

THE PROBLEMS OF LARGE CLASSES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS: AN APPRAISAL

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of English in Nigerian tertiary institutions is beset by many constraints, which the problem of large classes is among. English is not only the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools but taught also as core subject, cognate and elective course (Adamu and Joseph, 2015:38). The basis of English studies in the Nigerian institutions of learning is strategic as an instrument of human and societal transformation. More so, as a language of education, which expresses all disciplines, it contributes in no small measure to provide students with the necessary skills to cope effectively with other courses in their various disciplines. In spite of the central role English plays in the Nigerian educational life, many problems stand on its way, retarding smooth and effective teaching and learning. Some of these constraints overshadow both the teacher and learner. This paper discusses problems of large classes on English education in the country, the effects the problems have on both teachers of English and the learners of English as well as useful recommendation as way out of the problems.

Keywords: Large Classes, English Language Education, Nigerian Tertiary Institutions, Learners' Attitude and Teachers' Attitude

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Backgorun to the Study

Nigeria is endowed with many great institutions of higher learning. An approximate estimation of Nigerian universities alone is over one hundred and forty. This number includes the federal, state and private owned universities. There is no state in the country without a university. A lot more are still springing up. There are polytechnics spread across the country that have operated for so many decades to advance the technological need of the nation, being the mandate for which they were established. Side by side the polytechnics are colleges of education whose core mandate is to train professional teachers for the country. Interestingly, all these institutions have lived up to expectations by advancing the literacy level of the Nigerian populace to the level the country is. The institutions have contributed to national development by producing the labour force in various facets of need.

English language is a global language, and in all Nigerian institutions, it occupies a pivotal role assigned to it as the language of education and this makes its teaching and learning indispensable and crucial for all activities that go on in these institutions. The effective teaching and learning of English as a second Language, language of educational instruction, language of documentation, language of commerce, language of literature, language of interaction and language of other disciplines all call for this serious recognition to it.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) formulated in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004, assigned English the role of serving as language of instruction from the fourth year of the six-year primary course to the tertiary level (Udofot, 2011:14). For both teaching and learning to responsively attain this expectation, a valuable recognition and resources must be expended to achieve this answer. Unfortunately, this desire has never being met. The required proficiency in English studies has not been achieved by students of higher learning in the country due to several reasons occasioned by the mass need for the course.

Methodology

The observational research technique has been adopted as the methodology of study in this paper. Specifically, the paper used the evaluative observational approach as a variable to relate ideas on the basis of its claims in the study. Observational research technique, according to Nwabueze (2013:69), is a method of searching for facts by making observations within natural settings. He sets out variables of observational research as descriptive, inferential and evaluative. Nwabueze explains that descriptive observation requires the investigator to observe and record the proceedings without inferences about the observation while inferential observation, he points out, requires the researcher to make inferences. Evaluative observation, he maintains, requires the researcher to make both inferences and judgment from the observed behaviour.

The Evaluative observational approach was the tool used in describing the problems of large classes and the generative consequences they have both on the teacher and learner of English in the Nigerian tertiary educational system. The approach is appropriate to the study because it allows information to be generated from the insider perspective with deeper and more valid understanding than can be obtained from questionnaire or interview etc.

Large Classes: An Appraisal

English studies carry different emblem in different institutions. It is either called English for Academic Purpose, Communication Skills, Language and Communication Arts, English language course or English Communication. For those professional areas with specific need for it, they tie its relevance to their area by attaching a disciplinary word to it as in the case of Business Communication, Media Communication Studies, Technical English, English for Science and Technology as the case may be. All these nomenclatures point to the same direction. In the university system in Nigeria, English is taught to most disciplines as a general course. The essence is to provide students with the necessary proficient skills to cope with the diffusion of knowledge in their core disciplines. The same need can be found in monotechnics, polytechnics and colleges of education in the country.

The question is, if the government of Nigeria views and appreciates the importance of English education in the country as a means of promoting social interactions and national cohesion among the people, why then the problem of large classes as a hindrance to the smooth execution of this dream? Large classes in the context of this study means the inappropriate overflow of classrooms by students. When class accommodation cannot contain the number of students needing instructions in a course, it is said to be a large class. In other words, the issue of large classes can be contextualized as the inability to provide available learning resources to cater for a number of students prepared to take a course within a specified time period. When the defining limits of students exceed a particular classroom situation and thereby overstretching both human and material resources available, it is said to be large classes. If English studies is designed to achieve an instrumental goal whereby the philosophy of education in Nigeria as contained in the National Policy on Education is to be realized, it means therefore that the problem of large classes suffice as an aberration to national expectation. No situations of overcrowded persons have produced credible results especially in the academics where careful planning is set to achieve some goals.

Effects of Large Classes on English Education in Nigeria

There are compounding challenges facing both the English teacher and his learner over the problem of large classes. This review is important in order to bring about a shared knowledge of some the problems militating against the learning of English in tertiary institutions in the country.

Experiences in practical situations of general courses in English are one good example of an arena where the problem of large classes is dominant. The General English courses in most tertiary institutions entail a roll call of various departments to assemble in one place for the learning of English skills. Most times, the multi-purpose halls of such institutions are selected as study centres. This notwithstanding, a crowd of students stand begging the attention of one teacher with one voice. Sadly, it leaves the English teacher not only with the task of formulating or devising hurriedly, an appropriate methodology for teaching in this situation, he also tinkers with the curriculum to make teaching more meaningful. In as much as he responds to this challenge, there are drawbacks that appear to negate such efforts. Normally, the pack of students who occupy back rolls of the class hall and others that hang outside the windows scarcely feel the teachers' magic. Consequently, such students have no opportunity for interaction and lack feedback cleanups. They rarely see the board clearly nor ask questions

targeted at certain clarifications. It behooves the teacher that such frustrations often lead most of them into noise making. This kind of poignancy extends beyond noise making, it also give most students a feeling of hatred, if not for the teacher, the course.

Closely related to this worry, is also the constraints experienced in learning English through the Distance Learning formula of education in Nigeria. The students of language communication in Distance Learning are mostly working class persons requiring training and proficiency in the course to get better in their job places. They, unlike the regular students are in contact sessions, systematically drawn to meet their instructors at periodic intervals. The Distance Learning style provides reading materials to students upon their registration. Once this is done, the mature adult learner, doing most of his reading at home needs the instructors' attention at the most slightest of opportunity clarifications. What characterizes the Distance Learning education is a huge population of students. Supposing such students needing attention are 500 out of a class of 1,200, which is normally the case, what magic can be ensued to save this situation? The point being made here is that, with regards to our experiences as language teachers in this system of education, students are usually fraught in disappointment. This category of students also lack opportunity of convenience in interacting with their teachers due to their numbers.

There is always some void of inattention received by the students who require training and performances in the language laboratories in Nigeria, that is, if such institutions have the facility. Most tasks performed in the laboratories are drills in phonetics, listening, reading comprehension and speaking. In some of these situations, the teacher needs a one on one interface with the students. It is clearly time-insufficient to draw out procedures for teaching of these skills to so many students who are bound by time limits and have distinct responses towards learning. It is easily observable that time constraint to carter for so many students within a short time period is one reason that contribute to their ill performances. Ezeude (2007: 211-212) even makes the matter more open and vivid when he laments that:

...yet Nigeria makes use of textbooks method of grammar-translation. There are very few language laboratories in Nigeria even in tertiary institutions. The number of institutions with laboratories could be counted on fingers. The most appalling thing about the laboratories is that they are exist in names. They are poorly equipped, and are dust-ridden out of disuse. Coupled with Ezeude's observation, the laboratories in most institutions, if found are hardly structured based on anticipated number of student users. They are created for fulfilling the laboratory requirement.

Another kind of frustration the problem of large classes presents is the load given to the language teacher in examining an enormous number of students by marking their tests and examination scripts. Time limits and deadlines are usually appointed to teachers to close up their schedule for semesters. Crossing deadlines for the submission of students' results in most institutions is like a taboo. What is expected of the language teacher is to do a sacrifice of his time with sleepless nights in order to cope with time. In most instances, the teacher is left with a backache and is at the mercy of the doctors. Just as the case with manufactured products, if there is pressure on supply, there is an obvious reduction in quality. We shall go further to examine the attitude of the language teacher and the learner towards the problem of large classes.

Language Learners' Attitude towards the Problem of Large Classes

Sad enough, the challenges brought by large classes are not healthy to the development of language learners in tertiary institutions of the country. The effects of large classes have already been demonstrated and what is expected here is students' responses or attitudes towards this problem.

The mastery or proficiency in English is an invaluable asset to the student. English to the student, according to Adamu and Joseph (2015:38) is a vehicle for personal growth and transformation; an instrument with which he visualizes the world and narrows it to his perspectives through his inventions.... This means that, the mission of the student to learn is defeated, while he seeks and is denied this expectation. One of the denial factors is the problem of crowded classes. Moreover, contextualizing this denial in its right perspective, there could be some obvious responses by the student.

He is a noise maker. A student who receives teaching from the window of the classroom is short changed and in response to his frustration, relapses to inattentiveness and noise making. He complains and spurns on other classmates by also digressing their attention. Another characteristic of this category of student is that because he lacks satisfactory clarifications on concepts and issues in his course, he is bound to respond with off points after writing his tasks. The student, rather than being logical and comprehensive enough in his presentation, he speculates and is unsure in reasoning.

That most students have a craving of hatred on teachers and their subjects is not an overstatement. There are categories of students who often complain they hardly understand their teachers. This is not a baseless claim. The student who has no opportunity of interacting with the teacher is not integrated and this could justify his claim. This student/teacher non-contact breeds contempt from the student and calls for hatred on the teacher and his subject. A student who hates his teacher also launches attack at him at the slightest opportunity. The final sympathetic side such students find themselves is in the valley of failure. The case is worse with students who learn English as cognate or elective courses.

Language Teachers' Attitude towards the Problem of Large Classes

There are certain predisposed attitudes the English teacher exhibits which are occasioned by the enormity of tasks facing him because of the problem of large classes.

The first and most obvious response the teacher shows towards this problem is a drop in the quality of his performance. Like factors of production in industries, English teachers are factors of production in their own rights in the tertiary education system. They are also susceptible to over labour. They, like machinery in the manufacturing sense when unduly over-laboured there is tendency for collapse. Therefore, most language teachers pressurized by their assignments turn to dump quality to pay attention to quantity. This presupposes that the language teacher tinkers further with the stipulations of the curriculum in response to this pressure. Also related to this fact, the examiner who receives pressure on deadlines to submit his results fails to give a consummate attention to it. Most areas in language study do not require a grumpy mind or broken attention towards them, especially when marking written skills like argumentative essays. For most pressurized language teachers, the depth of attention required to examine these areas are not given into them.

In addition to that, there is a tendency for the language teacher to pick up quarrels with those responsible for such administrative procedures over deadlines. He turns to interpret such pressures as an infringement of his peace. This notwithstanding, he comes out of the standoff crossing deadlines.

Finally, an unfolding trend observable of the language teacher is the geographical mobility in search of greener pastures for better conditions of service. He is first dissatisfied with the emoluments of service and severally complains are not in tandem with the load of work undertaken by him. Since several institutions in the country are in short supply of English language teachers, he finds a ready market to sell himself. There is an apparent feeling to resist unfavourable job environments in the face of unbearable load of work piled on him. We shall in the next segment, form a conclusion to this paper.

Conclusion

The problems of large classes have been reviewed in this paper based on the contact experiences of the writers, as far as language teachers in different systems of tertiary education in Nigeria are concerned. The paper did not only discuss the constraints, but further evaluated the effects of the problems on language teaching and learning of English. The study observed some of the hindrances the problem of large classes present as militating factors to achieve the objectives of English studies as contained in the National Policy on Education. The degree of damage created by the problems have vividly been espoused, including the attitudes of the teachers and learners towards the problems. The study proffers a five-point recommendation, when implemented shall overcome the challenges.

Recommendations

Having treated the challenges of English education in Nigeria in view of the problem of large classes, the following recommendations are made to remedy the problems:

1. In order to curb the operational void inherent in the English language business of the country, given the pivotal role English occupies, the Federal Government of Nigeria should bring a deliberate policy which could give the discipline a closer attention by dedicating to it a faculty of its own away from the faculty of humanities or arts as the present case is. When this is done proper attention will be given to most of these problems.
2. A comprehensive needs assessment of language requirements from structures to equipment should be carried out across tertiary institutions of the country, after which the findings brought out by the assessment be religiously implemented. The assessment must anticipate the required number of students needing to study English over designated periods and the funding and equipment required over what time. When this is done the problem of overstretching the meager language resources will be solved and the performance index of students will scale up.
3. In the absence of the first two suggestions, admissions in higher institutions of learning should be done in line with available language resources in order to properly respond to student needs.
4. A mass language teacher training and retraining programme should be launched by the government as an end to the paucity of English teachers in the country.

5. As argued by Omachonu (2007: 128), evaluating the performance of linguistics in Nigeria in terms of 'Naira and Kobo' is not a baseless consideration. The language teacher, based on the demand on him, should also have his economic survival guaranteed by government for effective job delivery.

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