

# An Appraisal of the Written English of First Year Students of a Nigerian University: Implications for Academic Success & Future Leadership

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## The Context

- English Language in Nigeria:
  - Linguistic heterogeneous (400+ languages)
  - Language of government, education, commerce & inter-ethnic communication.
  - Medium of instruction from 4th year of Basic Education onward (NPE 2004)
  - Proficiency in its four skills—listening, speaking, reading and writing—a necessity.
  - A credit pass in English at O'Level required for admission into Nigerian university.
  - Use of English compulsory paper for UME exams.

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## The Context

- Performance in English O'level exams has been consistently deteriorating.
- Predominantly in written English (summaries, essays & letters)
- Problem areas include:
  - inability to spell or punctuate correctly
  - abuse of grammar
  - ignorance of difference btw sentence & phrase
  - inability to express ideas correctly
  - immature vocabulary & use of wrong words

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## The Context

- University presumably offer admissions to students who had scaled the hurdles of the O'levels & UME and thus have evidence of good performance in English?
- However, a credit in English did not necessarily mean that a student had the linguistic ability required to work at the higher education level (Okere, 1984; Okenimkpe, 2005)
- Realization led to inclusion of Communication Skills courses (*Use of English*) in the curriculum of first year students in the nation's tertiary institutions.

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## The 'Use of English' Curriculum

- Course usually runs for 1 or 2 semesters.
- Purpose
  - Remedial- to stamp out the effects of defective instruction in ESL at earlier levels.
  - Prepare students with communications skills required for advance study.
  - Prepare students who upon graduation will join the elite group in the society and are then expected to produce models of Standard English.
- Content
  - Often a rerun of the O'level syllabus- elements of grammar, types of essays and letters, comprehension & summary, plus perhaps a few topics on varieties and standards of usage

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## The Problem

- The course is largely ineffective:
  - Large number of students involved negates the essential principles of intensive practice and close personal attention for effective language learning.
  - Disproportionate teacher-student ratio (1:300+)
  - No attempt at sorting the students into different ability groups
  - Content of syllabus results in careless attitude by freshman who often has an exaggerated sense of competence in the use of English.
- Result is relegation of 'Use of English' to the status of a 'necessary evil' that a freshman must pass to fulfill the graduation requirement.

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## Purpose of Study



- Study appraised the written English of 1st year students of a Nigerian university that had completed the freshman's Use of English course; with a view to ascertaining the level of improvement that they had had in their written English.
- Explored answers to the problem:
  - ✦ Judging from the poor English language background of 1st year students in Nigerian universities, can the one-session '*Use of English*' course offered by them provide any significant improvement in grammatical competence in English?

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## Research Questions



- Do first year students demonstrate better command of the grammar of English at the end of the Use of English course?
- What is the nature of the grammatical errors in the students' written English?

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## Methodology



- **Design**
  - ✦ Case study of 1st year students of a Nigerian university.
  - ✦ Describes the grammatical proficiency of the students as displayed in their sentence construction in a given writing task.
- **Subjects**
  - ✦ 200 1st year students (125 female, 75 male).
  - ✦ Across disciplines: 92 Arts, 60 Science, & 58 Social Sciences.
  - ✦ All offered the Use of English during 1<sup>st</sup> semester of 1<sup>st</sup> year in school.

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## Methodology



- **Procedure**
  - ✦ Towards the end of the course, students asked to write a 2-page essay on "*Why students engage in examination malpractice*".
  - ✦ The essay was meant to be part of their CA. It was written in the class, but the students were given sufficient time to write as best as they could. The researchers then marked the scripts and conducted an in- depth analysis of the grammatical errors committed by the students.

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## Results



- While some students displayed some level of good command of English, the generality of others simply did not do well.
- The 200 scripts of the students contain 1,608 complete sentences.
  - ✦ 726 punctuation errors (leading to several dangling modifiers, sentence fragments and other faulty sentences)
  - ✦ 331 spelling errors
  - ✦ 782 general grammar errors in the use of the various classes of words in sentences.

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## Sample Errors



- **Literal Translation**
  - ✗ ...it is not the best advice for a student to **put his mind on it**. (think about it)
  - ✗ ...when examination malpractice **is been done**... (is taking place)
- **Wrong nominalization**
  - ✗ ...that problem is the **indulgement** in examination malpractice...(involvement)
  - ✗ ...the **consiquency** of the students action is that... (consequence)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Wrong Verbalisation

- ✖ They have no option than for them to **malpractice** for them to make their result at **ones (once)**. (engage in malpractice)
- ✖ Some also **girraffed** into other students papers...(peep)

### ● Wrong adjective form

- ✖ ...the possible solution to this **horrific** matter is...(horrible)
- ✖ ...if teachers can be **dedicative** to there duties... (dedicated)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Wrong adverbial form

- ✖ ...no matter **how** it **take(s)**... (what)
- ✖ ...as a result of not being **fulling** prepared for the examination... (fully)

### ● Number errors in nouns

- ✖ ...it has been the problem of **student** not to...(students)
- ✖ ...because they have a **poor education carrier** (poor education)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Reflexives

- ✖ ...they most have prepared **themselves**... (themselves)
- ✖ ...they **themselves** can still help **theirself**... (themselves)

### ● Colloquialisms

- ✖ ...even sometime they can **settle there friends**... (bribe their friends)
- ✖ ...they often **give their body to** lecturers (engage in immoral sexual relationship with)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Agreement error

- ✖ ...before the examination **start or commence**... (starts/commences)
- ✖ ...examination malpractices **has been**... (have been)

### ● Confusion of homonyms

- ✖ ...but they have **know** option... (no)
- ✖ ...to make **there** result at **ones**... (their...once)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Wrong use of tenses

- ✖ Because **they have** a poor education **carrier** including **they don't have** a good background... (they had/they didn't have)
- ✖ When I sat for my exam, I **don't** cheat that's why I **don't** pass the first time. (didn't)

### ● Wrong verb forms

- ✖ ...examination malpractice is **been done**...(being)
- ✖ ...these **can be stop** if the teachers and students...(can be stopped)

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## Sample Errors



### ● Punctuation errors

- ✖ .....now **lets** define examination malpractice... (let's)
- ✖ **At the end of the day they realized** that does people in the class... (At the end of the day, they...those)

### ● Spelling errors

- ✖ ...the reason why students **indurge** themselves into examination malpractice...(indulge)
- ✖ ...they don't have a good background **accedemy**... (academic)

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## Samples Errors



### ■ Run-on sentences

- ✱ This is because they have a poor education carrier including they don't have a good background accedemy when they are in school or it may be from the parent.
- ✱ The so-called representatives we elected are misbehaving officially is also a reward for examination malpractice

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## Discussion



- The *Use of English* as currently being run has not provided the much needed remediation for the freshmen's deficiency in written English, especially with reference to the grammar of English.
- Though the performance may not be representative of all first year students of Nigerian universities, it is clear that their experiences in *Use of English* course are similar in terms of the scope of the course and the conditions under which they learn it. One may therefore not expect much difference in performance.

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## Conclusion & Recommendations



- Error-free writing is not only desirable, it is also essential to effective communication.
- Many undergraduates are barely able to cope with their courses of study, not because of any lack of intelligence, but because their use of English language betrays them at crucial moments.
- At the tertiary level where the future professional niche of the students is being carved out for them, it might be a better idea to think about English for specific disciplines.
- Need to review the content and duration of the Use of English curriculum package for freshmen as currently provided for the first year students becomes crucial.

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## Limitations of Study



- This study no doubt has its limitations.
  - Performance of the students before the *Use of English* class was not assessed. Might have provided some insight into whether there was any significant difference in their performance before and after the course.
  - No attempt was made to compare the performance of the students across different disciplines, and possibly different L1 backgrounds.
  - The researchers did not employ statistical methods of analysis for this study, relying rather on the bare data, as presented, to speak for themselves
- These notwithstanding, the purpose of the study has been to ascertain that the first year students still fare badly in spite of their being taught the Use of English course for a semester.

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*Thank you for your  
kind attention*



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