

## **English Language: an Imperative Vehicle for Driving Sustainable Development Goals in the Nigerian Polytechnics**

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### **Abstract**

**S**ustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to say the least, is a reality starring the global humankind in the face, as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have ended in 2015. The SDGs follow and indeed elaborate and augment the MDGs. The SDGs demand a tightening-up of priority areas which were not properly handled by MDGs. The priority areas would inevitably drive the goals to practical fruition. One of such areas is the concretization of the teaching of English Language in Nigerian polytechnics as a vehicle to drive the SDGs, especially the ending of poverty and hunger in all its ramifications. Thus, this paper looked at English language as an imperative vehicle for driving SDGs in Nigerian polytechnics. To achieve the target of this research, the paper investigates the role of English in polytechnic education, the relationship between SDGs and English language and how SDGs could be driven using English language as a tool in Nigerian polytechnics. Recommendations are made among which are the Standardization and implementation of the teaching of English Language at all levels in Nigerian polytechnics.

**Keywords:** *English Language, Sustainable Development Goals, Imperative vehicle and polytechnics*

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### **Background to the Study**

English language, according to history, is one of the vestiges of British colonization in Nigeria and other West African countries. From the time of its adoption as a *lingua franca* owing to Nigeria's multilingualism, the English language centripetal role in educational development system became prominent. Its salient functional and utilitarian roles in education, government, business, commerce, mass media and most of internal and external communication make English language a vital subject in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education system, especially in the polytechnic. Thus, it becomes not only the language of political and ethnic integration, but more importantly, the language of industrial harmonization and technological transfer in Nigerian polytechnics. It is at this level of its phenomenal relevance that English language carries the burden of millennium Development Goals in Nigerian polytechnics. Among the SDGs are the ending of poverty in all its forms and manifestations.

Sustainable Development Goals are the offshoot of Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are the eight key development targets declared by world leaders at the end of the Millennium in 2000. Among the eight goals are the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. This goal has specific targets of closing the poverty gap ratio (incidence and depth of poverty), sharing of poorest quintile in national consumption, increasing GDP growth per national consumption, ensuring employment rate, enabling proportion of employed population below 81.25 per day (PPP values), ensuring proportion of family-based workers in employed population, reduction of prevalence of underweight children under five years of age and reduction of proportion of population below minimum level of dietary energy consumption (FRN, MDGs Report, 2006). The now Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are seventeen, the first two being the ending of poverty in all its forms and to end hunger (by achieving food security and improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture). It is a fact that the MDGs actually provided a focal point for governments and NGOs but they failed to consider the primary causes of the target goals, for instance, poverty. The MDGs also overlooked gender inequality and other aspects of holistic nature of development. In practice and reality (not in theory), MDGs were considered targets for poor countries to achieve with finances from wealthy countries, the SDGs intricately involve every country, and all the countries of the world are expected to work towards achieving the SDGs. As a successor of MDGs, SDGs are comprehensive and inclusive with characteristics of meeting the needs of the present without comprising the ability of the future generation to meet their own needs.

It is substantial argument that the unifying threads throughout the 17 goals of SDG and their 169 targets, are the commitment to ending poverty and hunger. These are the greatest challenge and indispensable requirements for sustainable development. Therefore, this article derived its inspiration from the afore-stated goals and their specific targets owing to the fact that extreme poverty and hunger cannot be eradicated without polytechnic education that provides resources for national industrialization, which in turn, provides sizeable job opportunities and subsequent improvement in standard of living. Importantly, the said goal and polytechnic education would successfully be driven through English Language teaching in Nigerian polytechnics.

### **The Role of English Language in the Polytechnic Education**

English Language, though an adopted *lingua franca*, has assumed a phenomenal vitality in the Nigerian society, especially in her educational system. Aside proficiency in English language being a pre-requisite for admission into tertiary education, its introduction as course in polytechnic education as one of the general courses, defines its absolute importance in achieving technical education. This is so because "students who have so much difficulties with their communication skill in English Language may not function effectively, not only in written and spoken English Language but in their academic pursuit (Aina, Alexander and Shola, 2013:356). Adegboye (1993: 9) corroborates Aina et al claim that,

When students' proficiency in English Language is high, it will definitely affect and improve the academic performance of such student. Nevertheless, where the proficiency in English is lacking in any academic setting, it will definitely lower the level of academic performance of such student.

Furthermore, Itsuokor (1987: 60) avers that "competency in English significantly determines performance in intelligence or academic test". It means, in essence, that mastery of English Language is vital in students' academic performance in intelligence test, especially as it pertains to science and technical education which polytechnic belongs, that involves a lot of laboratory and workshop in the acquisition of skills. Technical (polytechnic) education simply put is,

An aspect of education which leads to the acquisition of practical, basic scientific knowledge which involves *special manipulative skills, creative minds*, and attitudes relating to occupations in various sectors of the economic and social life. (Ogundele, 2010: 219) (*Italics, mine*).

"Special manipulative skill and creative minds" are some of the objectives of courses like Literary Appreciation and Oral Composition (GNS 402), Use of English I, II and III (GNS 101, 201 and 301). The content of the above courses, especially literary aspects, engender in the students their manipulative and creative capabilities. The courses are targeted at energizing and empowering the act and art of creativity in the students. The students do not only indulge in scientific exploration and production but more importantly artistic creation.

Nigeria, in her 'National Policy on Education (2004), sees technical education from a functional perspective as (a) an integral part of general education, (b) a means of preparing for occupational fields and for effective participation in the world of work, (c) an aspect of lifelong learning and a preparation for responsible citizenship, (d) an instrument for promoting environmentally sound sustainable development, and (e) a method of alleviating poverty. Arguably, the above systematic essence of technical education cannot be realized without essentially understanding the language of communication and instruction which is the vehicle that drives it. Thus, students trained (and being trained) in technical education programme require English language to understand the content of the programme, which invariably will improve their academic excellence.

The role of English Language in Polytechnic education is integral to the academic success of any given student. Even the text books and other materials such as practical manuals as well as scientific calculations are written and done in English Language. No wonder, Jadie, Sonya, Luara and Natasha (2012: 154) asserts that, Low proficiency in English Language has been considered a barrier to learning and academic success at the post- secondary level and this is because English learners often lack the language proficiency necessary to understand the test content and academic work.

As a “Powerful factor in the study of science in Nigerian Universities and Polytechnics” (Ige, 2011: 164), English Language is the primary language of the ubiquitous and all-influential world wide web. It is typically the language of latest version applications and programs and new freeware, share ware, peer-to- peer, social media networks and website. Software manuals, hardware- installation guides and product fact sheets of popular consumer electronics and entertainment devices usually are available in English first before being made available in other Languages. Thus, digitalization and globalization demand mastery of English Language. Today, anything produced or invented in any part of the world gets global character or recognition rapidly. To keep pace with the process of globalization, polytechnic students need to learn English Language. Indeed, the globalization process requires single Language for international communication; and English language has already achieved the prestige of global language. It is no longer an exclusive language of the British or American people, but a language that belongs to the world's people. Ashraf (2006: 6) contended that “by using English, one can become a citizen of the world almost naturally”.

Again, studies in English Language improve the communicative skills of polytechnic students .For instance, courses like Use of English 1 (GNS 101) and 11 (GNS 201) taught in polytechnics for ND students get the students abreast of the nitty-gritty of communication skills, syntax and registers of not only English but also other fields of study, and letter writing as a veritable form of communication. A course like Literary Appreciation and Oral Communication for HND II students exposes students to creative ability and writing as well as oral speech presentation. All these boil down to increasing the chances of polytechnic graduates getting lucrative jobs. Essentially, multinational corporations ask for people who have a good working knowledge of English. Even job advertisement in local markets requires those who are proficient in English. People who go abroad for work also need to be sound in English. Since English is indisputably the primary language of global trade, commerce and diplomacy, it is important for maintaining international relation and communication. In fact, Harmer (1983: 26) wrote succinctly.

English language has revolutionized the world. It has become a global language. It has opened up a plethora of opportunities in all fields. English is no more confined to classroom learning alone. It is being used now as a measuring rod in most of the jobs. It is in the light of the above that English language plays a significant role in polytechnic education in Nigeria.

### **The Relationship between SDGs and English Language**

The goal of providing basic education to everyone has been the main agenda of international development before the declaration of MDGs and subsequent SDGs. Government of all countries that signed up to MDGs including Nigeria agreed to Education For All (EFA) (*WCEAMBLN, 1990*). Education is the right of every individual at least to the level of Universal Basic Education (UBE). Government representatives from all around the world came together in Jomtein, Thailand, in 1990 to declare unequivocally that every single person on earth needs basic education. The very first article of the declaration for Education For All clearly affirms that the right of every individual—child or adult alike is to get fundamental education.

The Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004) sets out a goal for language teaching at the primary level. The aim is to attain permanent literacy in the mother tongue and the target language (English Language). Thus, the objective of language teaching is to enable the learners to use the language in communication, orally and literally. Again, the Federal Ministry of Education (FME, 1985) stipulates the objectives of Language teaching in the Language syllabus for the Junior and Senior Secondary English curriculum as follows:

1. To provide students with sound linguistic basis for further learning in secondary, tertiary and vocational instructions.
2. Equip schools' learners with a satisfactory level of proficiency in English Language in their place of work.
3. Stimulate a love for reading as pleasurable activity.
4. Promote the art of spoken English as a medium for national and international communication.
5. Enhance and develop further the various skills and competencies already acquired at the primary and junior secondary levels.

From the above, we can see the intricate and integral relation between SDGs, Ministry of Education's objectives and English Language. There is complex but realistic relationship between education, advancement of knowledge, prosperity, and eradication of poverty embedded in MDGs and extended to SDGs. Again, and more significantly, there is symbiotic relationship between education and engaged citizens. Tertiary education, polytechnic in particular, provides the needed skills that people need to contribute to their economies. Research by World Bank shows that polytechnic education build digital skills, inter-cultural skills (such as tolerance and communication) and increased political participation. All these can only take place if students are equipped with a satisfactory level of proficiency in English (FME, 1985, objective 2), which they, in turn, carry on to their places of work.

#### **Driving SDGs through English Language in Nigerian Polytechnics**

English Language, no doubt, is “the gate way to educational achievement” (Aina, Ogundele and Olanipekun, 2013, 4). Olanipekun (2013: 15) saw English Language as “the language of achievers and that the language counts as far as rising up and being a member of the elite is concerned”. Significantly as well, English language plays a unifying role by bringing together, under one lingua franca, Nigerians from distinguishing linguistic, cultural, religious and geographical orientations. It is the language of instruction, gateway to formal education and a livewire to the sustainability of Nigeria's unity. It is functionally indispensable in Nigerian educational system and Nigerian society itself, such that it is the language of science and technology, commerce, trade, administration and international relation and diplomacy.

With the above material, utilitarian and feasible functions of English Language, it thus, becomes arguably vital to drive SDGs through English Language in Nigerian polytechnics. Indeed, higher education, especially that of polytechnic is fundamental to long-term sustainable development. The developed countries, universities and research institutions enjoy an exceptional reputation for quality and innovation; and in Nigeria, it is only English Language that can guarantee that because both the knowledge and technological transfer can only be accessible through globalized language like English. By developing employable, globally engaged citizens, polytechnic education benefits young people not only in the developed countries like U.K and U.S.A, but also in a developing country and emerging economy like Nigeria. Chukwu, Ogenyi and Otagburuagu (2013; 144) argue that,

In the context of Nigerian national development drives, the English Language is not only invaluable but indispensable. The primary function of language that is always referred to by researchers and users alike is the communicative function.... English Language is also a powerful tool for self-employment. From the very point of its introduction,... it has been an object of decisive quest, perceived by the people as that which confers on the users great powers and influence of a magnitude almost infinite and, perhaps, mysterious.



In the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) curriculum for English Language for polytechnics, each English course taken by polytechnic students has goals. The goals of the courses are to fast track students' intellectual, academic, economic and social development. All these form the primary essence of Sustainable Development Goals. For instance, the goal for Use of English I (GNS 101) is,

*To provide the student with the necessary language skills which will enable him to cope effectively with challenges of his course, to use English Language effectively in the practice of his chosen profession as well as interact with others in the society. (italics, mine).*

The goal for Communication in English I (GNS 102) is “to enable students acquire the necessary communication skills, know the techniques of correspondence and *comprehend written materials*”. The written materials are the text books used in the science and social sciences and their practical manuals. The English Language thus drives the functionality of the courses in the respective science and engineering departments. The goal for Communication in English (GNS 202) is to “equip the student with the necessary level of competency and proficiency to enable him adapt to his professional environment...be able to communicate clearly and effectively in both general and specific situations”. The Communication in English IV (GNS 401) is to equip the students "to fit into all establishments requiring extensive use of communication skills for general and specific purposes", and Literary Appreciation and Oral Communication (GNS 402) is basically to "impart analytical, evaluative and interpretative writing and speaking techniques to the students...to encourage creativity" (*NBTE English Curriculum for Polytechnics, 2013*). All the above goals translate to the primary essence of MDGs. It means, essentially that the success of any course and any level in a polytechnic education, and by extension SDGs, is dependent on the effectiveness and functionality of English Language. Raman and Sangeeta (2004: 70) insisted that “Language has power which no other instrument can have. It is a medium of expressing our views and ideas to another individual”. Beyond this functional role, language, especially English, has the potentiality of effectively carrying the burden of driving Sustainable Development Goals of ending poverty and hunger as it is one of the vital factors that guarantees the sustainability of an individual in a given job as we have discussed above. Also, the success of the students in their various professional environment and subsequent working places is predicated upon English Language. SDGs, thus, have to be strongly aligned to English Language as its livewire and vehicle to driving its objectives.

### **Conclusion**

Sustainable Development Goals, especially eradication of poverty and hunger, are strictly integral to education, and English Language is elemental in Nigerian education system. Polytechnic education is arguably the only sure way of national industrialization which, in turn, guarantees mass employment and subsequent increase in the peoples' standard of living. English Language is a sine qua non to polytechnic education. Thus, SDGs would, critically speaking, be driven in polytechnics through English Language teaching in Nigerian polytechnics. With this reality in focus, we state that English language could be engineered to drive Sustainable Development Goals of eradicating poverty and hunger.

### **Recommendations**

If SDGs is to be appropriated in Nigerian tertiary institutions with particular reference to polytechnic education, and if poverty is to be eradicated and hunger ended, as well as develop knowledge-based economics that support sustainable development, some genuine and bold

steps need to be taken. And, since English Language is an imperative vehicle to driving SDGs, we make the following recommendations:

1. English Language must be taught and learnt correctly, for individual, and of course, for national development (Chukwu, et al, 2013: 147). Its correct learning is the foundation of correct and unconfused thought and speech as well as genuine analysis of laboratory practical, experiments and understanding of scientific materials and text books.
2. Ill-equipped lecturers and substandard text books should be addressed. Quality text books, practical manuals and use of lecturers well grounded on the subject will go a long way to correcting the ills.
3. English Language teaching should be standardized by building State-of-the-art English language laboratory in polytechnics and competent English lecturers should be employed to man them. Investigation during this research reveals that no government polytechnic in Nigeria has English language laboratory despite its strategic relevance to polytechnic education. It is only in some universities and colleges of education that we found somewhat moribund language laboratories. This does not speak well of English language courses in polytechnics that are expected to drive Sustainable Development Goals.
4. More competent and qualified English lecturers should be employed in Nigerian polytechnics. Our investigation during this research also reveals a situation where one lecturer has more than two thousand five hundred students from three or four departments. In this case, the lecturer experiences excess workload while the students receive a little.
5. There is a case of nefarious and unpatriotic actions of corrupt polytechnic education managers that approve substandard text books to be used in teaching English language as well as employ incompetent English lecturers. So, polytechnic authorities should be conscientized and reoriented towards being patriotic in doing the right thing. Such actions amount to disservice to the students and sabotage to SDGs.
6. Owing to indispensable vitality of English Language in polytechnic education, the lecturers should be encouraged to further their studies to a doctorate degree for maximum input by giving them study grant and leave by the polytechnic management. This could be done in batches and periodically.
7. Some percentage of TETFUND project should be channeled towards developing English Language lecturers and language infrastructure in the polytechnics.
8. Since English courses are General Courses that often have large number of students, equipment like public address system and overhead projectors are needed to help the lecturer get his lecture to the hearing and viewing by all the students. If the permanent ones cannot be installed in the classes, mobile ones can be made available to the individual lecturers.

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