

Improving Teachers' English Language Proficiency for the Better Achievement of Students' Learning Outcome: A Review of the British Council's STEP Programme in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *Considering the position of the English Language as the medium of instruction in Nigeria and the role played by the teachers using the language in classroom instruction, this paper saw it significant to observe the Strengthening Teachers' English Proficiency (STEP) course as introduced in Jigawa State by the British Council to improve teachers' English Language proficiency through self-study. Doing so is expected to enhance and provide a better learning outcome. The paper supported its views with the self-direct and andragogy approaches to adult learning as the basis for self-study which is believed to be compatible with teachers and teaching. The paper, therefore, tried to highlight the factors that may hinder the success of the programme. The paper stated that time, the commitment of the teachers and the other stakeholders in the state, financial issues and societal attitudes to the use of the English Language could be the challenges to this effort. As a point of concern, the paper suggested that the government, through the Ministry of Education should try to adapt and produce such materials used in the STEP programme and distribute them to teachers, especially those who did not attend the British Council's training. Similar training should also be carried out on regular basis to help teachers embrace using the language frequently in their classes.*

KEYWORDS: English language, Proficiency, Students' learning outcome STEP

INTRODUCTION

STEP is a program designed by the British Council in Nigeria and piloted its package by the DIFID and UKAID's Teachers Development Programme (TDP) in 2018 and 2022 to improve Teachers'

English to achieve better learning outcomes. The programme targeted English, Mathematics and Basic Science teachers at the middle and upper basic education in States like Kaduna, Kano, Jigawa, Zamfara, and Katsina where thousands of teachers were trained on how, with the aid of the materials provided by the British Council, they will engage themselves into a self-study that will lead them to improve their English. The reason is that the English Language remains the language of instruction the understanding of which will help learners understand many concepts and ideas in the end, achieve the set learning goals. The program focused on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary development, and classroom English. Print and Audio materials were provided containing a series of activities to engage learners and support their learning. And since it is a self-study, the content of the materials was structured and arranged as units and sections with each having a list of key outcomes. There are many assumptions that the program will change the teachers' minds to practice English with their students thereby making them explore more ideas and reap a lot of learning opportunities as well as acquire various skills of communication. However, like every other move in the transformation of the education sector, the STEP program, though successful to some extent, was not and still not free from challenges which if addressed squarely, will no doubt increase the success of the program. This paper, therefore, tries to look critically at the STEP course especially as it involves self-study intending to identify such challenging factors that can bring obstacles to the success of the learners and recommend solutions to the hurdles for the benefit of both teachers and students. The paper discusses whether language proficiency can be achieved through self-study and the difficulties surrounding the process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-study is largely about becoming better informed, gaining expanded understanding, and an effort to improve oneself as a teacher and one's practice. As mentioned, self-study is closely related to action research, teacher research, and reflective practice, and all these approaches share the assumption that the quality of education is "hinged" on the practitioner's (teacher's) knowledgeability (ability to; communicate with students, teach, create development processes, facilitate teaching, facilitate meaningful processes, etc.), and that the practitioner's actively studying their practice and teaching is a valuable approach to enhance these abilities (Vanassche & Keltchermans 2016). An important aspect of self-study is to search for the "gap" (distance) and contradictions between personal theories; own beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and how teaching is conducted (Whitehead & Fitzgerald, 2007). This means discovering and acknowledging the differences between own normative beliefs and aspirations of teaching on the one hand, and the actual teaching practice on the other hand. This is what Whitehead (2007) describes as the notion of experiencing oneself as a "living contradiction". To put it simply: we think, mean and say one thing but we do something else in action.

A key characteristic of self-study is that it is initiated and carried out by practitioners whose practice is studied (Nilsson & Loughran 2012). The authors emphasized and argued that it is

teacher educators themselves who must have control over the development and knowledge of other generation of teachers about teaching in teacher education, and how to facilitate students' development, understanding, and learning processes. This implies that it is the practitioners (teacher educators) who are responsible and must take responsibility for investigating, describing, and articulating the relationship between the given teaching and the student's development, understanding, and learning. Smith (2016) uses the term "teacher educators' 'agency" about this responsibility. This is about teachers taking control of their professional practice by researching it to develop and improve both oneself and practice and aiming to create new research-based knowledge. One important aspect here is also about being critical of the existing knowledge, traditions, institutional ways of thinking and acting, and institutional and political leadership related to teachers. An important aspect of self-study which is crucial in understanding the methodology is embedded in the desire of teachers to better align their teaching intents with their teaching actions (Loughran, 2007). It is unavoidable that the nature of the practice itself, with its inherent contradictions and tensions, affects how the practice is approached. According to Loughran (2004), it will also be unavoidable for teachers who engage in self-study that the study of; themselves – their thinking – their actions – their teaching, does not affect or is applicable in their practice. Another important aspect of self-study is about discovering and becoming aware of the complexities associated with teaching and learning. Many challenging operations take place simultaneously, and a teacher has a responsibility for everyone to support and facilitate both understanding and development, and for processes and actions to create meaning as well as challenge students. Zeichner (2007) states that research related to self-study has managed to bring out some of the complexities associated with teachers and contributed to a certain dignity and highlighted the important, yet underestimated work of teacher training institutions and teachers. According to Zeichner (2007), self-study may be the approach to research within teacher education that has contributed most to important developments in the field. Although an attempt has been made to briefly describe what self-study is about, it is according to Bullough & Pinnegar (2004) difficult to fully understand what it is and what it is not. In addition, they also emphasized that self-study is not a recipe or procedure that is slavishly followed, but rather a methodology for exploring and researching own practice, one's self, and own teaching about teaching. In the following, it will be elucidated why self-study can be a good approach to learning and development and what the purposes of self-study are.

The Relevance of Self-study to Teachers

Teachers who engage in self-study often share a broad motivation to improve; teacher education both individually and institutionally, the goal of building new knowledge and understanding that can be brought into the field, increase the knowledge and understanding of teaching about teaching by researching and improving their practice (Berry, 2004). Whitehead (1998) articulates this motivation to improve practice through some questions such as: "How do I help/support my students to improve the quality of their learning and development?", "How do I live my values more fully in my practice?" and "How do I improve my practice?" (Berry, 2004).

However, adult learning theories provide insight into how adults learn and can help teachers be more effective in their practice and more responsive to the needs of the learners they serve. There is no single theory of learning that can be applied to all adults. Indeed, the literature of the past century has yielded a variety of models, sets of assumptions and principles, theories, and explanations that make up the adult learning knowledge base. The more that adult educators are familiar with this knowledge based, the more effective their practice can be, and the more responsive their practice can be to the needs of adult learners. This fact sheet reviews two major theories-andragogy and self-directed learning-and discusses their implications for practice. It also provides a theoretical foundation for the teachers' self-study.

Andragogy Theory

In attempting to document the differences between the ways adults and children learn, Malcolm Knowles (1980) popularized the concept of *andragogy* ("the art and science of helping adults learn"), contrasting it with *pedagogy* ("the art and science of teaching children"). He posited a set of assumptions about adult learners that they move from dependency to increasing selfdirectedness as they matures and can direct their learning. They draw on their accumulated reservoir of life experiences to aid learning. They are ready to learn when they assume new social or life roles. They are problem-centred and want to apply new learning immediately and motivated to learn by internal, rather than external, factors. Inherent in these assumptions are implications for practice. Knowles (1984) suggests that adult educators set a cooperative climate for learning in the classroom, assess the learner's specific needs and interests, develop learning objectives based on the learner's needs, interests, and skill levels, design sequential activities to achieve the objectives, work collaboratively with the learner to select methods, materials, and resources for instruction; and evaluate the quality of the learning experience and make adjustments, as needed, while assessing needs for further learning.

Because adults need to know why they are learning something, effective teachers explain their reasons for teaching specific skills. Because adults learn by doing, effective instruction focuses on tasks that adults can perform, rather than on memorization of content. Because adults are problemsolvers and learn best when the subject is of immediate use, effective instruction involves the learner in solving real-life problems.

Andragogy theory is not without criticism. Brookfield (2003) calls the theory "culture blind," stating that the concept of self-directed learning and the concept of the students establishing a nonthreatening relationship with the teacher as a facilitator of learning may neglect races and cultures that value the teacher as the primary source of knowledge and direction.

Self-Directed Learning Theory

Approximately 70 per cent of adult learning is self-directed (Cross, 1981), and about 90 per cent of all adults conduct at least one self-directed learning project a year (Tough, 1971). Self-directed

learning (SDL) is a "process in which individuals take the initiative, without the help of others" in planning, carrying out, and evaluating their own learning experiences (Knowles, 1975). In essence, SDL is an informal process that primarily takes place *outside* the classroom. What qualifies learning as "self-directed" is who (the learner) makes decisions about content, methods, resources, and evaluation of the learning. Individuals take responsibility for their learning process by determining their needs, setting goals, identifying resources, implementing a plan to meet their goals, and evaluating the outcomes.

The benefit of SDL is that learning can easily be incorporated into daily routines and occur both at the learner's convenience and according to his/her learning preferences. It can involve the learner in isolated activities, such as researching information on the Internet; it also can involve the learner in communication with experts and peers, as in a traditional classroom.

SDL can be difficult for adults with low-level literacy skills who may lack independence, confidence, internal motivation, or resources. Brookfield (1985) suggests that not all learners prefer the self-directed option and that many adults who engage in SDL also engage in more formal educational programs, such as teacher-directed courses. Within the adult education setting, the teacher can augment traditional classroom instruction with a variety of techniques to foster SDL for individuals or for small groups of learners who are ready and willing to embark on independent, self-directed learning experiences. Self-direction is a critical component of persistence in adult education, helping learners recognize how and when to engage in self-study when they find they must stop formal education.

Following are strategies for facilitating SDL. The teacher can help the learner to:

- Conduct a self-assessment of skill levels and needs to determine appropriate learning objectives;
- Identify the starting point for a learning project;
- Match appropriate resources (books, articles, content experts) and methods (Internet searches, lectures, electronic discussion groups) to the learning goal;
- Negotiate a learning contract that sets learning goals, strategies, and evaluation criteria;
- Acquire strategies for decision-making and self-evaluation of work;
- Develop positive attitudes and independence relative to self-directed learning; and reflect on what they are learning.

English as the language of Instruction in Nigeria

On the one hand, English has come to be the international language and the language of global communication, due to various reasons which are political, economic, and technical. Globalization has made English a compulsory ingredient of a successful personality as it is an important tool widely used in international communication all over the world.

In the globalized context, there is economic competition among the countries in the world irrespective of developed or underdeveloped. Employers in the present global market need people who have international experience as well as good qualifications accepted and recognized all over the world. But high proficiency in spoken and written English is regarded as the principal prerequisite qualification. So, English is still the number one language in the entire world. It is not only for the employees but also for the students wishing for higher studies, especially in the countries where English is a native/official language.

It is well known that the role of English skills/proficiency is significant to both teaching and learning. Speaking all the below cited statements endorse that English language skills or proficiency are a key factor for effective teaching and learning.

On the other hand, the English language plays the vital role of being the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools from primary to tertiary level. The knowledge of the contents of school subjects is transferred to the students at all levels of education via the English language medium. It, therefore, follows that how well students would fare in academic attainment depends largely on their level of proficiency in the English language which is the medium of instruction. The poor performance of students in the English language at public examinations in recent times has been explained as a major cause of the decline in academic achievement and standard of education in Nigeria. According to Maleki and Zangani (2007), having difficulties in grasping fully the contents and concepts of the various subjects of the curriculum taught in the target language (English language) seems to be one of the most serious problems that the students face in their particular course of study.

English Proficiency and Students' Learning outcome

As a second language learner, one should be proficient in English for effective communication to take place. It means the ability to speak or express the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate smoothly and effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social, and professional topics. In general, proficiency equates with fluency, but there is a distinction between both of them. It is possible to be fluent without being highly proficient, as it is also possible to be highly proficient without being fluent. When it comes to second language learning, a few major aspects of fluency lay in the prosody of the language, pronunciation, and the timing of dialogue. Fluency is impossible to attain without engaging in dialogue with a fluent speaker of the language. Proficiency, on the other hand, is the primary focus of someone's ability to understand and communicate precisely in the language. Proficiency is best practiced through reading and writing.

Research findings by Fakeye, David O and Yemi Ogunsiji (2009) have stressed that the English language proficiency of the students has a significant positive relationship with their overall academic achievement and that there is a significant impact of English language proficiency on

students' overall academic achievement. The authors observed that English language proficiency is a good indicator and predictor of the academic achievement of students in Nigeria.

Therefore, it is recommended that the goal of educating Nigerian teachers to be proficient in English should be rigorously pursued since English language proficiency ultimately determines students' overall academic success. This requires a concerted effort of all stakeholders in the education sector in Nigeria as well as the commitment of English language teachers. They should therefore be specially equipped through refresher courses like STEP

BRITISH COUNCIL'S *STEP* PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

British Council Nigeria designed and introduced STEP programme to the upper and middle basic teachers and piloted its package by the Teachers Development Programme TDP in 2018 and in 2022 to improve their English proficiency so as to achieve better learning outcomes. The programme focused more on English, Mathematics and Basic Science teachers at upper basic education in States like Kaduna, Kano, Jigawa, Zamfara, and Katsina where thousands of teachers were trained on how, with the aid of the materials provided by the British Council, they will engage themselves into a self-study that will lead them to improve their English. The reason is that the English Language remains the language of instruction the understanding of which will help learners understand many concepts and ideas and in the end achieve the set learning goals. The program focused on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary development, and classroom English. Print and Audio materials were provided containing a series of activities to engage learners and support their learning. And since it is a self-study, the content of the materials was structured and arranged as units and sections with each having a list of key outcomes. There are many assumptions that the program will change the teachers' minds to practice English with their students thereby making them explore more ideas and reap a lot of learning opportunities as well as acquire various skills of communication.

Strengthening Teachers' English Proficiency STEP

Some Teachers, particularly in Jigawa State were recently introduced to a self-study course by the British Council titled STEP to strengthen their proficiency in English. The main purpose is to guide and support teachers to improve their classroom practice so that the learning outcome of students will further be improved. About 1500 teachers of English from both upper basic and senior secondary schools across the state were targeted for the program. There was the training of the master trainers on the structure, approach, and the use of the resources provided for the participants. The program was wreathed with lots of activities designed to engage the learners. Materials, both print and audio were provided for the participant covering key areas like what is self-study, planning a lesson, engaging learners, helping learners to understand, presenting subject content, moving from mother tongue to English, asking questions and helping learners to use English. The print material was designed to have ten units for book one and another ten units for book two with each unit having sections. The books were divided into participant materials,

answers and transcripts. During their self-study, the participants are expected to use both the print and the audio materials to listen to a particular instruction, dialogue or pronunciation practice. They will at a point, be assessing their progress during the weeks they have chosen to study. The monitoring team was set to monitor and give support where necessary some weeks after the commencement of the self-study. It is at this point important to note that all these processes are bound to so many factors like time, a commitment of the teachers and other stakeholders, financial issues and societal attitude to the use of the English Language which all could be the challenges to this effort. For the time, participants during the training were asked as an activity to make a plan on how to carry out the self-study. Most of their responses were that they would find it difficult to cover a unit in a week. This means that it will take them more than ten weeks to cover book one. This by extension will affect their classroom practice. And since the process involves a physical and financial commitment, both the teachers and other stakeholders of Education must think twice to have a smooth running of the programme. This also may affect the sustainability of the programme. It will also be agreed that our societal attitude to using our Mother tongue everywhere and rejecting any other language either for the fear of making mistakes or for the reason that the English language is difficult to understand by students will also affect both the teachers' proficiency and their classroom practice.

OBSERVATIONS

Though teachers can strengthen their English proficiency through self-study, this paper observes that there are some areas of challenges that need to be addressed for the expected good results. Some of these challenges include:

- Lack of the teachers' commitment in the areas of building one's capacity for the improvement of teaching and learning.
- The programme demands capital and resources to cover all teachers in Jigawa. Considering the number of teachers in the State getting to almost 15,800 teaching at basic and postbasic schools, only one per cent (1%) of the number has been taken care of by the British council. That means the government has a great challenge in addressing this problem affecting about 13,000 teachers in the state.
- Unless something is done, the inability to acquire learning gadgets, especially by those teachers teaching in hard-to-reach schools will remain a challenge.
- Pre-service teachers who are learning to teach in various teachers training institutions are neglected despite the fact that they are the ones to take over the teaching at basic schools.
- For the teachers teaching in low performing schools using the English language in their interactions with their colleagues and with the students, it will be a challenge to them and the process. It will also be difficult for them to be making a self-assessment.
- Monitoring the exercise is part of the challenges as it requires a financial commitment from the stakeholder.
- No researches have been conducted in order to evaluate the impact of such trainings on students' learning outcome in Jigawa State and many other states in Nigeria.

Way Forward

To address the above-mentioned challenges, the paper recommends the following:

- Teachers should be committed and develop self-confidence in learning and using the language. This will help to boost their proficiency capacity in the language.
- Looking at the percentage of the teachers not involved in the training, the government should do its best to partner with the relevant organizations like British Council to adopt and introduce a similar programme for all teachers in the State.
- Government should endeavour, through consultation, to provide the easiest way of getting learning apparatuses to the teachers teaching in hard to reach and low performing schools
- Government at all levels should also liaise with the British Council in Nigeria to train both pre-service and in-service teachers on strengthening their English Language Proficiency so as to achieve the desired goals.
- Teachers teaching in low performing schools should always see it as a challenge to them and try to be practicing the language frequently and create means of motivating themselves and their students in using the language within and outside school.
- By putting a financial commitment, the government should create a team of professionals to serve as monitors and also an advisory team to ensure the success of the programme.
- The beneficiary states of the programme like Jigawa should engage researchers to evaluate the impact of the STEP programme on the Students' learning outcome with a view to find out gaps and where the government's commitment needs to be focused.

CONCLUSION

Effective achievement of learning outcomes is realized when classroom instructions are clear. To many teachers, it is one of the most difficult tasks the lack of which leads them to teach using the immediate language of the environment. By implication, doing so leads the students to have poor performance in their examinations. This is because the examinations are written in English which they could not understand during their lessons. This makes it necessary for teachers to improve their proficiency in the language for their classroom practice. This paper looks at the STEP programme organized by the British Council to identify the challenging factors to face if the programme is to be adopted to strengthen all teachers' English proficiency in Nigeria, especially in Jigawa State. The paper looks at the suitability of self-study for that purpose and recommends possible solutions for the betterment of the process.

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