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An Analysis of Sociolinguistic Functional Elements in the English Language Course Books: Implications for English Language Teaching/Learning in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper discusses the importance of exposing secondary school students to sociolinguistic functional elements, which reflect the social functions they need to perform with English language. It highlights the fact that Nigerian secondary school students lack communicative abilities in both spoken and written English, because they are not taught natural language use in the classroom. It went further to analyze the sociolinguistic functional elements that occurred in three widely used English language course books in Nigeria and found out that these functional elements were not adequately reflected in the course books. Even the few that were reflected were not given in-depth treatment. The researcher comes to the conclusion that, there is the need to reflect these sociolinguist functional elements in English language course books, so that teachers can teach them to their students. In this way students will be able to communicate in diverse communicative situations of daily living.

Introduction

Applied Linguists and language teachers generally agree that communication is the goal of language teaching. Here in Nigeria, the main aim of teaching English is to help students acquire relevant communication skills require both

for speech and writing, to enable them communicate effectively in various social contexts and situations. So, the English language that is taught in the classroom is intended for use in the society; to function effectively in various situations of daily living.

In the past few years, there has been a growing concern here in Nigeria, over students' inability to communicate effectively (in speech and writing), after learning English at the primary, junior and senior secondary school levels. One reason for this inability is that, students are unable to relate what they learn in the classroom to real-life language use outside the classroom. It has also been observed that, the teaching techniques adopted by teachers do not expose the students to real-life language in the classroom. Teachers tend to focus on the teaching of grammar and neglect practical language use.

Another major reason for students' inability to communicate effectively is that, some of the course books used for English language teaching and learning do not clearly specify the communicative situations that students need to function in and the type of expressions associated with them; for example, many students do not know how to propose a toast because, their course book did not specify it and as such they were not taught.

Sociolinguistics Functional Elements

These refer to categories of communicative functions that are drawn from the social purposes of language use such as: asking for information, narrating an experience, expressing disagreement, accepting an offer and so on. They include all the communicative functions that English language learners need to perform with the language. Sociolinguistic functional elements were first formulated by Wilkins (1972). He proposed that course contents should be grade on the basis of functions and notions. He described functions as categories of verbal communication in a variety of settings, on a variety of topic and notions as concepts of meaning, which people use in verbal communication.

The ideas of Wilkins were expanded by Van Ek and Alexander (1981). They specified all the communicative functions that English language learners should be able to know and express at the threshold level of language proficiency. These functional elements are outlined below:

1. Imparting and seeking factual information

- a) Asking for information;

- b) Reporting their experiences and those of others;
 - c) Describing people, places and things;
 - d) Narrating stories;
 - e) Correcting their friends and siblings; and
 - f) Identifying things, people, places etc;
2. **Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes**
- a) Expressing agreement/disagreement;
 - b) Denying something;
 - c) Declining an offer or invitation;
 - d) Accepting an offer; and
 - e) Expressing possibility/impossibility, certainty/uncertainty, and capability/incapability.
3. **Expressing and finding out emotional attitudes**
- a) Expressing pleasure, like/dislike, interests/lack of interest, surprise, hope, and satisfaction/dissatisfaction; and
 - b) Expressing disappointment, sympathy, gratitude, desire etc.
4. **Expressing and finding out moral attitudes**
- a) Apologizing;
 - b) Granting forgiveness; and
 - c) Expressing approval/disapproval, appreciation, regrets, indifference.
1. **Getting things done**
- a) Making suggestions;
 - b) Requesting someone to do something;
 - c) Inviting others to do something;
 - d) Warning others about something;
 - e) Instructing and directing others; and

f) Offering or requesting assistance from others.

2. Socializing

- a) Greeting people;
- b) Introducing oneself and others;
- c) Taking leave;
- d) Attracting people;
- e) Proposing a toast; and
- f) Congratulating others etc.

The Need to Reflect Sociolinguistic Functional Elements in English Language Course Books

In the Nigerian educational system, course books and textbooks present most of the topics that teachers teach and students learn. So, the content of the course books or textbooks determine to a large extent the level of success the students can achieve. If the sociolinguistic functional elements are reflected adequately in the English language course books used by both teachers and students, it then means that these functional elements will be taught and learnt in the classroom. Also, students will be able to use them in natural communicative situations. At present, English language course books used in Nigeria focus mainly on grammatical categories, little attention is paid to communicative functions, that is why students are able to master the grammatical categories and still lack communicative abilities.

The Need to Teach Sociolinguistic Functional Elements

Roberts (1982) emphasized the need to expose students to real life language in the classroom, if they are to acquire communicative competence. The communicative functions outlined above reflect the actual communicative needs of the students – what they need to do with English language. So, teachers should focus on helping students to acquire words and grammatical structures needed to perform these tasks.

Also, teachers should adopt an interactive approach to English language teaching/learning, which exposes students to a variety of language activities, social roles, settings, styles and topics. William (1996) stressed that communication should not only be the goal of second language teaching but also the methodology. He emphasized that communicative competence can only be acquired through the process of social interaction. If teacher begin to

teach English as it is used in natural situations, students will be better equipped to express themselves both in speech and writing.

Methodology

The sample consists of three English language course books, widely used in Nigerian Secondary Schools, namely: *Intensive English for Junior/Senior Secondary Schools*, *Effective English for Secondary Schools and Junior/Senior Secondary Schools English Project*

The research instrument is a checklist: an inventory of all the sociolinguistic functional elements that English language learners need to learn outlined by Van Ek and Alexander (1981).

All the functional elements contained in each of the three course books were categories and quantified numerically. The number of functional elements in each of the course books was weighed against those in the checklist on the basis of percentage, in order to determine the extent to which these functional elements were reflected by each course book.

Data Analysis and Results

The results of this research are presented in the tables below:

Table 1 shows that, for all the levels (JS1 – 111, SS 1 – 111), *Intensive English* contains 11 (21%) functional elements, *Effective English* contains 24 (48%) and *English Project* contains 14 (27%) From this table, it is obvious that *Effective English* has more functional elements than *Intensive English* and *English Project*.

Table 2 shows that, there are 52 (100%) functional elements in the checklist out of which only 11 (21%) were reflected in *Intensive English*, 25 (48%) in *Effective English* and 14 (27%) in *English Project*. From this table it is clear that most of the functional elements in the checklist were not reflected in the course books.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this research shows that all the course books used for the research did not adequately reflect the functional elements. All of them were below average. The implication of this is that, since these functional elements were not adequate reflected, they were not taught. It then means that Nigerian Secondary School Students do not have the means to express themselves, whenever they find themselves functioning in certain social roles.

It was also found out that even when these functional elements are reflected, they are not given treated satisfactory. Most of them were given superficial treatment. The researcher also observed that, some categories of functional elements were neglected, especially ‘socializing’. This accounts for the level of difficulty experienced by students, whenever they are to function in this category.

Implications for English Language Teaching and Learning in Nigeria

The results of this research have very important implications for the teaching and learning of English Language in Nigeria. First, it is evident from the research that, Nigerian Secondary School Students are not adequately taught the sociolinguistic functional elements, since these elements are not adequately reflected in the English Language course books used by these Students.

Secondly, it is obvious that, English Language Teachers do not make serious effort towards the teaching of these functional elements. Curriculum planners on their own part have neglected this aspect of language study. This deduction is based on the premise that, the course book writers derive their content from the curriculum. In other words, the curriculum serves as a frame of reference for these writers. There is therefore the need for course book writers and curriculum planners to ensure that sociolinguistic functional elements are adequately reflected in both the course books and the curriculum, so that teachers can teach them to their students. In this way, Nigerian secondary students will be able to communicate effectively in any situation they find themselves.

Conclusion

Sociolinguistic functional elements embody all the communicative functions that Nigerian secondary school students need to perform using English language. As important as these functional elements are, they are neglected by English language teachers, course book writers and curriculum planners. This to a large extent accounts for students’ inability to express themselves freely in certain communicative situations. Teachers need to acquaint themselves with these functional elements so that they can teach them to their students. It should also be made vital aspects of the course books and the curriculum.

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Table 1: Functional Elements in the Three Course Books.

Levels	Intensive English	Effective English	English Project
JS 1	3	8	0
JS 2	2	10	4
JS 3	6	5	1
SS 1	6	1	9
SS 2	0	1	0
SS 3	0	0	0
TOTAL	11 (21%)	25 (48%)	14 (27%)

Table 2: Comparison of the Functional Elements in the Course Books with those in the Checklist.

S/No	No. of functional Elements in the Checklist	No. of functional Elements in <i>Intensive English</i>		No. of functional Elements in <i>Effect English</i>	No. of functional Elements in <i>English Project</i>
1.	Imparting and seeking factual information	6	2	2	2
2.	Expressing and finding out intellectual attitudes	13	5	7	6
3.	Expressing and finding out emotional attitudes	12	2	6	2
4.	Expressing and finding out moral attitudes	6	0	4	1
5.	Getting things done	7	1	4	1
6.	Socializing	8	1	2	2
Total		52	11	25	14
Percentage		100%	21%	48%	27%