel 'oppressed', 'bothered', and 'burdened' by the introduction of this course into the school curriculum. They regard it as a 'minor' subject even though they are aware that a failure in it may delay their graduation.

In most non-conventional institutions, the *Use of English*, a course designed to equip students with language skills which will help them comprehend their core courses, is taken in one semester or year with one or two hours allotted it per week. In other words, the teacher has about twenty eight hours per semester to remedy students' deficiencies in the language skills of Listening – Speaking - Reading – Writing.

The focus of this paper is on the challenges of teaching the second stage of language acquisition (Speaking Skill) to students of the University of Agriculture, Abeokuta (UNAAB) as an aspect of the *Use of English*. In UNAAB, this skill does not enjoy the attention it deserves as it is neglected probably because of time constraint and other factors. Comprehension and writing are given priority, and the student is left to carry his deficiency in pronunciation into the labour market and the society at large.

The university, inadvertently, I suppose, leaves out the speaking skill from the *Use*

of English (GNS101) curriculum as reflected in the prospectus:

it is designed to equip students with language skills which will enable them to comprehend their lectures fully and write acceptable summaries, reports and essays with the aid of relevant reference works.

This is not peculiar to UNAAB; Aborisade (1997) says, "unfortunately, institutional constraints such as time and space allocation, large classes... make it near impossible to include this aspect (speaking) in the foundation curriculum since it involves not only 'receptive' but also and more especially 'productive' tasks".

In fact, prior to 2002, the workbook designed for teaching the course in UNAAB was titled 'Listening, Reading, and Writing'. In effect, the Speaking Skill was considered unnecessary. Even the first edition (unlike the present one) of *Communication Skills in English for Tertiary Institutions*, a collaborative work of the lecturers of English in the Department of General Studies, did not include the speaking skill. However, in the 2003 / 04 session, the need to teach the art of speaking was identified by the lecturers because of the very poor speaking abilities of the students. Their faulty pronunciation was compounded by bad grammatical constructions. In this connection, six teachers set to work, divided the one thousand six hundred and seven strength of students into six for better class management. The first semester was easier with about a hundred in each group. The second semester was, however, more tedious with an average of one hun-

dred and sixty seven students in each group. The various forms of obstacles they came across are enumerated in the following sections.

The Challenges

The challenges encountered in teaching Oral English (OE) in UNAAB range from those posed by the students, lack of equipment, interference from the learner’s first language, the structure of the English language itself, the nonchalant stance adopted by the government towards the educational system, to the evaluation of proficiency in the skill.

Students’ Attitude

Most of the students, as is common with students in science classes, believe they do not need special lessons in OE. After all, they argue, their productivity does not depend on the ability to speak. This attitude usually makes teaching and learning difficult and a re-orientation had to be done on the students before effective teaching could be commenced.

Secondly, most students had poor knowledge of the rudiments of OE. For example, they were not aware of the sources or mechanics of pronunciation. The introduction of speech organs (basic knowledge which ought to have been acquired at the primary and secondary school levels) in the *Use of English* class not only engendered laughter (and in some instances resentment), it seemed to them to be a waste of time. For lack of facilities and time, the phones/phonemes of the English language were introduced without teaching about their production. This, of course, would have a ripple effect on the students’ pronunciation and in fact, writing. Because

only two hours could be devoted to teach the skill, it was not possible to teach the symbols representing the phones of the language which would otherwise have helped the students’ writing.

Lack of Equipment / Poor Facilities

In teaching OE effectively, a standard language laboratory is required. Most higher institutions, UNAAB inclusive, lack adequate and functional equipment for teaching OE whereas the value of instruments in teaching OE is of no mean measure. Peterson (1957) reiterated that they “are of considerable importance in the description of language structure and in language teaching”. Perhaps, the provision of good equipment would have made the teacher’s ordeal less cumbersome. Because of lack of appropriate equipment, the teacher was to improvise with the use of battery operated tape recorder (an alternating current (A/C) operated one would have been rendered useless because of inconsistent electricity supply). Even this could not work because of the sheer number of students in the class. A normal OE class need not have more than twenty-five students in an air-conditioned or well-ventilated language laboratory. What obtains in most institutions is that language laboratories are not available, and where the teacher has to make-do with some open classrooms, a large number of students awaits him. In the experience being reported, over one-hundred and fifty students were jam-packed into a class that normally seats a hundred. (In fact, if all the students in the group came to class about a hundred and seventy would have squeezed themselves in there). With this situation, some students had to stand or hang around outside the class during lectures. This kind of situa-

tion makes learning task harder and some resolve not to attend *Use of English* classes, particularly the OE sessions. It also renders teaching ineffective because the teacher cannot have adequate interaction with the students. The assessment of the students' progress in pronunciation was almost impossible.

Interference from the Student's Mother Tongue (MT)

Another challenge normally faced in the teaching of OE is that posed by interference from the student's MT. The English language consists of twenty-four conso-

nant sounds, twelve monothongs (single vowels), and eight diphthongs (double vowels). No Nigerian language has up to this number of sounds so, what the student does is to substitute those not found in his MT with what is available to him. This is interference, and could result into bad or incorrect articulation, and sometimes indistinct articulation where one or two sounds which ought to be pronounced are deleted. Below are examples of some phonological interferences encountered in teaching the subject. Majority of students in the class were of Yoruba origin and the following substitutions were identified:

ʃ	for	t ʃ	ʃ aid	instead of	t ʃ aild	'child'
t	"	θ	tin Fewt	" "	in fei	'thin' 'faith'
d	"	ð	dis də	" "	ðis ðə	'this' 'the'
f	"	v	fifa	" "	fivc(r)	'fever'
s	"	z	si:l	" "	zi:l	'zeal'
ʒ	"	^	k ⊃ t	" "	k^t	'caught'
a	"	ə	ab ⊃ v	" "	əb^v	'above'

In some cases meaning was impaired by such substitutions and only context helped to decipher meaning. For example, when

θ	in	θ ik	'thick'	is substituted with	t	it becomes	'tick'
θ	in	θ in	'thin'	" "	t	" "	'tin'
z	in	zi:l	'zeal'	" "	s	" "	'seal'
v	in	væn	'van'	" "	f	" "	'fan'

If these words were pronounced in isolation, the listener would definitely have associated a meaning not intended by the speaker.

In some instances, the morphological structure of the MT made the students delete some sounds which ought to be pronounced, for example,

dz:we	for	dzu:əl	'jewel'
sp]i	“	sp ð il	'spoil'
ju:s tu	“	ju:st tu	'used to'
hol	“	həuld	'hold'

This resulted from the fact that the students' MT does not allow for consonant final syllables / word, they transferred this to the English language and so deleted any consonant ending a word.

Interference has to be corrected with the teacher making conscious and concerted effort over and over again to help the learner pronounce words correctly. This was not possible because of time constraint. Moreover, the average undergraduate gets shy or sometimes intimidated by comments from colleagues and withdraws from participating in oral drills. This made teaching difficult and often

times frustrating.

Inconsistency in the English Language Phone / Graph

Another challenge faced in the teaching of OE is in the structure of the language itself. The language is not consistent in the representation of its sounds with letters. This causes a lot of problems as the learner is often confused about the pronunciation of words, most especially since his own language has consistent graphs and pronunciation of sounds. These inconsistencies had to be pointed out. Examples of these are highlighted below:

- (i) sounds can be represented differently and the learner must bear this in mind, for example,

/ k /	is	k	in	'kite'
		ck	“	'kick'
		ch	“	'chaos'
		c	“	'catch'

- (ii) the same letter or a combination of two letters can be pronounced differently, for example,

ch	is	/ ʃ t /	in	' ch ampion'
		ʃ /	“	' ch assis'
		/ k /	“	' ch aos'

ea	is	/ i /	in	'lead' (to go before others)
		/ ε /	"	'lead' (a mineral resource)
		/ i /	"	'read' (present tense of the act of looking at some graphic representations)
		/ ε /	"	'read' (past tense of the same word)

(iii) some sounds are pronounced in some words but they are not pronounced in others even when they exist in the same phonological environment, for example,

/ t / is pronounced after / s / in stern / ste:n /
style / stail /

but not in

listen / lisən /

/ b / is pronounced in 'bombard' / bZmba:rd /

but not in

plumber / pl^mə /
bomber / bZmə /

(iv) some letters are written, they must not be pronounced
g in 'gnash' / næ

w " 'yawn' / j ɔ :n/

h " 'what' / wa:t /

The situation with

k in 'know' / nəu / and 'knot' / nY:t /

is compounded in that not only is the first letter not pronounced, they have the same pronunciation with 'no' and 'not' with which they have no similarity in meaning.

These and a lot of other linguistic characteristics like stress and intonation made the learning and teaching of OE difficult. It is worth pointing out that teaching stress was particularly difficult as the majority of the students found it hard to imbibe the stress patterns. The difficulty could be partly attributed to the influence of the students' MT which is a non-stress language, and also the students' attitude. It is saddening, however, that despite the

efforts the teachers of Use of English have put into teaching the speaking skill, our students' speeches are not devoid of substitutions such as those identified under interference from student's mother tongue.

Assessing Oral English

The mode of testing the speaking skill also posed a great challenge to the teacher. Because of the large number of students in the class and inadequate equipment, the testing

of OE became difficult and the teacher had to improvise by examining the *speaking skill* through **writing!**

Find below samples of questions testing OE in the 2nd Semester of 2003 / 2004 session.

Students were asked to

- i. Underline the word among the words lettered A to D that has the same sound as the one underlined in the control word:

only: A one B boat C broad D gone
 yes A yeast B her C any D complete
 seven: A days B bells C buds D lips

- II. Identify the sound(s) of the underlined letter(s) and write out their phonetic symbols:

phone [] plumber [] thesis [] mould []
 seize [] mate [] just [] elite []

This technique is grossly inadequate in the sense that the student might be able to pronounce the words correctly but not know the symbol representing it. He might also transcribe correctly but miss the pronunciation. In essence, the students' speaking ability was not adequately tested because they had no opportunity of pronouncing the sound to the hearing of the examiner.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problems encountered by teachers of OE at the tertiary institutions can be reduced if the students are taught the rudiments of the language at the lower levels of education where time allotted to teach far exceeds that of the higher institutions.

If students have a good grasp of pronunciation at the primary and secondary school levels, it will be easier to concentrate on improving the other skills in order to enhance their understanding of other courses. It is also essential to learn the correct pronunciation of words as it makes for clear meaning and reduces ambiguity.

Speech sounds not found in the learner's MT must be specifically learnt in order to master correct pronunciations. In other words, it is necessary that the learner perceives the differences between the sounds of the English language and that of his MT.

Problems of inconsistency in the English language can only be solved by constant practice and the recognition of the orthography as it is.

Teachers on their own part would benefit a great deal by identifying the needs of their students and giving them tasks that would improve their speaking abilities. Motivational strategies that would encourage the students and make them have favourable attitude towards the skill should be introduced by the teachers. For example, since science students are 'experiment-oriented', a speaking skill class could start with the introduction of the production of English sounds with the use of film slides showing the various places and manners of articulation. This, I believe would make the *Use of English* class more interesting.

Obviously, two hours of lecture on the skill cannot do justice to it, hence the need for more contact hours to be allotted the *Use of English* course. The one semester touch is definitely not enough, it should span over

two / three years of students' stay in the university. In this way, more time would be allowed for remedying each of the skills – listening, speaking, reading, writing.

Another way of improving students' spoken English is to encourage them to listen to television and radio programmes especially international and network news.

The government would do well to provide adequate / functional facilities such as well-equipped language laboratories where OE can be taught with relative ease. This would go a long way in making the course more interesting to learners and at the same time alleviate the challenges faced by teachers.

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