

# TOWARDS THE IMPROVEMENT OF THE USE-OF-ENGLISH SYLLABUSES BY THE ENHANCEMENT OF READING CONTENT

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## **Abstract**

Use of English and Communications courses are part of the curriculum of virtually all tertiary education programs in Nigeria. The need for such courses is especially relevant in a country like Nigeria where the language of instruction at the tertiary level is a second language in which students' proficiency levels are often disappointing. In this paper an attempt is made to make relevant generalizations about the effectiveness or otherwise of existing approaches to the teaching of these courses, concluding that the existing situation falls short of expectation. The paper proceeds to take a look at relevant scholarly insights into the teaching of English as a second language, and drawing from these, prescribe emphasis on reading as the only viable alternative, in view of the problems identified.

## **Introduction**

The teaching of English language courses has become a permanent feature of all or at least, most courses or programmes in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The compulsory teaching of such courses, of course, is necessitated by the need to enhance the competence of the students in English -the sole language of instruction at the tertiary level in Nigeria. It is clear that this imperative is made more pressing because English is a second language for the overwhelming majority of those studying in institutions of higher learning in Nigeria.

It is very obvious that in recent times, there has been a decline in the ability of our students to communicate effectively either in written or oral media, regardless of what kind of pass in English they came in with. Also, some considerable degree of drop in communicative ability is also obvious among many graduates of our institutions regardless of whether they passed our English and communication courses. Obviously, the low quality of intakes from secondary school must be the dominant factor operating in this situation. However, when we consider the fact that our Use- of -English and communication courses are supposed to serve as opportunities for communicative skills improvement, especially for academic and post-graduation occupational purposes, we need to assess and take stock of our methods. In this regard the frank question, which we need to sincerely address, is whether our efforts are yielding the desired result. It is the belief of this writer that the answer to this question must be negative in view of what we can easily discover from the general observation of our students and the products of our academic programmes. Where there is a problem with the products, we must, among other things, scrutinise our methods. In the words of Cook (1991) "the proof of the teaching is in the learning" (P.3)

In view of the above, this paper summarizes problems with the objectives and the content of most use of English courses, with additional insights into problems associated with the teaching methods. Thereafter, an attempt is made to give insights into past and present approaches to language teaching (especially second language teaching) and, drawing from these, the paper brings in the relevance of reading. General insights are also given into the salient question of selection of materials for a reading programme.

This paper does not contain the technical nitty-gritty of syllabus design. It is simply an attempt to provide food for thought aimed at forming a general theoretical background for the subsequent design of relevant syllabuses for Use of English course in our institutions of higher learning

## **The Use of English Syllabus: Contemporary Trends**

**In** our introduction we briefly explained the fact that the imperative for Use of English courses in tertiary institutions arises from the need to sharpen the students' ability to communicate effectively in an academic setting and in their post-graduation endeavours. However, there are some general issues we need to understand concerning the situation we have in Nigeria.

The typical Use of English syllabus is designed with the general assumption that the tertiary institution student must have successfully undergone a "General English" programme at the secondary school level. Metiboba (1988) explains that this "General English" is believed to be the one given at secondary school starting with the beginner and bringing them hopefully to a reasonable competence in all areas of the English language. The scholar explains that at this stage the learners' specific purpose hardly ever arise (P. 13)

The- Use- of- English syllabus on the other hand tilts more, though not absolutely, towards a special purpose syllabus. The perspective of the special purpose syllabus designer is based on academic and professional needs. When we consider the perspective of Metiboba (1988) in his prelude to the presentation of a model special purpose syllabus for technology students this position comes out clearly. According to the scholar:

...It is hoped that the students have done a general course at school and now as young adults, they wish to extend or apply the competence they have acquired to one particular field of study (occupation) or the other (P. 13)

This kind of thinking sums up the theoretical foundation of syllabuses that are either wholly special purpose or partly so, such as most Use- of -English syllabuses. Contemporary realities, however, prompt one to conclude that the kind of assumption in Metiboba (88) has become a rather dangerous one. The reality today is that a substantial number of those coming into our institutions these days do not have the appropriate foundation to cope with the take off point of our courses. Usually, you achieve very little when building on a faulty foundation. This issue, as we shall see, is fundamental to the proposals raised in this paper. But in the main time, we shall consider some other related shortcomings of existing situations such as syllabus content and teaching approach and methods.

The details of the content of Use of English courses vary across the categories of institution. However, the items common to most include, essay writing, correspondence, aspects of grammar, reading comprehension, summary and note making skills, aspect of oral production, vocabulary development, punctuation and mechanics, literary appreciation, reasoning skills, report writing and so on.

Whether or not formal processes of need analysis have been carried out to determine the inclusion of items in the various syllabuses, it seems safe to assume that these syllabuses are based of the perceived academic and occupational needs. Of course such needs are crucial. But the question that arises is this: are these the dominant needs of contemporary higher institution students today? In view of the drastic drop in the abilities of new intakes into our institution, it may no longer be appropriate to think mainly in terms of the need for specific academic or post-graduation vocational or occupation purposes. It seems that there is now a need to adopt appropriate means that can make the acquisition of general competence a continuing one that will be guided in the instructional environment. As we shall see, our view is that enhancing the reading content of syllabuses can help to a large extent to achieve this. Details are however discussed later.

### **The Instructional Philosophy**

The teaching method usually adopted in the teaching of Use of English courses in our tertiary institutions is the traditional classroom method. Here, we refer NOT to the fact that instructions take place in the classroom setting but to the teaching style that appears to assume that it is possible for people to pick up language skills while being instructed on rules of grammar and other related principles.

Commenting on the issue of teaching methods (albeit in reference to secondary schools) Ihezubor (1992) puts this issue clearly and his comment relates quite appropriately to what obtains even at the tertiary level. The said scholar explains that:

The method currently being adopted in implementing language curricula in Nigeria leans more to the traditional grammar based approach. Thus, the classroom method is strongly at variance with the stated objectives and recommended methods of most language curricula in Nigeria. They are also

largely anachronistic since language-teaching methodology has now strongly swung in favour of the communicative methodology with a de-emphasis on concentration on grammar. Most books by Nigerian authors on language teaching methods appear also to lean heavily in favour of a traditional grammar based approach (P. 129).

The above comment reflects a general orientation, which we seem to have grown up with such that many people are not even aware of alternative approaches. This error is a major problem with the teaching of Use of English in our tertiary institutions.

Apart from being relatively unrewarding, this teaching method mentioned above has a detrimental effect on students' attitude to English courses as it is difficult to sustain learners' interest with the classroom method. It is important for teachers of Use-of-English courses to have a proper grounding in matters of approach and methodology. Ignorance in this regard seems to be the real issue in the continued use of the traditional approach (Odejic, 2002).

For the purpose of enlightenment, therefore, effort is made here to give an overview of the communicative approach to language teaching with a view to proving its contemporary acceptance and relevance to this paper.

### **The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching**

The communicative approach to language teaching is really not a brand new concept. It actually began to evolve in the early 70's as a consequence of the shift in emphasis from the internal structure of sentence to the overall realization of meaning (Melrose, 1995) Prior to this development, the traditional grammarians under the influence of Leonard Bloomfield emphasized structure, which inevitably led to the assumption that it was possible to teach language skills by breaking down language to immediate constituents and then teaching these to learners.

Chomsky's transformational generative grammar came up later but it also emphasized structure until 1965 when Chomsky came up with an improvement on his ideas. This was published in *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. This work emphasized the meaning component and generated greater interest in the realization of meaning. This new awareness encouraged many early 70's scholars to show interest in aspects of meaning, which often goes beyond what can be broken down into constituents on a chalkboard.

Based on these new dimensions, new teaching approaches emerged which were variously called functional, notional, or functional/notional approaches. These were the early forms of communicative approaches to language which were concretized in 1972 at the Congress of Applied Linguistics in Copenhagen. Scholars such as M. A. K. Halliday took off on this note, coming up with the systemic functional grammar, which emphasized context of situation. This dimension, which seemed to have a sociolinguistic focus, was essentially popularized by Dell Hymes who, according to Melrose (1995) developed the concept of communicative competence which look the issue of learning right to the level of communicative context, thereby emphasizing how competence is developed in the context of language use.

This idea was further developed by J.L Austen whose pioneering work in the area of speech acts further opened peoples eyes to the essence of behavioural and sociological aspect of linguistic communication, thereby limiting scholars' focus on structure of sentences and utterances. All these must have informed the publication of what Melrose (1995) describes as "the first modern communicative syllabus in 1976 by David Wilkins. In Wilkins' publication, (*National Syllabus*) a critique of the traditional approach is strongly made. This Melrose (1995) sums up thus:

His (Wilkins) main criticism of grammatical syllabuses seems to be that language learning is not complete when the content of a grammatical syllabus has been mastered: learning grammatical forms does not guarantee the learning of grammatical meaning and to describe the grammatical form of a sentence does not account for the way it is used in an utterance (P. 5).

Littlewood (1981) cited in Melrose (1995) is quoted as saying:

The most efficient communicator in a foreign language is not always the person who is best at manipulating its structures. It is often the person who

is most skilled at processing the complete situation involving himself and the hearer...(P. 18).

All the above demonstrate that the trend of language teaching has, over the years, shifted to the communicative approach especially with J. Mumby's 1978 publication of *Communicative Syllabus Design*-a landmark application of this approach to second language situations (Melrose, 1995).

The summary of the philosophy of communicative language teaching is therefore that learners must not only be schooled about rules but must also learn, from contexts of use, issues of how to effectively use language to achieve specific communicative objectives. In this situation the classroom becomes a forum of orientation and guidance while the world out there becomes the learning field for individuals whose attention have been drawn systematically to strategies of practical learning.

However, in the Nigerian context, it is almost impossible to consistently experience the right communicative strategies being used in the right communicative context. This limits the possibility of learning from context, on the part of the students. But as we shall see this situation can be helped, not necessarily by anything academically exotic, but by a simple and somewhat taken for granted aspect of language teaching —reading.

### **The Relevance of Reading**

As we have pointed out there are factors that make the realization of exact communicative context impossible in the Nigerian society. The first factor is obviously the fact that English is a second language in the Nigerian environment. Learners' exposure to the English language is limited and in some cases classroom situation represent the only available opportunity. Outside the instructional environment learners are not likely to speak English. Indeed, the trend among tertiary institution students is to rely almost exclusively on pidgin outside the instructional environment. Even where English is used, the standards may not help the learners but may actually complicate their problems by feeding them with inappropriate linguistic data. This paper submits, therefore, that the best way, though not the most ideal, of simulating appropriate communicative contexts is to subject the students to extensive reading if the reading list is such that only appropriate and relevant materials are included.

Some scholars seem to assume that it is possible to simulate communicative contexts within a well-conducted E. S. L. classroom. Such ideas seem to inform Olateju (1998) and some scholars he refers to who seem to assume that classroom discourse can provide appropriate data especially via teachers' contributions. While this is quite true, the classroom set up can be easily overwhelmed by what Bright and McGregor (1976) call "the multiplicity of context". Also, the problem of large classes and limited time available for lecture periods make interactive sessions quite unrealistic. Moreover such is not usually the character of institutions of higher learning. This situation makes the conclusion of Bright and McGregor (1976) quite relevant to tertiary institution students. The said scholars argue that". . . the student who wants to learn English would have to read himself into a knowledge of it unless he can move into an English speaking environment"(P.54).

No English teacher at whatever level needs to be tutored about the value of reading. The limited place of reading (especially of literature) in our courses may be linked to the assumption that students already have general competence and the consequent focus of specific proposes. We have pointed out however that the peculiarity of our time makes it imperative to work for general competence at the tertiary level with greater emphasis on reading. Reading provides a short-cut way of revisiting general competence without excessive classroom work on rules of language, with the process of reading being process of learning outside the classroom set up.

The reading bias goes with additional benefit which include the fact that it will be easier to sustain student interest with entertaining literary pieces and essays on contemporary and very relevant issues, provided that lecturers are adequately orientated, motivated and competent, and have the correct version of what Robinson (1978) calls "instructional philosophy" The current poor attitude to reading is caused partly by the fact that the students have never been made to feel the value of reading right from primary and secondary school. Some correction can be imparted even at the tertiary level, with the attendant benefit of improvement in the reading culture.

The benefit of focusing on reading skills at a higher level can positively impact on many students who, frankly speaking, cannot read well enough to cope very well with tertiary work. Yet "— in modern life learning depends largely upon one's ability to interpret the printed page correctly" (Strang, 1978 P.61). The peculiar potential of reading (especially literature) for intellectual development and sound knowledge base cannot be ignored. Knights (1995) argue in his defence of prose that "telling stories is central to being in the world and a larger part of what we consider to be knowledge is shaped in story form" (P.70).

### **The Reading List**

Obviously syllabuses based on reading lists prepared by syllabus designers can be focused on certain general criteria like those set out in Bright and McGregor (1978) such as (i) the entertainment value (ii) the appropriateness of the language (iii) the relevance and appropriateness of the setting (iv) the appropriateness of the subject matters (v) the diversity of genre and type.

In this regard, literature texts particularly drama and prose must be included as well as materials containing interesting essays on relevant philosophical, sociological, political and religious perspectives. Such materials can be efficient ways of complementing whatever is taught about writing with ready examples of essays on ideas from different perspectives and in different styles. In fact, it is possible to create new materials specifically designed to achieve purposes of general competence from the communicative approach point of view.

Apart from these, it may be possible for experts to come up with standard predictive readability formulae, with sample reading lists to reduce the probability of arbitrary text prescriptions by book and handout merchants whose interest may have nothing to do with language development. For lower levels of reading, (Primary and Secondary) there are existing formulae such as the Lorge formula, the Flesch formula, the Dale-Chall formula etc. [Klare, 1978] There is nothing stopping the establishment of appropriate formulae for tertiary reading as well.

We must emphasize the fact that we are not advocating a neglect of the special or specific purpose motive, especially the aspect of using the language for academic purposes. What we are advocating is the integration of extensive programmes into the syllabuses in question such that while some specific academic needs are being addressed issues of general competence are being simultaneously attended to in such a way that the system of dishing out rules in the classroom is not adopted.

### **Conclusion**

We have tried to carry out general overview of Use of English courses as they are taught in our tertiary institutions, pointing out the problems that relate to the syllabuses in use, especially the fact that they do not adequately reflect an understanding of the need of the students for general competence because of the focus on English for academic purposes. Also, the issue of the reliance on the classroom method was examined and we established that it is not adequate. This was buttressed by the fact that methodology has swung the world over towards the communicative approach. The possibility of solving some of these problems, by increasing the reading content of syllabuses was highlighted mainly on the ground that reading represents a good way of drawing learners' attention to appropriate communicative strategies in the right contexts. One is not unaware of the fact that reading is usually integrated into Use-of-English syllabuses used in colleges and universities today. However, it is clear that intensive and not extensive reading seems to be the focus of such syllabuses. Here it is advocated that the focus should be on extensive reading such that reading materials by means of which task-based teaching can be done will be integrated into syllabuses.

Also, it must be said that this approach must be used (as we have pointed out earlier) based on the appropriate instructional philosophy. In spite of the effort of those involved in the Communication Skills Project (COMSKIP), the wrong instructional philosophy still dominates the practice of communication skill teaching. All concerned must also rapidly address this area.

It is hoped that this paper will contribute to the generation of new insights that will make Use of English courses of greater relevance to students in our institutions of higher learning.

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