

4-1-2011

Challenges of Oral English in English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning in Nigeria

Olufunso Fasanmi

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Recommended Citation

Fasanmi, Olufunso (2011) "Challenges of Oral English in English as a Second Language (ESL) Learning in Nigeria," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 9: Iss. 2, Article 11.

DOI: 10.58809/JBMW1443

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol9/iss2/11>

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Academic Leadership Journal

INTRODUCTION

Second language learning has continued to pose learning challenges to English as a Second Language Learner (ESL) learners in Nigeria. Many scholars have carried out various research works on the problems of language learning and have come out with various recommendations, but in spite of these efforts, the problems of learning to use a second language have persisted. As it is, many of the teachers of English are non – native speakers and secondly, the language is being learnt and used far away from its natural environment. Elugbe (2000) observes that non native speakers are not likely to have expertise in second language because only the native speaker can claim to have expertise and proficiency in his language, other users are only aspiring to reach the target of proficiency, especially in spoken English. This challenge is the focus of this paper.

English language has occupied a prominent position in Nigeria, because of its second language and official status. It is being used in official functions and in Education. It is a pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions, for white collar jobs; it is the medium of teaching in schools, and it is studied as a subject. Oral English is the spoken form of English language, it is being put into perspective in this work because many people speak it more than write it.

Researchers have continued to investigate the problems of second language learning and as Chomsky had come out with the issues of competence and performance, it has been observed that an English learner and user of a second language may not likely have competence during performance (usage) of the second language. While competence has been described by Chomsky (1960) as the intuitive judgement and knowledge of the native speaker of his language, another scholar Elugbe (2000), sees performance in the light of proficiency which a non native speaker does not have in full. Many factors have been perceived to be responsible for this situation, which include: mother tongue interference, bad teaching methods, attitude of learners to second language learning, lack of facilities, interest and language policy, among others.

The thrust of this paper is to research into some challenges of oral English learning, while some research carried out by scholars shall be highlighted, and some recommendations proffered.

THE SPOKEN ENGLISH IN USE

In most multilingual nations, English language has occupied a second language position. Oftentimes, it is used as an official language and the language of instruction in most higher institutions of learning. The weak foundation of learners coming from a language policy that is not consistent in its operations and implementation or lacks clarity in its provisions, creates confusion because it is often fraught with lapses. The mother tongue of most learners and users of English often interfere with free flow of utterances. Mother tongue is the language in which the learner has the best facilities and if some of the sounds or materials that constitute the speech or writing of the learners are not present in the target language, the possibility of transfer is very high. A negative transfer causes impediment to the learning

of English language. However, if transfer propels fast learning, it is a positive transfer. The two instances are still cases of interference in language learning.

In nearly all institutions of learning in Nigeria, courses in both written and spoken English (Oral English) are provided for students. Sometimes, the mass media spread good and bad models of English language, but the English departments of Schools are laden with the responsibilities of breeding and spreading good models either as teachers or other entrepreneurs, for the nation's workforce. They provide courses in grammar, lexis and structure, semantics, phonetics and phonology, morphology, literature among others.

The introduction of the Use of English courses for the first year undergraduates of some universities in the early 1960s in Nigeria confirmed English language for Academic Purpose EAP. Although, it was not called EAP at that time, the need for it is still being felt today when students are exposed to English language in usage. This is an attempt to reduce the linguistic problems of freshmen and women coming from secondary schools to higher institutions, to enable them cope with the academic demands thrust at them through the English language medium (Orisawayi 1994). Examples of such efforts are the Compskip Project by the ODA/British Council and the Nigerian Universities Commission of the Federal Government of Nigeria, a project designed for students of higher institutions (Federal Universities and College of Technology). In the same vein, the Lancaster Research Project introduced the Use of English as a specific course of study at the Bayero University Kano; and some institutions in Northern Nigeria followed suit. These efforts show that proficiency in Oral English is highly important for learners and users of English in Nigeria.

However, Elugbe (2000) observes that the language in which speakers have pronunciation expertise and proficiency is the mother tongue, which is acquired from mothers and the immediate environment. Hence, one cannot claim total proficiency in the second language. On the contrary, some notable Nigerians like Professor Wole Soyinka, a Nobel Laureate for literature and many others have a good grasp of the English language, especially the spoken English, with a near-native speaker's accent. He further reiterates that since our teachers and parents are not native speakers of English, our near-native status cannot be guaranteed. English language has been linked with the elites in Nigeria and Oral English teaching in schools, especially in the primary schools, is elitist.

Fasanmi (2000) corroborating this opines that only the children of privileged parents are sent to expensive schools especially the private nursery and primary schools where there are facilities for teaching Oral English. The primary school is expected to provide the solid foundation for secondary and tertiary education where teaching is done through the spoken and written media. But when the primary school lacks the basic facilities for teaching, the education of the child is jeopardized. The public primary school in Nigeria, as observed by some educationists, has continued to suffer neglect in this area. While some schools teach Oral English, others avoid it. Consequently, the weak foundation affects the education and spoken English of pupils. However, fluent speech for some people is associated with Mass Communication where newscasters and presenters of programmes are required to speak fluently and pronounce sounds with a near-native accent. The native accent is the standard variety of English referred to as the accepted ideal norm. This is the variety that is taught in schools, institutions, in communication and in mass media broadcasting. Unoh (1987) observes that the Standard English enjoys the highest degree of intelligibility and acceptability. He also suggests that an "effective communicator is expected to understand how to produce the basic phonemic features

(segmental and the supra segmental varieties of English) to ensure intelligibility and acceptability”.

The description of phonetic sounds is based on this variety as it is used in schools to teach English phonetics. This is called Received Pronunciation (RP), a reference point adopted, using International Phonetics Alphabets (IPA) used in England as “Standard English” has IPA symbols. Bauch and Cable (1983) indicate that the printing press was first established by Caxton who made London his publishing center. Using the most popular language in London, he invariably influenced the status and the spread of the Standard English (RP). They further observe that, 300 years later, the Standard English was formally entrenched as a dialect of written English and invariably, language of the educated elites.

Trudgill (1986) describes Standard English as the variety of English, which is usually used in printing, employed as the medium of expression in schools and used by the non-native speakers who use the language. It is the opinion of Palsgrave (1962) that prestige status had been attached to some English pronunciation accents, especially in London. Early phoneticians like John Hart (1969) note that “*it is in the court that the flower of the English tongue is used*”.

Native users of English believe that a second language user can never attain the native speakers’ proficiency. This is applicable to all languages of the world. Oral English in tertiary institutions reflects efforts of some students geared towards near-native accent although, sometimes in a negative way. This is observable in the way undergraduates pronounce words, which is sometimes a bad imitation of the native accent. This is often imbibed from the numerous Nigerian broadcasters and television presenters who are trying to sound English in a non-native speakers environment (thus becoming ‘more catholic than the Pope (i.e. claiming to have 100% fluency in spoken English in a non-native speakers’ environment)).

Gimson (1962) points out the prestige status attached to the Received Pronunciation (RP), which is considered as the social standard of pronunciation. He observes that the RP came about as a result of social judgement, rather than official judgement. It is currently the practice in Nigeria now that people speak English at social functions and in the entertainment industries more than indigenous languages. Palsgrave cited in Gimson (1962) notes that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is recommended for announcers because it is widely understood by the elites. It is true that good spoken English is desired as a status symbol in Nigeria but in the words of Elugbe (2000) “as far as English is concerned, we are experts neither in its pronunciation nor in its writing”. It follows therefore that, mother tongue interference has played down the efforts of users of English for near – native speakers’ proficiency desired by most English as a second language (ESL) learners.

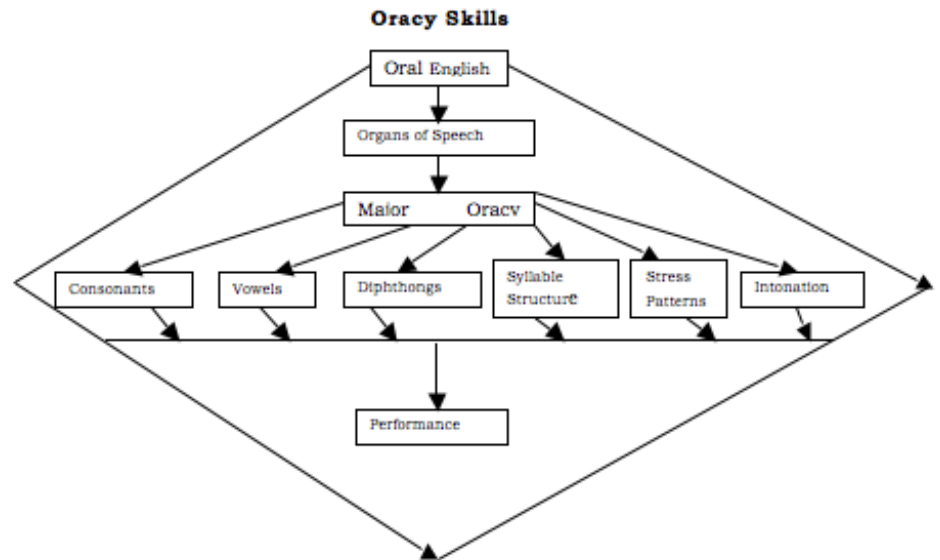
Thus Elugbe (2000) suggests that English that can be understood all over the world should be encouraged i.e. English which meets international standards of intelligibility, especially as, English Language is an international language, spoken all over the world. Corroborating this Adegbile (1998) gives two reasons why Oral English should be well taught in schools: intelligibility to other speakers and opportunity to understand other users wherever they come from. He explains the Oracy skills that learners of language must master in language learning. From the following illustrations of Oracy skills in Fig 1, fig 2 the paper presents an expansion of these skills to accommodate mutual intelligibility for proficiency these.

Diagrams 1 & 2 give illustrations about skills involved in oral English, first by Adegbile (1998) and the second diagram (an expansion of the first) by Fasanmi (2009).

Oracy Skills

Fig 1 Adegbile 1998

Figure 1 above shows the graphic representation of what oral English is all about according to Adegbile (1998). Oral English teaching at any level entails mastering of the organs of speech. Oracy skill is also referred to as Phonetics and Phonology, where segmental and supra segmental features are mastered. These features are what Adegbile listed above as: consonants, vowels, diphthongs (segmental features); and stress, intonation pattern etc. (supra-segmental features). Proficiency in all these according to him leads to good performance (Chomskyan's level of competence) in pronunciation and spoken English.



Skills for Proficiency

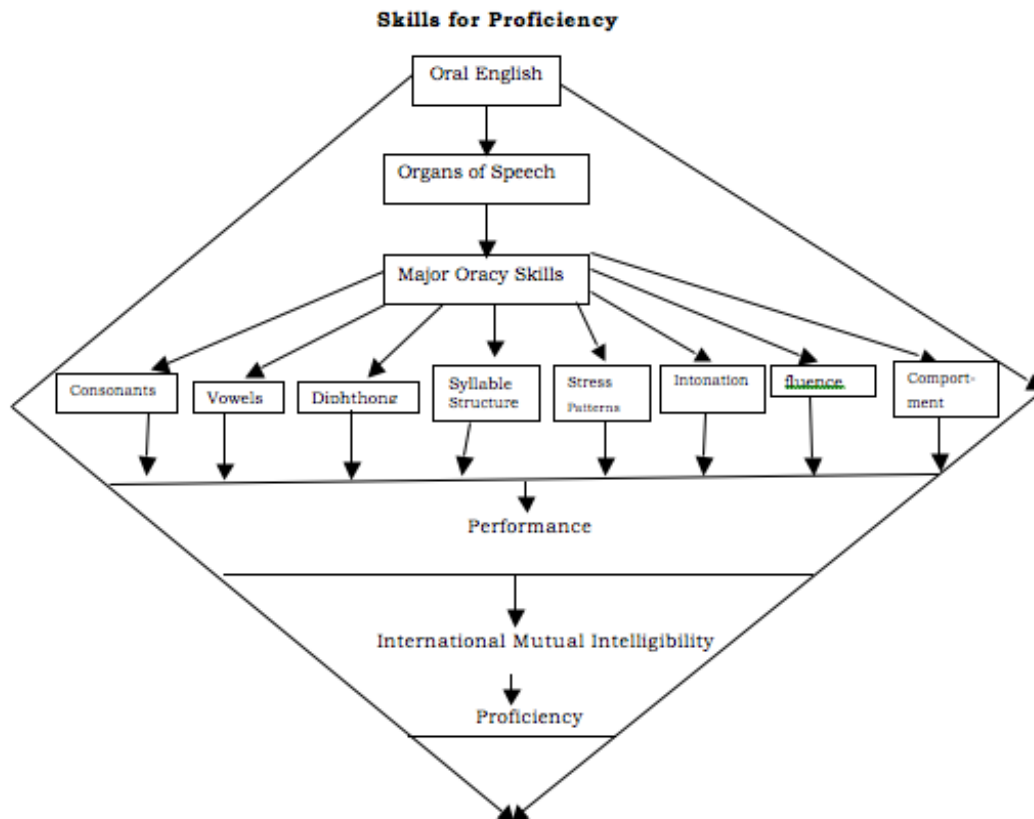


Fig 2 Fasanmi 2009

Figure 2 above is the expanded version of Adebile 1998 by Fasanmi (2009). This version takes the Oracy skills beyond performance to international mutual intelligibility brought about by proficiency (Chomskyan's level of advanced performance). This state of proficiency bridges the linguistic and communicative gaps between the two interlocutors in speech act. The encoder would have been convinced of correct response from the decoder through the exhibited obvious reactions irrespective of race (across borders). Performance in figure 1 stops at competence level, while mutual intelligibility is an indication of proficiency.

Challenges of ESL in Oral English.

The status of English Language and oral English in particular necessitates the identification of the difficulties of learners of oral English in an ESL environment like Nigeria, by some researchers, Gleason (1969) cited in James – Morgan (1997) observes that the command of phonology is evidently a central problem when learning to speak a language. That except in rare cases, trying to learn a language as adults is not an easy task. This therefore constitutes problems for some pre-service teachers at the higher level of education in universities and colleges of education.

It is further pointed out that poor performance of Senior Secondary School students in English Language in Nigeria affects admissions, which stagnates or reduces general intakes of students for higher degrees. However, some get admitted with fake results in English and find it difficult to cope with the courses when they are admitted into the university. Most students are used to their indigenous languages.

Dunstan (1969) in "*Analysis of Twelve Nigerian Languages*" opines that there is basic difference between English and Nigerian languages. They observe some differences and some sounds that are not in any of the Nigerian languages. Examples include /ə, ɐ, ʌ/ diphthongs /iə/, Uə/; consonant like /θ/. These sounds are not present in any of the Nigerian languages.

Dairo (2000) identifies the incongruity and irregularities that sometimes occur between words spelling and pronunciation. In essence, when English words are incorrectly pronounced, they often lead to misunderstanding and distortion of message(s) conveyed by the speaker. Another problem is the phonemic structure of morphemes referred to as morphophonemic. An example of these is the confusion about how an English plural form can be realized differently during pronunciation thus:

/s/ as in cats /ts/

/z/ as in dogs /gz/

/ɪz/ as in losses /ɪz/

The most problematic of the features of oral English have been identified as the supra segmental (prosodic features) and these features and their importance are highlighted by Williams (1990) that: "Materials for speech work would be far from complete if they did not include the supra-segmental features: like stress, rhythm and intonation" etc. Adebile (1994) laments the neglect of teaching prosodic features in the primary and secondary schools. More attention is paid to the segmental features than the supra segmental which he considers as the core of the speech features. (Adebile

1994)

He further stresses that these features influence and modify segmental features, vowels in particular. He explains that if a syllable in an English sentence or phrase lacks stress, the pronunciation of the vowel present in that syllable is affected (takes a weak form). This is problematic for ESL learners of English because the stressed and unstressed syllables in words of English language are a problem to learners.

The intonation pattern of English language is another problem of learners because most indigenous languages in Nigeria and Africa are stress-timed when tone-marks are used to express vital information. Quoting Amayo (1986) Adegbite (1994) points out that “the supra-segmental features in English phonetics almost exclusively give the language its characteristic accent. “He then suggests that because of its importance, in his own words, “pre-service teachers in the colleges of education and universities in the country should be well – equipped in this respect academically and professionally to enable them perform their work efficiently as future teachers in primary and secondary schools”.

Dada (2000) observes that apart from teaching and drilling in oral English sounds. Phonetics should be taught and integrated with other aspects of oral English like the prosodic features. It is quite unfortunate that some learners of English have no mastery of the oracy skills. Findings by Ayodele (1981, 1984 and 1985) and Adegbite (1985) show poor performances of students in oral English as a result of ineffective use of oracy skills and not only because of lack of intelligence or inadequate facilities. These oracy skills include: the use of consonants, vowels, diphthongs, syllable structures, stress and intonation patterns, which hinder performance (Adegbile 1998).

However, further findings reveal availability of few instructional materials for oral English teaching in most of our secondary schools. Also, in their findings, the only common textbook used by schools is by J. O. Abolade Oral English for West Africa and that only 5% of the schools that have tape recorders, utilize it. While some tape recorders are turned to a music apparatus, and are occasionally used to listen to ‘News on the hour, there are no language rooms or laboratories in most secondary schools. Also, a test in Oral English at the Senior Secondary School level is fraught with lapses. In most schools, oral English is neither taught nor tested at all and where it is taught, testing is done shortly before the School Certificate Examinations (Ayodele 1981b) in Adegbile (1998). It is confirmed by Adegbile that Ayodele’s observation is still valid today.

The implication of all this is that the Oral English component should be given closer attention by teachers and learners, if students want to be proficient in spoken English for both local and international intelligibility. The curriculum and teaching methods should be re-evaluated. It is note worthy to indicate that a lot of work has been done in the areas of English language learning. Various findings from numerous researchers have shown the problems of essay writing, composition, comprehension, syntax, lexis and structure and phonetics or oral English. However, a lot more is still to be done in the area of oral English because the verbal form of any language is often used more than the written form. For this reason, continuous and systematic research should be carried out from time to time on Verbal Communication for intelligibility.

While some scholars believe that oral English is the most problematic, others believe that other components like essay writing, summary and comprehension, literature and so on are the most problematic. It is important to say that all the components of English language are complementary and

have their peculiar problems, especially in learning and usage. In their own findings Okolo (1990) in Ezeokoli (1999) are of the view that essay writing is more problematic than summary and comprehension aspects of English. However, deficiency in one affects proficiency in the other components.

Tiffen (1994) in Ajayi (1998) in a research finding reveals that lexical and syntactic errors constitute 8.8 percent of causes of intelligibility problems, while pronunciation problems cause about 9.12 percent of intelligibility hindrance in English language in Nigeria. It is observed that some educated Nigerians, professors, medical doctors and other scholars working or studying in Britain have to contend with problems of being understood by native speakers of English. This usually manifests in features like pronunciation and heavy Nigerian accents peculiar to Africans using English as a second language. The activities of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) have revealed various works in pedagogical innovations, research on teaching and learning methods and Second Language Acquisition. The researchers of CALL according to the Joint Policy Statements by Computer Assisted Learning Institution Consortium (CALICO) EUROCALL and International Association for Language Learning Technology (IALLT) have engaged in a systematic inquiry into discovering new information, create or revise new theories and develop learning material in language learning. Many linguists and researchers have recognized the efforts of CALL in areas of Linguistics and Second Language Learning and have continued to tap from its resources and findings to improve on their own research findings and pedagogy.

As one of their research activities, CALL has done quantitative studies like testing of the acquisition of phonological and syntactic elements. In addition, they also did a systematic investigation into the psycholinguistic and socio-linguistic variables and the effects of these on learning, using modern technology. A research group on Socio-Linguistics Conversation Analysis, Language Pedagogy and Socio-Cultural Issues (SCALPS) also focuses its investigation on socio-linguistic studies of the sociology of language and cultural linguistic/lingual culture and pluri-lingual competences. They organise many international conferences and had many joint projects involving socio-linguistic researchers. An example of such is the Phonetic Manifestations of Language Variation by Dr. Dominic Watt, from Aberdeen.

Findings from one of the studies conducted on language attitude in three secondary schools in York and UK in March 2002 are presented at the International Conference on Language Variation in Europe (ICLAVE 2) Uppsala in June 2003. Other activities of SCALPS in the areas of second language acquisition are: hosting of a highly successful international conference at Roskilde University in May 2003 with several papers presented, one such paper is "The Consequences of Mobility: Linguistic and Socio-Cultural Contact Zones". In 2004, the conference on "Second Language at Work was also held at Roskilde University. The aim of the conference was to focus on the interface between language and Workplace Learning. Many linguists were in attendance. Another findings by Fasanmi (2008) in a research conducted on six hundred pre-service teachers revealed some pronunciation errors and general disposition to spoken English.

In the United States, most of the current researches in the areas of linguistics were credited to Chomsky who tried to develop theories of Language that can be used to describe other languages. For instance, he sees the grammar of a language "as the model of the linguistic competence of the fluent native speaker of the language" which includes: knowledge of syntax, phonology and semantics.

He also observes that a speaker's competence or knowledge of a language may not be the same as the performance or production of such language. He therefore concludes that a second language L₂ learner needs both the grammatical and communication competence in a new language community (William, 2001).

TEACHERS AND FLUENCY IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

In second language learning, it is expedient that teachers must be prepared for many challenges. This is because learners coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds have a lot of things to learn. What they already know in their languages can either enhance or inhibit the new learning, hence, interference is very likely to occur. In addition, the problems of learning and individual level of capacity to learn are also issues for concern. Sadly, most teachers do not have the patience to treat learners as second language learners. They first see their inadequacies in the second language as deliberate laziness. Ironically, most of these teachers passed through the same process of language learning, even as second language learners and non-native speakers.

Teaching English as a second language on African soil has always been laden with challenges. One of such is the free flow of speech, which can be described as fluency. Fluency includes the uninhibited articulation and production of phonemes. To this effect, one expects that all other components of English language like; Grammar, Syntax, Lexis and structure, Vocabulary and Morphology must have been perfectly mastered by the user of English. This done, fluency in terms of speech articulation becomes easy, both orally and in written form. If there is any defect or deficiency, free flow of speech is hampered. In second language learning, most times, one finds deficiency in some of these components. In consequence, the fluency of an ESL learner is affected.

If there is deficiency in proficiency of one or some of the components of English Language, it will likely affect the way an ESL user of English reacts to an environment during a speech act. Sometimes, if an individual does not have mastery of grammar and being conscious of the environment where the speech act is taking place, the speaker may become jittery, shaky and sweating profusely, stutters or loses voice pitch during a speech act. This nervousness affects the comportment of the speaker. Such may not always be experienced in the first language.

LANGUAGE POLICY

A policy is a plan or course of action in managing and directing affairs of a nation. It includes guidelines, objectives and general operational terms.

Effiong 2007 cited in Adegbite and Olajide (2007), observes one of the vital ways by which a nation's language policy manifests itself. This he noted is through the type of language education policy for children. Some of the questions usually posed include (i) which language(s) to be used as a medium of instruction in schools? (ii) which language varieties are taught in schools? (iii) at what age and class should the language be made available to students and (iv) for how long will the learners learn the language within the school system? Quite obviously, the answers to these are provisions that are usually enshrined in a Nation's language policy.

WHAT IS IN PRACTICE?

The Nigerian language policy, as well stated as it is, with the good intention of the Federal Government, is fraught with challenges at the implementation levels. Most of the provision therein were not put into use and even where they are utilized there were misinterpreted. As observed by Effiong (2007) the contradiction as regards the use of mother tongue or language of the immediate environment is a thing for concern, while the Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasized mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary school level (1st 3 years) most schools and even parents prefer English as the medium of instruction at this level. This is against the fundamental human rights of the Nigerian child. To support this, Nnolim (2007) in his recommendations opined that the Federal Government of Nigeria should review the policy to ensure that each Nigerian child studies his or her mother tongue to school certificate level. He further observed that the famous Greek plays and philosophies which had influenced the world culture were written in Greek and were later translated into different languages. Examples are: the famous Chansons de Gestes and Chansons de Roland philosophies written in Indian Sanskrit French and English (Nnolim, 2007).

Today, the Holy Bible written in millions of languages was in its original Aramaic language. It is a debatable issue that a child learns better and develops faster cognitively when he acquires his or her education in the mother tongue. Those who support this debate include: UNESCO (1953); Chunbow (1990); Bamgbose (1991); (International African Institute, London); Effiong (2007) cited in Adegbite and Olajide 2007). It was argued further that a child becomes most creative and innovative in the mother tongue and forms more meaningful concepts than what he learns through a foreign language; while some schools use the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment at the first three years of primary school, others use it up to the primary six. For those who stopped using the mother tongue at primary three, it has been observed that the abrupt change to English from primary four to six has not really augured well for linguistic development of the learners.

Also, issue of the use of language of the immediate environment of the child being specified in the policy statement is not clear to many stakeholders. Is it immediate environment of the child to the East or to the West?

Conclusion

Oral English proficiency in a non-native speakers' environment has continued to face challenges as a result of many factors like the mother tongue interference, policy implementation, lack of good facilities and bad teaching methods among others. However, efforts of various researchers have shown significant impact on the proficiency of learners and users of English, which can be credited to persistence at influencing the policies, teaching methods, attitude, interest and general apathy to oral English teaching and correct usage. For these reasons the following recommendations are proffered.

Recommendation

From the foregoing, it is recommended that: -

v Oral English teaching should be given proper attention.

v There should be provision of facilities like language laboratories in Nigerian Secondary Schools (Publics and Private) to enhance Oral English teaching.

v Stakeholders in Education should make the language policy statement very explicit in its interpretation.

v The spoken English that meets international status of mutual intelligibility must be encouraged by teachers and users of English language.

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