

TEACHER-CENTERED IMPEDIMENTS TO ORAL ENGLISH LEARNING: OVERVIEW OF ESL CONTEXT

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This paper examines features which have continued to impact adversely on the oral proficiency of learners of especially English, in the light of a supposed decline in the standards of education in Nigeria. There has been a preponderance of studies on learner-centered impediments to learning of Oral English in a second language environment as Nigeria, while the all-important role of the teacher is often either mentioned in passing or all-together ignored, hence the need for this study. This study elucidates the circumstances that brought about the downward trend in learners' performances debunking the constant reference to learners as mostly responsible for the situation. It calls for a re-examination of Teacher-talking-Time (TTT) and the significance of Teacher-Language Awareness (TLA) since teachers' awareness, application and response to factors regarding TTT and TLA examined in this paper are important precursors of learners' oral proficiency. The study concludes by suggesting the need to pay more attention to these areas in ESL teaching operations.

Key words: Oral English, teacher-talking time

INTRODUCTION

There is a popular concern about a supposed decline in the standards of education in Nigeria as in some other countries of the world where English is taught as a second language. Among these concerns, standards of literacy are of

perennial prominence. The usual move is to highlight present deficiencies in comparison with a hypothetical golden age of education in Nigeria. Although evidence of such comparisons may be difficult to find as no solid corpus of past evidence is readily available, yet these comparisons cannot be dismissed as untrue given the certain existing pedagogical phenomena in Nigeria presently. However, the effectiveness of education and pupils' performance particularly in English language largely depend on the people responsible for making the school system work and teachers are at the centre of this process.

Teachers constitute an important social and economic force in almost all countries: half of all government employees in Nigeria are teachers, and teachers' wages account for nearly 75% of the operating budget allocated to ministry of Education. They play an indispensable role in transmitting knowledge (especially by words of mouth), their great number and the large budget share devoted to them mean that teacher-management needs to be all the more rigorous and effective. The basic premise of the present paper therefore is to discuss the centrality of competence in the spoken language and methodology of the teacher to successful teaching and meaningful learning of especially Oral English.

1.1. THE PRIMACY OF THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE IN TEACHING

During the 1960s, psychologists throughout the English speaking world identified oracy or the spoken language as a crucial component of learning. Speaking and listening then became a requirement in all subjects of the curriculum. Its inclusion as a separate profile component in the curriculum gives official support to the importance of the spoken English. In Nigeria, there has been no methodical investigation of Teachers' attitudes to the role of speaking in the national curriculum. This may be one reason why students' performance particularly in oral English has been consistently low as remarked by Oladele (2001). It should be acknowledged that oracy does not only take place in English lessons. It is a condition of learning across the whole curriculum. *But what kind of talk do we have in Nigerian classrooms today?* It is the teacher dominated and directed talk. Pupils have limited opportunity for participation and the talk which is allowed is usually of a low level. As posited by Widdowson (1994:386-38), learners require some measure of autonomy and personal identification with the language they are learning as a L2, but these methodologies are lacking in Nigeria as addressed by this paper. This situation further compounds the already existing problem of what model to adopt for

teaching oral English, which continued to linger due to the wide gap that exists between education policy formulation and implementation in the country.

1.2. TEACHER TALKING TIME (TTT)

Teaching methods for learning in Nigeria place little emphasis on talking by pupils. In most classrooms settings, teachers ask many questions 80% of which require mere recall of knowledge (and the students normally give it verbatim). This method is known as imitation/response/feedback (IRF) discourse structure, adequately discussed by Edward and Westgate (1994). This method allows little opportunity for pupils to interact with other pupils, ask questions or initiate comments, coupled with the problem of extremely large classes in especially our tertiary institutions (averagely 150-200 students per class). Lessons, where pupils passively receive the teachers communicated wisdom, remaining largely silent unless invited to speak, will only contribute to the annihilation of quality education in Nigeria. Lessons in oral or spoken English require that students be given opportunity to pronounce especially the English sounds over and over, so as to internalize them.

Mercer and Wegerif (1999) wrote on the importance of oracy or the spoken language, as one of the best reliable methods of assessing pupil's abilities, especially in oral English.

Pupils' language-learning propensities may be assessed by getting them to try to produce oral texts. By listening, the teacher can gain idea of which areas of grammar and lexicon need help, and modify his teaching accordingly.

In their research, 88% of the respondents reacting to a questionnaire agree that if learners do not get the chance to talk they will not generate ideas. It is significant that some of our learners lose ability to speak fluently; a skill they acquired during the pre-school age. One of the reasons for this deterioration is the very little opportunity they are given to talk freely during class lessons. The bulk of their lessons, especially in the primary schools are "repeat after me"-mere repetitions. The spoken language, like an outer coat of an orange, gives the first impression about the speaker to the listener or hearer.

The development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is an approach to the teaching of second language, emphasizes interaction as both the means and the end in language acquisition (Bern 1984:5). Studies on CLT brought with it a methodology which emphasized communication in the classroom and a reduction of the teacher talking time (TTT) which has been proved to be counterproductive for the following reasons:

- (a) Excessive TTT limits the amount of STT (student talking time). If the teacher talks for half the time in a 60 minute lesson with 15 students, each student gets only 2 minutes to speak. Besides, the classes in the humanities of most Nigerian Federal Universities fall between 100 and 500 students.
- (b) A large amount of TTT results in long stretches of time in teacher-to-class (T/class) mode and a monotonous pace. Student under-involvement inevitably leads to loss of concentration, boredom and reduced learning.
- (c) TTT often means that the teacher is giving the students information that they could be finding out for themselves, such as grammar rules, the meanings of vocabulary items and corrections. Teacher explanations alone are often tedious, full of terminology and difficult to follow. There may be no indication of whether the students have understood.
- (d) If the teacher takes the dominant role in classroom discourse in terms of initiating the topic, allocating turns and evaluating comments, (as is the case in Nigerian schools) the student's role is only that of respondent. Opportunities for developing the speaking skill are therefore severely limited.
- (e) If the teacher is constantly dominant and controlling, the learners take no responsibility for their own learning but learn what the teacher decides and when. Student autonomy is thus limited and it becomes difficult to have an objective assessment or empirical analysis of students' pronunciation patterns especially in matters relating to expression of identity (bringing their home culture or cultural 'niche' into their classroom participation) as argued by Widdowson (1994:387)

1.3. THE TEACHER'S LANGUAGE AWARENESS (TLA)

Also important is the teacher's language awareness. In the context of any second language (L2) classroom, the three main sources of input for learners are materials, other learners and the teacher. As mentioned earlier, this study concentrates on the teacher as a major source of input for oral English learners.

The TLA has very great impact on the input which is made available for learning as explained by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999). It is difficult to expect an excellent performance from among English teachers who themselves

are product of an educational system in which the formal teaching of pronunciation was anathema. This factor is elaborated in Andrews (1999:161-177), Fajobi (1999) and Faleye (2004). Teachers Language competence is described as the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively.

The L2 teacher may not attain native speaker proficiency, but he can strive to approximate the target language. The spoken mode is particularly important for prospective teachers who act as models (substitutes) for native speakers. To expect Nigerian English teachers to speak with an Oxford or Received Pronunciation or even BBC accent would be a quixotic task. However, teachers of English should speak in such a way that ridiculous ambiguities are avoided. For instance if a teacher pronounces shells instead of cells, while teaching on a topic like "Snails in West Africa" ambiguity may set in, since both shells and cells are contextually appropriate. Taking cognizance of minimal pair is important and teachers in especially the ESL environment should make efforts to make distinctions in the pronunciation of seemingly homophonous words which are minimal pairs (words which have their pronunciation different only by one single sound) as in the words; *worn* and *won* or *live* and *leave*.

Learners depend more on context to resolve ambiguities caused by mispronunciations. Due to the fact that most teachers in Nigeria do not often make distinctions in the pronunciation of minimal pairs (Soneye 2004), when a teacher makes a sentence like "working is good for one's health" except he/she adds another statement such as "slothfulness hurts a great deal" many students in the Nigerian classroom may write down *walking* instead of *working*. The reason for this, being that walking is also good for one's health and both words are often pronounced the same way in Nigerian English.

If the teacher, especially the language teacher, constantly attempts explicit expression, his teaching methodology will become a source of motivation for learners to learn. Effective teaching in a second language situation such as Nigeria requires of the teacher more than just the possession of the knowledge of English language. The teacher also needs to reflect upon that knowledge as well as the knowledge of the underlying systems of the language. This is a major way to ensure that students maximally benefit from the input for learning. Most teachers are contented with the ability to draw upon a language just for communicative purposes. Leech describes an effective and result oriented language teacher as follows:

A model teacher should be aware of the contrastive relations between native language and foreign language. The model teacher should understand and implement the processes of simplification by which overt knowledge can be presented to learners at different stages of learning. (Leech 1994:18)

Even though this paper is on the teacher per se yet there are other issues which affect the teachers' proficiency directly or indirectly in Nigeria. Some of these are discussed in the following section.

2.0 PERPLEXING ISSUES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN NIGERIA

There are several other issues on English language teaching which impact the teaching-learning exercise in Nigeria. Among the most prominent factors are the implementation of the language policy of the 6-3-3-4 system of education and the structure of the secondary school curriculum in relation to British and American varieties, the unsuitability of British RP as ELT model in Nigeria, the duality of the native speaker concept and the issue of International intelligibility and acceptability.

2.1. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE LANGUAGE POLICY OF THE 6-3-3-SYSTEM OF EDUCATION

The national policy on Education (N.P.E) section 3: FRN 1991(paragraph 15: line 4) dwells on primary education and states that:

The government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English.

The implementation of this policy till date (2007) seems incongruous because of the vagueness as to when the transition from L1 to L2 should take place. This lack of uniformity frustrates the teaching and learning process and leads to a poor foundation for literacy in both the mother tongue and English. The implication of this shoddiness is often seen in the absence of a good foundation for most pupils and leaves the teacher frustrated.

2.2. THE STRUCTURE OF THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM IN RELATION TO BRITISH AND AMERICAN VARIETIES OF ENGLISH

The Nigerian secondary school curriculum allows candidates sitting for the Secondary School Certificate Examination to write either British or American English in principle without penalty. Students are required to be consistent with their choice. This trend has brought in a great deal of confusion into the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria for the following reasons:

- i. Most secondary school teachers are aware of only the British English spellings and pronunciations. This apparently is due to the length of years British English has been with us in Nigeria or the absence of avenues through which teachers can update themselves in line with global phenomena such as internet facilities.
- ii. Teachers and learners use the American spellings and pronunciation without being aware of the variety they are using. Many teachers do not even recognize these varieties either in speech or in writing. Some teachers mark students down supposing that their transcriptions were wrong in words such as *lieutenant, tomatoes, route, herb and vase* which have different pronunciations from the British variety as in the word *Tomato* with the a rhyming with the a in car in British English and with the a in the word *cake* in General American. The pattern of stressing in British and American varieties is also different in words such as *debris, address, and magazine*. As posited by Crystal (1997:117), The United States of America “exercises a greater influence on the way English is developing worldwide, than does any regional variety” and the influx of American films and the internet indeed expose a majority of Nigerian students to American English pronunciations that even their teachers are not conversant with.

2.3 THE UNSUITABILITY OF BRITISH RP AS ELT MODEL IN NIGERIA

Up until now in Nigeria, the British RP accent is the ELT model in schools. Teachers, themselves cannot speak this variety, so the in-put has been largely Nigerian English. Little wonder, that students fail woefully in oral English examinations which are based on RP accent as investigated by Soneye (2004b).

Awonusi (2004: 14-15) at the 21st Nigerian English Studies Association (NESA) conference in 2004 highlighted some important reasons against RP

such as : “it is almost a century old,” Estuary English (EE) is taking its place and forces of globalization are making alternative models like General American (GA) more appealing to non native speakers and gradually making in-roads into our local accents (also Awonusi;1994) and RP has been grossly domesticated in the very many environments in which, it is adopted as a model such that there is no uniformity.

2.4. THE DUALITY OF THE NATIVE SPEAKER CONCEPT

Apart from the issue of a model choice, equally problematic are the long-established ELT practices around the central figure of the omniscient ‘native speaker’. Research in English studies (especially long essays in tertiary institutions) in Nigeria is often based on interference where the Nigerian second language speaker (L2) of English is adjudged a defective speaker of English. In this regard, the native speaker is elevated to the status of a totem and the effect has been an extremely enervating inferiority complex among many a non-native speaker/learner and even teachers. Even with the growth and popularity of American English all over the world (the users being also native speakers) the concept of native speaker has been rendered somewhat blurred. No one can deny that language teaching in general, and ELT in particular, historically evolved around the notion of the native speaker. Theories about language learning typically posited the figure of the native speaker as the ultimate state at which first and second language learners may arrive and as the ultimate goal in language pedagogy. Hence ELT practices were premised on the key belief that someone who wants to learn English as a second language does so in order to be able to communicate with the native speakers of English. Whenever the phrase ‘native speaker’ is mentioned in this 21st century some clarifications must be made regarding the set of native speakers being referred to. This is because there are very many sets, such as the British, the Americans, the Australians or the Canadians, all of whom are native speakers of English. They are all native speakers of English yet they speak very different varieties. Besides, the idea that English belongs to everyone who speaks it has been steadily gaining ground. Rajagopalan (2004) supports this view.

2.5. IDENTIFYING STANDARDS OR STANDARDIZED VARIETIES

McArthur (2004: 416) states that ‘at the moment there are demands for a standardized international variety so that it can be taught’. But the word standardization is viewed from several perspectives, as there are interest groups, such that an objective standard does not seem easily attainable. Joseph says:

Standardization implies a decision about which are right variants in cases of existing variability, a necessary limitation of acceptable options and a regrettable inflexibilization of potential. In a modern context, ‘right and wrong’ should only be meaningful and useable attributions in cases where there is no such native variability where a wrong usage is only wrong because it is not in practice an available variant, and nobody at all ever speaks that way. (Joseph 1987:12)

In view of the above definition of ‘standard English’ one can conclude that both American and British varieties are standard varieties and that Nigerian English cannot also be regarded as wrong because ‘somebody speaks it’. What or which then is the standard, at least for pedagogical reasons there can only be one as a model otherwise there will be chaos. A key concern among EFL/ESL teachers and other language professionals in the first decade of the 21st century is how to prepare students for the use of English on a global scale and this is also the concern of this paper, particularly as it relates to teachers in Nigeria. Arguments and various perspectives on standardization of Nigerian English (phonology) have been generating a lot of interest in recent years as exemplified in the works of Bamgbose (1982), Akinjobi (2005:76-78), Adetugbo (2004:179-187) and Ajani (2007), but it suffices to say here that issues of methodologies of teaching the language, especially the oral aspect recently introduced into the curriculum in Nigeria should also be considerable attention, hence this study.

2.6. INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGIBILITY AND ACCEPTABILITY

Inherent in the problems earlier discussed are the problems of intelligibility and acceptability. One main reason often given for the continued use of RP as the model for ELT in Nigeria is international intelligibility, so that Nigerians can sound intelligible to especially native speakers of English. But in recent times questions on intelligibility have become multidimensional. Banjo (1979), three decades ago, states that the functions of the English language in Nigeria transcend “intelligibility”. It is simply not the issue of Nigerians or any other nation sounding intelligible to native speakers but also native speakers sounding

intelligible to (Nigerians) other speakers of other varieties of the language worldwide. This is well reiterated by Rajagopalan (2004). Besides, concepts on “the native speaker” and “ownership of English” have continually been contended as no longer being the exclusive rights of ‘a group of people living in an offshore European island...it is an international language with no distinctive phonology’ (Widdowson 1994:380-381). Despite these emerging phenomena around the globe, it is surprising that pedagogical practices concerning oral English teaching in Nigeria have become static and obsolete. Oral English teachers continued to labour, most times fruitlessly, to teach students to pronounce sounds the British way, they themselves not having the necessary input, thereby sounding bookish and the students most of the time passive.

These factors have further perplexed teachers and often make teaching ineffective. However, the major issue that the present study addresses is the problem of the almost inexistent learner participation in class which may impede pronunciation proficiency in especially the acquisition of the Standard English sound segments.

3.0. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURE

In order to compare Teacher Talking Time (TTT) with Learner Talking Time (LTT) a study was carried out, whose primary goal was to examine if learners have sufficient time to express themselves, thereby acquiring some proficiency. Much of the data for this study is drawn from previous observations through field work and daily interactions a University teacher as well as fresh data from three universities. Four Oral English teachers, three males and a female from the first university (henceforth UA) were observed during classroom lessons. The observation lasted twelve weeks, with each of them having three classes of an hour each. They taught the same group of students (164 in number) in part 2. Three male teachers (no female on the course) were taken from the second (henceforth UB) and three from the third (UC) with two males and one female). For purpose of analyses, the variables considered were five, namely A-arrival of teacher, IC-Initiation of communication, E-Explanation, R/Q-Response/Questions and F-Feedback. A, IC and E are assumed to be exclusively the teacher’s roles, while RQ and F most of the time, the learner’s.

| Hours in minutes | TM1 | | | TM2 | | | TM3 | | | TF1 | | |
|------------------------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|-------------|----------|----------|
| | 1st week | 2nd week | 3rd week | 1st week | 2nd week | 3rd week | 1st week | 2nd week | 3rd week | 1st week | 2nd week | 3rd week |
| 1 st 10mins | A/IC | A | A/IC | A/IC | A/IC | A/IC | - | AIC | A/IC | A/IC | A/IC | A/IC |
| 2 nd 10mins | E | IC | R/Q | R/Q | E | F | A/IC | E | R/Q | R/Q | F | R/Q |
| 3 rd 10mins | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | F | E | E | E |
| 4 th 10mins | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | R/Q | E | E |
| 5 th 10mins | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | R/Q | E |
| 6 th 10mins | Q | E | E | F | E | E | E | E | E | Q | E | E |
| Total TTT in minutes | 50 | 60 | 50 | 40 | 60 | 50 | 50 | 60 | 50 | 30 | 40 | 50 |
| | 160 minutes | | | 150 minutes | | | 160 minutes | | | 120 minutes | | |
| Total LTT in minutes | 20 minutes | | | 30 minutes | | | 20 minutes | | | 60 minutes | | |

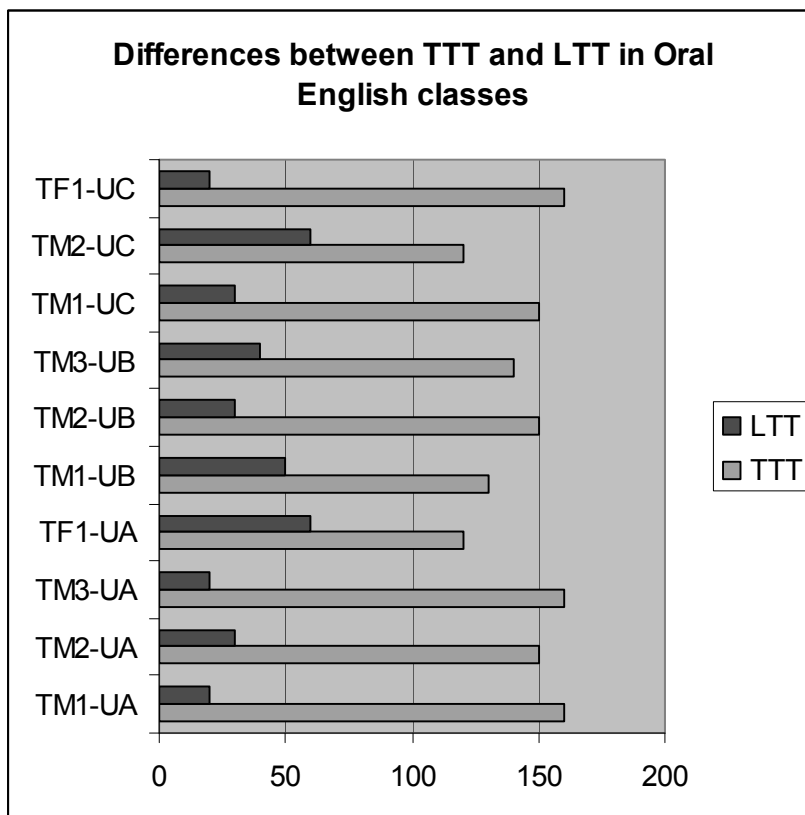
Table 1. A three hour lecture chart on the assessment of TTT versus LTT in UA

UA=first university TM=male teacher TF=female teacher

| Hours in minutes | TM1 (UB) | | | TM2 (UB) | | | TM3 (UB) | | | TM1 (UC) | | | TM2 (UC) | | | TF1 (UC) | | |
|-------------------------------|----------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|----------|--------|--------|
| | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk | 1st wk | 2nd wk | 3rd wk |
| 1 st 10mins | A/IC | A | A/I | A | A/I | A | A/I | A | A/IC | A | A | A/IC | A | A/IC | A/IC | A/I | A | A/IC |
| 2 nd 10mins | E | IC | E | IC | E | IC | Q | E | E | IC | E | Q | IC | E | E | E | E | E |
| 3 rd 10mins | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | Q | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E |
| 4 th 10mins | E | E | E | E | E | F | E | E | E | E | E | E | Q | Q | Q | E | E | E |
| 5 th 10mins | R/Q | F | F | E | F | E | E | Q | E | E | F | E | F | F | F | R/Q | E | Q |
| 6 th 10mins | F | RQ | E | F | E | E | F | E | E | Q | E | E | E | E | E | E | E | E |
| Total TTT in minutes | 40 | 40 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 40 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 50 | 40 | 40 | 40 | 50 | 60 | 50 |
| | 130 | | | 150 | | | 140 | | | 150 | | | 120 | | | 160 | | |
| Total LTT in minutes | 50 | | | 30 | | | 40 | | | 30 | | | 60 | | | 20 | | |

Table 2. A three hour lecture chart on the assessment of TTT versus ltt in UB/UC

UB=second university UC=third university



3.1. DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The findings revealed that only one out of the four teachers in University A (UA) allowed about one third of the total available time for teaching to be used by students to ask questions and respond to the teaching in their preferred ways. The fact that the female teacher (TF1) among them was the only one who allowed for the highest LTT may be a coincidence as the study did not have sufficient number of females to be able to establish a pattern. However, since all the male lecturers allowed for 20, 30 and 20 minutes LTT respectively, this seemed to have established a pattern with regard to male/female dichotomy in oral English teaching which may be verified by some other research in the future. The important feature in this study and worthy of note is the relation of

TTT to LTT. If a class with 164 students had only 130 minutes (1 hour, 20 minutes) to contribute through speaking to the teacher's in-put in teaching duration of a total of 590 minutes (twelve hours), there is the likelihood that about 75% of the students never spoke at all throughout the semester and this in an oral English teaching classroom.

Although the number of students in UB and UC were relatively lower than that in UA (between 110 and 120), yet the pattern of teaching does not seem too different. In table 2, a male teacher, TM 2 (UC) allowed for sufficient learner-contribution, such that the phenomenon intercepts any conclusion that one may want draw on the pattern of teaching of male teachers. Moreover, the only female teacher in UC (TF1) allowed for an incredibly low learner-contribution that the sex variable becomes inconsequential in this study.

Casual interactions with some of the teachers who were oblivious of their being observed, revealed that teachers were striving to complete the syllabus before the examination period and to cover lost grounds due to certain truncation of the academic calendar earlier in the year. It was observed that even some of the questions asked were neither attended to by the teacher, nor were other students allowed to respond to them, rather they were thrown back at the students as "written assignment" in an oral English practical class!

3.2 CONCLUSION

First and foremost, we as teachers must engage in the task of identifying the features of Nigerian spoken English and it must begin at the sound segments, if it will be adequately codified especially for pedagogical reasons. In order to do these, three main issues must be borne in mind. The EFL/ESL teacher must be able to attend to and formulate policies based on questions relating to groups of students who speak the accent that can be regarded as Standard Nigerian English, compare the English spoken by students with the accent from British or American or any other variety and freely observe phonological features in their use of segments. Besides, teachers of English as a second language, as it is the case in Nigeria, must understand that English is rarely spoken in informal contexts in the country and the school setting is a major and convenient forum for speaking English. These are the main issues that position the teacher as knowledgeable and contextually adequate for teaching English as a second language and all these cannot be possible until the teacher has given considerable time to students to speak in class.

Conscious efforts should be made by teachers to talk less and give ample opportunity to pupils to express themselves, irrespective of the very large classes. For effectiveness, the classes can be divided into smaller groups where students will interact with each other and forward their discoveries and ideas to teachers in both written and oral forms.

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