

## **THE CHALLENGES OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE ERA OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: THE CASE STUDY OF AN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT**

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The motivation for this study arose as a result of my experience as a teacher of the English language at various stages of educational system in Nigeria. I am not making any claim of being an experienced teacher here, but that the little I have seen and I am still seeing in the area of English language teaching and use in Nigeria really calls for a re-think. I had taught briefly at the elementary school and also at the secondary school level before moving to the tertiary level.

The teaching of English in the world today has become very challenging with the boom in information technology and the attendant fast pace with which pieces of knowledge are transferred from one place to another. People, and most unfortunately learners, are no longer patient to internalize the rules and conventions governing the language. As long as they could be heard, and as long as minimal sense can be made of their spoken or written discourse, second language learners, in Nigeria for example, are contented. They do not care if there are grammatical as well as semantic incongruities in their spoken and written discourse. The era when teachers would insist on learners crossing their 'ts' and dotting their i's seems to have gone forever. The more worrisome scenario is the fact that most of these oddities can also be found on the Internet, sometimes from official letters received from overseas, including native-speakers' environments.

But most language teachers are concerned and worried about the trend in the majority of ESL situations. At the recently held international conference of Nigeria English Studies Association at my university, more than two-thirds of the papers presented lamented this ugly development in the teaching of English in Nigeria. From incomprehensible slangy expressions that students write in composition, to the weird, avant-garde creations in text messages in the Global System for Mobile Communication, frenzied scholars pondered and wondered without being able to suggest how the trend could be reversed.

From my daily experience as a practicing teacher of English in the university, I can say that I have serious apprehensions as to the emergent trends of the English language teaching and use in my country. As a student of the English language situation in Nigeria, with a particular and abiding interest in the functional classification and the pragmatics of the language, I have always been concerned with developments about the language and always felt challenged to investigate such developments within popular linguistic platforms, such as the present concern of the American Society of Geolinguistics (*cf.* Babalola, 1999 and Babalola and Akande, 2002).

The signs are all there that the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria especially, and Africa in general, is bedeviled with many difficulties, most of which are posing serious challenge to Nigerian and African scholars alike. Bohn (2003) had equally discussed the pathetic scenarios of the teaching of English in Latin America and particularly Brazil. He suggested many concrete steps that could be taken to bring about the desired change, while identifying the pre-eminent status of the teacher “who must be prepared to pursue the audacious energy of Neo in *Matrix* in spite of the contradictions of the Oracle” (Bohn, 2003: 170). Some earlier Nigerian scholars like Tomori, Banjo, Afolayan, Bamgbose, Adetugbo, Adegbiya, etc, have tried to address some of these problems through contrastive and error analyses of various aspects of English linguistics. The situation as it is now, however, has gone beyond focusing only secondary school learners’ English. Every keen observer of the situational use of the English language among, most especially, the youths of this country will be alarmed. These avant-garde usages are mostly the outcome of the boom in information technology and the effects of globalization on the teaching and learning of English.

In her paper entitled “Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in Nigeria: Knell to Effective Written English,” Alabi (2005: 1) describes the effect of GSM on English as “a looming warfare on effective writing” and “a method in madness.” She distinguishes many trends in the morphemes, lexemes, syntax and mechanics of punctuation in selected samples of text messages. She submits that lurking in this language are many pitfalls of reckless substitutions and omissions, weird spelling conventions and innumerable arbitrary abbreviations. She concludes that scholars should strive to ameliorate the chaotic effect of this language on formal English teaching and learning, by keeping “the written language of the GSM out of formal writing so that it will not be one of its death knell.”

On her own part, Akinjobi (2005) decries the influx of Americanisms or slang into Nigeria and its attendant pernicious effect on the acquisition of formal English by the school children. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the use of these American expressions was viewed as an aberration rather than a variation considering the fact that the standard for the teaching of English in Nigeria was British English. But with the high rate of computer literacy, the easier access to the Internet and the high rate of importation of American films and music, Nigerian youths feel more at home learning these slangy expressions than simple correct English expressions. Their written English then becomes dominated by strange lexico-semantic features, verbosity and illogicality.

We are equally concerned about the way sophisticated English language users like senior academics in the higher institutions; experienced journalists, lawyers and high-profile government officials use the English language in Nigeria. Though the use of English in a second language environment like Nigeria cannot but be with some peculiar problems, the pervasive rot creeping in on English now seems surreptitious. David Cook (1994: 27) while speaking on his experience as a teacher of English in Africa has earlier said that

In my thirty or more years of working in African universities, I have

found among all groups of the most sophisticated users of English as a Second Language – finalist undergraduates, post-graduates, and many notable and outstanding scholars – that the most persistent recurrent problem in terms of slips and minor errors in their use of English for a wide variety of purposes has involved confusions about the little words ‘the’ and ‘a’ (‘an’) and their proper necessary non-use (zero).

One of the reasons Cook (1994) gave for the ESL learners’ difficult acquisition of some aspects of English is the mystique of the language, represented by its grammar. The most fundamental to this mystique, according to him, is the system of basic determiners, which expresses an infinite number of subtleties and distinctions of meaning. Another reason relates to the process of acquiring the required grammar of English determiners. It must be stated that many of the users of English in Africa are linguistic adults (having had to be well literate in their various mother tongues) when they started learning the English language. Thus, they had to contend with their competence in their indigenous languages that continued to interfere with the learning of the second language. Again, the many millions of examples of more or less “correct” use of English available to the native learners in their environment were not available to the second language learners.

Therefore, it could be said that second language learners of English are naturally disadvantaged in the kind of English available to them to learn, and the quality of teachers available to teach it. This also corroborates Cook’s findings that some areas of English that are dreadful for the ESL learners to acquire are quite easy for the native speakers. Nigerian scholars have also been aware of this problem confronting the teaching of English in the country for a long time. For instance, Asein and Adesanoye (1994: 132-47) lament that

If, therefore, students whose main preoccupation is communication work are still insecure enough in their written English performance to produce such grammatical errors (as I had highlighted in the body of the essay), one can only wonder what the situation must be with students in those other scholarly pursuits with far less interest in communication matters. In fact, one should necessarily assume far less English language adequacy in such students. *It is a very short step from this to the frightening possibility that, right now, not a few of the faculty members of our universities possess an ability in English that is less than impeccable. The reason for this is obvious: today’s graduate student is tomorrow’s faculty member and if, by the time a master’s student or a doctoral candidate is about to conclude his project [he still features so many errors in his writing] it is not unreasonable to fear that these inadequacies may accompany him to his new status [as lecturer]. (My emphasis)*

The present effort is, thus, by way of corroborating and reinforcing the submission of the scholars above. The following domains of the English language usage in Nigeria will be examined for the selection of data for this study.

Several scholars like Walsh (1967), Banjo (1969), Bamgbose (1971), Adetugbo (1977 and 1980), Awonusi (1985), Kujore (1985), Adegbija (1989), Bamiro (1994) and Jowitt (1991), to mention just but few, have attempted a linguistic description of the features of Nigerian English. Many of them, among other things, agreed that Nigerian English, though with its demographic and geographic peculiarities, has as its touchstone the native-speakers' standard English. In their descriptions, it also becomes clear that Nigerian English is characterized by excessive formality and text-bookishness, and "consequently has little or no room for the racy, colloquial linguistic features that characterize the domain of informal English" (Awonusi, 2004).

The above clarification becomes important, so that we do not, as some scholars are wont to, hastily conclude that the features of English use we are talking about in this paper are features of Nigerian English. Of course there are both non-standard and standard Nigerian English (Aremo, 2004). But that we strive to show here that the fad in the SMS messaging in Nigeria's English language use is a consequence of the malaise of the age of information technology in respect to language use and development. And that if the malady is not quickly addressed, it has the potential of eroding the acquisition of "correct" or standard form of the English language for which we are all struggling to acquire in the second language environment.

Although many scholars believe that there is no cause for alarm because the scenario we are trying to describe is nothing but "macro-style" (Bell, 1983: 3) or just "the multi-dimensional view of style" (Awonusi, 2004), the fact that the "style" has found a foothold among the young learners of English, who need to internalise the rules and conventions guiding the language, poses a great danger to the growth of English in Nigeria. Most of these young learners at their impressionistic age no longer care for correctness or appropriateness. In fact, there is a yawning hiatus between their speech performance and written performance. What determines what they write now seems to be the vagaries of tolerability among their peers. The samples below range from strange abbreviations that are almost gaining ground in the country, to grammatical peculiarities and text multilingualism. Many of these abbreviations, though hitherto used in SMS, are now being freely used in the formal writings of the school children, even at the university level.

#### **Abbreviations:**

chk	check
sch	school
yr/ya/ur	your
ms/mis	miss
dif	different
psoup	peper soup
rmberd	remembered
asgnmt	assignment
cald	called

## Sensational Spelling

Tx, thanx, tnx, t	thanks
@	at
Ame	America
Jandon/Jand	London
C ya	see you
4rm	from
4get	forget
2	to
2day	today

## Text Multilingualism

This is the use of English with indigenous Nigerian languages (especially Yoruba) and Nigerian Pidgin English. The codes are sometimes mixed or switched. Some examples are:

### English and Yoruba

*O ti e le text mi*

*Mo ti fee call e pa*

*Mis u mis ur wahala*

Mi ni ki n text yin pe its  
bin a long time

### Standard English Translations

You cannot even send me a text message

I am almost dead calling you

I miss you and miss your trouble

I said that I should send you a text  
message since it 's being a long time.

### English and Pidgin

*Oga wan see u*

*Why I no see you again*

### Standard English Translations

The boss wants to see you

Why did n't I see you again?

While we are not condemning the use of code-switching/code-mixing in informal communication, our worry stems from the fact that this use is fast becoming endemic in the written English of the school pupils, and the line between formal writing and informal or interactional English is becoming dangerously thin. You even find it difficult to determine whether the writers are knowledgeable in English or not.

## Grammatical Peculiarities

### Punctuation Peculiarities

The texts are characterized by weird punctuation conventions ranging from non-use and deletion of important marks like stops, comma, question mark, colon, semi-colon, etc. Though this may be due to constraint of space and the need to save money, it could also be due to the fact that the writers are ignorant of the marks. This ignorance has however been hidden under popular usage. Almost predictably, traces of these wrong uses of the punctuation marks are being noticed in the written English of the secondary and university students. Let us consider these examples taking from the scripts of some

final year students of *English for Specific Purposes (ESP)*, a part four course in my Department:

- a. ESP which is referred to as: “English for Specific Purposes” emerged after the second world war in 1945 as a result of d [sic] need for an International language to serve as the means of communication for international basis to be used for language of Science and Technology (EST).
- b. ESP is a course that is based on the culture and civilization, English for a specific purpose is a language of the people, in which various things is carried [sic] out, through the ESP course people were able to understand deeply, through what English does, at the International level, though English language is a second language to Nigeria for the ESL, but is used in providing learning and teaching.
- c. The Historical development of ESP, Initially [sic] what we have was ELT that is English Language Teaching which is a medium by which English was taught, later on the focus shifted to EFL which is English for foreign language which enables one to work abroad then ESL which is English as a second language, but all these did not meet the purpose for which it is created, there was now a search for a greener pasture which brought about ESP which mean English for Specific Purposes.

### **Undergraduate and Graduate Students’ Writing**

If we must say the obvious, the way most Nigerian English language undergraduates and graduate students of nowadays write English is very bad. Hardly would you read a two-paragraph essay without wringing about half a dozen errors, ranging from punctuation errors, structural imperfections, and wrong collocation, to incoherent texts and downright gibberish. The few instances given above can testify to this fact. Although not all the students are this poor in their acquisition of English, but the fact that some students majoring in English can write as bad as that is a thing of worry to many language teachers. When given any written exercises, the students prefer to search the web for materials to download verbatim to be presented to the lecturers. Unknown to them, most of these materials on the Internet require serious editorial work and sorting before they could be used. In addition, the students’ interest, which is learning English for academic purposes, was clearly at variance with the language of the Internet, which is a genre that seems to see already established conventions of grammatical structure and rules from a different perspective.

In a situation where there are no materials to be copied, an attempt at composition and writing offhand will almost always result into illogical and incoherent presentations. An attestation to this fact is the numerous error analysis studies that the

Nigerian scholars could not but embark upon on a regular basis (Asiyanbola, 1997, Dosunmi, 1999; Arayela, 2005; Aremu, 2005,).

### **The Use of English at the Highest Academic Level in Nigeria**

Professor Festus Adesanoye recently stirred the hornet nest when he attempted to point out errors in the written English of senior academics (most of whom have retired) from some Nigerian universities. In his words:

I considered it necessary to draw attention to the fact that, for some reasons which I have frankly not been able to explain, it appears that the English language, at the highest possible level of its use in Nigeria, is beginning to present some pathology, which must be instantly diagnosed and redressed....  
(Adesanoye, 2004: 239)

According to him, his appointment as the Director of the Ibadan University Press from 1991 to 2001 afforded him the opportunity to read some inaugural lectures in various areas of human knowledge like Law, Social Sciences, Agriculture, Medicine, etc, that had been presented in the university (We could not say however if any of the lectures was on English or Linguistics). It was while enjoying some of these lectures at some leisure periods he could get from the tasking job that he

...began to notice certain linguistic features in these very serious academic discourses which, though they had most probably escaped the listeners' attention during the oral presentation, could not but be regarded, on sober and attentive reading, as constituting serious noises in their communication... I began to notice that several of the lectures featured certain grammatical (and stylistic) deviations that I knew, from my experience as editor, could not be easily ascribable to the proverbial "printer's devil" (Adesanoye, 2004:242).

He then went ahead to make a list of the offensive aspects of the lectures. Altogether, he gave an assorted assemblage of sixty-five defective sentences. It is from this pool that I have selected the examples below, which I will try to analyse to buttress my submission.

- i. It was frightening that when the University of Ibadan Vice-Chancellorship became vacant in 1971, *the oldest University in the country*, there was a prolonged interregnum as the Premier University could not fill the vacuum for months. (dangling particle/sentence fragment)
- ii. On further discussion, he was frank that Nigerians needed more research on Constitutional Law...to find out why our Constitutions *were breaking down*. (transliteration)
- iii. Unfortunately, we forgot to realize, in time, that having *an old wine in an old bottle would eventually break the bottle*. (semantic illogicality)

- iv. This shows that however popular or benevolent a military government may be, it is still dictatorship and that democracy has gone *by the board* when a group of officers seizes the government. (Error of preposition)
- v. We should shelve white elephant projects and grandiose schemes, *which does not benefit the masses*. (Error of concord)
- vi. The concepts of globalization as it affects the scope of production and distribution of skilled work force *has introduced a new dimension*. (Error of concord)
- vii. There is already evidence to show that Nigerian scholars are consumers of scientific knowledge created particularly by the World Bank, *to shape the thinking of our people and therefore import certain cultural arbitrariness closely associated with economic dominance*. (sentence fragment/dangling particle).
- viii. *There is no concentration of power in any person or body and the principle of separation of powers as enunciated by Montesquieu that if there is too much concentration of power in a particular person or in the same body of magistrates there would be tyranny*. ( the whole sentence is a fragment).
- ix. I have carried out much research *in use of school libraries too numerous to mention*. A few are however cited above. (wrong use of preposition, non-use of article *the* and bad punctuation)
- x. The school *library resource centre* can also be seen as that part of the school *where information is gathered and transferred into knowledge*. (poor use of capitalization and semantic incongruity)
- xi. At this level, education will aim at inculcating permanent literacy and numeracy *the laying down of a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking as well as developing creativity*. (structural error)
- xii. *ecognizing this deplorable state of affairs in the school system who could have championed the cause of school libraries but the minister himself*. (structural defect and bad punctuation)
- xiii. As we already know, rumour has its own very powerful network; *its transmissions is* so fast and rigorous and strongly effective, on many people especially *those men and women with very weak internal control mechanisms*. (punctuation problem and semantic incongruity)
- xiv. Just as it is in economic theories of development, where the essence of economic development is a result of an increase in the economic productivity of the society, *so also it is in the cause of the roles which the Press can play in nation-building*. (wrong structural and semantic parallelism)



- xv. A nation that is socially irresponsible, its journalists would be contaminated with irresponsible instincts and thus *would practice irresponsible journalism, sensationalism, fatherhood bias, outright lies, propaganda journalism and unethical practices*. (wrong structure and verbosity) (Adesanoye, 2004: 244-249)
  
- xvi. These set of environmental officers have enough responsibilities on their hands that to be objective they could not cope with. (sheer gibberish!)
  
- xvii. Our global experience shows that when the two diseases occur together or are present in the same set of and at the same time in animals, there is usually a degree of inverse proportionality between them. (semantic incongruity)
  
- xviii. *As he talks of DIVIDEND [sic] of democracy, let us allow all the birds to fly without collusion with one another, let all the fish continue to swim without collusion with one another during this period of continuity 2007, so as to enjoy the dividend of the press in a democracy*. (sheer gibberish)
  
- xviii. His absolute faith that the courts would save him fell hollow. (semantic incongruity)
  
- xix. Lastly, but not the list, the great colossus ...who steam rolled the plan to make law a reality. (sentence fragment and wrong word use)  
(All the italicizations are mine).

Though, Adesanoye (2004) has refrained from given individual analyses of the errors contained in the citations, he however commented that the deviations manifested in the sentences “range from the relatively unobtrusive incidence of ‘failed concord’ to such grave errors of writing ‘maze structures,’ ‘pattern failure,’ ‘unusual collocations’ and in some extreme sense, cases bordering on sheer gibberish.” We have tried to describe the problems inherent in the ones we have selected from his list (as brief as time and space will permit in a paper of this kind). As can be seen, the errors range from the simple misapplication of punctuation marks, concordance rules; the use of minor sentences as major sentences, dangling particles; to the complex structural incongruities, semantic illogicalities and arrant nonsense.

### **Implications for the Teaching and Learning of English in Nigeria**

While some scholars may see the emergent trends in the use of English in Nigeria in this era of information technology as innovative and as a demonstration of versatility in the Nigerian users, the process of acquisition of a foreign language is a complex one to be competing with such disorderliness. It is a sensitive activity that needs to be handled with care. Therefore, this trendy use of the English language by these young learners who should learn the rules and conventions governing the language to cater for their

academic need and international intelligibility may not augur well for the status of English in Nigeria, which many believe is almost at par with any variety of standard English in the world (Quirk, et al 1985). If anything, the scenario painted has made the work of the teachers more tedious, and we could not agree more with the submission of Bohn (2003) that the teachers must be in combat readiness like a threatened viper anytime some of these faddish ways of writing English is noticed in their students' written English. The teachers should not accept a situation where the students depend on the computer to correct their grammar or punctuate their essays. They should make sure the students are taught the rudiments of writing correct English, and insist, in their composition classes, that the students practice writing different kinds of essays in the classroom.

It is suggested in this study that a review of the English learning methods being used in the country at all levels of English language teaching be done. Those that have become obsolete and irrelevant for this age should be jettisoned, and new ones that can be used to stimulate the interest of the learners embraced. The British Council and the United States Information Service (USIS) and/or other relevant bodies could also come to the aid of second language environments like Nigeria in the area of capacity building of the English language teachers, and the provision of relevant language teaching materials. The English language unarguably is the most widely sought-after language in the world; it is the language of science and technology, the language of the Internet, the language of globalization. It is the language in which over two-third of the world's most prized information is recorded and the language that has made accessibility to the computer more universal than any other known language. But do we realize that to continue to enjoy its pride of place, its teaching/learning and use have to be adequately and properly handled?

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