

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN GHANA AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the pre-eminent role the English language plays in Ghana vis-a-vis the recent concerns about the poor standard of English of our students and the products of our schools. It also looks at our roles as speakers of English, writers, teachers and curriculum developers.

INTRODUCTION

The English language in Ghana is as old as our association with the British. The introduction of the English language to provide communication and literacy education was welcome. It is now the official language of government, commerce and education. The school provides the child with the learning opportunities that will facilitate the use of English for all purposes. Unfortunately, our schools have not been effective at one of the things that they were expected to do when they were set up. The shift towards bilingualism is not as effective an educational goal as it was thought to be.

THE PROBLEMS

After forty years of English as a second language in Ghana, concerns about the falling standards of education are rife. The situation is not helped by claims of the falling standards in the use of the English language, for a poor command of the English language will certainly affect performance in other subjects across the curriculum.

Parents, teachers, employers as well as the chief examiners of the West African Examination Council's School Certificate and Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations comment on the poor standard of English of our students and the products of our schools. For example, the chief examiner's report on the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations from 1993 to 1995 makes reference to the abominable English of candidates and laments that they lacked knowledge of the rudiments of the grammar of the language. While teachers at the Senior Secondary School level may lay the blame on their counterparts in the primary schools, who takes the blame for the poor English of the undergraduate stu-

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dents in our universities?. The introduction of a mandatory course in communicative skills in our universities is a clear indication that communication in English is still a problem .

Curriculum based assessment data collected and analyzed from fourteen (14) schools selected from public primary schools in the Central and Western Regions of Ghana, by the Centre for Research on Improving Quality of Primary Education in Ghana (CRIQPEG), of the University of Cape Coast, indicate that a substantial proportion of pupils at all levels in the public primary schools is non-literate. About 53.6% of the 261 pupils in primary 2 could not express themselves in English and 53.6% could not write their own names. 60.6% of 259 pupils in primary 3 could not express themselves in English and 40.5% of them could not write their names. 67% of the 265 primary 4 pupils could not express themselves in English and 21% could not write their names. 71% of the 254 primary 5 pupils could not express themselves in English, 49% could not write 1 to 15 words and 4% could not write any word at all. While research results showed that oral proficiency skills in functional expressions, oral expression and listening comprehension were generally poor, the performance of pupils generally increased in the areas of reading and writing, a clear indication that pupils had more problems with speaking English. The research report (1996) of the Primary Education Programme (PREP) of the Ministry of Education does not give a different view. PREP's criterion referenced tests of primary 6 pupils from selected public, private and CRIQPEG schools, indicate that the mastery level of 60% for English rose from 2.0% in the base year of 1992 to only 5.5% in 1996. In spite of the project's interventions, progress in English has been slow.

LANGUAGE POLICY

It is not the purpose of this paper to review the policy on instructional medium. The issue I wish to address concerns the implications of policy decisions for classroom practice. It is obvious that the language policy which makes it mandatory for the native language of a region to be used as the medium of instruction from primary 1 to 3, while English is taught as a subject does not prepare the child adequately for the task ahead.

From primary 4, children are expected to take their place in a society in which a knowledge of English is essential. They are expected to have attained proficiency in the language to be able to communicate effectively and use English to learn other subjects in the school curriculum. In Ghana, English language learning takes place within the cultural and linguistic milieu of Ghanaian languages and these languages compete aggressively with English within and outside of the schools and classrooms. Pupils' use of the Ghanaian languages to communicate during and after lesson periods gives them very little opportunity, if any, to use the English language. While we cannot deny that children need their native languages to develop their personal relationships and to enable them to participate fully and effectively in the family and in the local community, there is also the need to get our children to use the English language effectively and purposefully from the outset, if the proper foundation should be laid and the move towards proficiency in the language is to be successful. It is common knowledge that some teachers prefer to teach mostly in the vernacular. Thus, it seems that the old policy of allowing use of the indigenous languages from primary one to three need review-

ing. In the Ghanaian Times (March 1, 1997) the Deputy General Secretary of the Ghana National Association of Teachers (GNAT), Mr. Joe Frimpong, called for a review of the language policy to improve the poor performance of candidates in English language. In his contribution to a seminar held by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) in Accra, he stressed the need to start teaching children in English as early as possible so that they would grow up proficient in the language.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Current English language teaching methodology does not seem to have led to a satisfactory level of communicative skill among the generality of pupils. Communication is fully accepted as an essential and integral component of the product of language teaching, but nothing short of lip service is paid to it as an integral component of the process of language teaching (Allwright, 1991). An examination of textbooks, national syllabuses as well as classroom teaching, suggests failure to ensure that communication is adequately represented in language courses. Classroom observation shows that the major student activities are listening and copying with some reading and writing. Class exercises invariably take the form of questions appended to the passages in student textbooks. Students' participation is generally in the form of spasmodic responses to teacher's questions and invitations and very little opportunity is given for students' spontaneous language production. The assumption that any teacher who has gone through the educational mill could play a contingent role as an English teacher does not auger well for our effort to promote proficiency in the language. The emphasis on examinations and the fact that learning is geared towards certification pre-empts coaching and writing becomes more important than speech. Oral examinations are minimal and often optional.

The competence to use English effectively for classroom communication is a specific skill which is unlikely to be developed by training in general English language skills. The development of this specific skill is a pre-requisite for effective learning in any subject on the curriculum taught through the medium of English (Ellis, 1985). Writing about language learning in classrooms, Allwright (1984) comments that the management of interaction in the classroom necessarily also constitutes the management of language learning itself. Allwright's observation means that at the heart of all learning is the communicative activity which takes place in the classroom. The problem is that teachers even when willing, are often unable to use the English language to generate the kind of classroom talk in which learning can flourish. In a recent survey of the English teachers' preference for teaching/learning interactions in some selected Senior Secondary Schools in Cape Coast, 121 out of the 124 respondents, that is 97.5% of teachers, said 'NO' to the lecture method of teaching. 114 or 91.9% of the respondents opted for the discussion method, 112 or 90% favoured the question and answer method, and 99 or 79.8% preferred the method which allowed teachers to guide students to find things out for themselves. An overwhelming 116 or 93.5% of respondents was in favour of active student participation in class (*Amua-Sekyi, Unpublished*).

The research shows that our English teachers know the type of teaching/learning activity that will best promote proficiency in the language. However, knowing what to do is one thing, and

being able to do what you know is another. The practice of teacher talk places a heavy demand on the teacher. The teacher needs language to organise classroom activities, to regulate the behaviour of pupils, to supply information when needed, to explain etc. Students according to Barnes and Todd (1977), need language to control progress through tasks, to raise new questions, to express their feelings, to relate to experiences, to monitor thinking, to identify problems and evaluate progress and outcomes. The communicative demands placed on both students and teachers are considerable. For many second language speakers in our classrooms, at the initial stages, the language-based operations necessary for learning have not been acquired. Unless they are afforded opportunities to practice these skills, they cannot achieve mastery. The communicative demands placed on both students and teachers are considerable.

Earlier on in this paper, we have observed that the skill to perform a variety of communicative styles in the classroom cannot be developed through general English programmes. Training in classroom communication skills should be an integral part of any teacher training programme, particularly where English is the medium of instruction. Thus, a course that deals with the nature of classroom communication in English and how this is related to learning will increase the teachers' understanding and develop awareness of how classroom communication affects the kind of learning that takes place (Ellis, 1985). The development of classroom communication in English will be one way of overcoming the kinds of problems faced by teachers in our classrooms.

SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE

Many of the syllabuses for the teaching of English in Ghana some 40 years ago were carbon copies of syllabuses used in schools in Britain. The assumption was that teaching English should not only improve communication skill, but also provide education in the literary and classical traditions which the native speakers of English had. There have been shifts in perspective in language teaching both locally and globally. There has been a shift from literature to language and a shift from teachers to learners. Perhaps, because the model of language teaching was based on the teaching of Latin and Greek in our schools, many were those who interpreted the fairly immediate goals of language teaching as access to literature. Through the early years of this century however, there have been people trying to encourage linguistically more sensitive and more communicatively competent syllabuses. The tendency now is to encourage dependence on the communicative aspect of language. That shift has also changed the concept of 'teaching'. The shift in emphasis on the teacher as an instructor to the teacher as a facilitator, with emphasis on learner participation, undermines the idea of the prime role of language teaching as literary activity.

The feeling of the times leads towards emancipation and empowerment in the use of English. A definite shift from English as part of an education that inducts the learner into a humanistic tradition to an education that facilitates communication (Brumfit, 1993).

PROSPECTS

In an article entitled 'Our Poor English' (Daily Graphic: August 30, 1997), Africanus Owusu-Ansah lends support to a statement made by one Nicholas Ahator that 'we all contribute to the decline of English language without realising it' (Ghanaian Times: August 1, 1997). According to Africanus Owusu-Ansah, teachers, parents, the media, administrators and even the West African Examination Council (WAEC), have questions to answer for 'subtly' teaching the youth wrongly. His argument is that we have overlooked certain common mistakes which now seem to be accepted. We hear these mistakes in our conversations and on radio. We read them in statements and receive them as instructions, but we do nothing about them. For example, a passenger who wants to get down from a bus tells the driver "I will drop here" as if he were a piece of wood. When a watch is damaged or does not function, we say "It is spoilt" - like a spoilt child perhaps. A radio presenter advised a caller during a phone-in to lower his radio set instead of asking him to lower the volume of sound on the radio. Announcements such as "The police kindly requests the finder to report ..." is familiar. The question is, who is being kind? the police or the finder? The general attitude is one of "it is acceptable" or "what I said is comprehensible".

The assumption that anyone who has gone through the educational mill can teach English because English is the medium of instruction should by now become untenable. The English teacher does not only manage classroom communication but teaches the language as well. Teaching English language through English is challenging enough for the teacher who is a specialist in the subject. For the teacher of another subject who has to teach English, his/her limitation will result in the choice of a less taxing, more familiar, more orderly and more predictable communicative style. The teacher settles on asking students teacher-directed questions or getting them to read and answer questions based on the passage; a method less rich in learning possibilities because the students do not get the opportunity to express and share their ideas freely or relate those ideas to what they already know through the use of the English language.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that only specialists in the language who can make real and effective use of teaching aids to facilitate learning should teach the language. Language resource centres similar to the science resource centres that operate in selected secondary schools could also be established in district educational centres. Professional English teachers could be attached to these centres as resource persons and charged with the responsibility to provide support by way of demonstration classes and on-the-spot in-service training to English teachers in their districts.

With the abolition of the common entrance examination, primary school children have 9 years of examination free time which the English teacher can utilize to teach the English language effectively to promote proficiency in the language. Story telling, role play, discussions and debates should be encouraged at all levels in the primary and senior secondary schools to promote language use.

If children are to have a good grasp of the language they will use in their educational pursuits, what needs immediate attention is more class time for the teaching of English. The 3½ hours of English language teaching a week on the primary school time table is simply not enough. About 7 to 10 hours a week will make for a more meaningful and productive learning of the language if the proper and effective foundation is to be laid. Pupils' reading of a variety of books both at home and at school at all levels should be encouraged to promote language development. This brings up the issue of textbooks. Every pupil must have a textbook to ensure effective teaching and learning through class activities and home work. Perhaps, parents can invest more in their children's education by ensuring that they have their own textbook to use at school and at home if government supply of textbooks is inadequate.

CONCLUSION

As a result of the communications revolution, English is seen by many as the means by which we shall all have access to information technology. There is easy knowledge transfer now at speeds unimaginable in the past. We can be in principle anywhere in the world. There is real communication, not just through television but communication of massive data bases. The computer has changed the various methods and practices in the business world as well as in the teaching/learning process. The computer is no longer an option for doing things but a tool we need to enhance our operational activities, a tool that will inevitably enable us to exploit the knowledge associated with our language teaching. Thus, the interaction between technological change, change in our general attitudes to English language teaching and learning and our personal involvement are going to be what determines where we go as individuals and as members of professional groups.

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