



## Language for Higher Education: The Place of the English Language in Nigeria

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### Abstract

This paper looks into the language of higher education: the place of the English language in Nigeria. It is not an overstatement to say that of all the legacies bequeathed to Nigeria by the colonial masters, the English language is the most essential. This is because the nation cannot strive successfully without a unifying language like English in Nigeria. It is the language of education in Nigeria and is used as the language of instruction from upper primary school to tertiary education. Due to the importance of the English language, good performance in it is crucial to getting admitted into tertiary institutions and getting decent employment in the country. It is unique in Nigerian education because of the significant role it plays. This paper concludes that students need to understand the English language with appropriate vocabulary for them to achieve academic success. Proficiency in English is essential not only because it is the language of instruction in Nigerian schools but it plays an important role in the communicative sphere of the world. Based on the importance attached to the English language in higher education, the government should employ more competent lecturers to handle the teaching of the language in higher institutions of learning. This study would make students understand the place of the English language in higher education and why they should be exposed to standard English and its usage.

**Keywords:** Language, the English Language, Higher Education

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## Introduction

Language occupies an important position in human life. It is very important because it is the means through which concepts, ideas, thoughts and facts can be conveyed. Language is indispensable to man because it helps man to give expression and fully explore his environment to his advantage (Kolawole, 2016). According to Idiakhwa and Omoike (2020), language is a system or means of communication through spoken or written words by any group vital to the users as air is to human beings.

Donald (2010) states that language is a system of vocal auditory patterned sound units and assembled according to set when interacting with the experiences of its users. He concluded that language is a tool that is intimately used by man in all his daily activities. Blosh and Trager (1942) describe language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which social group cooperates. It is a non-instructive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires by means of a system of sounds and sound symbols. Okedara (1997) views language as an essential factor in human survival and national development. In fact, without language, the life of a nation becomes meaningless. It occupies a very strategic position in human affairs. Very strategic in the sense that language is the vehicle through which concepts, ideas, thoughts, facts and a host of others can be conveyed. Language is characterised by a set of arbitrary symbols. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the object and the symbols which stand for it. The meaning attached to any object in any human society is purely arbitrary (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

Obanya (2004) distinguishes language among three concepts: Learning in, with and from a language. “Learning in” means studying the language as a school subject. “Learning with” refers to using the language for instructional purposes, that is using it to teach the school subjects. “Learning from” has a broader perspective as it embodies the linguistic and cultural/educational elements. The linguistic aspect is the acquisition of the language for communicative purposes. The cultural dimension entails the cultural values inherent in the language.

According to Crystal (1977), the importance of language in the life of individuals has been well-documented over the years despite the fact that

language was never created, in the strict sense of the word creation, when other things were created. Still, language has found its way into existence and has become so central to development, advancement, civilisation, education, science and technology, without which it will be impossible to talk of civilisation.

Language is the most important tool of learning. It serves as the most crucial part of the teaching and learning process because all the educational messages the teacher has to pass across to the learner are packaged in a language. It is the bedrock of formal education. Proper knowledge of the language used in school is of absolute necessity for learners to succeed in their quest for knowledge. Education largely depends on the communication of knowledge and language is indispensable for that communication (Chimhundu, 1997). This paper considers the place of the English language in higher education for students to know why it is important for them to understand the language. Proficiency in the English language is mandatory for academic and career advancement. This paper looks into the language situation in Nigeria, the English language in Nigeria, the place of the English language in Nigeria and the English language as the language of higher education in Nigeria.

### **Language Situation in Nigeria**

There are many countries in the world and every country has its own unique language. Ogunsiyi (2004) describes Nigeria as a multilingual nation. It has the English language as its official language and many indigenous languages are still widely used across the country. Nigeria chose English language as the official language to unite the country because of its heterogeneous nature. According to Oladipupo (2008), from various databases, the official number of languages spoken in Nigeria is intractable. Bamgbose (1971) estimates the number of languages spoken in Nigeria to be 400. Akinjobi (2004) notes that there are 470 living languages in Nigeria. Gordon and Raymond's *Ethnologue* (2005) note that the number of languages in Nigeria is 521, 510 are living, two are second language without mother-tongue speakers, while nine have gone into extinction. According to *Ethnologue* (2019), Papua New Guinea has the most languages, with 840 living languages. Indonesia has 710 living languages and Nigeria has 515



living languages. Lewis, Gary and Fenning's Ethnologue (2013, 2020 and 2021) claim that 522 to 527 languages are living, while seven have gone into extinction. It can be concluded from the above that, Nigeria is blessed with many languages.

### **The English Language in Nigeria**

There is no gainsaying the fact that English has become a Nigerian language. The language has become an invaluable legacy of the British which has provided Nigerians with yet another means of expressing their culture. Before the incursion of the Europeans into various African States, a kaleidoscopic linguistic diversity was already in existence. Many of these languages are genetically and historically related. The extreme linguistic complexity before the advent of the Europeans has largely remained unchanged up till now. Many African states were already bilingual or multilingual in many local tongues. So, it was possible that bilingualism and multilingualism in local languages were not a new phenomenon before the coming of the whites.

The coming of the Europeans to the continent helped to compound the linguistic situation at least one step further with the addition of the English language (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

Furthermore, the use of English in Nigeria survived the departure of the colonial administrators as the language of administration. Now, several years after independence, English still survives and has assumed a more important status in Nigeria. Apart from being a medium of social and inter-ethnic communication, English is a national language and it is used to conduct legislative, executive and judicial functions at the three tiers of local, state and federal government levels. Some of the main factors for its initiation and retention in Nigeria are discussed as follows (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

According to Akindele and Adegbite (2005), the English language performs three broad functions in Nigeria: accommodation, participation and social mobility. In performing the accommodating function, the English language is recognised as a world language; so it performs international functions. It

serves as a link between people of multilingual societies of Africa and the outside world. It is the language of international politics. Nigeria has no language other than English for taking part in political deliberations. English also opens the door to high technology, science, trade and diplomacy. All these are possible because of the large number of English speakers. English also serves as the official language in the country. It is the language with which the government conduct its business. It is the language that literate people from different ethnic groups use to communicate with one another.

### **The Place of the English Language in Nigeria**

The English language is unique in Nigerian education because of the significant role it plays. It enhances students' educational attainment and improves their communicative competence. Nigerian government made it a core and compulsory subject for students in Nigerian schools. The importance of the language in Nigeria's educational system cannot be over-emphasized because it plays a crucial role. Apart from being the medium of instruction, especially at the upper primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, it is also the language of the textbooks (Ezeokoli, 2005). Danladi (2013) asserts that the English language is the medium of instruction in our schools and a compulsory subject that must be passed at all levels of education in Nigeria. It is the language through which all other subjects in the curriculum are taught.

The English language played a very significant role in the development of Nigeria, brought in by the colonial masters. The multilingual and multi-cultural nature of Nigerian polity and the absence of a national unifying indigenous language on the other hand, have led to the adoption of the English language as a medium of intra-national and international communication (Fakeye 2011). The English language therefore plays a unifying role because of the numerous local languages in Nigeria (Ohia, 2010). Its uniqueness cannot be downplayed as it relates to almost all sectors. It enhances students' educational attainment and improves their



communicative competence. The state of the English language as a second language in Nigeria and the importance attached to the language, compel numerous Nigerian citizens to learn and speak the language (Ogunsiji, 2004).

The language has not only engineered human development through education but it has also conferred other significant opportunities on Nigerians. At different levels of education in Nigeria, students are equipped with lifelong knowledge and skills that would make them realise their full potential as human beings. The skills and knowledge provided by education for human development will not be possible without the English language in which the concepts are expressed (Akeredolu-Ale and Alimi, 2012). The advantages, global influence and functions of the English language have been acknowledged widely. Adekunle (1974) notes that the English language is a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools and it is believed that competence in the language is a key to effective knowledge in the development of science, art and technology.

### **The English Language as Language of Higher Education in Nigeria**

In Nigeria, the English language is considered indispensable to modern life and this is why children must be encouraged to learn it effectively in schools right from the primary to the tertiary level (Adegbile, 1998). Fakeye (2002) asserts that because of the importance attached to the English language, most students are being delayed from advancing from their studies to higher institutions because of the inability to obtain credit in the subject which is a prerequisite for admission into tertiary institutions. Since proficiency in the language is mandatory for academic and career advancement, efforts must be made to ensure that the teaching and learning of the subject is effective.

According to Babajide (1998), the English language has not only been a central subject in schools, polytechnics and universities but also has been gaining increasing importance in day-to-day human activities worldwide. Literacy in the language is a sure means to educational advancement, job

opportunities and fuller participation in national activities. Competence in the English language assumes great importance for students as it directly affects the level of progress attainable, irrespective of aptitude in their particular fields. Okonkwo and Okpara (1991) note that competence in the English language is an essential prerequisite for educational and career success.

English Language is seen as one of the most important subjects (if not more than all other subjects in the school and government circle) because it is the bedrock for higher institution admission. English is important in securing good jobs and a credit pass in the language is a prerequisite for admission into the universities (Ohia, 2008; Oyeleye, 2016). Students who are not proficient in the English language will find it difficult to make meaningful progress in school (Fakeye and Ogunsiji, 2009).

Geraldine (2012) notes that the English language is very important and that is why students of Nigerian tertiary institutions are taught the Use of English as a compulsory course. Above all, the English language is a passport to good employment. Competence in the English language is observed as an index of academic excellence because it is a yardstick for measuring students' academic performance. Furthermore, no student can graduate from tertiary institutions in Nigeria without passing the Use of English courses.

It is inevitable that for a long time to come, the English language will indisputably be the medium of instruction for higher education in Nigeria. It has no rival among the indigenous languages which are still far from being able to accommodate the expression of modern scientific and technological concepts. As a subject in higher education, English ought to serve in two different contexts: The primary academic and secondary academic contexts (Afolayan, 1984). The primary academic context refers to the situation in which English constitutes the subject matter of obtaining a certificate or degree after undergoing the necessary higher educational



programmes. The secondary academic context is the situation in which the English language is used in support of obtaining a certificate or degree in another academic field. The first context from the point of view of university undergraduate programmes could take the form of a single honours or combined honour degree programme. In contrast, the second context from the same point of view of tertiary institutions is what has been called the “Use of English” or General Studies Course in English (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has looked at language for higher education: the place of the English language in Nigeria. Students need to understand the English language with appropriate vocabulary for them to achieve academic success. Proficiency in English is essential not only because it is the language of instruction in Nigerian schools but it plays an important role in the communicative sphere of the world.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the importance attached to the English language in higher education, the government should employ more competent lecturers to handle the teaching of the language in higher institutions of learning. Students should be exposed to standard English and its usage. They should be equipped with the knowledge of grammar, lexis, phonology, semantics, vocabulary, spelling and so on for them to have communicative competence. Students should imbibe a good reading culture as it will acquaint them with correct spelling, punctuation and other grammatical mechanics. Students should be trained not to use cyber language (internet language) in formal contexts because it differs from the traditional approach to language teaching and learning. Also, it is not suitable for examinations, academic writing and official communication.



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