

**EQUITY AND FAIRNESS IN THE ASSESSMENT OF
NIGERIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE
IN ENGLISH:
THE FACTORS OF INFLUENCE**

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ABSTRACT.

The medium of instruction at most levels of education and the lingua franca of Nigeria remains the English language as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE). Therefore, the acquisition of English language by Polytechnic graduates for communicative functions and for studying various disciplines has become imperative and so, to ensure its mastery, the 'Use of English' (UOE) course has been put in place and is taught to students at most levels of the Polytechnic education regardless of their disciplines. As laudable as this practice may seem, this paper posits that it is being affected by factors like differences in students' English language background, differences in the provision of learning tasks, infrastructure, personnel, admission policy into the Polytechnics, time constraint and teacher incompetence all of which confirm that the issue of equity and fairness in the assessment of Nigerian students' performance in English is lacking. Such a situation according to this paper is definitely unacceptable. Hence, suggestions like the adoption of a new approach to the teaching of the UOE in Nigerian Polytechnics, teacher training among others have been proffered to enhance a better acquisition of the UOE and have more equity and fairness in the assessment of Nigerian Polytechnic students' performance in English language.

Introduction

Polytechnic education – an arm of tertiary level education in Nigeria has come a long way and no doubt, has come to stay because of the current global move towards technological development. The Polytechnics have achieved immeasurable results in the provision of middle and high level technological know how which is a move in the right direction towards the advancement of Nigeria from a developing to a developed economy- a move that is close to the heart of the present administration of the country.

In order for Polytechnics to further advance to greater heights as is now being sought, there is the need to consider factors like the issue of equity and fairness in the general assessment of the performance of Polytechnic students in all areas and particularly in the area of the acquisition of the English Language: the National lingua franca, the language of Education at most levels, the language of international integration, the language of government etc. and a compulsory course under the title of “The use of English” (UOE) for all disciplines in the Polytechnics and at almost all the levels of all the disciplines.

The National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) is the body that coordinates and advises on all aspects of Technical Education (TE) falling outside the Universities in Nigeria. The board categorizes English language studies under General Studies. In the introductory remarks of her General Studies course specification for National Diploma (ND) and Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes, the board opines:

Nigeria has reached a critical stage in its development. It is now forced, through economic, social and moral constraints to decide whether to fully take over the reins of technical

development and training or to continue to import technology and technical expertise. It appears the country has opted to lead, rather than to be led... we in the Polytechnics are a key in the process that is to follow for through our doors will pass those who will become the technological back-bone of the nation (NBTE, 1999: 2).

As one of the strategies for achieving her laudable objectives the board insists that all ND and HND students take the courses provided in English language and Communication skills with details for GNS 101,102, 201,202,301,302,401 and 402 for the eight semesters of studies in ND and HND programs (NBTE, 1999:3)

From the foregoing, it would seem that all is well with the acquisition of UOE in the Polytechnics but this paper insists that there seems to be inequity in the different spheres of Polytechnic administration that are hampering the equity and fairness in the assessment of Nigerian Polytechnic students' performance in English. As a result, this paper particularly examines:

- _ The conceptualization of Equity and fairness in assessment.
- _ The factors of influence (in the case of UOE implementation in the Nigerian Polytechnic)
- _ Conclusion
- _ Recommendations.

1.0 The conceptualization of equity and fairness in assessment.

Equity implies fairness. It is a situation in which no one has an unfair advantage. It is the situation of being fair and reasonable in a way that allows equal treatment to everyone. In other words, this means giving room for fair judgment. Equal opportunities in assessment entails two parameters including whether every student being tested has had the same opportunity to learn in preparation for the test/examination and whether the test

examination itself is bias-free. In a situation of inequity in any assessment system, individual students or groups may be disadvantaged such that the results earned from a test/ examination would not be the true measure of performance. Infact, the test may not measure the abilities that it claims. An equitable and fair assessment system then is the one that provides every individual with the same learning experience and equal ability to earn the same result. (Ugodolunwa, 2005) How far we can achieve this in the administration of teaching and subsequent performance in the examinations by Polytechnic students, in English language studies in Nigeria is the crux of the matter here. The situation of complete equity is certainly very difficult to attain but we must begin from somewhere – we definitely could improve the present situation.

2.0 The Factors Of Influence.

The factors to consider in educational assessment with relevance to school based assessment as obtained in the Polytechnics in Nigeria are indeed very many. There are many considerations which fall outside the school like the socio-economic background of students, their indigenous languages, their exposure to English language before arriving the Polytechnic et cetera but there are still many more inherent in the administration of the Polytechnics which are hereby categorized into school administration problems which if properly tackled, a lot would be done to salvage the situation of inequity in the assessment of students performance in English language in the Polytechnics of Nigeria.

The first set of consideration pertains to the admission policy of the Polytechnics. The fact that the system allows for a first and a late admission exercise during every season of the admission exercise implies a double

standard. Many students often arrive the Polytechnics with over four weeks difference of others but at the end of their first semester are subjected to the same examination. How unrealistic this is! The students of the late admission definitely have a disadvantaged start, which is a direct indication of inequity – inequity in terms of access to curriculum [Stobart, 2003].

Further more, there is variation in the entry mode into the Polytechnic. Students could either directly apply to the individual Polytechnic of their choice in which case they do not write any examination or they could go through the Joint Matriculation Examination for Polytechnics and in which case an examination is written. These provisions lend support to the situation of inequality, because, the Polytechnics in the country do not operate a uniform academic calendar and which means that the times for their own admissions which differ from Polytechnic to Polytechnic may not correspond with the release of the admission result through JAMB. Therefore, the admission of either the individual Polytechnic or JAMB comes first and in either case, the result is inequity in the entry into Polytechnics. Relatively is the unequal duration of study before students are eventually subjected to the same examinations of which the results add up to their final grade.

Admission gained through the JAMB examination is called direct entry and the student spends two academic seasons of four semesters to earn a National Diploma Certificate whereas, in the admission offered by the Polytechnics themselves, students go through one session of two semesters before they are joined by the direct entry students and so, in the end, students of the same course and set would either have spent two academic sessions or three to earn the same certificate. All of the foregoing is to take for granted the fact that in the Polytechnic generally, some brilliant

candidates are dropped in place of their not so brilliant counterparts to satisfy the quota requirements of and admission of the students into the Polytechnics.

The second set of consideration has to do with the general studying environment and the welfare of the students. Prior to their arriving the Polytechnics, students would have had differences in their background knowledge in English, had little or much experience in the use of the language and would have had varying access to learning materials in the language, for instance, and sadly enough, these differences remain because across the board of the Polytechnics in Nigeria, the situation is similar-a situation that is however, grossly undesirable because, ideally, Polytechnic students certainly require a very rigorous English language instruction strategy to make up for the lapses created by the admission of certain categories of students who not being qualified for direct admission into the Polytechnics, manage to “steal” into system through the certificate and introductory programmes (Onjewu. 1999). Whereas, the technical nature of most of the courses in the Polytechnics requires a good grounding in English language to facilitate a successful mastery of the language and the professional courses, the prevailing atmosphere in the Polytechnics does not yield the desired results and the reasons for this are not far fetched.

Also there is inequitable distribution of the knowledge of the course content of the UOE to students because of the different teaching methods of lecturers. There is also the problem of assessment whereby most lecturers of English seem to know and use tests negatively – knowing only the negative use of tests (the pass and fail labels) and knowing nothing of the positive use of tests in the teaching of English language (Ubahakwe. 1979). In addition,

the English language classroom and language laboratory (which is now lacking in most Polytechnics) constitute an English-speaking island. Soon after the weekly contact period of not more than four hours at most, students are let loose in an unsupportive environment (Parry, 1980) so that the wide disparity and confusion between the English language classroom and the Nigerian society outside the class, constitute considerable interference rather than reinforcing the acquisition of a standard. Hence, students have very little opportunity to use the language outside the classroom. Similarly, there is no central feeding of Polytechnic students, no adequate supply of relevant books in the libraries, no decent hostel accommodation, no adequate medical care, recreation facilities and not even adequate classroom accommodation. In short, students could either make do with what is available or supplement them themselves which further compounds the already inequitable backgrounds of the students. No doubt, this situation directly poses a threat to students' performance in their assessment in English Language.

Another set of the factors that influences the studying and subsequent assessment of Polytechnic students in English language have to do with time. The timing or duration specified in the course guide by NBTE for teaching the course is often not adhered to for many reasons ranging from departmental issues to the entire institutional administrative problems. For instance, it is not an exaggeration to say that the staff and students of some departments still do not realise that a good English language acquisition would enhance their professionalism but rather question its inclusion in their curriculum which they demonstrate either by reducing the number of hours it is taught or removing it entirely from some levels of their courses. A further

case is that of removing some items from the syllabus to be taught at some levels.

On the part of Polytechnic administrators and even the federal government, sometimes, there is failure to resolve some issues with either the academic or the non-academic staff of the Polytechnics. This situation often times results to strike actions which lead to time lose that is often difficult to completely recover. In the end, in order to make up for the time lost, lecturers and students have to rush through the course in as little time as possible and to do so in English language is definitely not desirable as such would only add to the already existing bottle necks in the teaching/learning of the language.

At other times, even when there has not been a strike action, the lecturers of English language find it difficult to return to lectures at the commencement of a new semester after one in which examinations were taken for the fact that they would not have finished marking before the commencement of the new semester. Lecturers of English language being in a servicing department which services all other departments are often times over loaded with work. Also because of the aspectual marking of most of the topics, they are unable to conclude the marking of their students' scripts in record time like their counterparts in other departments.

The engagement in Students Industrial Work experience scheme (SIWES) for a couple of months by ND II students of some of the departments in the Polytechnics at the commencement of every session is another contributing factor to the time constraint experienced by some of the lecturers of the

students at that level. In the case of the teaching of English language this is a particularly serious problem because, there is no extension of time and again the lecturers are compelled to rush through their teaching in a way that may not yield the desired results with the attendant large classes that they have to teach.

The last set of factors discussed in this paper has to do with teacher competence. The nature and complexity of English language, its usefulness to Nigeria and Nigerians generally lend support to the fact that it should be taught by competent lecturers who are capable of delivering the goods but what do we have instead? We rather have lecturers who may be qualified but backward because as times are changing so are teaching methods and lecturers of English as a second language need very much to change with the times (Burton, 1978). The necessary change can be achieved through the attending of conferences and workshops and the joining of professional organizations. In this regard, the Polytechnics in Nigeria have tried and have now made it mandatory for lecturers to have higher certificates, conference papers and publications as well as show evidence of belonging to professional associations as pre-requisites for their promotion. However, lecturers' participation in the programmes is still being grossly hampered by inadequate funds.

The syllabus of the UOE at most levels cuts across most if not all the four languages skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. What obtains now in the Polytechnics is that one lecturer is given the implementation of two or three syllabus at the same time of which he ends up being a "Jack of all trades but master of non." This is unlike the teaching of English in the

universities where lecturers are assigned to teach only aspects of the language. Ideally, lecturers are supposed to be trained to teach specific aspects which the students need to master although there is a further need to integrate the skills.

A further incompetence of the situation of the learning of English language in Nigerian Polytechnics is the inability of the lecturers to select suitable and uniform textbooks for the students. The course guide has failed to include the list of recommended textbooks and the departments of English language often times also do not specify any textbooks to be used. So then, individual lecturers are left to make their choice and the result is the difference in the learning experiences of students who in the end have to write the same examination.

Lecturers of English language have yet another area of inequity to contend with in terms of some having more hours than others and more students than others. Some of the classes are really large with students population ranging from one hundred and above. Definitely, it is impossible for students in a large class as such to have the same treatment (individual attention and exposure as their counterparts that are about thirty in class).

3.0 Conclusion.

The need to ensure equity and fairness in the teaching/learning of English language cannot be over emphasized. So far, many factors that have instead indicated the situation of inequity in the Polytechnics have been discussed and it is no gain saying the fact that there is gross inequity in the assessment of Nigerian Polytechnic students' performance in English language i.e. that in

many ramifications, some of the students, offering UOE /Communications skills are more advantaged than others.

4.0 Recommendations.

There is the need to improve the existing situation of the situation of the acquisition of English language in the Polytechnics in Nigeria. Here are some recommendations to improve the situation.

§ The federal government of Nigeria through the NBTE should look into the issue of the admission policy of the Polytechnics, with a view to making it uniform and in harmony such that no student has a disadvantaged start or late access to the curriculum.

§ The federal Government of Nigeria should improve the funding of the Polytechnics to the extent that the basic needs of the students are met in order to improve their inequality to undertake a uniform assessment.

§ Polytechnic authorities should borrow a leaf from the Universities by training lecturers to specialize in the different aspects of the course and then let the teaching/learning of the language be done in that manner instead of the general way it is done now whereby individual lecturers have to teach the different aspects all by themselves.

§ The NBTE and Polytechnics should be involved in the recommendation of relevant and uniform textbooks for use by students in the learning of English language so that students can have a better uniform experience to justify a uniform assessment exercise.

§ The federal government should further increase funding to the Polytechnics to enhance the training of lecturers to earn higher certificates and to attend more conferences and workshops that will improve them, equip them with better skills to teach and make them more promotable on their jobs which

will have the additional benefit of making them happier and better overall lecturers.

§ Polytechnic authorities should attempt to have a uniform number of students in the classrooms of a size that is easy to manage in terms of giving individual attention to the students and assessing them.

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