

The English Language in a Multicultural Society: The Nexus between Theory and Practice

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Introduction

The title of this paper "The English Language in a Multicultural Society, the Nexus between Theory and Practice." would seem to take up an avalanche of fundamental questions and perhaps, assumptions. A sincere assessment of the undercurrents in the topic, compels one to ask the following questions: As teachers of English in a multicultural society, have we discovered or stumbled on any new ways of teaching and learning the language? Have we been able to introduce any rocket-silence innovative practices in our teaching methods? An equally germane question is what is the level of proficiency achieved by the students under our tutelage and mentorship? Which parameters or indices have we been using to assess the English language learning outcomes of the students? Are we satisfied with, or convinced that the results of our considerable efforts in teaching English over the years are commensurate with our input? Do we rely on the results of examination bodies such as WAEC and NECO for assessing our productivity and our students' learning outcomes? Or do we wait patiently for our students to matriculate in the tertiary institutions and, then turn to the Use of English course for assessment of their competence in English? These are just a pinch of the weighty concerns agitating one's mind and indeed, a good food for thought as one considers this topic.

Multiculturalism

Societies are becoming more dynamic, multicultural, complex and complicated; especially, with the new wave of human armada afloat on all the high seas leading to Europe. This has come at a cost: the dire consequences in loss of lives and valuables, because in almost all the cases, the flotillas of human cargo usually turn into flotsam which is harvested in body-bags by European Coast Guards. What we see now is evidence of slavery, re-enacted, a different kind of self-enslavement by economic migrants and asylum seekers whose shackles and manacles are self-constructed and self-adorned. This is the new face of multiculturalism in action as Europe and many parts of the world may never be the same again. The hybridization resulting from this tide of human waves of asylum seekers conflates new variables with existing ones. So, instead of contending with ethnic and minority issues, sex and gender hot points, civil rights and feminist movements, marginalized cultures and sub-cultures, and compulsive immigrants with fringe-siege mentality, we now have unrepentant, well- educated, but disgruntled, dissatisfied, and disillusioned economic migrants "who must, willy-nilly, go to Europe." At the risk of sounding harsh and perhaps, being misunderstood, it must be admitted with good caution, that in all these cases of human self-deportation, there are genuine, political migrants who are unfortunate

victims of war, geney, persecution and discrimination The Middle-east inexorable tubuleve in Syria, lag and Yemen, constantly hatches interminable string of willing and melting migrants. In my parts of the world today, Nigeria Inclusive, there are Internally Displaced People who are forced to migrate to safer, conducive and economically resilient and viable locations because of civil-strife and wars. The result in all the circumstances described, is the same a new face of multicultural in a type of multiculturalism that unsettles welfare, institutional and eshational provisions in the affected, receiving nations. This new multiculturalism attracts a veneer of empathy but it is obvious that, it carries a kind of sympathy that is laced with deep-seated xenophobia official discontent and strident calls for fortified, if you like. improved border controls." Even erection of walls, which once primitively separated East and West during the Cold War era, has been contemplated, and restraining barbed-wire fences now adorn some European borders, all in a bid to stem the tide of economic migrants and asylum seekers. The underlying fear no doubt, is that many of these migrants could constitute security menace to Europe, especially, at a time of unbridled international terrorism and insurgency. Sometime in 2011, some European Leaders expressed worries over the doctrine of state multiculturalism, which now appears to have turned into a mortifying and uncontrollable apparition for them. The UK Prime Minister, in synch with many European leaders, had expressed this concern:

Under the doctrine of state multiculturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong. We've even tolerated these segregated communities behaving in ways that run completely counter to our values. So, when a white person holds objectionable views, racist views for instance, we rightly condemn them. But when equally unacceptable views or practices come from someone who isn't white, we've been too cautious frankly - frankly, even fearful- to stand up to the search for something to belong to and something to believe in can lead them to extremist ideology....for sure, they don't turn into terrorists overnight, but what we see... in so many European Countries is a process of radicalization (David Cameron 2011).

Prime Minister Cameron's speech echoes the sentiments expressed by other European leaders from Germany, Spain, Italy, who also believe that state multiculturalism may after all, not be a good idea. One can say now, with a glint of mischief that the recent immigration albatross on European necks has stung their leaders out of their somnolent prevarications on the matter of excessive multiculturalism, to one of pragmatic defense of border and ethnic solidarity. The sermon of cultural pluralism which some of them had preached previously has come unstuck, and active

protectionism has become the new mantra The USA is so lucky in of geographical distance from Africa and the Middle East because not even the deployment of its nuclear arsenal would have stemmed, discouraged or dissuaded economic migrants on their kamikaze maverick boat journeys to greener pastures. Cuban and Mexican immigrants provide the USA with its own dizzying nightmare. However, it must be admitted unabashedly, that the USA fares better in matters of immigration, even if that also means bleeding other parts of the world of their best brains.

The point in these random thoughts is to present a new face of multiculturalism and in the process suggest that if there were multi-headed challenges to contend with in the hitherto, apparently normal multicultural societies, the current migratory tendencies and trends magnify and complicate the matter further. The seamless national borders make paperless migration attractive, sustainable and, perhaps, unstoppable. A security conscious observer of the activities of street hawkers in many Nigeria's major cities will confirm to you that a good number of them is foreign, and certainly, non- I assure you that they neither came from Mars nor Pluto. They walk across Nigeria's open and porous borders. Luckily, majority of them did not have to embark dangerous boat journeys to arrive Nigeria and neither is anybody bothering their thriving mobile businesses. This is a multicultural mix which anybody thinking of language planning in Nigeria, must accommodate. Of course, it is the English language that will be the major target.

Multicultural Nigeria and the English Language

The multicultural Nigerian society with its bewildering ethnic diversity is already at crossroads of some sort, with a burgeoning population that tasks social facilities and educational infrastructures. As the national and official language of Nigeria, English has successfully carried the onerous communication responsibilities thrust upon its shoulders and seems to have done well at it. The new Nigeria's multicultural society considered in this paper is one with expansive socio-cultural latitudes and an enlarged coast of human pot pour, capable of unpredictable complications. It is not the usual multiculturalism. This is the emergent multicultural society where English will have to be taught and learnt. This is expected it to throw up new challenges never before contemplated.

To be able to teach English language successfully in this new scenario, perhaps any subject for that matter, the first step will be to socialize such peoples from differing backgrounds to the cultural mores and norms of the mainstream. This will give them a sense of belonging and unanimity of purpose with their hosts, and underscore the need for everyone to pull in the same direction. The implication is that their languages would have to yield to the dominant host's language in the normal process of language shift. In this regard, some linguistic engineering will have to be devised and deployed for the task ahead. The authorities (in Nigeria's case, the Federal

Ministry of Education), entrusted with language planning responsibility will have to fashion out how the English language can be used to accomplish three of its useful functions of social mobility, accommodation and participation. These are three major planks members of a multicultural society need in order to achieve total immersion which will guarantee a near-complete socialization process. With these they can navigate and negotiate their participation in activities that bulk large in their lives.

The need for effective and clear-headed language planning policy that can meet the needs of a multicultural and multilingual society cannot be over emphasized. As Crystal has noted: languages can be actively promoted, passively tolerated, deliberately ignored, positively discouraged, and even banned." (447). A favoured language arising from this process of linguistic engineering will no doubt be a result of the demographics of ethnicity which Meyerhoff describes as ethnolinguistic vitality. This is the "negotiation of official status for languages in multilingual communities or nations," and "involves a number of social, political and attitudinal factors" (107). Such factors will indicate the institutional support provided for the evaluation of the relative strength of the language (108). Let us examine some of the attitudes and reactions to the English language in some other multicultural societies. The Linguistics Society of America in a statement on language Rights in 1995 proclaimed that:

Notwithstanding the multilingual history of the United States, the role of English as our common language has never seriously been questioned. Research has shown that newcomers to America continue to learn English at rates comparable to previous generations of immigrants. All levels of government should adequately fund programs to teach English to any resident who deserves to learn it. Nonetheless, promoting our common language need not, and should not, come at the cost of violating the rights of linguistic minorities." (128)

In a similar vein, Republican Jose Servano in his "English Plus Resolution" in July 1995, stressed "the value of multilingualism to the US community" while acknowledging that it was a concomitant of multiculturalism. He was convinced that:

- a) It would enhance American competitiveness in global markets,
- b) It would improve United States diplomatic efforts by fostering enhanced communication and greater understanding between different racial and ethnic groups. (128-129)

It is obvious that to the US, the English language was and is still considered a social adhesive for the teeming multicultural and multilingual population. But let it not be assumed that the reception to English in all other multicultural and multilingual

societies has always been a positively deafening as in the US in 1967, Tanzania detached English from Swahili which became the sole official language of the country. The same fate befell English in Kenya in while Malay won the contest of primacy in Malaysia in 1967 when English was decoupled from joint official language status, Crystal (115). Although English has lost out completely in India; it is yoked with Hindi and twenty (20) other officially recognized languages. In all these countries mentioned above, English does not have the kind of suffocating stranglehold it has in Nigeria where it enjoys over-lordship status against the indigenous languages, especially in official transactions. In each of these cases, it is obvious that there are prevailing intra-national realities that dictate attitudes and decisions that guide how English is treated. This is perhaps, what Bolinger and Sears allude to when they opine that:

...there is scarcely any group in a society that is not affected to some degree by the way it uses language or the way language is used about it the forces that would regulate usage are a tangle of clashes, temporary alliances, advances, and retreats Every ought in language promotes an interest of some kind - the culture-imparting of education, the image-making of commerce and politics, the conflict-easing (or suppressing) of government, the fact-defining and truth-conveying of science, law, and political reform. (300)

The Nexus Between Theory and Practice

How do we successfully pin down and/or assess the connection between theory and practice in the teaching and learning of English in the new multicultural society? The deluge of responses (majority of which is negative) received from industries, government parastatals, and agencies, private sector operators and foreign universities, to which our graduates apply for further studies, provides an answer. While it is not healthy to tar all our graduates with the same tattered brush of incompetence, many have been written off as unemployable and half-baked.

There is also the uneasy feeling amongst teachers at the tertiary education level that many of the students are not serious with their studies - they no longer read except things on the social media platforms. If this is the case, as it is obvious now, it is therefore not surprising that there is a yawning disconnect between theory and practice. If they do not listen to theory, then there is hardly anything left to practice. We are even lucky that some are half-baked! What about those who literally shun the classrooms - the baker's oven, but insist on going home with degrees? How do they get away with this blue murder?

But should the students carry the can alone? No! Many English language teachers are themselves products of the same defective and stone-cold bakery. To worsen the situation, many charlatans have also invaded the discipline. When graduates of other

subjects insist for example, that they can mark English language examination scripts in NECO and WAEC for the simple reason that they speak English, then, where will our salvation come from? The governments, state and federal, that do not encourage Continuing professional development of teachers especially English language teachers are complicit in the mediocrity the nation reaps. If the teachers are poorly trained, their products will not be better than them. There is a karmic certainty about this.

Concluding Remarks

The considerations in this paper have been mosaic in structure and fleeting in content. They have also neither rehearsed the well-known gladiatorial status of the English language in many multicultural and multilingual societies nor dwelt on the definitional content of culture, both of which are considered unnecessary distractions in this paper. But what have been presented are the patterns and consequences of the new face of emergent multiculturalism that is poised to unsettle the many hitherto traditional, environments. It is hoped that this new wave of immigration, with its religious, social, cultural and political entanglements will not hasten Europe to its untimely Armageddon or Nigeria to its ever-threatening imminent dismemberment.

Nigeria has always been and will remain an attractive option for economic migrants, religious fanatics, insurgency-sympathizers amongst other fringe groups. Such groups further muddle Nigeria's complex multiculturalism. There is no doubt that the English language, as a world language, will continue to be taught and learnt in Nigeria, as the best and most convenient tool for harnessing the energies of the disparate multicultural and multilingual populations that are welded together for political and economic expediency. However, new challenges will emerge as new migrants, with new cultural emblems, arrive on the scene to seek participation and accommodation in the new foster home. They will also be taught English language in English language.

The challenge to the teachers of English in Nigeria and elsewhere is to attempt to devise new and unorthodox strategies and techniques for teaching the English language to a multicultural and multilingual society like Nigeria. To tackle this herculean challenge, the instructive observation of Crystal is noted below:

In the long search for the best way of teaching a foreign language, hundreds of different approaches, or methods, have been devised. Each method based on a particular view of language learning, and usually recommends the use of a specific set of techniques and materials, which may have to be implemented in a fixed sequence. Ambitious claims are often made for a new teaching method, but none has yet been shown to be intrinsically superior. (437)

What is obvious from Crystal's insightful observation is that there may not be any single method that can be described as the apes and inviolable standard. It is for this reason that he recommends and we accept the need for a flexible and utilitarian strategy that can sustain an eclecticism.

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