

# The Teaching and Learning of the English Language in Ghana: Problems and Implications

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**Abstract :** *The teaching and learning of the English language in Ghana and Anglophone countries in Africa for that matter has been a subject of unflinching debate in quite recent times. Many opinions point to the assertion that the teaching and learning of the English language is centered on reading comprehension, summary, grammar, spelling and writing skills and other such related areas to the disregard of oral communication skills. Many researchers have found the neglect of oral communication skills in the school curriculum as the major problem in the leaning of the English language. A survey of trends in the teaching and learning of the English language however reveals that the contention is much on the teaching of the English language as compared to its learning as most teachers of English are unqualified to teach English. Drawing from his experiences as a learner and a teacher of the English language, the research explores in detail the problems and implications in the teaching and learning of the English language. The origin of the English language and its encounter with the diverse languages in Ghana are examined vis a vis its role in diverse facets in the Ghanaian society and new measures proposed for possible adjustments.*

**Key Words :** *Teaching, Learning, Language, Implications, English, Challenges*

## 1.0 Introduction

Ghana, like many other African countries adopted the language of their former colonial masters. Hence, the adopted language, being English,

has grown to serve as the national and official language of the country. The assertion that Ghana has a wide variety of languages and dialects for that matter is no news. Throughout the African continent, many languages abound; thus crediting Africa as the continent with the most languages in the world [Naden, 1998]. Adika [2012] summarizes the growth of the English language from its early stages in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the present time and examines the debates that follow in relation to its use in the educational sectors.

In the quite recent past, many debates have arisen on the need for African countries to adopt an indigenous language as their official as well as their national language. The same is being said of the African continent as a whole. Reasons given for this change are far more convincing than can be envisaged. For instance, how can the English language, for so long a time used as an official language (over fifty years) and today a language that enjoys international recognition be bagged for an indigenous language? This presupposes that an indigenous Ghanaian language, suffering from ethnic politics with yet no international recognition and enough scholarly investigation be nursed to fit into the global and multinational world.

In Ghana, many contend that if there is the need to acquire an indigenous language as an official as well as national language for the country, then it must be Akan, also affectionately known as Twi, since it serves as a lingua franca in Ghana. However, the issue of the dialect of Akan to adopt also becomes a vital problem for contention. This being the case, this looming issue seems to have found itself in national archives.

The educational system in Ghana has seen tremendous changes in the past years. For example, it moved from the sixth form, the O and A levels to the recent Junior and Senior High. These changes have also culminated to changes in the curriculum and prescribed text books and the final examinations held at each level. The three year duration of both the Junior and Senior High system was later changed to four years for the secondary and yet brought back to three year in its few years of implementation. The word “Secondary” has also been dropped for the word “High”. Many a Ghanaian have wondered: Does a change in a name necessarily correlate to the purpose of the said institution? Nonetheless, the poets of old have stated it once, that “a rose by any other name will smell as sweet.” However, with respect to the diverse structural and curricular changes within the past few decades, academic output remains appalling. Though many students may qualify to move into the tertiary institutions, there still remains the lurking problem that most fail to reflect what they are supposed to know.

As reiterated earlier, English is the language of instruction in Ghana. Though good reason has been given that pupils in the early stages of their education be instructed in their mother tongue, it is rarely practiced. And for so long a time, the country has witnessed a reincarnation of laws and bylaws that have scarcely seen the light of day. Permit me too present at length Benzie's [1940: 4] quotation of a resolution passed at Rome, October 1930 on the use of the vernacular in education by the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures.

It is a universally acknowledged principle in modern education that a child should receive

instruction both in and through his mother tongue, and this privilege should not be withheld from the African child. The child should learn to love and respect the mental heritage of his own people, and the natural and necessary expression of this heritage is the language. Neglect of the vernacular involves the danger of crippling and destroying the pupil's productive powers by forcing him to express himself in a language foreign both to himself and to the genius of his race.

It continues,

As a general rule, therefore, during the first three years of school education instruction should be carried on exclusively in a native language, and we understand that there is a considerable body of educational experience which supports us in this opinion. We consider that no European language should be taught during that time and that it should be followed by a period during which the pupil begins to learn a European language while other instruction is continued in the vernacular.

Formal education was originally introduced by the European traders. They established schools to train clerks and interpreters to support their trading ambitions. And since Britain's colonization of Ghana, the English language as a medium of instruction has also undergone significant alterations since its inception in the Ghanaian school curriculum. A study by Owu-Ewie [2006], reveals the following changes in the use of the English language as a medium of instruction. Below is his diagrammatic representation.

**Table 1: A diagrammatical representation of the language policy from the pre-colonial era to 2002 (1529-2002).**

Period	First Year	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year
1529 – 1925				
a) Castle Schools Era	-	-	-	-
b) Missionary Era	+	+	+	-
1925 – 1951	+	+	+	-
α 1951 – 1955	+	-	-	-
1956 – 1966	-	-	-	-
1967 – 1969	+	-	-	-
1970 – 1973	+	+	+	+
1974 – 2002 (sept.)	+	+	+	-
Present (2006)	-	-	-	-

Where + = A Ghanaian language used as a medium of instruction  
 - = No Ghanaian language used as a medium of instruction

## 2.0 Statement of the Problem

A survey of trends in the teaching and learning of the English language reveals that teaching and learning as key concepts go in tandem. The teaching of the English language by far needs to be taught in a way and manner that will boost students' knowledge and enthusiasm in the language, as the standards and performances in the English language in the formal educational sectors have taken a down turn.

Many assertions point to the claims that the teaching and learning of the English language in Ghanaian academic institutions in recent times is centered on reading comprehension, summary, grammar and writing skills to the disregard of oral communication skills. Most Ghanaians who went through formal education especially in the 60s and 70s put blame on the poor performance of students in the English language on the almost neglect of oral communication skills in the recent curriculum.

However, the approach of many Ghanaians to the English language is like a two edged sword. While some dread the English language, others are overconfident in it. Critical observations reveal that both approaches culminate into many problems in the teaching and learning of the English language with consequent implications that need to be addressed appropriately. There are some students who simply parade with the excuse that the English language is not their mother tongue and hence, do not see the need to take it serious. Others simply believe that they have a good knowledge in the English language as far as they communicate and are understood by mostly their peers in it. Yet, the fact remains that, the fact that one is understood in the communication process does not necessarily mean that what is being communicated is apropos.

Though there have been many institutions that offer the English language as a teaching career path, few students graduate from these departments. Hence, though the English language is mandatory or perhaps serves a core subject in virtually all the levels of Education, very few students are ever fortunate to have been taught by professional English teachers. Interestingly, it appears that anyone who graduates from the tertiary Institutions, especially the University is qualified to teach English. Ironically, the graduates or students that have been put in positions to teach the English language themselves may have had a tough time in understanding basic

pertinent rubrics in their core English classes as Academic Writing or Communication and Study Skills depending on the institution.

These particular issues need to be checked critically if not immediately as there tends to be consequent effects on other subjects. Why? The English language is the conduit through which other subjects or courses are communicated. Hence, to be a good student in Medicine in Ghana you must necessarily be knowledgeable in the English language. The same is true to Engineering, Law and the host of other disciplines. No Ghanaian child studies either Law or Medicine through his mother tongue as Twi, Dagbani, Kasem or Ewe.

## 3.0 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:

1. To identify the challenges that face students in their formal learning of the English language.
2. To identify the challenges that face teachers in their teaching of the English language.
3. To examine the implications involved in the teaching and learning of the English language and the need for strong implementations of government policies and (by) laws.
4. To suggest measures that will ensure effective learning and teaching of the English language.

## 4.0 Methodology

This research is primarily a Qualitative study: It is primarily exploratory and descriptive, and for which peoples words and actions are the main source of data. It is worth noting however that, in qualitative research as this study is concerned, data collection and data analysis move on simultaneously in that data interpretations subsequently yield to other sources of data that may not have been intended.

### 4.1 Sample

This study was predominantly conducted at the University of Education, Winneba. College of Agriculture Education. The researcher realized at first instance that students approach to the English

language rest on two opposites. While others were over confident other were much terrified in their approaches to the English language.

First year students of the University of Education, Winneba – College of Agriculture Education were purposefully sampled. The main reason for this sample is on grounds that it is during the first year that students are mandated to study the course “Communication and Study Skills”. Sandwich students who are also mandated to study the courses “Academic Writing I and II in the first and second sessions respectively were also interviewed for this study. In all, students are from diverse institutions from all the district capitals in the country. They also represent a cocktail of students of varying ages and levels of education. Their ages range between twenty (20) and fifty (55). The majority being around the age bracket of the former. With respect to their educational levels, while some are graduates from the Senior High Schools, others are graduates of polytechnics, colleges and universities: especially with respect to the Sandwich programs that Awards Diplomas in Education. Any teacher deemed professional must have necessarily pursued this program. Generally however, most students on the regular program are of Science backgrounds while some others are from the Arts and Business amongst a host of other disciplines.

It must also be noted that some students and teachers of the English language were also interviewed to ascertain their peculiar concerns in the teaching of the English language. As a whole, the research is also based on the experiences of the researcher as a student and teacher of the English language. Hence, the generalizations are not entirely made based on the findings but also on an in-depth analysis of the experiences and perceptions of the entire sample. Below is a summary of the sample.

1. First Year students of the University of Education, Winneba – College of Agric education. (From 2011 – 2014).
2. Sandwich Students of the University of Education, Winneba – College of Agric education. (From 2012 – 2014).
3. Teachers of the English language and some students in general.

#### 4.2 Data Collection Methods

A qualitative research of this kind involved a phenomenological investigation of the language and behavior (words and actions) of the respondents. A convenient sampling was employed as the researcher is a teacher of English in the College of Agriculture Education, University of Education - Winneba. Most of the teachers and students sampled were also purposively selected. For instance, as this study hindered on the teaching of the English language, teachers were interviewed on the basis that they taught English language in their respective schools. Some students were also purposively chosen as and when the researcher found that such students encountered some peculiar problems in the learning of the English language.

In all, participant observation, in-depth interviews, group interviews and the analysis of relevant research related to the study were the methods employed.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis Procedures

“Interpretative –Descriptive” Analysis. [Richard and Morehouse quote Belenky 1994: 123] is the data analysis procedure employed in this research. Thus, while the analysis is primarily descriptive in nature, interpretations of the findings are also employed in the analysis.

The Constant Comparative Method of Analysis and the Emergent Design in Qualitative research are liberally implied in this study. According to Richard and Morehouse [1994: 176], the “Constant Comparative Method of analysis” is a non-mathematical procedure that seeks to identify themes and patterns in qualitative data. They maintain that “The validity of such findings ultimately rests on whether the participants or people who know them will see a recognizable reality in these propositions.” The Emergent Design in Qualitative Research rest on these claims: “important leads are identified in the early phases of data analysis and pursued by asking new questions, observing new situations or previous situations with a slightly different lens or examining previously unimportant documents.” [Richard and Morehouse, 1994: 44]

#### 5.0 Research Findings

According to the participants sampled, the following issues were ascertained as the problems in the teaching and learning of the English language in Ghana: Poor foundation in English at the early stages of education, inadequate qualified English teachers,

difficulty in Relating English rules to the indigenous languages, negative attitudes towards English as foreign Language that culminates to the notion that English is difficult to learn, let alone master its rubrics, the use of Pidgin English and its variants in high and tertiary schools, the propensity of others shying away from speaking the language as they will be mocked if they committed any grammatical English blunders and the mass media as a negative role modeling agent as far as the English language is concerned.

### **6.0 The Teaching and Learning of the English language in Ghana: Problems and Implications**

One of the issues many respondents stated as a major problem in the learning of the English language is that qualified English teachers are woefully inadequate. Come to think of it, very few teachers graduate from the colleges of education and the universities with a specialization in English. Hence, many students rarely get the chance to be taught by qualified English teachers from their nursery to their secondary levels of education and sometimes at some tertiary institutions. Most pupil are normally taught by pupil teachers who do not understand the rubrics of English grammar nor the teaching methodologies involved.

Permit a brief reference of what has earlier been said on the educational policy indicating that students at the lower stage of their education should be taught in their mother tongue. We may, at first sight not realize the implications of disregarding such pertinent investigations. "Opinion is divided as to whether bi-lingualism is a helpful or harmful thing for a child. My own view is that the undoubted benefits which will be felt later in life outweigh any temporary disadvantages that may occur in childhood, such as a slight slowing-down of language developments." [Strevens, 1956: 54].

Why the lack of professional English teachers? English is a requirement for any entry in the educational system of Ghana. Yet only few teachers are really qualified to handle the subject. It must be reiterated however that, as a subject, the technicalities or perhaps the methodology involved require that a professional English teacher takes up the course and tackles it in proper detail for the understanding of students in general. When non-qualified teachers of English are made to teach English, there are bound to be problems: because

they barely understand what they teach, they hardly deliver the necessary knowledge; thus creating fear and panic among students in their encounter with the English language.

Many have been indoctrinated with the wrong notion that English is a difficult area of study, thus making only a few to venture into it. Many are also of the view that anyone who graduates from the university is up to the task of teaching English. This notion is erroneous on grounds that, the fact that one speaks the English language eloquently, which is rarely the case, does not mean that one can necessarily teach English. Many graduates from the tertiary institutions in their bid to fulfil their national service responsibilities are sent to the teaching fields, and many end up teaching English irrespective of what they studied at the tertiary levels. As if any university qualification or perhaps tertiary certificate is tantamount to an English qualification. Thus, one who acquires one can teach the English language. It is however, an undeniable fact that one cannot teach what he or she does not understand.

The teaching and learning Environment is also often not too conducive. Class sizes are normally very high and therefore makes it very difficult for the instructor to effectively address students concerns in their entirety. Hence, many students will leave the class or the entire semesters with many of their questions or doubts unanswered.

Much of the teaching of the English language in recent times is based on the rubrics of the English language, summary and comprehension to the disregard of reading and spelling skills. "This is particularly true of English, although it is true of African languages also. In many teacher-training establishments it has been assumed that if you teach the student how to teach grammar, composition, and so on, you have covered the field of English teaching. But in fact you have barely begun, because the section of the language that you have dealt with is the secondary section, the written language. The teaching of spoken language is the most important of all skills and should always be included as a highly important and obligatory part of a teacher's course." [Strevens, 1956: 52] Strevens further concludes thus: "Once we are clear that spoken language is the primary form and written language the secondary form, the sequence of skills obviously becomes: first, understanding the spoken language; second, being able to speak it; third, learning to read it; fourth, learning to write it. This is the ideal." [1956: 62]

The reason for this neglect in recent times, mostly at the tertiary levels, rest on the facts that the students involved are too many to be handled by few teachers or a teacher and significantly also, there is not enough time to treat all the necessary areas with the students. It is proposed however that “the first section of the course must be concerned with the nature of language and the part that it plays in society and in the life of an individual... The essential differences between languages and dialects, and also the difference between spoken and written language must be known, with example of cases, such as English, where speech and writing are not closely related. This means a short consideration of writing, in which should be compared the system of writing of the local languages and of English. [Stevens, 1956: 87].

The use of the various forms of Pidgin English amongst most growing teenagers in the senior high and tertiary institutions is also one major factor hindering the learning of the English language. The various forms of Pidgin English do not adhere to any strict rules as in concord in Standard English. Hence, many students who have developed a likeness or perhaps have been caught in its shackles consequently find it difficult to adapt with the rubrics of Standard English language.

Consequently, there also arises the issue of others shying away from speaking or communicating in the English language simply because of the fear of committing some grammatical gaffes, which are often sneered at and mocked by some claimed perfectionists in the English language. Yet, it is common knowledge that for one to be perfect in any language, one must necessarily speak it and use it in all respects. It is only through this practice can one come to master the nuances entailed in the language. The lack of interest in the learning of the English language is itself a problem, and as Benzies will maintain: “instructing bored children is like driving a car with the brakes on.” [1940: 131]

The negative attitude of many who simply see the English language as a foreign language is also one other factor that hinders the learning of the English language. The English language is the national as well as the official language of Ghana, yet, there are many people who tend to express the unfortunate excuse for their inability to communicate effectively in the English language with the claim that English is not their mother tongue and as such, they are not perturbed about their inability to communicate effectively in it. Hence, there are some

people who do not make any efforts to learn to speak it.

The general excuse by most respondents is that the English language is very difficult to learn. They move further to point out the areas of grammar such as concord and tense and aspect amongst a host of many others which are very difficult to comprehend depending on their individual strengths and interests. Other respondents maintain that the problems in learning the English language is that the English language does not relate to most of the languages spoken in Ghana. Hence many remain unfamiliar with the nuances involved. There is the difficulty in relating the rules of the English language to the indigenous languages in Ghana. See for example the direct translation of the Akan expression “Me ba” as in “I will be back” in English which is often mistranslated as “I am Coming”. This is the case in most indigenous languages in Ghana and most people are often guilty of the literal translation of their indigenous languages into the English language. Many speakers of English will normally use the expression “I am coming.” when what is actually implied is the opposite. That is to say, instead of the appropriate expression “I will be back” or “I will be with you soon.” This is because, when the former expression is literally translated in many Ghanaian languages the latter expressions are what is meant. The rendition “I am going to come” is said when what is actually meant is “I will be back” or “I will be with you soon”. A host of other such related issues abound in the spoken English language in Ghana.

Teachers of the English language have found this practice most prevalent in students’ essays, where their writings of the English language are direct thoughts and expressions of their relative indigenous languages or the languages they understand. The problem of comparison of syntactic structures in the English language and the indigenous Ghanaian languages is also quite complex to bring to the understanding of students. Some pronunciations and spellings in the English language are often arbitrary. Why Psychology is spelt with a “P” as the first letter is a case in point. And like some other words in the English language, you need to have necessarily seen the word and known its phonetic rendition before you can spell it right.

The mass media has also equally compounded the problems of the teaching and learning of the English language in Ghana. Accents do not necessarily determine the best speakers of the

English language as some television and radio stations will tend to portray. Not only are accent peculiar to Ghanaian speakers of the English language, indigenous speakers of the English language equally have diverse accents. We tend to adapt well with what we see and hear on our diverse media. As is the case of growing children in their bid to imitate, when the wrong thing is conveyed by such bad models as we find on most radio and television stations and the written media today, we are bound to imbibe the wrong information.

There are also some respondents that have nurtured the belief that the English language is very difficult to grasp. Hence, with this notion, no matter the stringent efforts the instructor involved tries to make the student understand what is being taught, no good results will be met as the students with this notion will make no efforts at all to understand what is being taught.

Most students are also over dependent on the instructor. As a language and discipline for that matter, the English language cannot be learnt entirely in the classroom. Students learn some pertinent rubrics that are channels to other discoverable rubrics and then apply them in their daily encounters. Yet, some students tend to act as receptors that should merely be filled with the required knowledge. The role of parents and guardians with good educational backgrounds can be a plus to students understanding of the English language. Yet, this can be a best case in the early years of education.

Reading, Listening, writing and speaking the Standard English language in our daily encounters have significant influence on our better comprehension of the English language. However, as stated in earlier discussions, there is scarcely enough time for tutors to tackle all these pertinent areas in their teaching. That notwithstanding, very few students make efforts to research on the relevant areas not taught on their own.

There were other instances where some respondents argued that the time for their studies were inadequate. Such respondents complained that the courses they study are too many and as such, they barely find sufficient time to study the courses sufficiently. Yet, others put the blame on socio-cultural and poor financial background on some students and parents in general as problems hindering the learning of the English language by some students in Ghana. Critical opinions however do not consider these assertions as true reflections of the

problems and implications in the teaching and learning of the English language in Ghana.

## 7. Conclusion

The falling standards of education in quite recent times has been of great concern to various governments, non-governmental institutions and other agencies and the society as a whole. The blame on the abysmal performances of students in virtually all the levels of education is often attributed to secondary factors as poor infrastructure and inadequate teachers amongst a host of factors. However, the findings of this study suggest that if indeed the English language is approached appropriately in academic cycles, academic performances in general will be improved. Thus, in Ghana and most parts of the world, text books and books in general are written in the English language. Hence, students cannot perform well in any subject if their knowledge of the English language is poor. What is taught can hardly be understood by students whose knowledge of English is poor, simply because, the medium of instruction is predominantly English.

No matter the reservations of Ghanaians, the English language is for now the national as well as the official language of the country and the language of instruction. It is also an international language of communication and commerce. Hence, the reality of this language should be well enshrined in any growing child. Hence, efforts should be made by governments to ensure continues research to bridge the gaps in the teaching and learning of the English language.

The codification of Ghanaian English now or later is not the best solution to the problems of the teaching and learning of the English language in Ghana.

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