

English Studies in Igbo Land: The Impact of the Covid-19 Menace in Orlu and Awka

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Abstract

Teaching is a sine-qua-non of human existence on earth as human beings are taught from the cradle for survival. Hence, the teaching of English language is a bedrock of communication and the medium of social relation in every modern and developing society. English like every other language is associated with numerous challenges. The brain behind this research is to investigate the factors influencing the teaching and learning of the English in the Covid-19 era in selected secondary schools in the Orlu and Awka parts of Igbo land with their accompanying remedies. Some of the factors associated with the teaching and learning of English language can be linked to the inefficiency of teachers, a high influx of unfamiliar words into the lexicon of the language, disinterestedness posed by economic instability, retrenchment of English language teachers, unqualified teachers, time streaming and shift in timing of classes. The data for this study are collected through questionnaires and oral interviews. Up to one hundred questionnaires were administered. Our investigation reveals that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has an adverse effect on the teaching and learning of the English language in this part of the world. It also poses a serious setback in the performance of students on the language during examinations which is a prerequisite for their further studies. This work also reveals that the setback experienced in English language teaching/learning adversely affects the interaction of students with their contemporaries and subsequently, stunts the growth and development of the Igbo students for individual and national development.

Keywords: National development, Covid-19, English

Introduction

Language is a method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of word in a structured and conventional way. It can also be seen as a system of communication used by a particular community. This is a feature every human being is associated with. Language affects all areas of human activities as it provides a base for interactions and serves as a tool in solving the problems of man in the areas of science and technology, health, religion, education, politics to mention but a few. Scholars like Sapir (1921) define language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires utilizing voluntarily produced symbols. Going further, Anagbogu et al (2010) define language as a means by which human beings have devised for themselves for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires etc. through complex vocal or written symbols. For them, language is normally a learnt system of symbols and other complexities which every fluent speaker must go through just as we have in the English Language. Asiyanbola (2012) adds that language is “a human vocal noise or the graphical representation of that noise used systematically and conventionally by a group of people in a community”. This definition is encompassing as it goes further to enumerate the characteristics of language which is its nature of belonging to a speech community and has an agreed set of symbols.

Ipso facto scholars like Bamgbose (1971:35-48) classify all the languages in Nigeria to be 450 and the 2005 Ethnologic data, 521 indigenous languages, the English language stands out as the official form. Little wonder Igboanusi and Peter (2005:11) in Dada (2010) aver that, in Nigeria, the dominance of English is overwhelming in practically all domains: government and administration, education, the mass media, the parliament, the judiciary (excluding Sharia courts and customary courts), science and technology and literary creativity. It is also a language of interethnic communication. English language as a foreign and second language, occupy a unique place in the Nigeria education system because of its significance in our national life. In spite of its colonial origin, it has become over the years the language of official business and vital link language between the various ethnic groups in the country as well as at the international level.

The Advent of English Language in Nigeria

According to Taiwo (2009), English as a foreign language had its way in Nigeria as far back as the 16th and early 17th century with the arrival of the British merchants who traded on slaves and the Christian missionaries who were settled in Badagry and Calabar. For the Christian missionaries, their interest was to help the people get closer to God and introduce them to God as they were pagans at that time; hence, the need to get a language of instruction for their religious needs. Basically, the people started with learning how to read the bible in English and from there they became competent and the language was established. It was following this incident that Bishop Ajayi Crowther translated the bible which was in English language to the Yoruba language.

After the British colonization, English became the official language in Nigeria. Furthermore, there was need for these missionaries to found schools in the quest to get the western education. The National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1997 which was revised in 1981 and 2004 states that English language will be used for the first three years of primary school as the language of instruction. This prescribes that the students in the junior secondary school will have to take the English language and two Nigerian languages as language subjects.

Today, English language performs myriads of function even as it extends to the health sector with the translation of sophisticated machine languages to English just like the case of most psycholinguistic machines and others used for medical computing which are translated to help humanity. In the aspect of creative writing, some writers like Chimee Adioha, Ukamaka Olisakwe, Roy Ubaka, Adachioma Ezeano, Chibuihe Obi and others who do not have their L1 as English have influenced and contributed to English literature over the years. Also, in the entertainment industry especially that of the film industry, English language has been explored widely and developed the industry for a wider audience.

The Post Covid-19 Era

Following the coronavirus pandemic, the world had to adapt to so many changes caused by the pandemic. In fact, the pandemic brought about “transformation”. Meanwhile, the problem of mass failure of students in English language has been a universal one as it cuts across all other parts of Nigeria but became worse after the pandemic. This study will focus on discussing the negative impact of the pandemic in the learning of English language, particularly in the Awka and Orlu parts of the South Eastern Nigeria. The problem has been a concern to “education patriots” of both cities and an issue that needs a thorough analysis and prompt action by the government (Federal Ministry of Education) and other stakeholders, parents and the general public to avert. In Nigeria, we refer to such situations as students’ mass failure. Hitherto, the researchers try to illuminate the causes and suggest remedies. The next section looks at different concepts associated with the learning of English as a second language in Nigeria.

Review of Relevant Literature

This section reviews related literature on the topics presented under the following headings.

1. (a) The concept of language
(b) The role of language in Nigeria education
(c) The effects of students’ background on their English language
2. The secondary school English language curriculum
3. Language policy making and planning
4. Some studies in English learning.

The Concept of Language

Language consists of all meaningful sounds, words and possible sentences which are basic to all communication the world over. It is through communication that we pass information from one person to another; Our ideals, feelings, knowledge, and request- indeed, every aspect of human life Awoniyi (1983:321).

Language is important in the political, economic, social, religious and educational activities in the country. Language therefore remains the content that holds the curriculum together. English language currently is the most widely spoken and written language worldwide with about 380 million native speakers. Awoniyi (1983:322).

The Role of English Language in the Nigerian Educational System

The role of English language in the Nigerian Educational system means the importance of English language in the Nigerian Educational system. Nigerian students studying English aim at acquiring five basic skills.

Understand the language

Speak the language

Read books in the language and

Write in the language. Ayodele et.al (1995:19)

English to Nigerians is a second language and the nation's official language. According to Williams (1990:19), language usage maybe considered fewer than three different plans.

Conventional Usage

Transactional Usage

Institutional Usage

i. **Conventional Usage:** This means following the opinions and behavior that most people in the society consider to be normal, good and acceptable. To live and enjoy life in a society, there is need to learn and understand, then make the conventional use of the language in that community.

ii. **Transactional Usage:** In this wise, it is only meant to be used for business purpose and transactions.

Communicative language use have their formula for buying and selling in the market, posting letters at post office, sending mails, chatting, withdrawing money from banks, boarding of flight at the airport, buying of beverages at the minimart etc. with

appropriateness of usage, communication can lead to better understanding in business administration.

iii. Interactional Usage: This is meant for the day-to-day activities that ensure communication among people. Most of our encounters are relational rather than transactional because we are not always on business trips. We therefore, compulsorily talk about the weather, greet friends, ask about the health conditions of our colleagues and neighbors etc.

Again, English language education inculcates and develops four basic language skills in learner in order for him/her to be competent in the use of the language, both in oral and written communication. These skills are receptive language skills and writing skills.

English language education starts from kindergarten through primary school where the language is taught as a school subject in the curriculum like any other subject in the secondary school. Where the English language subject is accorded two important positions in the curriculum as a core subject and as a medium of instruction.

Therefore, all the learners must have to receive English education especially in order to be able to learn other subjects in the curriculum.

In addition, at the tertiary level, English language retains an enviable position as an important subject and a medium of instruction with a new nomenclature such as use of English and communication skills. Therefore, for any student to be successful in his/her career, irrespective of whatever he/she is studying, he /she must be proficient in the language. Those who could not pass it in SSCE find it difficult to further their education. Some end up practically as drop outs. In the same vein, those who could not pass the subject at the tertiary level end up not graduating.

Language in policy making and planning

Bamgbose (2003), on the reality of language policy in planning opines that language is a reoccurring decimal in that it is used in all facets of planning both in Nigeria and in other parts of the world. According to him, the prominence of language maybe due to a number of factors such as population, prestige, status, functionality and nationality etc.

Educational background of a student

- a) The quality of English that the parents speak to their children affects their proficiency, the children will learn to speak intelligible English too.
- b) The extent to which parents emphasize correct usage of the language matters. It is the duty of parents to instantly and always correct mistakes in their children's use of English. Parents should make it a priority to patiently correct their children's usage.
- c) To enlarge vocabulary and increase student's general proficiency in English, they should be provided with adequate motivational materials like libraries, internet access and other supplements to reading readiness.
- d) Physical surroundings especially at home should be conducive for learning for instance, a dirty environment will not only disturb a child's ill health but will also affect his or her learning.

Dada (1999), holds the view that performance is realization of competence (what you do with language) and that it is a performance that can be used to determine the level of goals reached in language learning.

Attitude to English language are distinguished from other attitudes by fact that they are precisely about language. Attitudes to English language also include attitude towards speaker of the language, Grejean (1982)

The Economic background of the student

It is important to note that a second language as a skill can only be learnt and not inherited. Hence, the economic background from which a student comes from must encourage the student towards the learning of English language.

Social Background of Student

Parents have a great influence on learner's performance in school. Their efforts range from the influence they exert on learners unconsciously to those deliberately inculcated. Most parents dictate to their children on the subjects they should study very hard.

Abiola (1985) and Obeneta (1996) agree that the intelligent and thus the achievement of learners increase with improved social status of parent's a great deal of parents affects their children's performance by setting unrealistic goals for them. Some parents choose course of study for their children without considering whether they children have the potential and suitable environment required for effective performance in such courses. In many Nigerian homes where the only medium of communication is their indigenous language, students often are not afforded the opportunity to practically improve on the English taught to them at school. Parents in such homes should make concerted effort to minimize this disadvantage, knowing the importance of the reverse case. They could do this by sending their children to extramural classes and by consciously encouraging their use of English language among other children.

The Secondary School English Language Curriculum

In spite of the other languages existing in Nigeria, English language came into Nigerian through the foreign traders dominated by English people who later became the colonial masters and ruled the country from 1914-1960. English became the official language of trade and socialization. It is for these reasons that English language has become prominent in the school system in Nigeria.

Tiffen (1969:7) argues that the child growing in English speaking Africa is surrounded by a complex language situation. Far beside having to master his own and often a second or third indigenous language, he also requires a thorough (good) command of

English language if he is to be educated in modern sense of the world. With these difficulties notwithstanding, English language continues to dominate the school curriculum. Tiffen (1968:8) in this regard claims that if the speaker is to understand and be understood, he must be within the general accepted norms of English, from point of view of pronunciation and grammatical usage. English language dominates the school curriculum right from the nursery school up to the university level. This therefore shows that English language as one of the subjects recognized in school presently, covers about 6-8 periods every week on the school timetable.

Some Studies in English language teaching in Nigeria

Dozie et al (2019) carried out an evaluation on emerging trends in written English among university students in South Eastern Nigeria with a focus on the students. The aim was to find out the degree to which students use emerging trends in their handwritten academic work using a three stage random sampling. Questionnaires were also administered to facilitators at the Imo state University, Owerri. The researchers discover that there are emerging trends and a very high frequency as they graded scripts while identifying the causes of usage as poor learning in English, social media influence and just conforming to the trend. The study revealed how facilitators frequently give corrections to their students by adopting different methods like giving assignments, essays. Finally, the study recommends a hands-on approach on the correctness of grammar.

In further research, Ibrahim (2018) investigated the factors affecting effective learning of English language learning among undergraduate students in North-West Nigeria which was survey design based. The aim of the research was to fish out the lecturers' role and students effective learning of English and also, the relationship between students and teachers. The conclusion by Ibrahim is that an awareness program should be flagged off on the salient role of lecturers on the language learning by undergraduate students and even in the wider society. The next section gives a rundown on the method adopted by the researchers for the research.

Research Method

In an attempt to get data relevant for this research, questionnaires were designed and administered in four schools as the research is purely quantitative based. The area used by the researchers for the study is Orlu and Awka zones, two in Orlu and two in Awka. Orlu is a popular local government area of Imo state while Awka is the capital of Anambra state. The questionnaires were shared to students and teachers of the schools. The states of both cities have a common boundary. The people of Orlu are predominantly civil servants and a few traders with a number of them who are subsistent farmers. In Awka, with the level of urbanization and number of higher institutions, there are only very few farmers. In Awka, almost 90% of the population, is civil/public servants and few traders too. Marist International Secondary School, Owerre-Ebeiri and Community Secondary school, Owerre-Ebeiri were visited for Orlu and the Redeemers' High School and Unizik high School were visited. For Awka.

Four major themes were selected as identified in the abstract. They were represented and analyzed in a table following a detailed discussion.

Rationale for Study

For a balanced data, some schools are private/mission owned and the others owned by the government. Up to twenty-five students were given the questionnaires for the two schools in Awka and twenty each for the schools in Orlu. This is attributed to factors like population and differences in urbanization.

Data Analysis

This section deals with the collection and interpretation of data collected from the questionnaires issued to both students and teachers in the above mentioned secondary schools. A total number of 102 copies were distributed. 94 copies were given to students and 8 to teachers.

Table 1: Qualification of teachers

S/No	Qualifications	Number Available	Percentage (%)
1	Graduates	8	100%
2	NCE	Nil	Nil
3	Others	Nil	Nil
	Total	8	100%

From the table above, it could be observed that 100% of the teachers in the schools who responded to the questionnaires are qualified secondary school teachers both for the junior and senior sections. Therefore, we could posit that they are qualified but are few in number. They can't meet up to the standard and serve the needs of the students. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, most of these schools had some teachers retrenched. A French teacher who teaches the English language was disallowed by the researchers to attend to the questionnaires. This is exactly what happens in other schools. Some people claim to be qualified while they are not. As solution, the government can advertise for the recruitment of English teachers and even in other fields.

Table 2: Efficiency of teachers in the post-covid-19 era

S/No.	Teaching Appraisal	Number Available	Percentage (%)
1.	Positive	36	38.29%
2.	Negative	56	59.57%
3.	Void	2	2.12%
4.	Total	94	100%

The table shows the minds of the students so far from their experiences since the outbreak of the novel corona virus pandemic in Orlu and Awka to be precise. The teachers have changed their teaching methods for so many reasons like the reduced periods of class. Some schools used to have English language class almost every day but the story has changed today owing to the pandemic. This is what the ministry should look into. It can be observed that what the students are taught here is not and cannot be enough for their final school certificate exams.

Table 3: Disinterestedness

S/No.	Interest	Number available	Percentage
1	Morning	67	71.27%
2.	Afternoon	5	5.31%
3.	Both	22	23.40
4.	Total	94	100%

Having represented the figures of the findings, the interest of the students seems to have been shifted. According to the table, majority of them love to have the class in the morning for the situation on ground. Some of the schools visited by the researchers disclosed that they have some classes in the afternoon to cover up. Now, when the subject is taught, so many will be disinterested in learning. It's just like teaching Mathematics in the afternoon. This may be a reason for their poor performance visited, there, the English teacher was from the French discipline.

Table 4: Provision of books

S/No	Books	Number available	Percentage %
1.	Yes	66	70.2%
2.	No	28	29.78%
3.	Total	94	100%

Recommendations

The government and owners of these institutions have done well by providing the necessary books required by the student for the language subject even now that the economy is shaky. It is pertinent to note that the 29.78% response came from those in the government owned institutions as the government does not pay attention to the books used by students. The ministry should mark out funds to provide free books that can be shared to the students; books like dictionaries, encyclopaedia, thesaurus and even foreign texts like Longman and others. These books should not just be used as a status symbol for decoration in the libraries. This step can be beneficial to those in the public school.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the learning of English language as a second language in Orlu and Awka is facing a trying time and not up to standard in these towns. This gives rise to so many anomalies we experience in the regions today. However, further findings show that the government and even private owners lack qualified and efficient staff strength for the job. The high influx of unfamiliar words has also affected the students' performance as the teachers don't perform as expected. The post covid era stands to be significant in this regard as the economic instability has drastically affected the interest of these students. In addition, the streaming of the time table due to the pandemic as pointed out by some students has also worsened the situation as some private owners of these educational institutions also retrenched their English language teachers because they can't afford to pay experts. This was very well portrayed in one of the schools the researchers visited.

From the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

- Teachers should try their best to attend classes, create conducive atmosphere for the students, apply all teaching methods relevant to the learning of English as a second language and try to do their job with happiness.
- Again, teachers should try to always update their knowledge of the new words in the English language lexicon. On the other hand, the government should provide these updated linguistics text books that handle lexicographic topics and dictionaries. Some of the schools attested that the school owners don't provide textbooks for the students. In our today post covid era, there are many unfamiliar words.
- Parents and stakeholders, are not excluded in this assignment, parents of these students should also try to provide textbooks for their children, engage in discussions in the family using English as the code, as this is done constantly, the children will be getting familiar with the language.
- Qualified teachers should only be allowed to teach the English language to avoid worsening of the situation.
- Enlightenment programs should be organised from time to time on the importance of English language by secondary schools especially for schools in the rural areas. This can also be done during the moral instructions also, if the management cannot organise one. On the part of the government, the ministries and other agencies in charge of education, seminars and workshops can be organised for more trainings specifically targeted at the language teachers. The teachers confirmed that they don't receive any.
- All education policy makers should review the languages taught to school children in schools.

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