

Repositioning English for Specific Purpose in Language Education for Sustainable Youth Empowerment and National Development

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Abstract

Education is key to human development and the development of any given society relies solely on the development and sustainability of its education. Language is a catalyst in educational development, which is an index of national development. Any highly developed nation in the world today is simply the product of its educated citizens. In Nigeria however, education is beset with recurring challenges of academic inefficiency, school drop-out, academic strikes, conflicts, political violence or war in communities and kidnapping in formal institutions of learning. The implication is that the education that children have does not prepare them for the world of work. This paper is therefore premised on the deployment of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as an approach to language education, which allows learners to use the target language in specific academic, professional or occupational domains. The study shows that there is need to respond to the learning poverty in the Nigerian educational system by repositioning ESP in language education to equip learners with the right and needed linguistic skills for empowerment, economic sustainability and entrepreneurship. Education with such values will motivate learners to embrace education that targets skill acquisition rather than education that seeks white-collar jobs. The paper asserts that English for Specific Purpose (ESP) can influence and equip youths with the right linguistic skills needed for their profession or workplace for self-reliance, sustainable self and national development.

Keywords: English Specific Purpose, Language Education, Youth Empowerment, Sustainable Development, National Development.

Introduction

The centrality of education in the context of nation building and national development is without gain-saying. Education is a powerful tool and fundamental requirement for personal and national development. It has been responsible for the economic, social, political and human resource development worldwide. It spurs a nation's economy by producing the manpower to harness and manage its natural resources, businesses, and other aspects. It holds the key to the production of skilled human resources necessary for development in all spheres of human endeavours.

Whether formal or informal, education aims at providing individuals with knowledge, skills and competence that will make them productive citizens. It improves and empowers societal status and their social welfare. It molds individuals to fit into the society. Education entails the total process of human training in which knowledge is imparted and skills are developed. The development of any country depends not on abundance of its natural resources but its educated citizens.

The peculiar power of language is a point worthy of consideration. The power of an instrument is virtually the power of him who wields it; and as language is used in common, by the wise and the foolish, the mighty and the impotent, the candid and the crafty, the righteous and the wicked, its power lies in its fitness or efficiency for the accomplishment of the purposes for which it is used. As it is the nature of an agent, to be the doer of something, so it is the nature of language, to be that with which something is effected; and words which represents thoughts, are things of mighty influence, not only in addresses to the passions and high-wrought feelings of mankind, but in also their illocution and perlocution.

Language is the tool that enables man to achieve every task in life. Whether verbal or non-verbal, language is fundamental to human communication and central to human development and survival because, most human functions require its usage, and it serves as the medium through which the literature and the culture of its speakers are transmitted to the younger generation . There cannot be any sustainable development of any kind in any nation or country in the world without the use of well-understood language.

This paper examines how English for Specific Purposes in the context of language education can support self-empowerment and sustainable national development. Certain concepts central to this paper are examined below to provide direction to the paper.

Language Education and English in Nigeria

Language education is the teaching and learning of language in general, be it indigenous/mother tongue/first language, second or foreign language. In

the 21st century, language education become an important factor in international development programmes. There is a huge industry of language teaching in many countries of the world today, particularly the English language teaching, because of its great influence in the global realm. The growth of education, trade, technology, mass media, and tourism created a dire need for people to communicate in different languages based on the different language environments. Countries like Nigeria, China, and Japan have all developed language policies to teach at least one foreign language at the primary and secondary school level of education (Kim, 2009). According to Gong and Guo (2019), China has been putting enormous importance on foreign language learning, especially English language.

Makiliuwa (2001) sees language education in two dimensions: language in education and languages for education. According to her, the former refers to language taught or learned in educational system as a school subject, while the latter has to do with language used as a medium of instruction or language of instruction. This paper sees language education as both the language for instruction and as a subject taught.

In Nigeria, English language is the medium of education and it plays significant roles that enhance national development positively. It is the language brought by the British colonial masters in the 17th Century for a multilingual society. The language brings interaction and communication among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. As such, it is a formidable instrument for national unity and the viable medium of instruction in education for

technological development. This agrees with Eyisi (2007), when she states:

English occupies a unique place in the Nigerian education because of its significant role and status in the national life. English is socio linguistically important in spite of its colonial origin, having become, over the years, both the language of official business and a vital link language between the various ethnic groups in the country. It is pedagogically significant as the language of instruction in virtually the entire school system, from the upper primary to the highest tertiary levels ... Accordingly, a good pass in English has become mandatory for transition from primary level and for admission to all levels of higher education in the country.

She further asserts that:

So long as the English language remains the official language of Nigeria, so long as text books are written in English and so long the language remains an international one and a veritable gateway to the understanding and mastery of science and technology, it will continue to be *primus inter pares* if not the *numerouno*.

To this, there is no gainsaying that English language occupies a central place in the Nigerian education system. The system has found English to be valuable, viable and indispensable, with which to measure the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of any educated individual in the country.

The education sector needs to give adequate attention to language education because it plays an important role in the academic and economic development of any nation. Failure to handle language education in academic and societal levels adequately could affect or destroy the future of the younger generation. It is an indispensable instrument for developing and empowering people for national development.

Sustainable Development

Sustainable is the ability of something to be sustained, supported, upheld, or confirmed so as to maintain a certain state or position for a particular period. Herman (2002) submits that sustainability is a way of asserting the value of longevity and intergenerational justice, while recognizing mortality and finitude (p. 2). On the other hand, Hornby (2001) defines sustainable as something that can continue or be continued for a long time (p. 1209). Therefore, sustainable or sustainability are all concerned with the act of continuing something that has already been started.

Development, on the other hand, can be viewed as a state or condition-static, or as a process or course of change- dynamic. From the latter perspective, development is a process of improving the quality of all human lives. It is a shift from commodity to human approach with investment in education and

skill training. Thomas (2000) explains three ways the word 'development' is used:

Development as a Vision is a vision or description of how desirable a society is. *Development as a Historical Process* relates to social change that takes place over long periods of time due to inevitable processes. For example, arguments have been made that both capitalism and communism are unavoidable results of progress, and *Development as Action* is a deliberate effort to change things for the better. For example, providing food aid to alleviate hunger. In clear terms, Senwua (2007) maintains that:

Development involves the achievement of self-fulfillment, goals by individual beings; able to participate actively in structuring and restructuring their own affairs, their environment and matters that affect their daily lives. It is therefore an attitude of mind and approach to life in which an individual accepts to a greater degree that he is the master of his own future, and can personally participate and intervene in the social engineering of his community.

Although the concept of development is multivariate in meaning, Senwua's definition of development fits into this study. In sum, development is creating conditions conducive to the growth of peoples' self-esteem through the establishment of educational, social, political and economic systems and institutions which promote human dignity, respect, improve standard of living, and eradicate poverty.

Sustainable development is the development that is durable, consistent and stable through the concerted effort of a progressive government and its citizens. It has been defined by the United Nation General Assembly as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It is a development that is likely to achieve lasting satisfaction of human needs and improvement of the quality of life of people. A development that can be sustained, upheld and maintained for the use and progress of the future citizens.

Youth Empowerment

The youths are the young energetic members of the society, who, when actively involved and engaged will boost economic and financial transformation of their country. A robust economic growth would be achieved through youths' empowerment. Page (2003) asserts that empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their lives, a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, communities and societies, by acting on issues that they defined as important. This definition suggests that empowerment is a process that leads to good gains at the end of the process. However, there is high rate of youths' unemployment in many nations nowadays, including Nigeria. According to a UN report, Nigerian youth migrants in Europe and America are three times more than migrants from other West African countries, excluding the massive migration rate of Nigerians to Canada and other foreign countries. Again, according to National Bureau of Statistics Reports (2018), Nigeria has the youngest population in Africa, who fall within the age-range of 16-39. This implies that

more than 50% of Nigerian population are youths with great prospects for economic development through employment and empowerment programmes. Data from National Bureau of Statistics indicates that about 20.9 million Nigerians were unemployed at the third quarter of 2018, which implies that about 80% of these unemployed Nigerians are the youths. However, the youth unemployment rate dropped from 8.6% in first quarter of 2023 to 8.4% in the first quarter of 2024. Although recent report indicates that there is a significant decrease in unemployment rate in Nigeria, the problem of youth unemployment still persists.

In Nigeria, several factors account for youth empowerment notably lack of quality education and labour market. The labour market consists of the formal and informal sector, and out of the hundreds of thousands of graduates yearly, only 10% are employed. Other factors that affect youth empowerment include: preference for white-collar job, skills mismatch, lack of interest in vocational skills, consumers' preference for foreign goods to indigenous ones, corruption, inconsistency in policy implementation, security challenges, etc.

Without gainsaying, youth empowerment is key to any sustainable and national development. It is the process through which young people gain the opportunity and ability to make decisions and bring about changes in their lives. It is also a means of getting the youths to do something great for themselves, the society, the country, and to be self-reliant. Youth empowerment is therefore an attitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby young people gain the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and Implement changes in their own

lives and the lives of other people in the society (Suzama & Young, 2006). Furthermore, Adams (2008) defines empowerment as the capacity of the individuals, groups and / or community to take control of their own goals, and the process of by which individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives (p. 6). In sum, empowerment is a means of promoting the well-being of people by supporting them with anything that will enable them overcome their lack of influence or unemployment. Empowering the youths is making them self-reliant, thereby creating the needed requirements for self and national development. The benefits of youth empowerment, among others, can be summarized thus: poverty alleviation/eradication, crime reduction and security improvement, improved standard of living, employment creation, higher education pursuit and enhanced good governance.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

English for Specific Purposes (henceforth ESP) is an established subfield of Applied Linguistics, and an approach to English language teaching in which content and method of teaching the target language are based on the learner's needs or the purpose in which the learner needs the language for. The approach dates back to the 1960s as a result of pressing worldwide demand for fast-paced language training in occupational and professional settings. In other words, there are three reasons for the emergence of ESP: the demand of a New Brave World, linguistic revolution, and focus on the learner need. It is meant to meet specific needs of the learners by making use of underlying methodology and activities it serves; and it centred on the language appropriate to these

activities in terms of grammar, lexis, register, skills and discourse.

Many definitions have been given for ESP. The aim of learning ESP is to equip learners with certain English proficiency level for a situation where language is going to be used (Sujana, 2005). Some linguists describe ESP as being an approach to the teaching of English for any purpose that could be specified. Richards and Rodger (2001) consider ESP as a movement that seeks to serve the language needs of learners who need English in order to carry out specific roles (e.g. student, engineer, nurse), and who need to acquire content and real-world skills through the medium of it rather than master the language for its own sake (p. 107). This implies that ESP is a language teaching approach that prepares learners to use English just within academic, professional or workplace environments where the language will be used. Again, ESP is learnt not for the purpose of gaining general knowledge about the language but to make smooth the path to entry or greater linguistic efficiency in particular environments (Basturkmen, 2006, p. 18). Lorenzo (2005) asserts that ESP “concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures” (p. 1). As an approach, ESP has particularly functioned to help language learners to cope with the features and basic tenet of the language or to develop the needed competence to function in a discipline, profession or workplace for which the learners intend to learn. Safely put, ESP is premised on learning the basics of English to achieve their aim by functioning effectively in their profession, academics or businesses or tourism.

English for Specific Purpose focuses on the basic knowledge of the language system, and may be used, in specific teaching situation, a different methodology from the general English. It is usually designed for adult learners at tertiary institutions or in professional workplace. It could also be meant for learners at secondary school level to prepare them for effective use of the language in their profession or workplace.

The teaching of English for Specific Purpose (ESP) should be encouraged in secondary schools to help learners to be equipped with the language skills needed for their education, skills or future endeavours, so that a students who wants to be an architect or engineer should be guided with the linguistic registers that would build their future ambitions.

Repositioning ESP for Youth Empowerment and National Development

The essential purpose of education is to ensure the progress and survival of any nation, and the survival of education depends on the careful and honest observance of standards set for its operation. There are clear evidences in some parts of the world such as Japan, China, South Korea which have shown that, the critical factor for developing any economy is not in mineral deposits and similar materials but in human resources that are equipped with the required and appropriate knowledge and skills. In other words, education is the determining factor for the development of any meaningful economy.

Repositioning ESP in language teaching can bring about youth empowerment and national development in several ways as highlighted below.

Career opportunities: ESP can enhance employability of the youths in specific industries, companies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). For instance, effective teaching of ESP and trainings in fields such as agriculture can provide the opportunity for employment of the youths. There are NGOs that provide empowerment of people particularly youths. They train and certify people with the needed skills and offer capitals for startup businesses such as fish farming, poultry farming and some cash crops farming which provide employment opportunities for youths. It can also influence national development when higher institutions specifically designate courses for ESP studies, where people can obtain higher degrees in ESP as it is done at the University of Birmingham, and Aston University in the UK where ESP courses are offered for overseas students in English speaking countries in Africa.

Communication skills: ESP will help young people develop effective communication skills in their career, profession or workplace. For instance, a hotel receptionists needs good communication skills to attend to guests from different parts of the world, and this can be effectively done through ESP instruction. Journalists also need to be well equipped with the linguistic skills both spoken and written.

Global Connections: ESP facilitates international communication and collaboration. International agencies or organisations such as WHO, UNICEF and UN organized and implement programmes for the benefit of host countries. For instance, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is a United Nations agency that provides humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees. In this agency, Palestinian youths were employed by the agency, which reduces unemployment and improves their

standard of living. There are similar cases in Nigeria where people were employed by UNO, UNICEF and NGOs in IDP camps. Such organisations employ people who can communicate and get things done properly, and people who pass through ESP instruction stand a better chance to be employed. It enhances good relationship and gives the host countries better chance to benefit from more programmes which promote national development.

To empower the youths for sustainable and national development, this paper stresses the point that English for Specific Purpose (ESP) is a potent model to repositioning language education for sustainable and national development in Nigeria, considering the status of English as the official language and the language of social cohesion in a multicultural society like Nigeria. Since ESP is a model to language teaching or training that seeks to serve the language needs of learners who need English in order to carry out specific functions or roles, there is need to provide English education to serve the needs of those who need English for specific purposes beyond the undue emphasis for proficiency in general English or general knowledge of the language,

In Nigeria, there are instances of graduates from pharmacy, law, engineering who are doing better in life in comedy show, film industry, business, politics, etc. ESP should be introduced to students at the secondary school level. This could influence many students to key in to an enduring field or profession from the onset. It will also provide the trainees with the basic skills they need to effectively develop to enhance their performances and successes in life. Being introduced to ESP at an early stage of education would help people choose better career

paths than wasting years in higher institutions, only to abandon such certificates to pick up interest in different fields.

The paper further believes that adopting ESP in language teaching will give learners confidence and the much desired zeal to learn, considering the opportunities or chances of employment that lies ahead. Therefore, the paper maintains that the need of the learners should be the focal point in language education. Entrepreneurs employ those that have the linguistic skills needed for the job. This can best be achieved when the needed language skills are inculcated into the learners. For instance, bank marketers are employed solely to market the banks, that is, to persuade and convince customers, especially those with access to money to make deposit in their bank.

Conclusion

The state of the Nigerian education and the economy with high rate of youth unemployment calls for urgent need to reposition English for Specific Purpose (ESP) within the context of language education for sustainable national development. For effective and sustainable youth empowerment for national development, young people need to be equipped with the kind of language education, which specifically fits into their needs, purposes or desires in life. Through this, the individual is able to function, become productive and self-reliant, either as an employee or an employer of labour.

Recommendations

To address the challenges of youth unemployment and empowerment in Nigeria, this study recommends that:

- i. Needs Analysis in ESP should be conducted to identify specific areas of language needs for the youth that can enhance their employability and influence national development.
- ii. Nigeria should borrow a leaf from the University of Birmingham, and Aston University in the UK by developing ESP curriculum and designating ESP courses to be offered for higher certificates and for overseas students in English speaking countries in Africa.

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