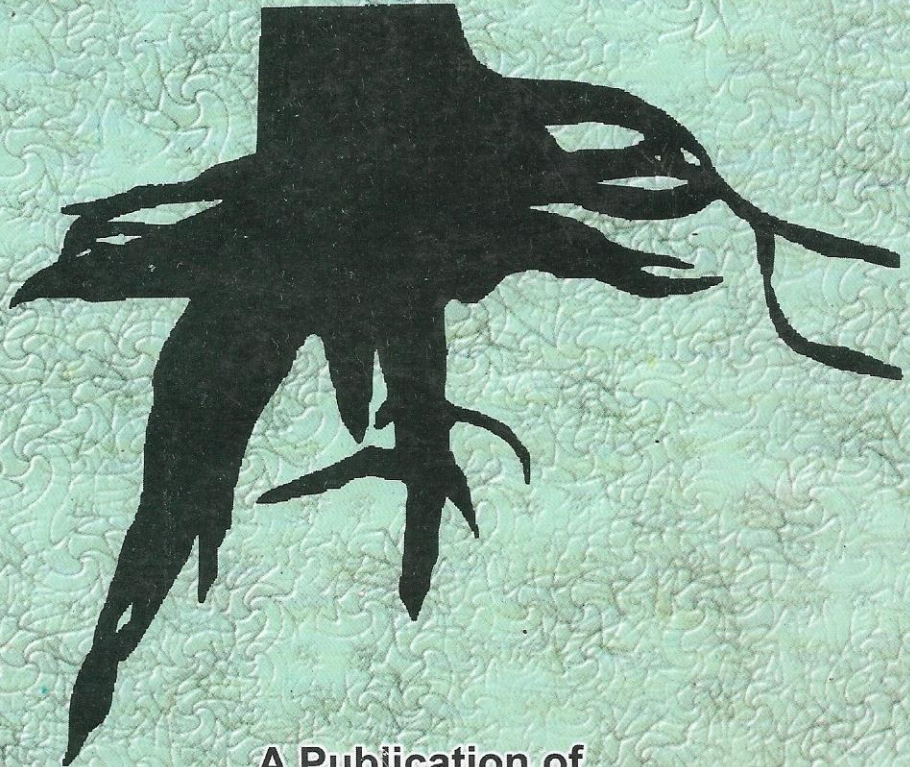


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Basic Language Skills for Effective Communication: The Pedagogical Implication

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is to emphasize the need for serious and result-oriented training activities that will enable Nigerians learning English as a second language in formal settings to communicate better via the literary media. The motivation for this work hinges on the observation that even though called advanced learners of English in Nigerian universities, polytechnics and colleges of education hardly read effectively or write with ease to communicate their ideas or feelings. Greater disappointment is suggested as the attempts by some of these people who have had many years of studying communication related courses, such as Use of English, Advanced English Composition and Reading and Writing for Language Arts respectively do not reflect in anyway the efforts of teachers and their acclaimed academic status. The data for this study are obvious evidence of poor written expression extracted randomly from essays of selected undergraduates for analysis. The methodology adopted by the study is Corder's (1974:127), Recognition and Description of Error. Our findings include: firstly, there is a growing tendency for weak written communicative attempts among this category of learners, yet teachers (and/or lecturers) of English have not designed any radical remedial work to stop the trend; instead more graduates with communicative deficiencies are produced annually from these institutions. The paper therefore recommends that the syllabus be redesigned to allow for maximum practice in reading and writing as against the current trends of more theoretical teaching with minimal opportunity for learners' performance.

Key Words: Reading, Writing, Communication, Applied Linguistics and Pedagogy

Introduction

To use language is the mark of a man; to understand language in the deepest sense, is the mark of an educated man. (Anderson, W. L. and Stageberg N.C., 1962:ix)

The goal of Reading and Writing for Language Arts is to make students good readers and writers of English and not merely acquiring knowledge about these two aspects of language skills. It is for this reason that the learners of the language programme must be helped to understand the over-allexpansive structure of English beginning with phonemes, morphemes, sentence and paragraph to larger units of discourse and pragmatics and in reverse order. The operational objectives therefore include among others:

- helping the learner to gain control of reading and writing English
- guiding learners to develop appropriate reading and writing skills.

According to Nwachukwu (2006:40) “ the index of a child’s intellectual development is his use of language”. This opinion underscores Chomsky’s (1988) observation that *knowledge of language is source of all knowledge; therefore, knowledge of language is not different from knowledge in general.* Unfortunately, there is generally poor performance in English at virtually all levels of Education in Nigeria (see Adesanoye, 1979, Oluike, 1979, Adejare, 1984, cited by Jowitt, 1991:25 and Omachonu, 2010:iv). Onah (2015:7a) decries the unsuccessful English education in Nigeria in the following terms: English has been with us in Nigeria now for the past one hundred and seventy-one years. And despite the availability of useful textbooks, supposedly qualified teachers and abundant instructional aid for teaching and learning the subject, not many Nigerians (even the highly educated ones) speak or write the standard variety of it. Added to the already existing problem is the growing decline of interest in reading among Nigerian students. For example, in recent times, the campaign among Nigerian school children is to return to book (reading) culture. In allusive terms, a sign that all is not well is when a bride is begged to smile on her wedding day; or a sick person is pleaded with before he takes his drugs. By extension, what is the

justification in pleading with a learner of any academic programme to read or write when the future he seeks lies in his reading and writing readiness?

A loss of interest in reading culture is an indication that illiteracy has besieged the society of the literate. And no one can deny the relationship between reading and writing as reading increases the potential of a learner to write with minimal errors. This is why the writer of this paper wishes to argue that a habitual reader is most likely to:

- (i) increase his word stock in a target language
- (ii) gain operational knowledge of the mechanics of writing
- (iii) attain fluency in oral performance
- (iv) develop a of better world view of any topic of discussion
- (v) advance a reasonable argument than a non-reader
- (vi) gain better understanding of how to use meaning generating systems in the target language
- (vii) write effectively and achieve rhetorical effects.

If the revival campaign to resuscitate the reading culture in Nigeria is not achieved, the ultimate implication is that a time will come when a good reading habit would have been lost and consequently creative writing equally be inhibited.

Professional Insight in Perspectives

The utilitarian services of the English language in Nigerian are far more than the roles of all the over five hundred indigenous languages put together (Onah, 2015:139b). Some linguists identified one of such functions as a vehicular language. Ayodabo (2015:35) defines a vehicular language as "*one which is used for communication by people who do not have it as a native language*". Jolayemi (2013:9) explains the underlying motivation to learn English as a second language as an aggressive effort to learn the language in order to acquire the functional proficiency prerequisite to their needs, which must be achieved with some measure of accuracy in order to meet the international acceptability and intelligibility.

Unfortunately, a number of language experts believes that, of all the aspects of English, the most affected in terms of poor performance is Oral English (Banjo 1979 and Akinjobi (2002). Omachonu (2010:iv) explains the reason thus:

This is because sometimes even the language teacher is not comfortable with it let alone the learner. At another time, the teacher does not know what to teach either because he had never been taught or is not sufficiently informed on the fundamentals of the subject matter. Even the so-called experts in the field hardly qualify as role models worthy of emulation

Ayodabo (2015:36) was profound when he writes: Teachers and lecturers with backgrounds in English (BA, English, BA English Education, M.ED, M.A. English, Ph.D in language education, Ph.D in English) demonstrate some appreciable measure of competence. But errors and mistakes still manifest in the areas of spelling forms (intercontinental spelling inconsistency), pronunciation, tense sequence, misuse of words and over-generalization and poor mechanics in terms of the application of punctuation marks, among several others.

Pedagogical Weakness

The second language learner has a number of problems to contend with in his attempt to gain mastery of both verbal and written communication media. Some of these factors include:

1. Learning an additional language is to raise a bilingual in languages with assymetric morphological, phonological, syntactic and graphological patterns.
2. The learner is most likely going to be reasoning/thinking in his mother-tongue while writing or speaking in the target language. According to Tiffen (1969 cited in Chindaya 2001:155), the learner's performance in the second language would be named as a result of his interference with the contrasting features of his first language.(We may accept that theoretical explanation for the learner's weak verbal performance; not in his written ability as it is far less susceptible to interference).

3. The narrative or descriptive skill of the second language learner is necessarily marked by circumlocution, verbosity, etc. (like Amos Tutuola). It is on this ground that Otagburuagu (1997 cited in Kwasau 2015:11) finds justification when he says: the second language learners do not have sufficient vocabulary that will enhance their proficiency in the writing task that they are confronted with at the tertiary level of education.
4. The choice of target variety may not be the same as the attained variety. For example, the WAEC and NECO SSCE syllabus and the SSCE English curriculum prescribe the teaching and learning of Standard British English. However, the actual events in most classroom and learners' communicative evidence ranks between Nigerian English and a mongrel usage.
5. The learner's or his society's attitude to his pursuit may affect the overall objective of the second language learning programme. For example, Wilkins (1972 cited in Chindaya 2001:156) explains that:

The instructional attitude toward the learning of English language that prevails generally, among most Nigeria students do not help matters especially in the conscious hostility against the language, both among the students and communities,

Finegan (2013:515 cited in Kwasau 2015:2) observes that contrary to what obtains in the first language situation, learning a second language is not context bound; learners use the language in the classroom to discuss imaginary or decontextualized events unrelated to the learning situation. It may sound exaggerative, however, there is hardly any serious attempt now by most teachers of English in Nigeria that aspire to attain the pronunciation (phonology) modelled after the speech way of the native speakers of English. This may probably be because of Kachru's (1985:14) defence for the World Englishes, particularly those in the outer circle to which the Nigerian learners of English belong.

Competence and Performance

According to Bever and Langendoen (1969:32), "A person knows how to carry out three kinds of activities with his language: he can produce sentences, he can

understand sentences, and can make judgements about potential sentences". It is against this background that communicative analysts investigate every utterance on the basis of the following three questions:

- (i) what does the speaker or writer want to say?
- (ii) what has he said or written?
- (iii) how should he have said or written it?

Linguists believe that no user of a language can perform better than his underlying level of understanding in the phonological, morphological, lexical, graphological, syntactic and semantic operations. The underlying ability to understand one's language is what linguists refer to as competence. Chomsky (1965:4) defines competence as "the underlying system of rules that speaker knows and put to use in speaking. It is a mental reality that provides the basis for actual use by a speaker". Tyler (1978:153) underscores the above definition when he writes: "competence is a form of theoretical knowledge which makes performance possible". Lipinska (1980:133) also corroborates Tyler's definition when he writes: "the basic idealistic assumption is that performance is a direct reflection of competence".

Data Presentation and Analysis

According to anthropological linguists, the primacy of language is speech. However, with human development, every language has (or potentially) developed into two worlds. The first is what I describe as the general world of unconstrained usage, while the second is the literary world. In the former, the literate holds no advantage over his illiterate member of the speech community. But in the latter, reading and writing are the exclusive prerogatives of the literate. It is against this background that one can say that the literate user of any particular language belongs to the two worlds of that very language.

Reading and writing are complex, additional and productive language skills accessible only by the literate. Reading is passively active in the sense that the reader continually tries to give life to the grapho-phonological representation to what the writer (who also could be the reader or someone external to him) has

crafted as text. Writing, on the other hand, is the representation of the writer's original idea at a particular point in its permanent form either with appropriate mechanics that can aid interpretation or inappropriate mechanics that inhibit communication and/or comprehension.

Every writer has a potentially limitless word stock form which he can string together in a conventionally syntagmatic relation capable of provoking any of the following affective evidence:

- (i) awe evoking
- (ii) hilarious atmosphere
- (iii) uncontrollable tear or fear
- (iv) outburst of joy or rage, etc.

But a word stock without appropriate communicative skills (i.e. mechanics) can ruin the locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary expectations of an utterance. For example, the following three sentences (tagged A, B and C) are selected as data for this work mainly because of their length, and communicative success whereas Texts D, E and F are selected for their communicative failure. For instance, Text A, though a single sentence, contains 103 words and Text B, a structure of equal grammatical class consists of 101 words. Despite their unusual length, the appropriate but peculiar use of punctuation marks by the authors enhanced their communicative effects.

Text A: Excerpt from Defoe, D., (1719): *The Life and Strange and Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe.*

I was born in the year 1623, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull: he got a good estate by merchandise, and leaving off his trade, lived afterward at York, from whence he married my mother, whose relations were Robinson, a very good family in that country, and from whom I was called Robinson Kreutzonoer; but, by the usual corruption of words in England, we are now called, nay, we

call ourselves and write our names Crusoe, and so my companions always call me.

In the above text, a total of fifteen (15) commas (see lines 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8), one (1) colon (see line 3) and one (1) semi-colon (see line 6) were used yet the writer did not lose the tread of his argument because his mastery of syntactic rules, appropriate punctuation marks and use of illocutionary negotiation.

Text B: Text C is Babalola's (2005:269) suggested probable modern version of text A reads:

I was born in York in 1632, of a good family. My father came from Bremen and first settled at Hull, acquired his estate by trading merchandise, and then moved to York. There he met and married my mother, form a well-established family in the country named Robinson. I was consequently named Robinson Kreutznoer, but in time my own name and that of our family was Crusoe. That's what we're now called; that's how we write our name, and that's what my friends have always called me.

The text (B) presents:

- (i) a reduction in the length of Text A now referred to as Babalola's version of Defoe's sentence. It has a total of:
- (ii) six (6) commas are used (lines 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7)
- (iii) five (5) full stop are used (lines 1, 3, 5, 6 and 8)
- (iv) The colon used in the original text did not survive in the modern version, it did not occur in its original position (see text A; line 6 and text B line 7 respectively).

Text C: Excerpt from Franklin, B., (1986:260): *The Autobiography and Other Writings.*

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of who you particularly desire, I think the system of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the

best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenter in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity; tho' it is a question I do no dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.

This sentence consists of 101 words yet the communicative strength is adequate and explicit. The writer (Benjamin Franklin) used a total of ten (10) commas (lines 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7); two instances of the use of semi-colon (lines 3 and 5), and the full stop was used as end mark (line 8). Also used in some peculiar ways are capital letters that violate normal convention. And, despite the unusual length of texts A and C, the appropriate but peculiar use of punctuation marks by the authors enhanced their socio-pragma-discourse (communicative) effects.

Text D: An Excerpt from an Undergraduate Project of a 400 Level Student in One of the Nigerian Universities

People may use different pronunciations, vocabularies, grammar or styles of language for different purposes, different dialect in different context and in some communities they select different languages according to the situations available for use in different social context to form a kind of repertoire of available options and this options are (SIC) govern by certain choices which generally indicates people's awareness of the influence of one or more of these components:

The above text is a single sentence of 70 words. And because of the failure of the writer to punctuate it appropriately, the communicative intention is weak; and ultimately the sense of discourse is lost. The error is an avoidable one if the writer had chosen to say one thing at a time.

Apart from the unmarked terminals of what should have consisted of different sentences within this particular sentence, the following linguistic-induced analysis can be identified the text:

- context determined factors
- diglossic reference
- gibberish construction
- tense error
- error of concord

Texts E and F presented below are within a manageable piece of expertise of any second learner of English, especially at the tertiary level. Notwithstanding, the meanings of the two sentences are enshrouded by inappropriate syntactic order and suggestive ambiguity.

Text E: An Excerpt from an Undergraduate Project of a 400 Level Student in One of the Nigerian Universities

It is observed therefore that the effect of socialization through language appear in every individual's life,

Text F: Excerpt from an Undergraduate Project of a 400 Level Student in One of the Nigerian Universities

In other words, to give an account the way of language is used in a community and the choices people make when they speak.

The above sentence is another example of a weak sentence. In a weak sentence, extraneous misplaced pause marks, improper use of capital letters can affect the overall illocutionary effect(s) and/or the reader expected comprehension.

The undisputed fact is that language is a resource at the disposal of a creative communicator. This is why it is not only the content that counts; the form equally matters. In other words, beyond the communicative attempt, there should be

pragmatic success and rhetorical entertainment. Therefore, from diction to pronunciation meticulous attention must be given as a safeguard to anything that will result in the linguistic tragedy manifested in any of the following ways:

- (i) Errors of redundancy e.g. still yet, pretty and beautiful
- (ii) Errors of concord – agreement between:
 - a. Subject of a sentence and its verb
 - b. Subject and its complement
 - c. Pronoun and its antecedent
- (iii) Morphological errors
 - a. Wrong amalgamation of words or letters
 - b. Wrong inflection of words
- (iv) Semantic Errors i.e. wrong meaning attached to a word or expression (sentence, clause or phrase) e.g. fatal, borrow and lend.
- (v) Syntactic errors i.e. wrong arrangement of the elements that constitute sentence structure
- (vi) Phonological errors
- (vii) Common errors of spelling
 - a. grateful = grateful
 - b. priviledge = privilege
 - c. pronounciation = pronunciation
- (viii) Failure to set the imaginative boundary for ideas to mark them into separate paragraphs
- (ix) Verbosity
- (x) Cloudy expression of idea
- (xi) Over-extension of concept due to poor diction
- (xii) A lope sided mastery of the vocabulary at the expense of syntactic (grammatical) rules.
- (xiii) The constraint of differences between the L1 and the TL of the learner
- (xiv) Poor pronunciation has a way of affecting the spelling
- (xv) Poor punctuation resulting in over dependence on the comma and full stop

Summary of Findings

From the findings, the study shows that there is a growing tendency for weak written communicative attempts among the Nigerian learners in tertiary institutions, yet curriculum developers and teachers (and/or lecturers) of English have not designed any radical remedial work to stop the trend; instead more graduates with communicative deficiencies are produced annually from these institutions.

Going by the Chomskyan (1965) definition of competence, one can argue here that users whose usages have faulty underlying system of rules are incapable of using them to produce sentences that are faultless. Inexcusably, the written discourse of any average Nigerian who is not an academic (a lecturer) reflect weakness especially because of the poor reading culture among Nigerian literate people. It is not just an aspersion but a gross evidence of unserious academic interest for a university student to depend solely on his notebook and/or jotters to prepare for an examination without necessarily stretching for materials in the school library. Consequently, one can predicate the heat period of actual reading attempts in Nigeria; (when candidates are preparing for some prescribed examinations), or when a social national issue makes the news headlines in the national dailies. Some Nigerians politicians may buy newspapers but do not read beyond the headlines before trashing it.

Contrary to Banjo (1979) and Akinjobi (2002) beliefs that of all the aspects of skills the Nigerian learner of English can display, the most affected in terms of poor performance is oral English, this study reveals that the written skill is currently the most affected. This is because the oral performance in English medium of most Nigerian undergraduates, graduates and postgraduates is far more intelligible than the written discourse. The reason may be as a result of contact options they have with better models users of the target language from media agencies; particularly as wrong syntactic structure and/or punctuation marks are not directly examined in the verbal communication as in written usage.

Conclusion

One mark of a creative user of a language is the ability to communicate (whether in written or oral medium) and be understood without any extra psycho-semantic analysis to aid his reader's comprehension. It therefore behooves the reader and/or writer to observe all the meaning generating mechanics (punctuation marks, graphological patterns, etc.) and the speaker's articulatory factors (such as the supra-segmental features, e.g. stress, intonation, pitch, etc.) to ease the analytical difficulties that might arise from his misuse of them. Often, communicative failure is a product of poor ability to string together the vocabulary items in the syntactic order that can enhance the understanding of discourse. For example, a writer may have facts but lack textual unity. Poor expression may be as a result of wrong or barren punctuation. Intrusive ideas can render discourse to lose its illocutionary force. But without sounding prescriptive, the following guidelines can be observed, especially by learners of English as a second language. And when a writer or a speaker fails to achieve the communicative intension, it is like wasting a very precious linguistic or any natural resource. For example, what a waste of resource the Rivers Niger and Benue would have been to Nigerians if there had not existed some channels for them to flow; even at the confluence? The worst probable implication is that there would not have been a name for each of them. It is against such backdrop that the author recommends that:

1. Sentences are not expected to be too long else they lose their communicative force or meaning.
2. Unexpatiated sentences must be avoided by ensuring that the topic sentence is followed by a defining or explanatory sentence. Examples or further applications can be generated to give the reader or listener balanced information on the subject of discussion.

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