

The Nature of Culture of Learning in Nigerian Non-Tertiary English Language Classroom

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Abstract

The study aims to characterize the culture of learning of English in Nigerian schools to determine the nature of Nigerian culture of learning appropriate to the teaching of English as an International Language (EIL) not only in Nigeria but also in all Anglophone West African countries. The study is a report based on an extensive classroom observation of the researcher's experience, as a supervisor, of undergraduate Education student teaching practice. There are two parts to the report—pre-pedagogical and pedagogical inputs. The pre-pedagogical input reveals that teaching and learning are instrumentally and extrinsically motivated. Teachers teach to enable their students to pass their examination in English and students learn to pass their examinations to please their parents. Government provides and recommends curriculum and textbooks respectively for the teacher, who is tacitly compelled to abide by their provisions in lesson delivery. Pedagogically, Nigerian classroom does not tolerate autonomous classroom dominated by peer-group interaction in which the teacher is a facilitator and may be challenged by his students. Rather, the classroom is regulated. The teacher wields unquestioned authority and respect. Teaching is explicit and deductive. Teacher talk dominates the classroom. Questions and answers, enhanced by other appropriate instructional techniques, are common classroom procedure.

Keywords: Teaching method, culture of learning, culture learning, culture for learning

Introduction

This study begins by making appropriate distinctions to place it in focus. Underlying this study is the concept of *culture*. From a layman's point of view, *culture* is generally defined as a people's way of life. This way of life is informed by shared knowledge and value of a people (Hobby, 2004). Cultures are diverse and complex. This diversity and complexity result from various responses to environmental differences such as climate, war, migration patterns and agrarian differences (Lei et al., 2011). *Culture* has generated three main areas of academic discourse – *culture learning*, *culture for learning*, and *culture of learning*. Firstly, the concern of *culture learning* is the study of specific cultures – its language, cross-cultural differences; cultural adjustment; impact of culture on human communication, behaviour, and identity; teaching and assessment of cultural learning (Paige et al., 2013). Secondly, *culture for learning* discusses cultural differences in beliefs about learning. Its major areas of research are beliefs about intelligence, general attitude toward learning, and motivation for learning and achievement (Li, 2002). Finally, *culture of learning* is viewed in two perspectives. In its broad view, it focuses on cultural influences in the educational planning and organization of a country (Kerchner, 2011). In its narrow perspectives, it is the traditional way of teaching and learning in given local contexts (Hino, 1988) and (Hu, 2002). The concern of this paper is on the narrow view. Consequently, *culture of learning* is operationalized to mean traditional classroom practices for facilitating the learning of the English language common among a given cultural group. Such classroom practices are categorized into two—pre-pedagogical and pedagogical inputs. Pre-pedagogical inputs consist of those elements which lay the foundation for effective classroom teaching. They comprise the following: teacher proficiency, student/teacher relationship, teacher/student motivation, teacher/student expectation, and parents' expectation. On the other hand, pedagogical input is the actual classroom teaching and practice.

Research in *culture of learning* is motivated by the recognition accorded to English as an International language (EIL) as the global lingua franca and the need to teach it both in native speaker (NS) countries (Jing, Meddagama, Morris, & Wicasono, 2008) and non-native speaker (NNS) countries (McKay, 2002). EIL is defined as either the English spoken by all NNS speakers (the narrow view) or both the NS and NNS (the broad view). The NS comprise UK, US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand while the NNS consist of all the countries where English is used as either a second or foreign language. While such countries as India, Singapore, Nigeria, etc. use English as a second language, Russia, France, Japan, China, etc. use it as a foreign language. Because, according to Seidlhofer (2003, p.8), "the plurilinguals (NNS) outnumber the monolinguals (NS)," the English language does not belong to any country. Consequently, NS do not serve as the norm of usage in speech, pragmatics, and teaching methods. Intelligibility, accommodation, and appropriateness of usage become the norms (Rajagopalan, 2004). This study accepts the broad view of EIL and its norms.

A number of researches have been conducted on culture of learning as operationalized in this study. Two such studies are relevant to this study because they represent the pattern of research and the criticism that follow in their wake. They are Flowerdew & Miller (1995) and Cortazzi & Jin (1996).

Flowerdew & Miller (1995) contrast Japanese and Western culture of learning in academic lectures. The study notes that while Japanese respect the authority of the lecturer, their Western counter-part regards him as a guide and facilitator. Similarly, Japanese students do not question their lecturer. Western students challenge him. While the motivation of Japanese students is to please their parents and to succeed, the Western students learn to develop themselves. Silence and effacement characterize Japanese classroom behaviour. Self-expression is the norm in the Western classroom. While the Westerners emphasize creativity and individual development, the Japanese value “group orientation” (Flowerdew et al., 1995: 348). Kubota (1999) is a strong critic of this study because it creates the impression that Japanese education is mechanical and uncritical. This impression is created because the conclusion is based on inadequate classroom observation. According to her, similar research on Japanese primary schools reveals that there is creativity, original thinking and self-expression in Japanese education. It is not the purpose of this study to join issues in this debate. It is cited to demonstrate the type of research in culture of learning – classroom practice.

Cortazzi et al. (1996) is another classroom-oriented research in culture of learning. The focus is on Chinese classroom. The research first of all provides generalizations on the role of teachers and students, and nature of learning. It moves to contrast Chinese and Western culture of learning. The findings are as follows: (a) Western teachers see volunteering as a positive indicator of interest on the part of the students whereas Chinese students view such action negatively; (b) Chinese students have a negative view of group discussion but value teacher talk more than group discussion. For Western teachers and students, group discussion is prized as student-centred learning through interaction.

In addition to the contrast, the study views Chinese education as behaviourist-driven.

The two studies reviewed above are relevant to this study because they inform the content of the present study which is set against the background of present advocacy to teach EIL and the enriched literature in this regard (Alsagoff, McKay, Hu, & Renandya, 2013). The teaching, according to Matsuda (2009:170), “requires a mindset that is significantly different from the approach traditionally used in English language teaching that positions English as the language of UK and/ or United States and its people.” Consequently, a different set of assumptions have been proposed to guide EIL pedagogy as follows (McKay, 2003, 2013): (a) model speaker to replace native speaker model; (b) cultural content to be derived from source culture content and supplemented by inter-cultural materials; (c) culture of learning based on classroom observation to inform method of teaching; (d) NNS pragmatic norms to replace NS norm. Of particular interest in these assumptions is the reference to *culture of learning* to inform classroom teaching method. This is a revolt against dependence on Western imported teaching methods, which are believed to be unsuitable for many NNS English classrooms. For instance, Medgyes (1986) reports the problem teachers of English in Hungary have encountered in the implementation of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as a result of the following tenets of its approach: (a) curriculum should be based on students’ needs; (b) authentic communicative situations are to be used; (c) textbooks are to be replaced by supplementary reading materials that represent Western culture.

Medgyes’ report reveals the inappropriateness of CLT regarded as the ideal teaching approach (McKay, 2003) by the West and uncritically adopted by NNS countries. Similarly, Hu (2002) reports the cultural resistance to the use of CLT in China. The studies by Medgyes (1986) and Hu (2002) affirm the view that it is wrong to assume that a teaching method which has worked in the West will equally work well in other parts of the world (Matsuda, 2013). Therefore, the culture of learning of each NNS country should inform the teaching approach. Such a culture of learning should emerge from elaborate classroom observation McKay (2003). Although EIL pedagogy is yet to take root in many NNS countries, there is need to be proactive and plan toward the expected replacement of English Language Teaching (ELT) with EIL pedagogy in NNS countries by evolving a culture of learning based on elaborate classroom observation of each cultural group. Following the studies in Chinese and Japanese culture of learning, this study attempts to provide additional literature on culture of learning from the African perspective, using Nigeria as an example. To this end, the research question for this study is: What is Nigeria’s culture of learning of English that may inform EIL methodology in Nigeria and, indeed, all Anglophone West African countries as they share identical colonial educational heritage from Great Britain.

Observational Report

The following report is based on the researcher’s extensive classroom observation of ELT in Nigerian secondary schools for the past ten years to determine Nigeria’s culture of learning. Incidentally, extensive classroom observation is the appropriate research procedure for determining a culture of learning (McKay, 2003, 2013). The researcher made the observation in her capacity as a supervisor of undergraduate Education students’ teaching practice in the South-east geopolitical zone of Nigeria comprising Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States of Nigeria. ELT in schools in this geopolitical zone reflects the pattern throughout Nigerian secondary schools as there is harmonized teacher training programs in Nigeria. The observations for this study exclude elitist schools where a different culture of learning appears to be in operation.

The report is in two parts consisting of what are tagged, for the purpose of this study, pre-pedagogical and pedagogical in-puts. Each is reported in turn.

Pre-pedagogical in-put

In this section, such antecedents to classroom activities as teacher's qualification, teacher/student relationship, teachers' and students' motivation, parents' expectation, government role, and teacher's preparation are described.

First, all the teachers are trained. There are two categories of teachers in the schools. The first group is holders of National Certificate of Education (NCE) who are graduates of Colleges of Education, autonomous educational institutions empowered by law to train teachers in all subjects in the educational system below the degree level. NCE holders spend three years in a college of Education. For them to obtain a degree in Education with subject specialization, they need another two years of university education in the Faculty of Education. The second category is degree holders in Education with subject specialization in the teaching of English. It is the supervision of undergraduate teacher trainees in teaching practice that gave the researcher insight into the tradition of ELT in Nigerian secondary schools.

Teachers of English are highly respected as they are considered as authorities in grammatical usage because speaking and writing grammatically are the yardsticks for measuring proficiency in English. Consequently, students respect them by addressing their male teachers as *uncles* and their female counterparts as *aunties*. Respect is also shown to the teacher by remaining silent and attentive in class while the teacher is teaching. They do not question his authority to teach and to issue orders. Disobedience to the teacher attracts appropriate punishment.

The importance attached to the English language in Nigeria as the gateway to educational and economic opportunities has a motivating influence in the teaching and learning of English. To earn admission into higher institutions in Nigeria, a minimum of a credit level pass in English is required from the West African Examination Council (WAEC) or its equivalent. Consequently, English language teaching and learning is motivated by the need to pass the English language examination with a minimum credit level pass. Teachers teach to enable their students to pass the English language examination and students learn for the same purpose. No one teaches or learns for self-development. In other words, teaching and learning are instrumentally and extrinsically motivated. Teachers teach to satisfy the expectations of their principals and thereby earn their promotion. Students learn to please their parents so that they can advance their education as parents bear the financial burden of the education of their children.

Parents have high expectation on the performance of their children in the English language examination. They expect them to attain a minimum credit level pass in the English language examination as required for entry into such higher institutions as polytechnic, college of education, and university because they want them to further their education in any of these higher institutions. No meaningful parent will be satisfied to have his child end up with a high school education except in the Northern part of Nigeria where Western education is not valued by the generality of the people and where the rate of illiteracy is very high.

The Ministry of Education, through its relevant agencies, provides for the English language teacher English language curriculum in which the teacher has no input. The curriculum provides topics to be covered for each year of the two-tier levels of secondary education in Nigeria—junior and senior secondary levels each of which span three years. At the end of each tier, the students are subjected to a public examination in the English language among other subjects. The junior secondary students take the National Examination Council (NECO) examination to obtain the Basic Education Certificate (BEC) while the senior secondary students may take either WAEC or NECO or both to obtain the Senior School Certificate (SSC) in which a minimum of credit level pass in English is essential for educational and economic advancement. In addition, publishers publish textbooks on the provisions of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education collates all such published textbooks, assesses them and recommends to schools those found suitable for classroom use. This means that the teachers have neither control nor input in the choice of recommended textbooks for use in the classroom. Guided by the curriculum and the textbooks at their disposal, English language teachers, like other teachers in other subject areas, are demanded by the ethics of their profession to write lesson notes that serve as the blueprint for classroom teaching. The format of the lesson notes is harmonized and has to go through the critical lens of the Dean of Studies before use in the classroom to ensure conformity. The lesson note states the subject area, the class, the age of the students, the duration of the lesson, the topic of the lesson, its specific objectives, the entry behaviour of the students, a set induction which describes the techniques which the teacher uses to prepare the students psychologically for the lesson. The lesson notes state the instructional material and instructional techniques to be used. At the end of the lesson comes summative evaluation. The instructional procedure divides the lesson into steps—each step comprises teacher's activity including the formative evaluation that comes in each step and corresponding students' activity. The English language teacher follows rigidly the provisions of the lesson notes.

Pedagogical input

Three pedagogical dogmas regulate all classroom activities. These are: (a) teach from the known to the unknown; (b) exercise all domains of language learning—the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective; (c) make students practice all language skills.

The teacher enters the classroom with his/her lesson notes, textbook, which is mandatory for all the students to own and which serves as reference point for classroom exercises. Each classroom has a blackboard, chalk, duster, teacher's table, and desks for the students to sit. All classes are regulated in the sense that there are classroom rules to be enforced by the teacher through appropriate punishment. Some of these rules are that students should be punctual to class, should obtain permission from the teacher for absence from class, should remain quiet and attentive while the teacher is teaching. Noise-making in class attracts serious punishment. A class prefect monitors the behaviour of all students and reports defaulters to the teacher for appropriate sanction. The teacher contends with large classes. A class may have about 80 students and he/she may have up to four of such classes at various periods in each day. The large classes are due to inadequate number of trained teachers coupled with inadequate classroom space. A typical English language lesson begins with the set induction. The set induction makes the students start a new lesson from the known to the unknown. In this case, the teacher makes the students recall the previous lesson through questioning. Responses are either by students volunteering or by the teacher selecting. The latter is done when there are no volunteers. At the end of questioning period, the teacher summarises the previous lesson. After the set induction, the lesson is taught in steps, usually four steps, using any of the following instructional techniques as appropriate to a given step: use of examples, illustrations, demonstrations, questioning, explanation, reinforcement, and application (doing the exercises in the recommended textbook). The instructional procedure in a typical English language classroom is illustrated below with a lesson on *adverbial clauses*. A grammatical lesson is used as an example because grammar teaching is the hallmark of ELT in Nigerian schools as assessment in the examinations is accuracy-based. All ELT lessons—speech, grammar, reading/ comprehension, and writing- are divided into the following steps: Step I introduces the lesson and, like all the steps in the lesson notes, comprises teacher's activity and corresponding students' activity. The teacher's activity is to write on the blackboard the lesson for the day. He/she defines adverbial clause and explains it. The teacher uses instructional prompts such as: "Do you understand? Is it clear? Any question?" to ensure that the students understood what he/she has taught. The students' activity is both to listen attentively to the teacher's explanation and to respond in chorus either positively or negatively to the teacher's instructional prompts. In case the response is negative, the teacher repeats the definition and explanation until the response to the prompts is positive.

Step II begins the discussion of the topic for the day. The teacher's activity consists of asking the students to open to a particular page of their textbook dealing with *adverbial clauses*. He/she directs their attention to types of adverbial clauses. He/she writes each type on the blackboard, explains it in terms of its function and its distinguishing grammatical feature (the word that introduces it), and provides examples drawn from the textbook for each type. Using these examples as models, students are made to give their own examples of a given type of *adverbial clauses*. The students' activity is to respond to the teacher's instruction either by self-select (voluntarily) or by teacher's selection. Wrong examples are rejected with the exclamation "not correct" while correct answers are accepted with "correct" exclamation. Correct answers are written on the blackboard either by the teacher or the students who provided them. The teacher directs the student to read the sentences on the board two or three times.

Step III focuses on doing the exercises in the textbook on *adverbial clauses*. The exercises usually consist of identification of adverbial clauses and their functions in given sentences as examined in WAEC examination. The teacher's activity is to draw the attention of the students to the exercises. He/she does the first exercise by writing it on the blackboard, underlining the clause, and stating its function. The teacher directs the class to read what he/she has written on the blackboard two or three times. The students respond by doing as the teacher has directed. Next, the teacher appoints students to do a given item of the exercises. Appointed students respond by providing either correct or incorrect answers. Incorrect answers are rejected. Correct answers are written on the blackboard for the class to read.

Step IV is evaluation. At this point, students are to do the exercises in the textbook individually either in class or at home, depending on the availability or non-availability of class time. The teacher marks the students' work with scores given followed with such comments as: *very poor, poor, fair, good, very good, and excellent*. Students respond to such remarks either dysphorically or euphorically.

Discussion

The picture painted of English language teaching in Nigerian schools reveals the dominant features of ELT in Nigeria. First, teacher talk dominates classroom activities. The teacher initiates all activities while students

respond as appropriate. Second, teaching is done explicitly; using positive evidence (correct form of the language) enhanced by appropriate teacher's instructional techniques. The explicit teaching is deductive. Third, the classroom is compliance-driven for students do not challenge the teacher's directives. Fourth, class and homework exercises are derived from the class textbook and done as the textbook directs. From the foregoing, it is deduced that English language teaching in Nigeria inheres in explicit rule-focused teaching, deductively transmitted for intentional learning. There appears to be some similarities between a typical Nigerian English classroom and the Chinese/Japanese counterpart as reported by Flowerdew & Miller (1995) and Cortazzi & Jin (1996). For instance, there is a parallel between the motivational force of English learning in Nigeria, Chinese, and Japanese. This is because the countries rely on their MT or other forms of language for intra-national communication. In Nigeria, in addition to MT, Nigerian pidgin (NP) dominates all forms of informal intra-national communication in the cities and educational institutions. English is restricted to official use. Similarly, student/teacher relationship appears identical. There is respect for the teacher whose authority cannot be challenged. Furthermore, classroom activities are dominated by teacher talk and peer-group activities are not tolerated. In addition to parallels drawn from China and Japan, this observational report implicates other Anglophone West African countries because of their common colonial, educational heritage. For instance, intentional learning (Hulstijn, 2007) which characterizes English language teaching in Nigeria is a colonial heritage because the long term objective of English language teaching was to enable students to pass external examination, using a prescribed syllabus. The Cambridge School Certificate Examination conducted by Cambridge University was the external examination which all students from Anglophone West African countries sat and passed. Success in the examinations was determined by a credit pass in the English language paper. With independence, the Cambridge School Certificate Examination was replaced by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) that conducts examinations formerly conducted by the Cambridge School Certificate Examination Body. However, a credit pass in the English language paper is no longer the condition for success in the examinations of WAEC. A common syllabus is used to prepare candidates from all Anglophone West African countries for the examinations. Intentional learning invokes explicit and deductive method. This was the method during the colonial era which has also dominated the English language classroom. To ensure understanding, the teacher uses questions and answers as a ready tool. This practice is a colonial heritage deemed appropriate for intentional learning. Finally, that some of the English language textbooks used in Nigerian school is also used in other Anglophone West African Countries illustrates further that the culture of learning in Anglophone West African Countries approximates one another. A typical textbook in this regard is Nigerian *Intensive English for junior and senior secondary school*.

Pedagogical Implication

Advocates of a special pedagogy for EIL, among other (McKay, 2003; 2013; Alsagoff, 2013; and Kumaravadivelu, 2013), believe that western imported methodology is inappropriate for the teaching of EIL. Culture of learning is deemed the most appropriate method for its teaching. This means that, for EIL to be taught in countries where there is need to teach it, the countries or regions' culture of learning should be determined through extensive observation of classroom practices as this study has done. This observational report has sketched the culture of learning for the Anglophone West African countries, using Nigeria as a case study and justifying why the Nigerian example is representative of the Anglophone West African region. This means that, if the teaching of EIL is to gain root in the West African region, the culture of learning as sketched here should be the base with slight modification, where necessary, in each country of the region. This position may be regarded as a response to Kumaravadivelu's (2013) and McKay's (2003) call for a break from dependency on Western-oriented knowledge in the teaching of the English language in non-native speaker (NNS) countries in view of the globalization of the English language. Countries like Japan and Singapore have taken the lead in this response (Alsagoff, 2013). Unfortunately, Nigeria and other Anglophone West African countries are yet to respond to this call. Thus, the study may be regarded as a proactive research.

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