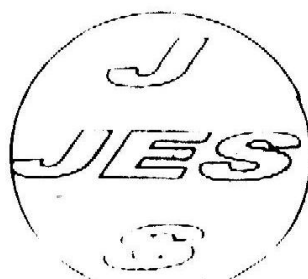


Journal of
ENGLISH
STUDIES



ISSN 0189 6652

VOLUME VIII

SEPTEMBER 2001

AN INVESTIGATION OF WRITTEN ENGLISH USAGE OF FRESHMEN IN A NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY

By

DR. BASSEY A. OKON

Abstract

Several scholars have identified errors committed by First Year students, while teachers and examiners complain about errors committed by students at both the primary and secondary school levels. It is worthy of note that there is no known attempt at ranking the errors of the students. That is to say, the errors being talked about have never been properly appraised in terms of their order of significance based on their frequency of occurrence in written English. The thesis of this paper is to show the relative significance in terms of the frequency of the errors. In addition, this paper seeks to identify some of the problems students manifest in the study and use of English. The identification and ordering of the salient problems confronting students with regard to English as a school subject, would help in the formulation of policy on improving the standards.

In order to investigate this problem of poor performance, this investigation is limited to First Year undergraduates of the University of Calabar in their Use of English course for the 1999/2000 session. The study was designed to investigate, among other factors

- (a) the relationship between the students' secondary school performance and their performances during the first year as undergraduates in the 'Use of English' course.*

It was also intended to

- (b) suggest ways of improving the present level of student performance in their Use of English, following findings from the investigation.*

Introduction

The language situation in Nigeria is one in which there exist many indigenous languages coupled with the imposition of the English language as the official language. English was introduced into Nigeria by the missionaries and since then its introduction has influenced the educational system of the country. In this multilingual setting, English is the language of government, business, mass information, the literary arts and education. The language has therefore, become a 'tool' language and, as such, is taught

and learnt as a second language. Its constant use in the day-to-day activities of the nation prompts the learner to strive to use it like the native speaker in most of its ramifications.

The current general consensus has been that over the years there has been no significant improvement in the English language competence and performance ability of Freshmen in Nigerian Universities. Even with a credit pass in English language, in the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination, students' performance in spoken and written English during their first year as undergraduates is generally far below expectation. Given the fact that the first year undergraduates are drawn from various post primary institutions nation-wide their poor performance in the 'Use of English' course could be seen as a national problem which requires a national solution. With the official introduction of the English language as a vehicle of instruction in Nigeria in 1930; emphasis has always been on the correct use of English both in the spoken and the written forms (Omolewa 1975).

Problems in the Use of the English Language

Works by different linguists have attested to the existence of problems for learners of English as a second language. The problems which manifest as errors are as a result of certain constraints which the learners face in an attempt to write well. Headbloom (1979) defines error as "... a systematic deviation from the target language by a non-native speaker." This is done to distinguish errors from what are known as 'mistakes'. The errors which learners commit, can be categorised into two: 'global' and 'local'. The global errors affect the interpretation of the whole sentence whereas the local errors concern merely a part of the sentence such as a clause or a phrase.

Various groups of people lament the poor performance of students at all levels of education in Nigeria. It has been observed that this poor performance is even worse with respect to the English language. From speculations and practical experience, the errors which students commit are diverse in form. This diversity tends to complicate the problem of identification and ranking of the errors by both teachers and the students so concerned. The hypothesis tested is, therefore, that the real problems facing the students in the use of English have not been properly identified and ranked according to their degree of importance.

Different problems have been identified and they will be categorised into four broad groups. They are:

- (a) Orthographic features: punctuation, paragraphing and spellings.

- (b) Syntagmatic features: concord, government and agreement.
- (c) Secondary Grammatical Categories: tense, mood, aspect and voice.
- (d) Others: serialization, preposition, adverb, use of pidgin forms; circumlocution/verbosity organization of materials, appropriate words and essay requirement.

Various researches have been carried out on the place of errors in language learning. Error analysis has been established as necessary for handling problems of second language learning. A linguistic universal is that each language has its own set of words as well as pattern in the ordering of words. This system of word order makes each language different from the other since word is peculiar to each language.

For the orthographic features, the learners need to know the rules and to apply them intelligently, especially when writing. For example: The question mark is used with direct questions and not in Indirect questions. Another example is in the use of colon(:) and dash(-). A colon is used in place of comma before a quotation or a passage of Direct Speech. It is usually used when the verb of saying is implied and not actually stated. E.g. Her words were these: "Do you not....?" Though the dash is a common punctuation mark yet, it should be used sparingly, and only when it cannot be replaced by a comma. The dash is used in a sentence to indicate an expression as a kind of afterthought, or comment, so breaking up the structure. Students have problems with spelling and Adesanoye (1973) has stated that inadequate visualisation results in the misspelling of words. Besides errors of spelling could also be traced to poor speech habits and lack of familiarity with English words. It may also be due to the problem with homophones. Errors of spelling are serious such that Umoh (1988) had to conclude that the poor performance of students is due to the fact that secondary school graduates cannot spell correctly. In order to solve this problem, Umoh proposes that spelling should not be taught incidentally but should form an important part of the school curriculum at all levels of education.

The syntagmatic features which comprise concord, government and agreement have to do with sentence formation, especially with how to prevent non agreement between the subject and the verb. The problem of concord is the most problematic because according to Oluikpe (1981:84),

agreement is essential in producing standard English sentences, it is important that you (the students) should learn how to use number, person, gender, tense and voice consistently.

In the above statement, Oluikpe has grouped both the syntagmatic and the secondary grammatical structures together, therefore the following explanation embodies the two categories. The students would perform poorly if they did not know the rules or they failed to apply the rules governing concord. One other problem which students face is to recognise that the Noun Phrase (NP) determines concord. That is the number and person in the Noun Phrase (subject) will determine the verb. Furthermore, the English personal pronoun ending is another cause of the lack of agreement between the subject and the verb. In English all grammatical persons take the same zero verbal ending except the third person singular in the present tense. This is the only verbal form with distinctive personal pronoun ending and it is not surprising that the students make this error from generalizing.

Lado (1957:61) asserts that "there is a correlation of forms in the English language and this is a problem to the learners of the English language who do not understand inflection through the addition of an 's'." Another problem with the learning and use of the English language is that of verb tenses. Tense in English is usually marked with inflections on the verb. The marking of tense on the verb poses a problem for the learners of English as a second language.

The English language has a kind of internal complexity where the rules are not uniformly applied. Learners face the severe problem of recognising the exceptions to the rules and tearing them accordingly. For instance, there is the problem of using wrong tenses, a problem which arises because of direct comparison with their first language. Sometimes, the present tense is used for the past tense and vice versa. Tomori (1963:72), has noted with respect to Yoruba language that there is no distinction between the present and past forms of a verb and that the same form is used for both. This observation is true of most Nigerian languages.

Besides the issues discussed above the problems categorised as others are: preposition, articles, organization of materials, choice of appropriate words and essay requirement. Prepositions are used to modify the meanings of words in English. In English there are quite a number of prepositions unlike in Nigerian languages where there is limitation in the number of prepositions available. For instance among the Yoruba, the preposition 'ni' stands for 'in', 'at', while in Igbo, the only preposition 'na' stands for 'in', during, on and 'without'. In Ibibio the preposition 'ke' stands for 'at', 'on', 'in', 'under' and 'by'. This problem of wide semantic ranges results in transliteration. In this case there is the negative transfer.

The choice of article proves to be still more difficult and this could be traced to the non-existence in the mother tongues. Hence the learners

have no frame of reference to which they can relate their expressions in the second language. The problem of articles can be classified as follows: omission, wrong usage and redundancy. The omission of articles can be as a result of mother tongue interference. Tomori (1967:116) observes that articles are not used in Yoruba in the same way they are used in English. Furthermore, he states that the Yoruba equivalent of 'the' is often omitted except when needed for emphasis.

They do not know the generic use of 'a/an' or their use before singular predicative nouns to denote a profession, a class or a religion. The definite and indefinite articles are used in referring to things or persons. This application is not found in the case of most African languages. In essence the students view this item as a unit on its own rather than as part of a larger stretch of the English language. Thus, they find it difficult to use them correctly as part of a discourse. It is therefore difficult for the learners to see the meaning relations underlying cross-sentential use.

Research Design and Methodology

The setting is the University of Calabar, and there are seven Faculties in the university. The emphasis is on testing the students' writing ability.

Source of Data

The data for the study were collected from 300 Undergraduates (First year), 55 Lecturers through stratified random sampling. The scores were from essays written for the 'Use of English' course during the first semester of the 1999/2000 session, meant to identify the following errors e.g. orthographic, syntagmatic, secondary grammatical and others. The other source was the use of aggregated responses from two sets of questionnaire administered to randomly selected university lecturers and students. The questionnaire was to elicit from the subjects, the types of errors which students make, the causes and possible solutions as well as reasons for poor performance. The study population is broken down as shown in the table below.

TABLE I

Distribution of Faculties for the Collection of Data

S/No	Faculties	No. of Students
1	Agriculture	42
2	Arts	48
3	Education	42
4	Law	42
5	Medicine	42
6	Sciences	42
7	Social Sciences	42
Total		300

The sample was made up of three hundred scripts randomly selected from the Departments of General Studies(GSS) for the students in all the Faculties of the University of Calabar. This population is suitable for the study and for the classification of the types of errors common among Freshmen. The reason for using this population, is that the style Freshmen write will show a general trend in the errors that occur. During their first year, students offer the 'Use of English' as a compulsory course and they have to pass it, the emphasis is on how they use the English language in expressing ideas (Okon 1990).

Instrumentation

The investigation focussed on orthographic and syntagmatic features, secondary grammatical categories and others. Students wrote essays on the following topics:

1. "Nigerian Policemen are a Disappointment"
2. "A Bank Robbery you have witnessed"
3. "Direction on how your friend can travel from his home to the University of Calabar"

Data Analysis

Data were collected, tabulated and statistically analysed. The computations were on percentage basis because of the nature of the research. Kendall's coefficient of concordance was also used to analyze the result of the questionnaire.

Journal of English Studies, Vol. VIII, Sept. 2001
Calculations of Errors and Total Mean for all the Faculties

Faculties	Types of Errors	No. of Students	No. of Errors	Total Mean
Agriculture	Orthographic	42	346	24.8
Arts	Syntagmatic	48	333	26.3
Education	Secondary Grammatical	42	293	20.8
Law	Others	42	290	23.9
Medicine		42	326	26.5
Sciences		42	366	32.5
Social Sciences		42	313	20.3

Total mean = 25.00

From our findings and calculations, we notice that the mean scores for the different Faculties are as follows:

(i) Synagmatic features have the highest as shown by the following

Agriculture	:	55.4	i.e.	35.7%
Arts	:	72.9	"	41.7%
Education	:	46.1	"	40.5%
Law	:	69	"	47.9%
Medicine	:	71.1	"	42.9%
Sciences	:	102.1	"	52.4%
Social Sciences	:	37.5	"	33.7%

These scores indicate these features as the most problematic to all the students in all the Faculties of the University.

(ii) Secondary grammatical categories ranked next in the order as shown by the mean scores:

Agriculture	:	22.5 or 26.2%
Arts	:	15.4 or 41.7%
Education	:	19.9 or 26.2%
Law	:	15.7 or 26.2%
Medicine	:	29.3 or 28.5%
Sciences	:	10.5 or 19.0%
Social Sciences	:	17.1 or 21.4%

These results were unexpected because the researcher had assumed that having learnt the English language right from the primary school and through the secondary school levels, students would make fewer errors on tenses. The reason for this assumption is because at those levels of

education, emphasis is placed on using the tenses correctly.

- (iii) Other aspects such as preposition, adverb and articles among others ranked 3rd in the order to difficulty. This is affirmed in the following scores.

Agriculture	:	15.4 or 23.8%
Arts	:	6 or 18.7%
Education	:	7.9 or 14.3%
Law	:	6.8 or 16.7%
Medicine	:	5.7 or 16.7%
Sciences	:	5.5 or 11.9%
Social Sciences	:	11.4 or 23.8%

- (iv) The mean scores on orthographic features indicate this as the least problematic area.

Agriculture	:	5.67	i.e	14.3%
Arts	:	9.8	i.e	16.7%
Education	:	9.1	"	19.0%
Law	:	4.2	"	9.5%
Medicine	:	5.7	"	11.9%
Sciences	:	11.8	"	16.7%
Social Sciences	:	15.2	"	19.1%

It is hypothesized that the real problems have not been identified and ranked according to their degree of importance. Using Kendall's coefficient of concordance:

$$W = \frac{S}{C^2 (N^3 - N)/12}$$

and subsequently subjecting the Kendall's assumed result to a chi-square test, the following results were obtained. The responses of the lecturers with a value of 'W' equal to 0.001007 was obtained indicating almost absolute disagreement between the lecturers as to the order of importance of the problems which confront students in the use of English language. Using the same procedure, the responses of the students yielded a value of 'V' is equal to 0.000179 which shows no agreement among the students.

The two results when compared confirm the hypothesis that the real problems facing the students have not been properly identified and ranked according to their degree of frequency. Ranking is the first step to finding solution to the problems of poor performance. For instance, while the

students responses showed problem with orthographic features as the most problematic, the lecturers do not see this as a great problem. On the other hand, the students feel that others viz: the organization of materials as their major problems, such a problem is minor based on the lecturers response. It is evidenced from the test carried out using Kendall's co-efficient of concordance 'W' that the problems so established by various researches have not been listed according to priority.

Conclusion

It has been variously observed that there is an alarming fall in the standard of the English language at all levels in the nation's educational system. In an attempt to contribute to the solution of poor performance of students, this study has attempted at ranking the problems in their descending order namely: Syntagmatic, secondary grammatical, others and orthographic features. The researcher believes that if this order is followed, there will be an improvement in students' performance in the use of English. This belief is in agreement with Okedara (1997) who observes that Nigerian students must write well because written standard of English is the same throughout the universe.

Implication

The role of linguistics in the teaching of the English language is very important because it explains the nature of language as a medium of human communication. In this study, the application of error and contrastive analyses reveal the students' perception of difficulty and the relationship between the error students make and the correct structure of the language. A knowledge of linguistics can help the teacher to eliminate some of the problems students encounter. For instance, the descriptive aspect of linguistics will give accurate descriptions of present-day practice in speech and writing. As observed by Oden (1999) who quotes Aboderin (1980), teachers need to teach composition or essay writing skills to learners because:

Writing is an art, and like drawing, or painting, or musical composition, rhetorical principles need be taught in an orderly sequence.

Students should be asked to assess their difficulties and abilities in the 'Use of English' course. The rationale for this is that it will act as feedback for planning the 'use of English' programme in the University. In addition, this feedback will ensure that the contents of the remedial courses reflect the express needs of the University students. As Corder (1967) observes the errors are indispensable to the learner because it is a means of

testing the nature of the language he is learning. Errors are also useful to the researcher as they provide her/him with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner employs in his discovery of the language. It is important to the teacher as they tell him/her how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn.

References

- Adesanoye, F. (1978). "A study of varieties of written English in Nigeria." Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Corder, S. P. (1967). "The significance of learners' errors." International Review of Applied Linguistics. Vol. 4; 161-170.
- Emenanjo, E. N. (1978). Elements of Modern Igbo Grammar: A Descriptive Approach. Ibadan: Oxford University Press.
- Headbloom A. G. (1979). "Error Analysis and theoretical considerations" in Ubahakwe, E. (ed.). The teaching of English Studies, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Lado, R. (1957). Linguistics across culture. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- Oden, S. N. I. (1999). "The process writing Approach as a facilitator of University Undergraduates' Competence in English Composition." An Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Ibadan.
- Okedara, C. A. (1997). "The English Language Communication and development in Nigeria." An inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Ibadan.
- Okon, B. A. (1990). "A study of English Usage by Freshmen: Evidence from the University of Calabar," Unpublished M. A. thesis. University of Port Harcourt.
- Oluikpe, B. O. (1981). "Agreement" in Oluikpe, B (ed.) The Use of English for Higher Education, Onitsha: Africana Publishers Ltd.
- Omolewa, M. (1975). "The English language in colonial Nigeria 1862-1960: a study of major factors which promoted the language." JNESA. 7/1 & 2: 103-117.
- Opsta, D.U. (1984). "An Investigation into the English language error patterns of our Undergraduates" in Freeman, R. and M. Jibril (eds.) The English Language Studies in Nigerian Higher Education. Britain: J.K. Printers.
- Tomori, S. H. O. (1963). "An investigation into the standards of written English in final year pupils in some Western Nigeria primary schools." Unpublished M. A. thesis. University of London.

- Journal English Studies, Vol. VIII, Sept. 2001
- Tomori, S. H. O. (1967). "A study of the syntactic structures of the written English of British and Nigerian grammar schools pupils." Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London.
- Umoh, S. J. I. (1988). "Teaching spelling in the secondary school: a taxonomic approach". Paper presented at the eighth International conference on African Literature and the English language. University of Calabar.

Key to Illustration of Errors

- Errors under discussion
- Errors noted but not relevant to the topics under discussion.
- Wrong use of capital letters
- Omission
- Wrong use of articles
- Not a sentence

Appendix : Samples of Errors

(B) ORTHOGRAPHIC ERRORS

1. 'The criminals that actually destroy Nigeria tend to fal in the bourgiouse class and own a lot of wealth'.
2. 'The class four and elementary six certificate holders are dominant in The Nigerian Police Force'
3. 'Policemen showing the wrigh order'.

Syntagmatic Errors

4. 'A large number are expected to arrive at the campus for the ceremony'.
5. 'The members of the public as well as the bankers needs advise, on how to react during bank robbery'.
6. 'The policemen in this country harass the taxi drivers sometimes unnecessary and when the drive, give his some amount of money....'.

Secondary Grammatical Errors

7. 'In most of the nation of the world, there must be policemen who guides, protects the citizens, from the more over helps to interpret the laws'.
8. 'Nowadays, the Policemen has became a disappointment in many some countries'.
9. 'I told my boss I shall be late since I will go to the bank'.

Others

10. 'I ran save my life under the bench'

11. 'Instead they prefer making friends with all these D rives and in the process, the drivers use that as a opportunity to play the road anyhow they like'.
12. 'But reverse is the case'
13. 'Oga cannot do that yeye business'.