The Problems and Prospects of Teaching the English Language in an Era of Digitalization

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ABSTRACT

The place and communicative role of the English language within global society, and within Nigeria in particular, cannot be underestimated.. English has become the predominant international language for multinational and multicultural communication, especially as the world has entered the digital age. As English interacts with different languages of the world, challenges abound in the teaching and learning of the English where it is not the local language. In view of this, the teaching and learning patterns of the English language for second language learners must change to meet the challenges accruing from digitalization. English instructions must be digitized in almost all areas of English learning. Digitalization increases student-centeredness and material accessibility, expunges geographical barriers, brings like minds together, and above all saves time. However, challenges abound in integrating technology in English language education in Nigeria. There is need for schools to equip and network their institutions. Technologies are needed in English classes for meaningful, innovative and effective education programs. This paper therefore discusses exhaustively the challenges, problems and prospects of teaching English in a digital age. The writer concludes by reiterating that concerted efforts should be made by the Nigerian government, individuals, teachers, students and corporate bodies in order to utilize fully the tremendous impacts of pedagogical integration of Information Communication Technology in English.
Keywords:Communicative competence, Integration, Digitalization, Technology

INTRODUCTION

We now live in a high-speed, wired world, where digital technology is woven into the fabric of our lives and our society [1,2]. Computers have been seen in schools for years; they are not a new phenomenon. They have been in Nigerian labs and classrooms in increasingly large numbers for twenty years. Information Communication Technology (ICT) development in Nigeria has accelerated since the beginning of the 21st Century [3]. It is part of our homes, our businesses and our schools [4]. However, their presence has been slow to translate into substantially changed practice or widespread use in Nigerian education, except in relatively straightforward applications such as email, word processing and presentation software [5]. There is dire need to integrate them into the teaching and learning process of certain subjects like English. In view of this, [6,7,8] asserts that we need to look at our youth in relation to how best to use technology in education. Technology and its place within the classroom has become an area of immense interest for educational researchers [9,10]. It is well documented and a generally accepted notion that the rapid advancements in technology have had a dramatic effect on society, in particular influencing the way in which we communicate with each other in various aspects of our lives. Educators need to equip their students with the necessary skills that will help them adapt suitably to the contemporary technological society [11,12]. [13], refers to

students as 'DigitalNatives' because they are "all 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet" [14]. Children of this era use programs like Facebook, 'to go', e-mail etc. Since digital technology has come to stay, it is pertinent to include it within the English studies classrooms throughout Nigeria. It must be reiterated that there are basic reasons for teaching English well. One of such reasons is to acquire the necessary skills for global interaction. To achieve such skills, it is important that language education is restructured to meet the demands of the digital age [15].

THE STATUS OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA

English today is a unique international language, functionally and structurally quite different from other languages of the world. English has been accepted as a second language in Nigeria, right from the time the country was colonized by Britain. Nigerians have shown much prominence in all academic pursuits. The English language has been a crucial issue in the Nigerian education system. This is particularly so because it is an official means by which a child receives instruction in other subjects of the curriculum. It is equally the means through which a child appropriates and synthesizes the knowledge transmitted to him or her by the teacher. The status of English as the official language in Nigeria contributes to the promotion of the language in Nigeria. English as an official language has been allocated functions as the language of the media, education, politics, legal drafting, and much else. English is unrivalled as the language of wider communication in Nigeria, and will remain so unless the government makes serious changes to its national language policy. It is the language of international and intra-national interaction., as well as inter-ethnic and some intra-ethnic communication in Nigeria. The status of English in Nigeria cannot be compared with that of any other language because of the various roles it plays in our society. English is a second language to most Nigerians and yet a first language to a fraction of Nigerians. English as used in Nigeria is a variety of British English as there are some features that keep it apart from other varieties of English as spoken in the US, South Africa, Ghana, Cameroon, and a host of other capillaries. Since English was imported from Britain, it has undergone gradual modification through the process of adaptation. Its dominance in government circles in the colonial times and particularly from the 1950's to the present is undeniable. In fact, its dominance in recent times has reached a new high with the increasing impact of economic and technological globalization. Among the many languages spoken in Nigeria, English has carved out a special niche, its own class in relation to other languages. Nigeria has evolved its own variety of English that differs from those of other countries. [4], as quoted from [5] says ''that academic considerations of the status of Nigerian English (NE) have established the distinctiveness of this dialect of the language and taken perceptions of its existence beyond the realm of fiction'' [9].

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY INTEGRATION AND USE IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

In the study conducted by [12] a large majority of Canadian school principals strongly agreed that:

· ICT allows teachers to broaden and enrich the curriculum (96%);

· Overall, ICT enables the curriculum to be more challenging and enriching (93%);

· ICT enables students to go beyond the prescribed curriculum, thereby

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facilitating an increased knowledge base (p. 28).

Alamin M. Mazrui (2004) maintains that computer technology has transformed the way people interact both locally and globally. Now we are at the edge of a new era of personal and group communications. The Internet has now become the flagship of global English with changing patterns in lexicon, syntax and semantics. These patterns need to be codified and made available in some permanent published form (p.1). In most teaching and learning processes in the Nigerian classroom, the teacher tends to talk and explain a lot, and the, students tend to be passive. It happens not only because students are not eager to participate but also because they do not have any chance to use English although they are in an English-medium class [16]. This conventional teaching and learning process makes students bored and in turn can increase the hardships in their learning English. [16] also adds that students are usually bored in class and are not given the opportunity to practice what they learn, making them reluctant to talk or say anything (p. 266). Given the above, the Nigerian educational system should be restructured so as to incorporate ICT into the curriculum. ICTs can be expanded in the areas of English language so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning.This is in line with [20] observations that the world is less static, collaboration is vital, and learning is a continual process (p. 15). The current environment that students are exposed to is media rich, immediate, fast, engaging, dynamic and instant. Therefore, teachers should enable their students to acquire skills needed in this new context. Language teachers should serve as facilitators and refrain from the old methods of teaching language. In English instructions, text can be typed in, pictures can be scanned in, and voice and video can be recorded digitally. Again, interactive conversations in the classroom can be digitized. The following are the basic reasons why instructions in the English language should be digitized:

1. *Digitalization helps the students to remain focused.* It helps tremendously towards helping to sustain the attention span of the students thereby enhancing the learning process.
2. *Digitalization increases accessibility.* Digitalization helps one to have access to others in other countries or learning environments. A language instructor can easily gain access to students who are not present locally.
3. *Digitalization removes geographical barriers and saves time.* Through digitalization, geographical barriers are broken, thereby saving time for both the teacher and the students.
4. *Digitalization increases creativity and resourcefulness.* Digitalization in the teaching and learning of English increases creativity as the students can utilize the different computer programmes and applications in a resourceful way.
5. *Digitalization brings like minds together.*People in various places in the world teach similar classes, have similar students, and are working on similar projects. The Internet makes it possible for them to meet, communicate, and work on projectstogether.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ICT IN ESL CLASSROOMS

Computers are becoming increasingly important for professional careers like teaching. Bearing in mind that the primary language of the ubiquitous and all-influential internet is English,

the inclusion/integration of ICT in the teaching of English is very pertinent. The use of ICT is good for English language teaching. We must stress that success for many students in the era of globalization demands that students have 21st century skills. Students have to be able to obtain communication and critical thinking skills. Therefore, students need to be sophisticated in expressing ideas using multiple communication technologies, not just the written word. In the words of Barker (2009), the best way to keep our students interested and engaged in lessons is by making them interactive.

The following should therefore, be integrated into the teaching and learning process:

1. Digital Recorder: the digital recorder is a device that helps students to experience interactive multimedia programs while they at the same time records their own voices for practice. The use of this makes them feel as if they are actually interacting with the native speakers of the language. This software increasestheircomprehension, vocabulary and speaking skills.

2. VoiceRecognitionTechnology: This technology is integrated into the Pronunciation module of the software. There is usually a built in microphone on the computer that will help the learner to be able to repeat words he/she hears from a native speaker through computer speakers. The software will analyze the learner's pronunciation and compare a waveform representation of the native speaker's pronunciation with a waveform of their pronunciation. An accuracy scale on the screen will display their voice match to the native speaker on a scale of "Bad", "Acceptable", and "Good". The answers to the learners' utterances are usually immediate and prompt.

3. The students can equally be given a series of quizzes that can be prepared using text, graphics, video and audio materials. These quizzes are graded automatically. The computer has all the facilities needed to help students achieve communicative competence in the English language.

4. Exercises that involve the use of computers can equally be given to the students. Such exercises can dwell on word meanings/vocabulary, filling in missing information, producing written summaries, taking notes, and raising thought-provoking questions for group discussionsandbrainstorming sessions. Writing can also be practiced through typing. These are aimed at improving reading and writing skills whilesimultaneouslyincreasing students' vocabulary stock.

Computer-assisted language instruction is therefore attracting increased interest because it has several advantages, as summarized by a number of researchers like [13]:

- Computers add variety and spice to the language learning experience.
- The individualize learning. The learner is not dependent on other members of a class, but can choose the pace at which he or she progresses, control the degree of difficulty (e.g., by leaving out elements which are too easy or too difficult), decide whether and how often to repeat an exercise, and so forth.
- In Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) exercises, computers can give immediate feedback for each answer.

- Many aspects of work with computers have an interactive element which is missing in books, tapes, television, and other media.
- Students are motivated to use the computer for all types of activity (p.231). By using the computer for the presentation, explanation, and application of grammatical structures, more classroom time could be dedicated to real communication that focuses on expressing meaning and using appropriate grammatical structures to express that meaning.
- CALL is a helpful environment for student-computer interaction, providing interactive computer activities for language learning which helps learners to interact in a communicative way.
- Using computers can save teachers time and work, with routine marking, for example. That time can then be used for more creative aspects of language teaching (thus benefiting the learner).

THE ROLE OF TEACHERS AND THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING ENGLISH IN AN ERA OF DIGITALIZATION

As with most teachers of language arts, English teachers face growing pressures to meet the needs of diverse learners, both in terms of ethnicity and language and also in terms of economic and social circumstances. With this change comes the need to balance an expanding set of subject priorities, as media analysis and communication technologies receive equal emphasis with practical language skills, reading and writing, literary analysis, and oral communication. English teachers communicate to students the concepts and skills necessary to function well in situations which involve reading, writing, speaking, listening, and social skills. The English language teacher should have an intimate knowledge of the computer in order to effectively and efficiently operate it. He or she should be able to carry out the following roles:

1. Have access to a computer with an Internet connection.
2. Know how to search for information on the Web.
3. Know how to send and receive e-mail.
4. Learn how to join and participate in news groups, and find colleagues with similar interests.
6. Create, publish, and update a home page.
7. Know how to type with both hands without looking at the keyboard.
8. Be able to use PowerPoint in the teaching and learning process.Amidst the duties expected of English language teachers, vast challenges are prevalent in the digital era. There is a serious problem of financing the acquisition of informationandcommunication technology in schools.Financing computers, obtaining copies/licenses of software, purchasing, and maintaining computer technology in Nigerian schools is capital intensive. Training of teachers in the knowledge and acquisition of ICT is another challenge confronting Nigerian schools. Another challenge is for teachers to incorporate up-to-date and emerging technologies into teaching and learning experiences in an authentic manner, whilst also addressing curriculum content.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE (STRATEGIES)

Bearing in mind the multifarious merits accruing from the

integration of computers in the Nigerian school system, I propose the following strategies:

(i) Schools/Universities should be encouraged to have full English courses online. Class texts and some other instructional materials have to be available via download. Class lectures should be available via streaming audio and video, and students and teachers expected to interact via e-mail and online teleconferences.

(ii) There should be a review of policy formulation with regard to language development in English versus Nigerian languages in line with Nigeria's educational, socio-economic and technological development objectives. To achieve the goal of technology integration, [12] assert that "No important impact can be expected when the same old activity is carried out with a technology that makes it a bit faster or easier; the activity itself has to change, and such a change cannot take place in a cultural vacuum" (p. 8).

(iii) The conventional method of teaching should be restructured. Again, today's students need English teachers who have the

computer knowledge and skill to facilitate their participation in collaborative, computer-based learning.

(iv) Every student needs one-on-one access to computers and other mobile technology in classrooms.

(v) Every teacher needs professional development in the effective use of digital tools for teaching and learning, including the use of digital tools to promote writing.

(vi) All schools and districts need a comprehensive information technology policy to ensure that the necessary infrastructure, technical support and resources are available for teaching and learning.

(vii) Routine and regular training workshops, seminars as well as courses for English language teachers in current and emerging trends in the use and applications of computers are absolutely necessary.

(viii) There should be effective and regular monitoring and appraisal impact of educational policy implementation as regards computer use and application in English language teaching, learning, and research.

CONCLUSION

The indispensability of technology as a tool in English language education cannot be doubted. This is just as true in the area of economic and development policies as in other areas. It can be employed in the teaching and learning of English throughout Nigeria. In this study, therefore, the writer has explored the problems and prospects of English language teaching in an era of digitalization. The writer equally examined the role of teachers regarding challenges in the integration of ICT in English language teaching and learning. Such new approaches can help to promote students' achievement of communicative competence in English by using ICT to solve pedagogicalproblems.

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