A Review of Challenges That Teachers Face in the Teaching of English Language

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews some factors that constitute significant challenges to effective teaching and learning of English language. Below-average performance of candidates in virtually all subjects in certificate examinations conducted by the different accredited examining bodies is a token symptom of the deplorable level of literacy among students. These daunting constraints notwithstanding, the teacher of English is under great pressure to *"deliver"*. While some of these factors are outside the teacher's control, there are those for which he must take responsibility. At the end, some measures are suggested to help make teaching and learning of English language more effectively to improve public literacy and enhance nation building.
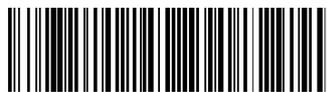
INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that teaching and learning of English Language, like many other subjects, is facing considerable challenges, both from within the teaching corpus and influences external to the school system. Ironically, effectiveness of the teacher's input is measured by the failure rate of candidates at public examinations, leaving the poor teacher bereft of any shred of public sympathy.

Aina (2009) argues that the quality of any school system is a function of the quality of its teaching personnel. Logical as this may sound, there is, nevertheless, a 'ceteris paribus' to the statement: if everything is equal, the teacher will plow back some of his quality into the educational system where he is chief operator.

In this paper, the writers draw attention to some constraints that impose significant stress on present day teaching and learning of English language and suggest measures that may be considered as solutions to enable the teacher make his modest contribution to national development.

Challenges to Teaching of English Language

- **Lack of quality out-of-school reinforcement**

Close (1962), argues that for language learning to be effective, it is necessary for the principles learnt in school to be reinforced by learner's out-in-school experiences. Unfortunately, the teacher has no control over these out-of-school experiences; many homes lack capacity to provide the child with opportunity to apply or practice the concepts and principles learnt in school. The teacher now has to cope with teaching and managing students with diverse literacy experiences and entry behavior (Hart & Risley, 1995). This is because of the changing nature of the learner and the learning environment. Some students enter school with thousands of hours of exposure to books (and internet) and an appreciable wealth of oral language experiences, while other children begin school with very limited and impoverished knowledge of print and spoken language. High level of illiteracy, erosion of family cohesion (resulting in reduced or complete absence of supervision at the home level) and other socio-economic factors have ensured that school time is about the only opportunity learners have to be "steeped in English-speaking environment" to experience the language in action (Close, 1962)

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- **Death or near-death of Literature as a school subject**

The rapidly declining popularity of literature in English as a school subject has significantly increased pressure on the teacher of English in his assignment. It is difficult too to understand why some subjects inclusive of literature have fallen on bad times, even though literature is a requirement for careers in Law and Mass Communication. These are courses that attract hundreds of thousands of United Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME) candidates every year in Nigeria. There is no gainsaying that Literature and the written text offer the best opportunity for learners of a language to see the language in operation, to see it used in context.

Very subtle, hair-line variations in meaning and emphasis of expression are best shown across the three major genres of poetry, prose and drama/play, which no human teacher can bring out with equal effectiveness (Williams, 2004; Eshiotse, 2014). It is believed that Literature, as a subject, is only an unlucky casualty of the undisguised aversion of today's learner for the written text, whether in hard or soft copy. It appears to be a generational phenomenon: if the book will not fit into the back pocket of a student's jean trouser, then it is obviously a burden (Eshiotse, 2014). The teacher of English, thus, has lost the complementary service of Literature in illustrating the principles and practice of linguistic and communicative competence.

- **New Technologies and Learning**

Information and communication technology has immeasurably impacted content and procedure of knowledge, especially in the 21st century. The 2011 National policy on Information Technology prepared the ground for integration of ICT in the Nigerian school system. Also, the reviewed National policy on Education acknowledges the benefits of e-education. According to Gulati (2008), learning, using technologies, has become a global phenomenon; when ICT is used to foster a rich learning environment, meaningful experiences are created that contribute to a person's growth and development (El-Khawas, *et al,* 2003).

The existence of ICT has taken some aspects of learning out of the classroom, making face-to-face, chalkboard learning inadequate to prepare learners for today's workplace challenges. Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and other trendy social networks have piled the greatest pressure on the teacher of English. The learner may be physically present in

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class, but he is actually in a chat-room, carrying on an exciting engagement with 'friends' across dispersed locations in the universe. Seizure of handsets and other dire punitive measures have not deterred these students. According to Fryer (2001), "our students have changed radically today students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach". The phenomenon has created a situation in which teachers, 'digital immigrants', teach students, many of whom are 'digital natives'.

Often, according to Azuike (2014), 'it is the students who are in the vanguard of technological curiosity unfortunately, some of their teachers are not so computer-wise and prefer to wallow and grope in electronic anachronism in this case, the blind cannot lead the sighted.' Explaining further, Raji-Oyelade (2014) identifies two kinds of teachers who must urgently do something to fit them into current trend of teaching and learning.

'Digital Rufuseniks': these are 'those who, out of their own determine indifference, fail to process, adopt or appropriate the facility and tools of the digital age' to enliven teaching and learning, and 'Digital Refugees'….. 'those who are technologically impaired or incapacitated'.

Complicating this vexations factor is the teachers' inability to accommodate the learner's new hyper-active orientation to learning within his (teacher's) inflexible and out-dated principles and practice of teaching. Added to this is the fact that, most often, because of lack of training and re-training opportunities for the teacher of English Language, his teaching repertoire hardly grows beyond the level with which he first carne with teaching. In other words, the only training the teacher of English brings into his class is that he received while in college! He ends up with his "yellow notes" and out-dated methods to prepare learners for life in the 21st century! Research has shown that Pedagogical roles have been found for YouTube, Facebook and other like social networks which the teacher of English must be familiar with to retain his position as effective facilitator of learning.

- **Existence of Open Education Resources (OERs)**

OERs are carefully researched learning materials generously deposited online for interested users. Access to these materials which cover virtually the entire gamut of knowledge is open and at no cost to users, provided their use is acknowledged. The import of the availability of OERs is that there is now no need for the teacher to 're-invent the wheel' of learning content, as these materials are authoritative, current and only a 'click' away. Painfully, many teachers

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of English and Literature are unaware of the existence of OERs because of either lack of ICT competency, or unreasonable suspicion of technology.

Consequently, the teacher need not waste his time, resources and efforts to concoct what to teach; he only needs to get and plan how to use these available materials.

- **Contributions of Globalization**

True to Marshall McLuhan's 'prophecy', the world, indeed, has become a 'global village.' According to Redmond (2007) and Tabb (2008), globalization is a comprehensive term for the emergence of a global community in which events in one part of the world quickly come to have significance for people in other parts of the world.

There is now mounting pressure on the teacher too produces learners who can perform, with very minimal adjustment, on the global stage. This is because, along with technological advances, globalization has altered the face of labour market (Dimon and Selzer, 2014). Unfortunately, the rising expenditure that employers of labour incur on re-training of their recruits to make them serviceable is a sad commentary on the quality of products of Nigerian school system. While British English still dictates (or influences) standard of usage in Nigeria, globalization has brought in other competing varieties or Englishes (Azuike, 2014). Coupled with this is the issue of culture content of curriculum of English Language in Nigerian schools. The selection of suitable content that should prepare students to be able to function effectively in the global cultural community becomes an issue for the teachers of English.

- **Organized Examination Misconduct**

A direct consequence of Nigerian's unabashed glorification of paper certification is the existence of the monster of organized examination misconduct. Driven by Machiavelli's (in) famous maxim that the end justifies the means, Nigerians spare no effort or means to ensure that their children and wards pass at distinction levels, whether it is in routine internal or public examinations. This canker-worm permeates all level of education. A colleague once reported of a woman who bought snacks for a teacher too help the little son come first in his KG One Class!

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Government has failed to control this malady because it also stands indicted. Its ministries, department and agencies, and the private sector continue to exclude candidates who hold certificate at pass levels other than good honors degree or Upper Credit from recruitment exercise. Today, a good number of products of Nigerian education system cannot write "Original copy received by me" without assistance, even though they flaunt intimidating results!

Thus, the reality of massive examination misconduct continues to vitiate and subvert even the best efforts of the teacher of English, making it possible to measure the effectiveness of his teaching style and delivery methods, since with or without his help, the student passes English at credit level.

- **The Teacher**

The teacher of English himself is a factor in the quality of learning his students manifest. Because of the challenge of retaining social relevance, he now appears to invest more in tangible material acquisition, at the expense of intellectual development. Driven by the desire to divest of the garment of perpetual poverty hitherto associated with teaching, he enlists in the rat race for acquisition of material possession. Much of learning at tertiary education level today is steeped in undisguised, unethical practices which have given birth to expressions such as 'blocking', 'sorting' and other metaphors of corruption. At the end, the teacher is hardly a model of the skills, competences and fidelity he is supposed to embody.

Also, the fear of job loss has forced many a teacher of English to aid and abet examination misconduct in the very subject he teaches. Majorly, pressure arises from the sole item in the teacher's unwritten performance contract that he record 100% success (or close to it) in relevant public examinations. Thus, he is driven to acts that jar against the dictates of good conscience, just to keep his job, and possibly save his life, to the bargain! The malady is akin to the odious and reprehensible acts of men who succumb to depravity to the point of exercising no qualms over uncovering the nakedness of their own daughters!

- **Pidgin English**

The exercise of Pidgin English as an open (and more popular?) alternative to Standard English will continue to confound every effort made to teach the subject. What is more, to validate this new status, national news is now available in pidgin, much of popular

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contemporary music is composed in pidgin, plays are acted in pidgin, religious homilies are presented in pidgin, and much of social intercourse is conducted in pidgin. Given this reality, the question now is: which is the demon that must be exorcised? Pidgin or Standard English?

- **Large Classes**

By no means is a big constraint to effective teaching of English Language the reality of large classes in the Nigerian school system, especially at the tertiary level. Except on election campaign grounds, the very sight of a large crowd strangulates pedagogical creativity. How can the teacher be effective when he has to teach students in their hundreds? Even when he knows that essay writing offers very reliable appraisal of students' diction, spelling, punctuation, creativity, sentence structure, etc, he would rather not use it because of hundreds of scripts that the exercise will generate. This is why many essay assignments end up not being graded!

CONCLUSION

Learning is a dynamic process; operators of the system, especially teachers, need to always stay connected to be effective and relevant. Some of the factors that negatively impact teaching and learning of English language are outside the control of the teacher, but there are those he can manage in order to mitigate their collateral effect on the teaching of his subject and enhance national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The teaching of English Language can be more result-oriented if:

- Not only government but also schools implement programmes aimed at raising the pride, self-esteem and dignity of teachers through training and re-training (Ossai, 2001)

- Governments, therefore, should invest in training and re-training of teachers to update content and method mastery so that they can model the competences they teach.

- Teachers of English should, as a matter of priority, invest in further personal knowledge acquisition to help them retain relevance in the task of helping learners acquire relevant linguistic and communicative competency.

- Teachers of English need to embrace ICT as an inevitability and integrate it in teaching

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- Government must play a leading role in promoting 'doing' competency over paper certification; this is the only device that can break the stranglehold of organized examination fraud over Nigeria's education system.

- Teachers of English need to subscribe to the noble ideals and ethics of teaching so that they can bequeath a worthy legacy to the next generation.

- The immediate solution to the challenge of large classes is recruitment of more qualified teachers of English so as to bring the teacher-student ratio down to something manageably effective.

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