

Classification and Characterisation of Language Deficiencies in the Written English of Final Year Students of Imo State University, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The thrust of this study is the classification and characterization of the language deficiencies in the written English of the final year students of Imo State University. To be able to achieve the objective of the study, a total of 200 male and female students were randomly selected from the various departments in all the faculties in the University. A written composition test was administered on the students. During the course of the test, the students were required to write on the spot a two-foolscap-paged essay on one out of three topics. The essays generated from the test were assessed by two experienced English language examiners, using multiple marking methods and a scoring rubric based on the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), which is in tune with the analytic scoring method. The deficiencies were ranked using frequency count and simple percentage. It was revealed that the written English of the students was heavily characterised by language deficiencies. The deficiencies identified in the essays by the two examiners were harmonized and classified into 19 groups, which included subject-verb agreement, spelling, punctuation, word choice, capitalization, tense, verb form, preposition, article, amalgamation of words, informal codes, vague construction, sentence fragment, run-on sentence, transliteration, redundancy, unacceptable idiom, pluralization of non-count noun and unacceptable use of cohesive words. While subject-verb agreement deficiency ranked the highest, unacceptable use of cohesive words was the lowest. Since research findings have revealed that there is intensive relationship between extensive reading and effective writing and that Nigerian students at all levels have poor extensive reading culture, it was concluded that the deficiencies were partly as result of the fact that the students have poor extensive reading culture. Consequently, it was recommended that extensive reading should be integrated in the school curriculum at all levels of education.

Keywords: *classification, characterization, language, deficiencies, written English, and final year students*

I. INTRODUCTION

According to Wilkins (1972), “educated men are those that can read and write, and it is believed one undergoes education in order to be able to read and write” (p.6). But in the Nigerian context in contemporary times, Wilkins’ view appears not to be the case. There is ample evidence that many contemporary Nigerian undergraduates as well as graduates are tremendously handicapped with regard to communicating in written English in particular (Oluikpe, 1979; Emonfomwan, 1996; Olajide, 1998; Orisawayi, 2002 & Ekah, 2004). The poor writing ability of many Nigerian undergraduates has constituted a serious concern not only to the parents but also those who teach them and their prospective employers. Poor standard of the written English of many Nigerian undergraduates has been found to be principally responsible for their poor performance in both internal and external examinations. Today, the impression held in many quarters is that the quality of Nigerian graduates is steadily on the decline, and the evidence the proponents of this view have is that Nigerian graduates, among other inadequacies which they exhibit, hardly communicate effectively in writing (Oluikpe, 1979).

It is in reaction to the poor standards of written communication among graduates and the attendant fall in the standard of Nigerian university education that some employers in Nigeria have resorted to subjecting their prospective employees to a written aptitude test to determine their competence in written communication. Besides, the new generation of Nigerian graduates who travel overseas (especially to English-speaking countries) to pursue higher degrees are often made to offer some courses at the lower level to remedy their background before they can be admitted into higher academic programmes. This is because often, a good number of them are found to be deficient in their written communication.

Against this background, it has become absolutely necessary to have a detailed classification and characterization of the deficiencies in the written English of the Nigerian undergraduates as a step towards

proffering lasting solution to this intractable problem of poor communication in written English among students of Nigerian universities. This objective, in a nutshell, is what this paper has set out to achieve.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Olagoke(1975) investigated the composition skills of 200 students drawn from various disciplines at the University of Lagos. The author based the study on the assessment of an essay on the topic: "A typical busy day of my life in the University". The study helped Olagoke to conclude that the common errors of the Nigerian undergraduates in written English revolve around transliterations, unidiomatic collocations, etc. Olagoke's finding is not out of place because of two reasons. First, it is unimaginable to write in a second language without committing errors. Second, since Nigerian students are found to have poor attitude to extensive reading (Ihejirika, 2011), their writing is most likely to be characterized by deficiencies. However, it is pertinent to point out that the study under review does not specify the level of the students investigated, which makes it different from our investigation as this study focuses on final year students.

Odejide(1975) examined a sample of first year undergraduates' essays and discovered the inability of the students to use and sustain an appropriate tone in their writing and their tendency to be didactic and melodramatic. Although Odejide's finding has added its voice to the fact that the written English of the Nigerian students is deficient, the study is different from the present investigation based on the study population. Whereas Odejide investigated first year students, the present investigation focuses on final year students.

Adesaonye(1976), in his own investigation, studied the written English of second and third year Nigerian undergraduates in the Humanities and identified serious deviations from standard English in syntax, lexis, tenor and punctuation. Although Adesaonye's finding reiterates the fact that the writing of the Nigerian students is deficient, the study differs from the present investigation in two respects. Whereas Adesaonye's study was based on second and third year students selected from Humanities only, the present investigation focuses on final year students in all disciplines in Imo State University.

Using 200 essays of freshmen offering composition courses in the Department of Language Arts, University of Ibadan to investigate and quantify the writing problems of this class of students, Ekong (1981) discovered that the sample population had basic problems in organization and development of ideas in their essays. The details of the problem, according to her, included inability to support generalizations with appropriate details and failure to interpret and maintain logical relationship among ideas. It is also obvious that Ekong's study is different from the present investigation. Whereas Ekong investigated freshmen irrespective of their discipline, our study focuses on final year students. Besides, the focus of this study is language component of writing.

Eka(2000) investigated and compared the written English of pre-degree and first year students at the University of Uyo. His findings showed that both categories of students were deficient in syntax, diction and mechanics. Although Eka's finding reiterates the view that the writing of Nigerian students is characterized by myriad of deficiencies, his study populations were pre-degree students and this makes his study different from the present investigation that focuses on final year undergraduates.

In a related study at the University of Calabar, Orisawayi (2002), using freshmen as his population studied their written English. The result of the investigation showed that the population had writing problems ranging from grammar, spelling, lexical choice, lack of coordination between sound and spelling, poor idioms to lack of reasonable grip on the general expression style. Orisawayi's finding is evidence that points to the fact that the writing of Nigerian students is characterized by writing deficiencies. However, it is pertinent to point out that the focus of the study under review was freshmen, which makes it different from the present investigation that has final year undergraduate as the study population.

The review of the research findings above has revealed that the written English of the Nigerian students investigated was characterized by various dimensions of language problems and deficiencies. However, it is evident from the review that none of the studies reviewed focused on final year students in the university. This singular feature, therefore, justifies the present study which focuses on final year students.

III. METHODOLOGY

The sample population for this study comprised the final year 2014/2015 Academic Session students in all departments in all the faculties in Imo State University, Owerri. The choice of final year students in this study is informed by some reasons. First, earlier similar investigations were based on other levels of students other than final year. Second, it is expected that by the final year, the students must have gone through the relevant writing courses in their programmes that are supposed to impact positively on their writing ability.

Above all, the study was aimed at determining how prepared the students were writing-wise to face the writing tasks ahead of them since they are at the threshold of graduation.

The intention was not to investigate the entire final year students in the university because such an approach would be cumbersome to the extent that it would be difficult to address all the relevant variables in the study. Consequently, we adopted the random sampling technique by which a total of 200 students (male and female) were selected from the various departments in all the faculties in the university.

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a test on expository writing. For the test, the subjects were required to write an expository essay of not less than two foolscap pages on one out of three topics. The topics were:

- (I) The Place of Science and Technology in National Development
- (ii) A Cultural Festival in my Community
- (iii) Youth Restiveness in Nigeria.

The three topics were chosen in order to give the students the freedom to make a choice they were familiar with and they could write effectively because it is believed that students do better when they write on a topic they are familiar with (Hamp-lyons, 1990).

Since our study covered different departments in the same university, the instrument was administered at different times that were suitable for each department. The writing test was administered by the researcher, who was assisted by the individual lecturers who taught in the various departments. The subjects were required to write the expository essay before the researcher and his assistants on a writing sheet under the supervision of the researcher. This approach was intended to eschew any variable that might interfere with the originality of the subjects' writing if it were to be a take-home test. Though the subjects were required to write about two foolscap pages, the writing lasted for a maximum of one and a half hours. The time duration was intended to de-emphasize examination conditions and allow the subjects to write at their own pace.

In view of the nature of the test and the questions administered, the data generated were the expository essays written by the subjects. In assessing the essays, we adopted the analytic scale rating method as against the holistic grading. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), "analytic scale rating has been and remains a popular way to assign a grade to students' writing and to provide feedback on specific aspects of the writing" (p.409). Again, since our aim in this study is to identify the language deficiencies of the subjects in their written composition, analytic scoring was found most suitable because according to Currier (2008), it is a scoring method commonly used to identify weaknesses in a student's writing. We also adopted a scoring rubric based on the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981), which is in tune with the analytic scoring method.

Also, we applied the multiple marking method. In doing so, we engaged the services of two independent professionally competent assessors; one of them was the researcher. The significance of this method is that multiple judgments lead to a "true" score more than any single judgment (Hamp-lyons, 1990). The language deficiencies identified by the two assessors were harmonized and classified. The analytical tools we applied for the analysis of the data were the simple percentage and frequency count.

IV. RESULT

Language Deficiencies in the Written Composition

The language deficiencies in the written composition by the subjects were identified and classified into 19 items. The details of the analysis of the language deficiencies as presented on Table 1 below, shows that subject-verb agreement and spelling deficiencies ranked the highest, having 8.9% and 8.3% occurrences respectively, while unacceptable idioms (1.9%), pluralization of non-count noun (1.7%) and unacceptable use of cohesive words (1.6%) had the least occurrences.

Table 1: Classification Of The Writing Deficiencies Of The Subjects

S/No.	Name of Deficiency	Frequency	Percentage	Mean
1.	Subject-Verb Agreement	175	8.9%	1.75
2.	Spelling	162	8.3%	1.62
3.	Punctuation	148	7.6%	1.48
4.	Word Choice	142	7.2%	1.42
5.	Capitalization	135	6.7%	1.35
6.	Paragraphing	134	6.8%	1.34
7.	Tense	132	6.7%	1.32
8.	Verb Form	86	4.3%	0.86
9.	Preposition	75	3.8%	0.75
10.	Article	72	3.7%	0.72
11.	Amalgamation Of Words	67	3.4%	0.67
12.	Splitting Of Words	65	3.3%	0.65
13.	Informal Code	62	3.2%	0.62
14.	Vague Construction	57	2.9%	0.53
15.	Run-On Sentence	49	2.5%	0.45
16.	Redundancy	42	2.1%	0.42
17.	Unacceptable Idiom	38	1.9%	0.38
18.	Pluralization Of Non-Count Noun	34	1.7%	0.34
19.	Unacceptable Use Of Cohesive Words	32	1.6%	0.32
	Total	1960	100%	

(Source: Written Test on Expository Essay by the Subjects)

V. DISCUSSION

The analysis on Table 1 above revealed that the written English of the final year students in Imo State University was characterized by deficiencies. The facts from the corpus (the expository writing of the subjects) show that a large number of the errors as classified (Table 1) have high frequency of occurrence, and they include subject-verb agreement, spelling, punctuation, word choice, capitalization, tense, verb form, preposition and article. These deficiencies, no doubt, significantly affected the standard of the written English of the subjects.

From all indications, it is crystal clear that the written English of the subjects is grossly characterized by deficiencies. This finding is supported by Widdowson (1979) which states that errors of cohesion and coherence are prominent in second language writings and Oluikpe (1984) who laments that most of our freshmen enter the university ill-equipped to organise and develop their thoughts in writing. Our finding is also supported by the view of other several scholars (Odejide, 1979, Ekong, 1981 & Jibowo, 2006).

This finding is also consistent with the process of second language learning in general and second language writing in particular. It is rather inconceivable to talk about second language writing without mentioning deficiency or error. It is in recognition of this fact that Nelson Brooks quoted in Headbloom (1979) comments that it is just unrealistic to reckon on language learning without errors as to reckon on existence without sin. Therefore, the issue of deficiencies or errors in the written English of the study population is not unusual given the second language situation. But what is really worrisome in the context of this study is the magnitude of the deficiencies. Besides, when one considers the fact that the subjects are at the threshold of bagging university degrees; this finding becomes startling as it has the capacity of compelling one to believe the view being held in several quarters that many Nigerian graduates today hardly communicate effectively in both spoken and written English.

In explaining and justifying this finding, it is absolutely necessary to explicate the factors that could be responsible for the deficiencies. First, research findings as quoted earlier point to the fact that Nigerian students at all levels, have poor attitude to extensive reading. Extensive reading has significant effect on writing according to research findings. Therefore, if the subjects do not read extensively, it is expected that their written English will not only be characterised by deficiencies but also be of low standard.

Second, it is common knowledge that the teaching of English in general and writing in particular in our primary and secondary schools have been everything but effective. Where it is not the problem of inadequate

teaching and learning resources, the accusing finger is pointed at the teacher. For instance, experience has shown that in some extreme cases, non-English specialists are charged with the responsibility of teaching the English language in primary and secondary schools for want of qualified English teachers (Oluikpe&Nwaebge, 1979). The consequence of this practice is that today many students admitted in our universities are deficient in English, a stigma they carry throughout their university years and beyond.

It is because of the fact that many freshmen are admitted to tertiary institutions with poor background in English that necessitated the introduction of the "Use of English" or "General English" courses in tertiary institutions. The aim is to remedy the poor background of the freshmen and equip them with the necessary language skills that would enable them cope with the challenges of higher education. Today in our universities and other tertiary institutions, it is doubtful if the aim has been achieved. Experience has shown that the teaching of "Use of English" in tertiary institutions has not been effectively carried out due to some challenges which include large class, inadequate teaching and learning resources, nonchalant attitude on the part of the freshmen, inadequate teaching periods and so on (Olajide, 1988, Esimaje, 2002). With these challenges in place, the freshmen pass through "Use of English" without it passing through them. In the final analysis, the students are still found to be less proficient in the use of English even in their final year as has been revealed in this study. This development has regrettably given rise to the impression being held in several quarters that many Nigerian graduates hardly communicate effectively both in spoken and written English.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this study, attempt has been made to classify and characterize the language deficiencies in the written English of the final year students of Imo State University. It is revealed that the written English of the students is heavily characterised by various language deficiencies, which is classified into 19 headings, ranging from subject-verb agreement to unacceptable use of cohesive devices. It is discovered that the classes of the deficiencies that have frequent occurrence are subject-verb agreement, spelling, punctuation, word choice, capitalization, tense, verb form, preposition and article. These errors account for the poor standard of the written English of the population, which is partly responsible for their poor academic performance and by extension unemployment. Since it has been reiterated by research findings that there is correlation between extensive reading and effective writing, it is not out of place to conclude that students' written English is heavily characterized by language deficiencies partly because they have poor extensive reading culture. It is hoped that the outcome of this investigation would enable teachers of English language at all levels of education to know areas to place emphasis in a writing classroom in a second language situation.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the objectives and findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. The primary and secondary school curricula should be reviewed to make adequate provisions for the teaching of extensive reading as a core subject in primary and secondary schools in Nigeria or any other speech community where English is taught and learnt as a second language. For effective implementation of this recommendation in the school system, extensive reading should be made an examination subject. This is without prejudice to the teaching of the English literature, which is ongoing in secondary schools. The extensive reading should be made compulsory up to the senior secondary level.
2. At the tertiary institutions including universities, the curricula should be revised to make provision for the teaching of extensive reading as a compulsory general study course or as an important component of "Use of English" or "General English", which already exists. The extensive reading as a general study course should be made to run throughout the duration of university or tertiary education.
3. The teaching of writing as well as grammar should be intensified in both primary and secondary schools. At the university and other tertiary institutions, the "Use of English" or "General English" programmes should make adequate provisions for effective teaching of writing and grammar. At all levels, the teaching of writing and grammar should be integrated with extensive reading.
4. The "Use of English" programme should be made to run for at least four semesters in universities. In addition, the credit hours for the "Use of English" courses should be stepped up to ensure that enough time is made available for the teaching of the courses. Arrangements should be made by the authorities concerned to ensure that qualified English language lecturers are recruited in the Departments of General Studies to ensure that the lecturer student-ratio is not more than 1-50.
5. Arrangements should be made to introduce "writing across the curriculum" in universities and other tertiary institutions. Lecturers in other subject areas, especially science and technology, should encourage their students to practise writing by giving them assignments which would require them to write extensively.
6. The authorities in the education sector should live up to their statutory responsibilities by ensuring that adequate arrangements are made to set up functional libraries in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions.

The libraries should be stocked with the necessary library resources including extensive reading materials which should be meaningful to the pupils and students and also be of interest to them. Efforts should be made to ensure that the pupils and students are taught and encouraged to make effective use of the library.

7. Parents on their part should encourage extensive reading by creating conducive reading environment in the homes. They should learn to buy newspapers, magazines, novels, etc. And keep in the homes for pleasure reading of their children and wards. When these reading materials are made available in the homes, the parents should encourage their children to devote time to read them by discouraging them from spending all their leisure time on watching home videos, playing computer games or engaging in time wasting activities.

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