

The Use of **ENGLISH** and **COMMUNICATION** **SKILLS**

For Tertiary Education

ANTHONY E. OGU
RICHARD C. IHEJIRIKA
OBIAJULU A. EMEJULU



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Chapter Two

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

Mary Okere and Felicia N. Nwulu

2.1 Introduction

One of the things for which Nigeria is known is that, it is a multi-ethnic society. The different tribes and ethnic groups that make up the nation have their own languages. Thus, multilingualism is one of the defining features of Nigeria. Over the years socio-linguists have tried to estimate and catalogue the number of languages spoken in Nigeria but, till date, no research finding has given the exact number. Nevertheless, there seems to be a consensus among scholars that there are well over 500 indigenous languages in Nigeria. These languages have been in existence before the advent of the English language. However, today, the English language which is a second language to many Nigerians has assumed a domineering position among the hundreds of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The supremacy of English language over the indigenous languages is such that a good command of the language is seen as a proof of good education. Often times, when a graduate could not express himself in standard English either in written or oral form, his

education is called to question. Besides, it is common place today to hear a parent say "we do not speak Ibo or Yoruba in the house". Another version of this is, "my children do not understand our native language". All these point to the prestige accorded the English language in Nigeria.

2.2 Historical Background of the English Language in Nigeria

The history of the English language in Nigeria has no specific date. While some claim that English language came into Nigeria in the 16th century, some say it began to play a significant part in Nigeria in the 19th century when European merchants and missionaries settled in the shores of Nigeria. It is important to add here that the implantation of English in Nigeria followed three channels: commerce, missionary activities and colonial rule.

History has it that the early 18th century witnessed a boom in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. At this period, the slave trade was the cause of serious commercial rivalry among European nations. Initially, the Portuguese dominated the slave trading in African continent but by 1750 British merchants took the lead from the Portuguese, and by early 19th century, Britain was exporting over half of all the slaves leaving West Africa. It is through this trade in humans that some

Nigerians were taken away into different European countries as slaves to work as domestic servants or to work in plantations. The slaves had to learn the language of their masters. In 1807 when slave trade was abolished, most of the freed slaves of Nigerian origin returned and settled in Nigeria and some other African sub-regions. They used the English language freely in their settlements and thus, they were able to introduce the language.

Another channel through which the English language came into Nigeria was missionary activities. The accusations leveled against the slave trade by humanitarians led to the end of slave trade and slavery itself. The humanitarians were deeply religious people motivated by the desire to relieve human suffering in Africa and to bring Christianity and Western education to its people. The earliest missionaries to Africa were Roman Catholics who accompanied the Portuguese explorers along the coast of Africa during the 15th century under Prince Henry the Navigator. They served as chaplains to their fellows and as missionaries to Africans. In Nigeria, the period between 1843 and 1914 was a time of serious missionary activities. The sole aim of the missionaries was to take the gospel to the indigenes who were regarded as unbelievers by the missionaries. To achieve this goal, it was necessary for them to preach the gospel in a language or languages

understood by the local people. Initially, because the European missionaries did not understand the Nigerian languages, they had to use freed Nigerian slaves who had been exposed to Western education and Christianity as interpreters and translators. Later on, the missionaries established schools where people were trained to become catechists, priests, teachers, clerks and so on. The basic subject was English language. They eventually taught the people how to read the Bible which is written in English.

The development of the English language in Nigeria could equally be traced to the activities of the colonial masters who imposed it on Nigerians for administration and governance. With the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the establishment of "legitimate" trade in Africa, the era of European colonization in the continent began.

The area now known as Nigeria was governed by the British colonial administration as two separate Protectorates: the Northern and the Southern. In 1914, the two Protectorates were amalgamated to become one administrative unit and Lord Fredrick Lugard, the former governor of the Northern Protectorate, was appointed the Governor-General of Nigeria. It was reported that on assumption of office, Lord Lugard made his criticisms of the educational system of the North and South public. The colonial administration in its

educational policies gave English language supremacy over the indigenous languages. According to Adetugbo (1979), English language dominated the school curriculum during the colonial era. It was studied under various sub-headings like reading, writing, dictation, composition and grammar. Besides, it was the medium of instruction in schools right from the upper primary to tertiary levels. Not only this, literacy in English was made the requirement for securing gainful employment in Nigeria. Within a short time, colonialism and English language as its symbol gained wide acceptance.

2.3 Functions of the English Language in Nigeria

The English language performs a wide range of functions in Nigeria. There is hardly any aspect of our national life that the English language does not play a significant role be it education, governance, commerce and industry, national and international interactions, etc.

2.3.1 The Language of Education

English has been widely used in the propagation of education in Nigeria and this is used in all facets of education. The important function of English in Nigeria appears to be most felt in the educational system. In all the levels of education in Nigeria, the English language enjoys the pride of place. For admission into any

Nigerian university, a credit pass in English is required irrespective of the course of study. It is a compulsory subject of study at all levels of education in Nigeria. As stipulated in the Nigerian Education Language Policy (2004), the English language is the only language of instruction in schools especially at the upper primary, secondary and the tertiary levels. At the lower primary school where the indigenous languages are meant to be used, the English language is taught as a subject.

2.3.2 The Language of Government

English language performs the role of the language of government. As it has been noted earlier on, Nigeria is the home of many ethnic groups of different languages. Given this background, the English language is the language common to all the ethnic groups. Almost all the transactions in government offices are carried out in the English language. Although, the official language policy of Nigeria as stated in Sections 51 and 91 of the 1979 Constitution and repeated in Sections 55 and 97 of the 1999 Constitution states that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangement has been made thereof. It is interesting to note that till date, "adequate arrangement" has not been made for the use of any Nigerian language in the transaction of business of the National Assembly. But then, whether

or not adequate arrangement has been made, the use of any of Ibo, Hausa or Yoruba language to conduct the business of the National Assembly is not realistic. Imagine a situation where three speakers would address the House in three different languages (Ibo, Hausa and Yoruba) each of which has to be translated into two other languages because none of them is understood by everyone. The House would only succeed in wasting precious time. Besides, how would members from other minority tribes whose languages are not even considered fit to be used feel? No doubt there would be chaos. But thanks to the English language which has saved us this problem. Thus, all official correspondences, memoranda, circulars, instructions and directives are all given out in the English language. All the volumes of the Nigerian constitution from inception till date are written in English. All the law books used in all the courts in Nigeria like the Supreme Court, the court of Appeal, the High courts, the Magistrate courts and their proceedings are conducted in English. It is in few cases that Latin is sparingly used.

2.3.3 The Language of Commerce and Industry

In Nigeria, most commercial transactions are carried out in the English language. This is mostly observed in cities where different ethnic groups converge for business. At the national level, English is the only

language used in the boardrooms during meetings by members of staff. Inter and intra business transactions are done in the English language. Transactions in the banking halls are carried out in English. Trading in the stock exchange market is also performed in the English language.

2.3.4 The Language of the Media

The English language has remained the most extensively used language in the print and electronic media in Nigeria. The majority of the daily newspapers (like The Guardian, the Times, The Vanguard, The Punch, The Sun, This Day, The Independent) are written in English.

2.3.5 Lingua Franca

Nigeria has been described as a linguistic jungle where over 500 languages are spoken. The speakers of these languages were merged to become a country by colonial administration. These different ethnic groups had no single language which was common to them. A scholar once said that when a country speaks with over 500 voices, mutual understanding becomes extremely difficult and there is lack of unity. English language which was the language of the colonial administrators became a common language not just between the colonial administrators and the indigenous people but

also among the speakers of the different ethnic languages. Thus, English language functions as *lingua franca* in Nigeria. As a bridge language for inter-ethnic communication among educated Nigerians, English language serves as a unifying language and it promotes national integration in Nigeria. However, with the uneducated Nigerians, who happen to be in the majority, English language is not a *lingua franca*. Rather Pidgin serves as a *lingua franca* in the South whereas Hausa is mainly the bridge language in the North.

2.4 Ways of Enhancing Proficiency in English

It has already been mentioned that English language is the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools right from the upper primary to the university and that it performs vital roles in the social, economic and political sectors. This background, calls for the need for proficiency among Nigerians generally and the Nigerian student in particular. It is important to note that enhancing proficiency in English entails enhancing the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Each of these skills will be discussed in details in other sections of the book. However, we recommend the following tips:

❖ Be a reader

Reading in any target language, which here is the English language, is one of the surest ways of

improving one's mastery of the language. Reading involves language learning and it is an indispensable means for students to learn English. Reading expands language awareness. As we read, we will come across sophisticated or non-standard examples of language. This helps a reader to know the rules of language use and how words are used in different contexts. So, to enhance proficiency in English, read good books, newspapers, journals and magazines. Do not patronize junks.

❖ Listen to good speakers

To enhance your proficiency in English you need to avail yourself of every opportunity to listen to good speakers. It could be on a face to face level or from the electronic media. When you listen to good speakers, you not only learn how words are used, you also know how they are pronounced. Aside these, listening to good speakers affords one the opportunity to emulate good intonation.

❖ Speak and write

Practice, they say leads to perfection. As you read and listen to good speakers, use the new words and expressions you have learned in your oral and written communication. Do not be shy and do not take offence when you are corrected. "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, but I do and then I truly

understand" (Chinese proverb).

2.5 Why "Use of English" in University?

At the tertiary level of education the need to achieve competence in English is greater than at all previous levels combined. Competence in English is needed in all the fields of study, be it engineering, computer science, information technology, mathematics, psychology. Usually, the ability to express oneself effectively in written and oral communication marks out the more accomplished graduate from the average and poor ones.

It is important to note that some students get into the university with the erroneous belief that the English language skills they acquired at the secondary school level are enough to get them through academic work at the university. However, experience has shown that, with the exception of a few of them, a greater number of them are incapable of coping with their studies. It is in view of this that the Use of English course was introduced in many Nigerian universities which is a great help in this direction. The main objective is to ensure that the students are able to grasp the rudiments of writing, reading, speaking, listening and other study skills so as to fit into a new system vastly superior and more complex than that which they had hitherto encountered.

In addition, because of the nature of programmes offered at this level of education, it has been realized that some students actually encounter serious use of language skills for the first time in the university. Many of them cannot spell correctly, read properly, nor can they write correct English sentences. These are grave problems which are brought to school by the students and which the teacher has to contend with. In conclusion, "Use of English" in universities provides students the opportunity to enhance their communication skills which in turn, helps to interact with people outside their discipline.

Class Activity: Do the exercises in Chapter Two of the workbook.



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