

The English Language in the ESL Classroom in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT — *Language holds the key to knowledge acquisition, thus making its teaching-learning process central to any educational system. Nigeria, Babel of many languages that include English, Pidgin English and the various indigenous languages, has no clear language policy and this continues to make the educational system wobble, even at the tertiary level. This poses a serious challenge to language teachers generally, but particularly to teachers at the tertiary level, who should blaze a trail in second language English teaching. This work looks at the shortcomings of the present traditional General Purpose (GP) approach to English language teaching, and recommends the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach in the teaching-learning process in the ESL adult classroom in Nigeria as a way of stemming the tide of the continued decline in proficiency in English with its ripple effects on other subjects and courses that are taught and learnt in the English language medium. This will enable adult learners achieve the needed academic and professional empowerment via the vehicle of English.*

Keywords— Teaching challenges, ESL, GPE, ESP, acquisition, learning, adult classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

If there is any shortcoming in Nigeria's educational system, it cannot be far-fetched from the question of proficiency in language, which remains a major tool in the educational system of any nation. The Nigerian linguistic situation, with, according to Dada (2012), referring to the recent 2005 Ethnologic Data, presents 521 languages, out of which 510 are living languages two second languages without MT speakers, even as 9 have gone into extinction. This kind of linguistic situation makes the choice of any of the indigenous languages, for any use other than cultural purposes, difficult. Without any clear cut policy on language, the Nigerian educational system continues to groan under the yoke of having to impart knowledge through a non-indigenous language.

The English language has come to be part of Nigeria's linguistic family, having since risen in status, from a foreign language (EFL) that it was at its advent, to the present status of a second language (ESL). It is now in use in virtually all domains and it is taught in schools, from primary to the university level. As there appears to be no clear implementable policy on language, the only policy on language that exists currently in Nigeria is the much or little that can be garnered from various documents and policy statements from the nation's Constitution, the National Policy on Education and other occasional documents emanating from government. The crux of some of these policy statements from various government documents is to the effect that at the formative stage of learning in the primary school, a child should be taught in the language of the immediate environment, which, in most cases, is the mother tongue. After this, the child should continue his/her education in English, usually, from primary three up to the tertiary level. It is also recommended that, at the secondary school level, the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) should be taught, with every learner, learning, at least, one Nigerian language other than his/her own mother tongue. The extent of the implementation of this policy remains a mere conjecture. So many factors have continued to hinder the implementation, one of which is the dearth of relevant materials and competent teachers. Besides, there is no serious commitment on the part of government. English, therefore, remains the choice language at all levels of education, including the kindergarten, and English will continue to remain so, for a long time to come, as some scholars have noted. For example, Jowitt (1991:22) observes that "...English continues to perform many of the functions of a national language as well as those of an official language, and probably would continue for a long time to do so even if some other language were imposed on the country by Government policy...". This is in agreement with Fafunwa's observation in far back 1976, which Attah (1995) subscribes to that English will continue to be of great importance to Nigeria even if an indigenous language were to be adopted. In the words of Ogunsiiji (2004), "Although there is a persistent clamour for the adoption of a true national

language, the position of English will remain certain for a long time in Nigeria because of the country's linguistic pluralism" (p.87). Orisawayi (2007: 8), takes a similar position when he says "...English will continue for the foreseeable future, to perform the utilitarian function assigned to it not only by official adoption but by the sheer necessities of the linguistic situation of the country". This uniform testimony of scholars is premised on the submission of Adedimeji (2004) when he says "English is the language of integration in Nigeria...Amidst the compounding complexities of Nigeria especially in relation to the language question, the only language that indexes the spirit of togetherness is English" (p.70).

Since the reasons for the continued learning of English by adults varies from individual to individual and from one discipline to the other in second language environments, Nigeria should, therefore, be considering a variety that will suit her different needs. This is because achieving native speaker competence is impossible, neither is it desirable, especially for adult learners who need the language for specific purposes in different professions. There are varieties of English that are as good as any other for communicative purposes, but usually one variety is used as a yardstick or model for classifying other varieties. Ballard (2007) considers this unfortunate as this is capable of misleading people into believing that the selected variety "is in some way intrinsically better as a means of communication than all the other varieties" (p. 8). In the concept of world English, Crystal, cited by Svartvik & Leech (2006) makes two observations, the first is: "if there is one predictable consequence of a language becoming a global language, it is that nobody owns it any more". Secondly, Crystal observes that "English has already grown to be independent of any form of social control" (p. 232). Svartvik & Leech (2006) expatiate further thus: "Perhaps we can envisage that the English, indeed the native speakers of English, will no longer have any special authority in how the English language is used and develops" (p. 232).

Demands for teachers of English continue to be on the increase as more and more people continue to desire the language for one purpose or the other, either in the Outer or in the Expanding Circle. The teaching and learning of English has not really been easy in the Outer and Expanding Circles, nor effort-free in the Inner Circle, notwithstanding that "native speakers obviously have much less struggle learning to speak good English than learners of English as a foreign or second language do..." (Kirkpatrick, 2007: 17). Foreign or second language English teachers, therefore, have an enormous challenge to make the teaching of the language relevant to their respective environments as a means of improving the standard of education, where desirable. As noted by Radzka (2009: 12), citing Liu & Shi (2007) "old grammar translation lessons are a thing of the past and teachers have the opportunity to focus on more communicative approaches." Ellis (2005), for example, avers that "the bulk of language acquisition is implicit learning from usage" (p.306). This may be what Mangubhai (2006) subscribes to when he says "Of greater significance to teachers is the current understanding that generally the amount of second language learning is related to input, however it is provided" (p. 3).

2. THE PROBLEM

The various policy statements on the language of education in Nigeria accord priority to the English language as a major language of instruction in schools. This is in addition to the language being on the educational curriculum at all levels of the educational system in the country. Despite the priority given to English, performance in the language as a subject, as well as proficiency in it as a tool appears to be, consistently, on the decline. This may not be unconnected with the constant threat to the teaching and learning of the language as a result of interference of the Mother Tongue in the different domains of use in the country. The critical age exponents believe that children have the capacity to learn any language to which they are exposed notwithstanding an earlier acquisition of a previous one, as long as they have not reached the age of puberty. Notwithstanding the controversy over the critical age hypothesis, Caroll (2004: 317) confirms the fact that "young children generally learn L2 better than older children and adults, at least in the long run". This remains the position even when indigenous languages are concerned, and so the scenario becomes more tasking when the second language to be taught and learnt is a non-indigenous one, and in a stifling linguistic environment. This is the position the English language and the English language teacher finds himself in Nigeria's multilingual and multi-ethnic environment, where many indigenous languages compete with English in virtually all domains, except in, very strictly, formal and official settings. This is one of the challenges the English language teacher faces in Nigeria, not to talk of the various inconsistencies and irregularities inherent in the language itself making its teaching and learning cumbersome.

The irregularities in today's English are brought about by the origin and development of the language. There are, for example, the highly irregular plurals of nouns such as *man-men*, *goose-geese*, *ox-oxen*, *child-children*, *baby-babies*, etc. Finnegan (2008:511) says there are some sixty irregular and overgeneralization of verbs in English. Some of these include the following in the present, past and participle forms respectively:

see – saw - seen
go – went - gone
write – wrote - written
beat – beat - beaten
cut – cut - cut

Other examples of irregularity in the English language are evident in the subject-verb agreement, otherwise known as concord, where there are so many exceptions to the rule of concord. The problems and challenges have had spiral effects on the educational system generally, because “without a mastery of the language of learning, a learner’s aspiration would remain just a mirage” (Ayodele, 2004:3).

The continued use of the General Purpose English approach to the teaching of second language English appears to have failed in the present dispensation, thus giving a challenge to language teachers to re-examine their method for the purpose of re-focusing to achieve needed results, in the English language, not just as a school subject, but also as a learning tool. This will help reposition the nation educationally for the much desired technological advancement by reversing the downward trend in education. Aliyu (2010), writing against the backdrop of poor performance in English at the tertiary level, observes that achieving a high level of excellence in academics “has been a painstaking task, since over the years the quality of Nigerian education has fallen ...” (p. 1).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is situated in Chomsky’s Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which concedes to the child the inherent capability to acquire any language to which s(he) is exposed. Jespersen, (1922), in the same vein, affirms that a child has a language faculty which predisposes him/her to naturally acquire any language, no matter how stupid the child, whereas an adult learner of a second language, after the acquisition of a Mother Tongue (MT) is bound to falter, his level of intelligence notwithstanding. This may be traceable to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) in language learning, usually put at puberty; the attainment of which makes the learning of a second language difficult, if not impossible. It is posited that even concerted efforts to learn a second language after attaining puberty can only result in the mastery of grammatical structures as phonological structures have continued to prove difficult to acquire.

This has been confirmed by research findings that age is a major constraint in phonology as age of arrival, rather than length of stay in the US, has been found to be a major determinant of the extent the speaker would acquire near-native pronunciation (Lennon, 1993). While disputes still exist about the critical age hypothesis, Carroll (2004: 317) says “young children generally learn L2 better than older children and adults, at least in the long run”. Abramson (2009), in a study, confirms that attainment of native-like competence is, in principle, unattainable by adult learners, and that it is even less common among child learners than previously assumed. However, in reference to Bley Vroman’s (1989) study, Abramson (op cit.) says adult L2 acquisition is a product of general, cognitive learning strategies and not the linguistically domain-specific principles governing children’s acquisition of a first language (L 1). This position is also said to align with Universal Grammar paradigm and for researchers arguing that adult learners no longer have access (or partial access) to the innate universal principles and constraints responsible for language development. Recent studies also support the view that there are certain distinct advantages to being brought up bilingually. Such advantages include a child’s ability to develop a greater awareness of languages exposed to, and also the ability to think more creatively and divergently as well as being able to conceptualize more easily, having a greater social sensitivity. Age is, therefore, a major factor in the teaching-learning process in the adult ESL classroom, because the older a person gets, the more difficult it is to acquire or even learn another language. In fact, acquisition is not known to be easy or, even, possible after puberty. This must form the basis for a new methodology to teach adult learners of language, and particularly when that language is a second and non-indigenous one, and in a non-native environment.

4. THE ESL ADULT CLASSROOM PECULIARITIES

Some of the peculiarities of the adult classroom include, among others, diversion and divided interest, which may lead to loss of concentration. Most adults are occupied by so many other activities that make the needed concentration on learning a second language a difficult task. Besides, some of them consider the learning of English at post-secondary level a waste of time, especially, when it is not the major course of study or training at that level. The ESL adult classroom, in many cases, therefore, requires English for the workplace (E4WP), as a sub-genre of English for occupational purposes (EOP). Barduhn (2009:7) has observed that “E4WP is also very important for the higher education sector...at present there is an ‘explosion’ of professional university courses related to English for Engineering, English for Law and English for Architecture”. Although the people envisaged here have been exposed to the English language right from primary school, they continue to learn the language beyond that level, having not properly acquired the language, for effective use, at a relatively younger age.

5. ENGLISH AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER IN A NON-NATIVE ENVIRONMENT

The place of the English language is guaranteed, for a long time to come, in the educational system in Nigeria, one of the largest ESL users in the world. The preference for English, as the medium of instruction in schools in Nigeria, is based on many factors, some of which include the well known multilingual nature of the country and also being one of

the largest ESL users in the world. Citing Gradol (1997), Akere (2006) says 63 countries have substantial populations of second-language speakers of English, with twelve of this number representing countries with over 5 million second-language speakers of English. Nigeria is noted to top the list with an estimated 43 million L2 speakers of English. Jowitt (2009), however, puts Nigeria next to India, in the number of those who speak English as second language. Whatever the position, it is not in contention that Nigeria is one of the largest L2 speakers of English in the world. Besides the factor of the multilingual linguistic terrain warranting the adoption of English for official and educational purposes in Nigeria, every nation in the world that desires development and diplomatic relationships across borders cannot but adopt the use of the English language in one form or the other. The native speakers have it as Native Language (ENL); the former British colonies have it as Second Language (ESL), while many Asian countries now adopt it as Foreign Language (EFL). Thus, English has become the world's most desired language, and any country that ignores it does so to its own detriment.

With the growing importance of the English language globally, the English language teacher, at whatever level, has a responsibility placed on him/her to ensure the language is taught for the desired effect; first on the learner, then on the educational system and finally, on the country as a whole. The English language teacher in a second language environment such as Nigeria finds him/herself in a very difficult position. The learners coming to be taught have, in most cases, acquired a first language, with its systems fully ingrained in their subconscious. This is unlike the privilege enjoyed by those who have English as a Mother Tongue and "... learn, for free (more or less), to speak this global language with a native accent...whereas those who happen to be born into the Outer and Expanding Circles have to put years of time and effort into attaining some mastery of the language" (Svartik & Leech, 2006:4).

6. DWINDLING EFFICIENCY OF OLD STRATEGIES

The method of teaching adopted by most English teachers, in non-native environments, is still largely prescriptive. In other words, teachers of English, at almost every level, bother more on the rules guiding the grammaticality of language rather than the application of these rules to real communicative language value in practical situations. This is the old General Purpose English approach to the teaching of the subject. When teachers' emphasis is more on the rules guiding the use of language rather than the practical communicative aspect, the outcome is always discouraging as, most often, learners resort to rote learning, which does not translate to real performance in actual linguistic setting outside the classroom. Mangubhai (2006) says "knowing a language rule does not mean that one will be able to use it in communicative interaction or in writing" (p.6). he proceeds further to say that "...the focus in classroom should not be on learning explicit rules of a language, but on activities that are meaning focussed" (p. 6).

This old General Purpose English method of teaching continues to hold sway in many classrooms including the adult classroom. At post-tertiary levels, learners need English for different purposes, and this requires new strategies if the different purposes for which adults learn English are to be achieved. Old strategies of grammar emphasis, as taught in good old "Grammar Schools" may not help to achieve the needed results, especially in the second language English adult classroom. Ewuzie (2009), for example, has noted and condemned the obsolete methods of teaching still maintaining a firm grip on Nigeria's tertiary institutions, which produces certificate carriers with little or no industry experience. Elsewhere, another ESL teacher, (Nishanth, (2008:8), observes that "the current English as a second language (ESL) curriculum does not have the provision to incorporate communicative language teaching aspects", giving the following reasons, among others, that are similar to what is prevalent in the Nigerian ESL terrain:

- (a) following old programmes not adequate to the demands of real life and
- (b) teaching from new textbooks without changing the attitude of teachers to the material taught (p. 10).

There are, therefore, a lot of challenges facing the teacher in the teaching-learning process in the ESL adult classroom. These challenges that the ESL teacher has to contend with are both physical and psychological. The physical constraints include the unfriendly learning environment, which put a lot of strain on both the teacher and the learner. Some of these include unnecessarily large classrooms making class control almost impossible in many cases. A lot of other activities are going on in the process of teaching. Surprisingly, such activities include buying and selling! This is possible because the teacher cannot effectively oversee the class. Yet, in this unfriendly environment, the old General Purpose English method still holds sway. The teacher merely teaches to "fulfil all righteousness", keep his job and justify his pay.

Most often, the physical constraints lead to psychological ones, as neither the teacher nor the learner, in the long run, is really psychologically fully prepared for the teaching-learning activity. Many of the learners combine the unfriendly classroom atmosphere with socio- economic problems from home, just as the teacher has to contend with poor working conditions. Barduhn's (2009: 18) observation that "Even under the best of circumstances, teaching is a demanding job, and most teachers do not work under the best of circumstances" captures the condition of the second language English teacher in Nigeria, where teaching has been a frustrating and difficult task. Here, there is little or no motivation, and "as motivation decreases and frustration increases, we lose the desire and energy to be creative,

developing teachers" (Barduhn, p. 18).

7. OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES IN THE ADULT ESL CLASSROOM

Gloating over an identified problem does not bring solution, rather it compounds it. Once a problem has been properly identified, it is half solved. This paper suggests some of the ways the problems of second language English teaching can be solved. One of the ways of overcoming the problems of second language English teaching is teacher preparation and training. Nearly all the present crop of teachers trained the old way, with old method. The old method, in most cases, although holistic, has not been found to be efficient in attaining the expected linguistic proficiency that adults require to function well in a world that is fast becoming a global village, and English as the major medium of communication. Teachers on the field and those in training therefore need new orientation in alternative methods as well as approaches in second language English teaching. There should, from now, be training and re-training in alternative strategies in second language English teaching and learning.

Teacher preparation, training and re-training will also involve new curriculum, which must be designed to address the needs of adult learners in the ESL adult classroom. This is essential because "all language users adapt the form of their language according to where they are, what they are trying to communicate, and the audience to whom they are speaking or writing" (Thorne, 2008: 97). Adult classes usually comprise varied needs, learning abilities and styles; therefore knowing what our students want makes the teacher's lessons become easier and more satisfying, and flexibility and variety become important factors (Ebrahimi, 2008).

Since most adults in the ESL classroom need English for different purposes, it is suggested that new curriculum development should consider the purposes for which different learners require English. As suggested by Belicka & Svetina (2009: 10) "we try to place the students' personality at the basis of the teaching process and so have to adjust to various degrees of maturity and life experiences as well as linguistic competence". This is the major difference between ESP methodology and General Purpose English methodology. Being purpose-specific, ESP curriculum analyzes learners' needs as a major means of determining what to teach them. It involves "a principle of selection from the language to meet the purposes defined" (Coffey, 1985:79) which will lead to customized curriculum designed to meet the already identified specific needs of learners. Thereafter, the teaching and learning materials are directed at meeting specific needs. This kind of curriculum will involve developing new types of literacy that will prepare learners with the communicative competence to partake in particular academic and professional cultural contexts (Hyland, 2002). Carter's (1983) restriction principle is at play in ESP methodology because it matches the actual needs of beneficiaries of second language with appropriate teaching materials and methodology. Designed courses are premised on the relative importance to specific disciplines and carefully arranged to go with the needs of target learners. ESP is patterned such that areas that are not considered pertinent to a specific field are not given undue attention. One of the ways the instructor can achieve this is the method adopted by Sullivan & Girginer (2002). Through interaction and observation they identified the actual, rather than perceived, needs of future pilots and air traffic controllers in Turkey to enable them teach the required English. This is the major focus of ESP in teaching English to non-native speakers, and in a non-indigenous environment, targeting learners' special areas of need (Dao-zhi and Chiang- hua, 1987). It involves teaching the essentials to ensure proficiency in English beyond the classroom.

An efficient and effective ESP program in an ESL classroom will be successful based on some suggestions. The ESP teacher should first identify the actual needs of learners. This, done through an enquiry method, is, as a matter of fact, a new approach in communicative language teaching, which, in the words of Atkinson, (1992:6), is "the current emphasis on communication in the teaching of modern languages" and "involves a move towards encouraging more pupils and less teacher input". When the learner is allowed to identify his shortcomings which will help to identify his needs, the learner's input is ensured at the entry point. A test of ability is conducted early enough, through a quiz on what the ESP teacher thinks learners ought to know. If learners lack knowledge of what they are expected to have known, the ESP teacher notes the deficiencies as possible areas of concentration in his course design. In the test of ability to decide learners' areas of need, the teacher should avoid a straight Yes/No type of question that may not likely reveal learners' cognitive ability. Concept questions that will help to elicit information on learners' areas of weakness that will require special attention should be asked. This is an area that is currently lacking in many ESL adult classrooms where different categories of learner are treated on a par. The needs analysis, through the test of ability at the onset will help focus on essentials rather than 'tailor -made courses when you don't know who the tailor is!" (Kirsch & Basak, (2009). The test of ability may necessitate separating learners into different grades or along disciplines or professions, based on their varied needs and abilities.

A realization of the inadequacy of the present curriculum is essential to changing the orientation and attitude of teachers, especially those already on the field. Until those concerned realize the fact that the current methods and curricula are deficient in meeting the current linguistic needs, a new attitude and methodology may not emerge. With the current status of English as a universal language and proficiency in it required to function properly in the world, every available and possible method should be adopted to achieve a level of performance that will guarantee functionality outside a second users' immediate environment.

A new curriculum development will, most often, involve developing new materials, which will specifically

address new areas of needs. Developing new materials will also involve a lot of efforts, as it is a venture that will require time to adjust to the new curriculum, which will vary across disciplines, as opposed to the General Purpose English that is not purpose specific, but directed at all learners without regards to their respective needs. Materials to be produced, through the ESP methodology, should be diverse to address the different needs of learners, in different fields or professions. For example, needs specific can be tailored along the following lines or disciplines, as shown in the table below:

Table 1: Needs specific by profession

Field/Discipline/Profession	Specific language Needs	Required Language Skills
Arts/Humanities	description, narration, entertaining and rhetoric;	Oral/writing
Law	probing, arguing, persuading, investigating, explaining and describing	Oral
Sciences and technology	describing, classifying, analyzing, exemplifying and reporting research, evaluating.	Writing
Social sciences	describing, explaining, narrating, reporting and propaganda, investigating, enumerating, classifying and commenting.	Oral and writing
Theology	pastoring (caring and shepherding), expressing compassion and probing;	Oral
Military and para-military	commanding, manipulating, evaluating and reporting.	Oral and writing

The classification above is not, by any means, exhaustive, but a mere guide. There are different other areas of human endeavour not mentioned here, directly, but which may be found subsumed in one or the other of the ones mentioned. For example, subsumed under social sciences are such other disciplines as accounting, mass communication, social statistics, etc. What we present here is a broad category. It should also be observed that certain skills cut across and are bound to. Such skills are not strange to second language English users.

The new curriculum in ESP will require a new teaching strategy. The new teaching strategy, most suitable to meet the challenges of second language English, is team teaching, which will involve the English language teacher and the subject teacher in the required discipline who will supply the required vocabulary that will be included in the material to be developed for use. This gives room for target teaching for maximum result. Colleges in the US have been known to develop undergraduate writing courses through cooperative efforts of Engineering and English department/faculties (O'Donoghue, 1984).

8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present second language English teaching strategy as well as the current curriculum still remains uninnovative and fossilized. This is a pointer to the fact that a new attitude as well as a new curriculum will be required if second language English teachers are to make the needed impact in ensuring that learners acquire the needed proficiency in the English language such that will enable them function optimally in a world that is fast becoming a global village and English its linguistic medium. To this extent, English for Specific Purposes, as an approach as well as a curriculum is, here, suggested as a way forward in Nigeria's ESL adult classroom. This is an approach, according to Yidz (2004) that meets the needs of (mostly) adult learners who are learning a foreign language for use in their specific fields, such as science, technology, medicine, leisure, and academic learning. A view associated with Noam Chomsky shows man's unique and innate ability to acquire and learn language, stressing the fact that human beings are born with a language acquisition device (LAD), which provides the parameters and controls for the acquisition of language (Jackson & Stockwell, 2011). This innate ability can be utilized by adult learners, coupled with target teaching to achieve appreciable proficiency in English for definite use. However, for the language acquisition device to be functional, the learner, especially adult learners need to be exposed to the target language. To fully achieve the desired result from adult learners, it is expected that they will get involved in language-related works outside the classroom such as interpreting and translating to facilitate their performance, as a way of grasping "something from the real world where language lives its real life" Belicka & Svetina (2009; 10). The following suggestions, if given consideration, will make second language

English learners in the adult classroom acquire specific linguistic needs to function well in their various professions.

- i. Include ESP courses in Nigerian tertiary institutions education curriculum.
- ii. Introduce target teaching in the Use of English whereby the course will be taught with purpose specific across different faculties, schools, colleges and fields.
- iii. Introduce team teaching, to include course specialists who will supply required vocabulary. (O'Donoghue, 1984).
- iv. Develop curriculum with purpose specific across various fields.
- v. Train teachers, directly and through in-service in the new approach.
- vi. Government and institutional support will be required in the sponsorship of seminars, conferences and in-service training.

These suggestions are, no doubt, grandiose. To reverse the continued decline in proficiency in the English language, the world's major linguistic medium of wider communication, science and technology, international and diplomatic relations as well as international commerce, second language users of English must acquire the requisite linguistic skills in their professions locally to enable them go global. In the words of Belicka & Svetina (2009: 10): "These days society requires practical knowledge that is immediately applicable in professional situations, easy to perceive and supported by the latest techniques, which implies that the teacher has to be aware of and open for the current developments in the public space". This presents an enormous challenge before second language English teachers, especially at the tertiary level, who usually bear the blame for learners' lack of linguistic proficiency in the English language, a necessity that will enable them achieve academic and professional empowerment.

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