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# IMPACT OF POVERTY ON TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

By

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and serves as a bridge across the barriers created by the expense of a mismanagement of funds. The use of

## Abstract

Poverty which is described as the situation of being very poor is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. The BBC English dictionary maintains that a third of the population of the world lives in abject poverty. In Nigeria, so many things have gone wrong in virtually all the sectors, because of poverty. The education sector is not an exception. Teaching and learning and the entire curriculum have been negatively affected. This paper therefore aims at a critical observation of the damage done to the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria. English Language is not only a subject in Nigerian schools' times table but also the language with which the country is governed at all levels. The language is used nationally and internationally. As a result, its proper teaching and learning should be of great concern to all. This paper also looked at poverty, its impact on teaching and learning of English Language which includes among others inadequate teaching materials and qualified teachers, absence of well equipped libraries, large class size, and lack of motivation of staff and students. Some of the recommendations offered include proper funding of education by the government through re-training and conference attendance and provision of environment conducive for teaching and learning.

English sets all levels of education and also serves as the medium of instruction to teach other subjects in the curriculum

## Introduction

English Language is a second language in Nigeria. It is a language more prestigious to the government than our mother tongues because it is the language with which the affairs of the government are conducted. It is the language of science and technology, internet, business locally and internationally, religion, politics etc. Adekunle (1985), Tafida (1998). Most importantly, English is the language of instruction in schools from nursery to university level, for even though the national language policy provides for the use of the mother tongue in the first three years, the use of English even at this level is not in doubt, (National policy on Education (1981). Surprisingly, English Language is even used in some homes in Nigeria more than the language of the immediate community.

As a result of the importance attached to English in Nigeria, its proper teaching and learning is mandatory. However, many problems hinder this proper

teaching and learning of the language one of which is poverty. Poverty is a great impediment to qualitative education in general and the teaching of English language in particular. In Nigeria, poverty hits the education sector more than any other sector in this country. Its influence is very obvious especially in government owned schools. In private schools, the situation differs. However, majority of Nigerians can not afford these schools where exorbitant fees are charged. English Language, a subset of the entire educational curriculum is also seriously hit by this poverty and this explains why the performance of our students in public examinations is worsening daily. This paper therefore is aimed at taking a critical look at the danger poverty poses to the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria.

### **What is Poverty?**

Poverty is defined by Zubairu (2006) as a situation where an individual cannot provide for himself or herself the basic needs of life such as food, shelter, clothing, simple means of transportation and essentials for good health. Olaitan, Onyemechi, Nwachuku (2000) see poverty as the scarcity of human basic needs or the inability of an individual or society to acquire basic human needs for existence. An individual or society can be said to be poor if any of them lacks the ability to provide the basic necessities of life such as education, health, food, shelter etc. Lynn (2006) opines that poverty is always a cycle. If one is a low income earner he would have little to save and then little to invest. Low investment means low productivity and low productivity leads to continued low income. A poor society may lack the capital to invest in order to become more productive overtime. A poor person or society may suffer from poor health which decreases income and makes it difficult to achieve health goals. Zubairu (2006) therefore sees poverty as a point of contradiction between the resources available to an individual and the demand and condition of his environment. With this knowledge of the concept of poverty, it is proper to look at Nigeria vis-à-vis the concept of poverty.

### **Poverty in Nigeria**

The concept of poverty is not peculiar to Nigeria alone. Unitus (2007) reports that each year more than eight million people around the world die because they are too poor to stay alive and that over one billion people i.e. one in every six people around the world live in extreme poverty. The report also continues to reveal that over one hundred million primary school age children cannot afford to go to school. Back here in Nigeria, Patrick (2006) confirmed that the last report from the Millennium Development goals (MDG) indicates that Nigeria, Africa's most populous country has 70% of the population living below the international income poverty line of one dollar a day. Also, the World Bank report titled "2000 World Bank Alas" rated Nigeria as the 12<sup>th</sup> poorest nation in

the world with a Gross National Domestic Product (GNDP) per capital of \$740. The genesis of this is that, the country emerged from colonial status as a poor country and her situation is weakened by poverty, disease and ignorance. It is disheartening to note that the cash income of an average Nigerian remains insufficient to provide for his/her minimum requirement for food, water, shelter, medical care and basic education. A better percentage of the poor live in rural areas and urban fringes (FOS,1998). The Nigerian economy has been characterized by growth with no poverty reduction. Many poverty alleviation measures have been introduced by successive governments (e.g. SAP, NAPEP) but not much has been achieved. The poverty level keeps growing day by day, the country's abundant natural material resources notwithstanding. The Federal Office of Statistics (FOS, 1998) reveals that even though the poverty level declined from 46.3 percent in 1985 to 42.7 percent in 1992, it rose sharply to 65.8 percent of the population. It however increased four-fold between 1980-1996. The following table is a graphical detail of the escalating poverty situation in Nigeria between 1980 -1996.

**Table 1: Poverty headcount by year**

Year	Poverty Incidence %	Established Population (million)	Population in poverty (million)
1980	28.1	65	17.7
1985	46.3	75	34.7
1992	42.7	91.5	39.2
1996	65.6	102.3	67.1

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)

Moreover, the moderately poor rose from 28.9 percent in 1992 to 36.6 percent in 1996 while the percentage of the core poor more than doubled from 13.9 percent in 1992 to 29.3 percent in 1996. This is shown in the table below.

**Table 2: The poor and the core poor by year**

Year	Non Poor (%)	Moderately poor (%)	Core poor (%)
1980	72.8	21.0	6.2
1985	53.7	34.2	12.1
1992	57.3	28.9	13.9
1996	34.4	36.3	29.3

Source: National Bureau of Statistics (NBS)

The Nigerian situation is therefore one that is wallowing in want in the midst of abundant natural and human resources. Many hardworking Nigerians are experiencing serious economic hardship and are not sure of their means of



livelihood. Ejikeme, (1995). believes that, the dimension of socio-economic and political conditions in the country is beyond services being provided through private or voluntary efforts or charity being provided by a small group of individuals concerned about the plight of families in need in the country. He therefore concludes that the quality of the overall population largely depends on the quality and volume of services made available to the masses. Levin (2006) observes that the effect of poverty is more pronounced in the educational sector generally where government funding of education from primary to university has been a great problem. This has contributed in no small measure to poor quality of education at all levels. The introduction of Universal Basic Education (UBE) was a measure to boast education for all but many of our children are still out of school. The poverty situation in Nigeria coupled with the desire for education by a large percentage of Nigerians has made the proper teaching and learning of school subjects a difficult task. This difficulty is also true of the teaching of English even though it is a second language in Nigeria and the language of the government. The next segment of this paper will take a look at how poverty has hindered the effective teaching and learning of English as a second language.

### **Poverty and teaching of English as a Second Language**

Poverty is not caning only an individual or a family but even the entire society. A society where the larger percentage of its inhabitants are poor is also a poor society and this situation would paralyse all its sectors be it economic, social, political or educational. In Nigeria, even the educational sector is not spared of the hazards of poverty and this extends to the teaching of English language.

English Language in Nigeria whether we like it or not is still a veritable tool for unity as Nigeria has about 500 Languages Tafida (1998). Even a layman knows that English Language is an important language in the environment. Therefore, enumerating the importance of English in Nigeria at this point is to be monotonous. This paper is not against the proper development of our mother tongues but the fact that the government still conducts her affairs in English Language and that teaching and learning in Nigerian Schools are still done in English Language calls for its proper teaching. However, just like the other subjects, poverty has infected the teaching of English and this can be seen in the following areas.

1. Scarcity of qualified teachers
2. Lack of suitable text books
3. Absence of well equipped libraries/language laboratory
4. Problem of large classes
5. Lack of sponsorship for re-training of teachers
6. Lack of motivation of English teachers
7. Lack of funds for excursion and educational visits



Furthermore, the level of poverty in Nigeria has also led to lack of well equipped libraries, language laboratories and other relevant teaching aids in our schools. Adefidiya (1989) observed that a school or class library is a compulsory tool in promoting the intellectual development of individuals and nations. He further maintained that the Nigerian government does not seem to have enough funds for a useful library since they do not recognize their importance. In situations where they exist e.g. universities, they are ill-stocked with outdated books. The same applies to most bookshops in large towns. Moreover, instructional materials such as television set, radio, tape recorder, slides, projectors, films and filmstrips, computers etc. are never used to teach English due to their absence. This constitutes a lot of problems to teaching especially in secondary schools.

Moreover, the situation in the country has made every one diligently looking for means of livelihood. This has made it difficult to have enough time for studying and making adequate preparation for examinations. Students now hawk or engage in one petty business or another to fend for themselves, their families and pay for their school fees as most parents cannot afford it. This situation has great impact on students' performance in English Language as they find it difficult to express themselves in simple and correct sentences.

Poverty has also led to the emergence of overcrowded English Language classes. Researches by Omojuwa (1989) and Lawal (1989) showed that most classes exceed substantially the official class size of 40 Coleman (1987) said that when the number of students in a class reaches about 52 then problems will begin to emerge in class management and instruction because the class is getting too large. It is however very common to see a class size of as much as 100 – 200 students these days. This situation makes it very difficult for the teacher to attend adequately and appropriately to the needs of every child.

Similarly, it is the impact of poverty that led to the fact that some children sit on bare floor or broken down chairs and desks to receive lessons. Even in universities, some stand to receive lectures. *See paper*

Lack of motivation for teacher most especially English Language teachers is also an outcome of poverty in Nigeria. Teachers generally and English Language in particular are not given good condition of service, the large class size they handle not withstanding. A well motivated teacher also stands a better chance to motivate his students towards English lessons. Motivation is necessary in a situation where there is an imbalance between what human nature wants for a person and what the environment provides for that person. Mallum (2004) believes that for motivation to take place, there must be an externally or internally induced factors followed by an activity in response to the energizing factor and such an activity must lead to the attainment of a pre-determined objective.

## Recommendations

Poverty has a negative impact on the educational system, the teaching and learning of English as a second language not excluded. This has affected the performance of our students in schools. Therefore, this paper has the following recommendations to minimize the impact of the problems highlighted in this study

1. Nigerians are not supposed to be poor if our resources are well managed, therefore, the government should prioritize its expenses based on the importance of the sector to Nigerians. If this is done, education generally should be given a better priority by funding it excellently in line with the UN recommendation of 26% of annual budget.
2. If the education sector is well funded, schools should provide conducive learning environment for our students. This involves adequate provision of classrooms, reading materials, learning/teaching infrastructures, better condition of service for teachers etc.
3. Investment in education can not come cheaply therefore, school fees even if not completely abolished should be subsidized so that the average Nigerian parent can pay it without much stress.
4. Government should encourage staff training at all levels through sponsoring for conference, seminar, workshops and further education to keep them in tune with the innovative changes in teaching methodology.
5. Parents should realize that education is the best asset any parent would wish for his/her child therefore they should provide their children with excellent environment for studies at home. Hawking and engaging in several petty businesses by students should be disallowed to allow them concentrate on their studies. Moreover, they should make available to their children essential reading materials and encourage them to read instead of watching television, video or playing computer games.
6. Teachers too should not always wait for the school authority for their development they should try in their own way to enrich their knowledge through extensive reading, internet browsing (where available) so as to update their knowledge.
7. Improvisation of teaching aids that facilitate proper teaching of English Language should be done by the teacher and sometimes together with the students in a situation where the school cannot provide such.

Also, Student Talking Time  
ST should be maximized

## Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at poverty and how it affects the teaching of English as a Second Language. It establishes the fact that Nigeria is a poor country because over 70% of her citizens still struggle to survive while a few are very comfortable. The cause of poverty in Nigeria might be due to mismanagement of the abundant natural resources God has endowed us with. However, the Nigerian situation notwithstanding, the education sector generally and English Language teaching in particular should be given utmost consideration. This is because, education is the yardstick used to measure the level of a nation's development. That is, a nation's development is dependent on her educational attainment. Moreover, poverty or no poverty English Language is playing a very important role in Nigeria. Therefore, its proper teaching and learning should be emphasized as no indigenous language does what English Language is doing in Nigeria.

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