

Optimizing Students' Performance in English through Quality Teacher Education

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Abstract

Research has established significant connection between quality teacher education and student achievement. This cannot but be a concept in considering the performance of students in English language, a skill-based school subject. This paper examines the course content for language education for trainee teachers in the University of Calabar. This study appraises and validates the adequacy of the curriculum content to meet the language needs of the trainees with regard to transferring their learning to meeting the curriculum demands of secondary school English language learner. Suggestions towards optimizing quality teacher and professional education with the aim of improving performance in English language are proffered.

Keywords: Student's performance, English language, quality teacher education, curriculum content, trainee teachers,

1. Introduction

Investigation into the performance of students in English in Nigeria has shifted from merely cataloguing the various weakness observed in the spoken and written ability of learners to isolating factors responsible for such weakness and suggesting appropriate remediation measures. One fundamental oversight has been the undue emphasis on the methods of English language teaching without a corresponding attention paid to the expertise of the English language teacher and the adequacy of the English language teacher preparation in Nigeria. Accordingly, some of the questions that ought to engage research on the unsatisfactory performance of students in English in Nigeria are: Who is teaching our children English? How adequate and competent are the trainers of pre-service English language teachers from the teacher training colleges, distance-learning programmes, colleges of education to universities in Nigeria? Sofenwa (1992), for instance, attributes poor performance in English to the wide disparity and confusion between the language of textbooks, the curriculum, the English language class and the Nigerian society outside the class. Fraser (1980:129) adds that students' poor performance in other school subjects is traceable to the inability of students to express themselves meaningfully in English or meet the language demands the subjects make on them. This paper does not intend to answer all these questions. Rather it shall examine the portfolio of the English language teacher in Nigeria using the English education programme offered by the University of Calabar as a case study. The insights to be gained from this appraisal will reveal gaps and what could be done. It is expected that the present study will provoke further inquiry on conducting a comprehensive survey of the English education programmes at all levels as a necessary step towards improving the quality of English language teaching in Nigeria.

2. The curriculum and English education

The curriculum could be said to include structured learning and the opportunities that will make for consolidation of what is taught, and aimed at fostering desirable change in students. Such change is in terms of knowledge gained and the ability to apply this positively in real life situations. According to Onwuka (1988:119), a relevant curriculum equips learners with the knowledge and ways of thinking and behaving in the face rapidly changing circumstances". Inherent in this are the skills to identify problems, gather information, attempt solutions co-operatively and build up a set of social values and social loyalties. A curriculum may therefore be defined as a "plan for providing sets of learning opportunities to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives for an identifiable population" (Sayyilor and Alexander, 1974:6 quoted in Onwuka, 119).

In Nigeria, English is a major language of education. The English language curriculum for trainee teachers must therefore incorporate planned content and delivery as well as expectation for students' change. Habtai & Ogbe (1988:139) present four interpretations of curriculum studies as:

* Curriculum is everything that happens – the school is responsible for everything that happens.

- * It is everything that is offered – the school is responsible for only what is offered, not all that may happen.
 - *The planned what and how content and methodology are structured and decided.
 - *The planned what – only content is prescribed; teacher has a free hand in choice of style and methods.
- Isangedighi (1996) and Ekah (2002) contend that any teaching of language structures must include the basic elements of language phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Thus, the language teacher cannot escape teaching grammar and vocabulary as well as development of language skills such as reading and comprehension (Denga, 1988; Obanya, 1982). What is important however is that these skills should not be taught in isolation. Rather, language instruction should be integrated into activities and exercises for teaching listening, speaking, reading and writing skills across the curriculum.

3.Poor performance and quality teacher education

Recent report to support the revitalization of English language teaching in Nigeria through a joint NTI-British Council project reveals that the performance in English among pupils and students in Nigeria has not only been very poor over the years but that Nigerian pupils performed below other children in twenty-six other African countries according to a World Bank Report 2004. The report noted specifically that ‘achievement assessment in English nationwide for children was only 25.2% and that secondary school students’ credit level pass average less than 15% over the years.

What is particularly instructive is that the partnership between NTI and the British Council has recognized that improving teacher effectiveness in the teaching of English is cardinal at securing improvement in English language performance in Nigeria. This position is justified because a number of scholars and studies have shown strong connection between quality teacher education and student achievement. Anyanwu (2002) identifies the teacher as one of the four major problems of language learning. Analyzing the teacher factor, Anyanwu considers the teacher’s personality, training, language proficiency and teaching ability as variables that add quality to the teacher pointing out that, the more proficiency a teacher has in the language that the teaches, the better will be his performance (p.160). In the same vein, Otagburuagu (2002:98) identifies teacher quality and teacher preparation as important for student achievement. The author notes specifically that the “Teacher training programmes do not inject enough language content into their programme as there is too much emphasis on method and education principles with the result that the trainees are not properly equipped to cope with the linguistic components of their language classes’ (emphasis ours). Villaume and Brabham (2003:478) reiterates this by echoing one of the most often replicated finding of educational research that ‘teacher expertise, not teaching method, is the major contributor to student success’. This, no doubt, accounts for why Banjo (1989), Mohammed (1995), and Ezema (2004) identify poor quality of teachers as a key factor while considering the state of teaching and learning English in Nigeria. As a way out, Ezema (2004:486) calls for a well articulated language policy in Nigeria with particular reference to the English language which deserves better attention.

The findings of the International Reading Association’s three-year study on National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction conducted in the USA in 2003, according to Cathy Roller, IRA’s Director of Research, is the first study to really show the connection between quality teacher education and student achievement (Reading Today, 2003:1). The findings of that study which was commissioned in 1999 and the results published in 2001, though on reading instruction, are relevant to overall achievement in English. The following specific findings are outlined.

- *Teachers who are prepared in quality reading teacher education programmes are more successful and confident than other beginning teachers in making the transition into the teaching profession.
- *Teachers who are educated in quality reading teaching preparation programmes are more effective in creating a rich literacy environment in their classrooms, preparing students to read, and engaging them in reading than teachers who are not.
- *Student achievement in reading is higher for students who are engaged in the kinds of literacy activities that teachers from quality reading preparation programmes provide (Reading Today:3).

The April/May 2007 issue of Reading today reveals that recent research offers compelling evidence for the impact of high quality teacher preparation in reading on: (i) the efficient and effective transition from pre-service are linked to student reading achievement in all content areas (p.8).

What the above underscore is the need for quality English teacher preparation before trainees are drafted to go and deliver content which they do not have. The need to address the professional training of English teachers should be considered as primary towards effecting improvement in the quality of student performance in English. The framework provided by Obanya (2004) for teacher professionalization in Nigeria to produce real teachers to meet the challenges of the 21st century is borne from the dissatisfaction with the current teacher education programme in Nigeria. Obanya's framework include: Selection, initial preparation, internship, certification, career development, compoment and status (p.88). Of interest to us are initial preparation and internship which are what the trainee needs to go through before certification. The gap which translates to poor quality English can only be filed if greater attention is paid to preparation and adequate exposure is given to trainees allowed to practice as English language teacher practitioners. Thus, exposing trainees to sufficient peer/mirco teaching is sacrosanct and should not be compromised whatsoever.

This is one step towards professionalization and it invariably requires a paradigm shift that will not only affect curriculum modification but also the orientations of the trainers of English language teachers at all levels. This is the position Hornstein (2004:6) takes when he argues that teacher trainers themselves need to be engaged with the set of activities they want teacher-trainees to be involved in even in the university classes. Using preparing teachers for whole language classroom as illustration, he proposes that the following range of activities for example should become a standard feature of English language teacher education classrooms:

- Students engage in silent reading of self-selected texts at regularly scheduled times.
- Students engage in literature study and discussion
- Students engage in inquiry projects
- Students participate in a 'writers workshops'

What Hornstein emphasizes is not just the teaching of methods but engaging trainees in authentic experiences by teacher trainers such that pre-service teachers' experience the same types of things their future students will (p.7). When trainees are provided such real experiences, they are more likely to value and affirm the learning of their pupils and students. The overall lesson for both trainers and trainees is that there is need for teacher to encourage their students to carry out learning tasks which they themselves have carried out. Quality teacher preparation entails such mutual engagements.

The report of Nta (1994) demonstrates the benefits of teacher-trainer turned trainee. Based on the experiences of twenty teachers from twelve countries who were taught, Moree, a language spoke in Burkina Faso, Nta reports that at the end of a two-week contact, all the participants agreed that they were better able to appreciate the emotive dimension of language learning understand the place of different strategies in language learning, and use, and the different learning style of the students. From these insights, Na suggests the need for inclusion of peer-based teaching and strategic development for language teachers and trainers.

The experience described above emphasizes that even after pre-service training, there is need for continuing professional development. A 2002 study by the Centre for English Learning and Achievement based in the USA outlined three essential characteristics for effective professional development namely:

- Teachers need to be reflective practitioners in a continuous process of questioning, planning trying out, evaluating their own and their students' learning.
- Teachers need to work towards establishing a professional community in which they rely on the collective expertise and mutual support of colleagues to inform their day-to-day judgements.
- Teachers need opportunities to learn about research-based strategies and pedagogy.

Having examined the evidence supporting quality teacher education and student achievement, and the need for continuing professional development, the present study sets out to evaluate the English education programme of the University of Calabar and validate whether the curriculum can deliver quality English teacher preparation on the one hand and improve students' performance in English through what trainees transfer from the English education programme on the other-all things being equal.

4. The University of Calabar English education programme

The general regulations in student handbook of the department of Curriculum and Teaching of the University of Calabar specify that the department offers B.A., B.Sc and B.Ed degrees in education. Students are required to complete a minimum of 129 units of study distributed as follows: Education 47-63, teaching subject 70-81, and General studies 12 depending on whether the student is admitted to do a three or four-year programme. Usually, units/courses for the teaching subject are drawn from different departments where such teaching subjects are housed.

For those in the English education programme, the following courses are specified as courses from the Department of English and Literary studies.

TABLE 1: Prescribed courses for English education programme

Year One

First semester	Second semester
ELS 1011 – English composition I	ELS 1012 – English Composition II
ELS 1031 – Introduction to Poetry	ELS 10022 – Introduction to Drama
	ELS 1042 – History of English Language
Year Two	
First semester	Second Semester
ELS 2011 - African Prose	ELS 2012 – African Poetry
ELS 2031 - Survey of Caribbean Literature	ELS 2012 – Survey of English Literature
	ELS 2032 – Advanced Composition
Year Three	
First semester	Second Semester
ELS 3011- The African Novel	ELS 3032 – African Drama
ELS 3051 – Discourse Analysis	ELS 3052 – Teaching English as a Second Language
Year Four	
First semester	Second Semester
ELS 4031 – English in the Nigerian Situation	ELS 4012 – Criticism of African Literature
ELS 4041 – Stylistics	ELS 4022 – Advanced Stylistics

From the course distribution, it is clear that from year one the trainees are not offered English language-based courses to provide a good foundation to develop expertise and proficiency. The English Composition I and II which are the only core English courses are similar, and the course outline does not go beyond the composition demands of senior secondary school English. The courses for year two are wide that depth is expected sacrificed. The teaching of English listed in year three is a methods course and the year four courses have no provision for pedagogy. So what simply comes through is that the trainee is likely to complete the English education programme really ill-equipped to teach English language and with no opportunity for peer/micro teaching, his/her competence as a teacher of English who is expected to make a difference in the performance of students in English is left to the imagination and at best the personal growth of the individual teacher.

5. Filling the gap

5.1 Enriched language courses

Aware of the glaring inadequacy of the language component of the English education programme, a curriculum review is already in place in the department of English and Literary Studies. The review has made provision for the inclusion of such courses as basic English grammar, introduction to language and linguistics, the sound pattern of English, creative writing, English syntax and lexis, semantics, pragmatics, English language acquisition and English for specific purposes among others. This is good

start and the department of curriculum and teaching will benefit from this review and hopefully inform the need for similar review of the education component of the curriculum to give greater emphasis to language Arts and methods and not so much concern to educational principles and practice.

5.2 Evidence-based exposure

The general affirmation that no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers simply implies that trainee teachers cannot give what they do not have. The need to provide them with evidence-based best practices through exposure to new strategies for teaching language skills and specific skills in English cannot be left to a service department. In other words, departments of teacher education should have the needed resources to provide quality pre-service preparation both in methods and English language content-specific instruction. This is where peer/micro teaching and the teacher become relevant, and trainers provide scaffolding as mentors and coaches.

5.3 English across the curriculum

There is also the need to draw attention to the fact that English is both a school subject and the medium of instruction of other school subjects. While pre-service teachers need instruction tailored to meet the content relevant to secondary school English, there is the requirement to provide instruction in English which equips learners to profit from their learning of other school subjects through English. English across the curriculum and English for specific purposes are indispensable as approaches and content specification.

5.4 Continuing professional development and affirmation

As language grows and changes, it becomes imperative that English language practitioners should continuously seize opportunity for personal professional growth and development. The training of the English language teacher should not stop at certification. Professional bodies and the government should make it a policy that English language practitioners have opportunities for continuous professional development. Evidence of such added quality to the teacher should be rewarded for enhanced performance whether through local school awards, community, local government, state and national awards for English language teachers who have distinguished themselves.

6. Conclusion

The quality of training teachers is expected to contribute to their effectiveness in the classroom and the eventual proficiency of the teachers. To achieve these, the curriculum of English language in the University of Calabar, as well as that in Education must be modified. The areas of modification would include grammar, language and communication skills, lexis, and morphology. In addition, avenues for continued professional training must be explored. Openings are usually available to teachers on the internet. Besides, the enthusiasm of the youth could be harnessed into exploring innovations in the language class. These are best presented during peer or mini lectures. Trainees could also observe identified lecturers who could serve as models and mentors. We must recognize that English is the language of education in Nigeria and that it ensures our citizenship of the global world. That we can Nigerian English and the local varieties which have developed and evolved further attest to the importance this second language commands. We believe that in order to have our students avail themselves of the opportunities open and thwart the dwindling standards of English language use, the recommendations articulated for education curriculum and subject specific content should be effected.

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