



Performance in English Grammar among Working-class Nigerians: A Case Study of Written Communications in Nigerian Universities

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Abstract: This study investigates the level of competence which working-class Nigerians exhibit as far as effective communication in English, Nigeria's lingua franca, is concerned. One cannot ignore the fact that there are several factors which contribute to lack of skills in English among Nigerians, just as one cannot ignore the truism that there are a lot of people who had Credit Pass in English and gained admissions into tertiary institutions through fowl means, yet graduated in their respective disciplines and became part of the workforce whether or not their performance in English is satisfactory. Relying on contemporary English grammar, the analyses done in this research, show that the chunk of the Nigerian workforce is incompetent in the grammar (incorrect sentences and misuse of the parts of speech) of English – as evident in written communications: memos, reports, minutes of meeting and letters from Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Nigerian Workforce, Nigerian Universities, Contemporary English Grammar, Performance, Written Communication, The English Sentence

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to promote competence in English, not just among working-class Nigerians, but also among other Nigerians. English studies in Nigeria have not yielded expected results. Therefore, the pedagogical process which does not merely teach foreign or second language, but also examines it in formal instructional setting, has to be revisited. The fact that English is a foreign language in Nigeria is not a justification for the embarrassingly low level of performance in it. So long as competency in English does not hinder proficiency in Nigerian languages, there is need for Nigerians to improve in their use of English. The roles of English in nation-building make it urgent for Nigerians to become literates in the language. According to Banjo, Nigerian Educator must have a foreign language component while at the same time developing the Nigerian languages to the fullest. Literacy in English is expected to impact on the productivity of the Nigerian workers in public and private establishments. Indeed, the overall development of the country is determined by effective use of English which is Nigeria's Official Language. It is unfortunate that formal education in Nigeria has failed to deliver its mandate of producing literates in English. Many Nigerian so-called literates do not demonstrate tacit competence in English Language as far as written and spoken communications are concerned. More efforts are needed to teach English in schools before its full developmental potentials can be achieved in the country. It is unfortunate that workers in Nigerian universities are far below native-like control of the different aspects of skills in English. Indeed, competency in the use of English Language presupposes having adequate speaking, reading and writing skills. The project of enhancing linguistic competence in English studies in Nigeria has remained a matter of rhetoric for decades. In the distant past, Credit Pass in English was not compulsory for admissions into certain Courses (particularly the science-based ones) in Nigeria's tertiary institutions. Perhaps

this trend contributed to the poor attitude towards learning the language. However, the country's education system later acknowledged the instrumentality of English in nation-building in a country like Nigeria where the language anchors people's careers; see Adegbiya (1992), Omolewa (1978), Ayodabo and Acheoah (2013), Butari (2010) and Ugoji (2010) for the roles of English in Nigeria. Scholars who contend for the teaching of English as a core subject in the Curriculum of schools (as entrenched in the Federal Constitution of 1979 as well as that of 1999), and acknowledge the Language as a critical instrument of Nigeria's development include: Butari (ibid.) and Ugoji (ibid.). See Emenajo (2010) for insights on the technological implications of literacy in a National Language. English is worth being studied extensively because: it has undergone graphisation (standardized orthography); its numeration system of English is modernized (the decimal principle operates); it is potent as a metalanguage (being able to function as a medium of instruction in schools); the language is widely used in television and radio broadcasting; and it is the language of literary writing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions of this study are pungent and thought-provoking:

- (i) What is the proficiency level in English among those who constitute the Nigerian workforce?
- (ii) What are the causes of poor mastery of English by working-class adults in Nigeria?
- (iii) How can English be instrumental to better performance at work places?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant to the Nigerian workforce in particular and the Nigerian speakers of English in general; the analysis provides insights on common errors of grammar and how to construct sentences that are void of grammatical errors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ayodabo and Acheoah (ibid.) submit that "after about two hundred years of British rule, Nigeria gained independence. However, post-independence institutions were immersed in the British legacy which projected English as a unifying language that operated in important aspects of daily life. Akindele and Adegbite (1999) and Babajide (2001) share this view. In ESL (English as a Second Language) context, English is the dominant language in official situations. This is what obtains in contemporary Nigeria where English is used as a National Language. Oyeleye (2005) establishes a link between globalization and English. He traces the roots of globalization to capitalism and its attendant appendages. He views English as a consequence of, and a contributor to globalization which is a new entrant into English discourse, and influences regional Englishes. Two factors that influence the present-day status of English are the expansion of British colonial power which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the main economic power-block of the twentieth century. It is the latter factor which continues to direct the global status of English today. English is no doubt, a vehicle for cross-border communication.

Acheoah and Adeoye (2015) note that more efforts are needed to teach English in schools before its full developmental potentials can be achieved in the country. Realizing the importance of English in Mass Literacy, the government of Nigeria formulated Adult Education policies; literacy in English is not outside the objectives of such policies. However, the extremely low literacy level in English became a major set-back in the pedagogical process. Poor performance in English grammar among working-class Nigerians is therefore not incidental.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The major theoretical framework for the analysis of the data is principles of Structural Grammar (see Adegbiya 1999 for tips on grammatical theories) which explains grammatical units such subject, verb, predicate, word-

classes and other principles of English grammar. This study also hinges on the principles of Contemporary English Usage in the analysis of the eight corpora (data) extracted from macro structures (the categories of written communications listed in 4.1 above), to identify, analyze and correct errors of grammar. Instructive texts in contemporary English grammar include: Osisanwo (1999), Leech G. & Svartvik (2002), Quirk R. & Greenbaum S. (2004) and Murphy R. (2004).

METHODOLOGY

The data of this study are generated using certain objective parameters: types of grammatical errors evident in each datum; number of grammatical errors in each datum; and the quality of analysis that can be made from each datum. Different types of written communications (letters, memos, reports, and minutes of meeting) are gathered from universities in Nigeria. Micro structures (extracted sentences) constituted samples for analysis. Errors in each datum are underlined and listed with superscript Roman Numerals.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

The corpora are analyzed as follows:

(a) However, the Chairman said if he wasi the leader of the Accreditation Team, he willi adviceiii all Departments to ensure that students were on ground during the exercise. In serious tertiary institutions, when most students are available during Accreditation, it is not because their institution has rangiv the bell for them to gather.

Subject-verb concord rule makes it clear that singular subjects are used with singular verb, while plural subjects are used with plural verbs; but there are exceptions to this rule. The use of the verb “was” in (ai) is a wrong application of subject-verb concord rule. The writer is supposed to use the plural verb “were” because in English, the subjunctive mood – a mood that predicates what is not the case (a supposition) – does not obey subject-verb concord rule; thus, plural verbs are used with singular subject (nouns or pronouns).

According to contemporary English grammar, clauses of a sentence should have the same tense; that is, a present tense in the preceding clause should be followed by a present tense in the following clause. Similarly, a past tense in the preceding clause should be followed by a past tense in the following clause. This principle operates for all other tenses and aspects. This grammatical process is called “tense balancing” or “verbal sequence”. However, there are exceptions to this rule. For example, a present tense is used after a past tense if the present tense clause makes a predication that is existential (a universal truth). Consider:

- When Tommy visited (past tense verb) me he said (past tense verb) snow is (present tense verb) white.
- The teacher entered (past tense verb) the class and taught (past tense verb) the pupils that water is (present tense verb) liquid.

Since (a) does not have any existential proposition, a past tense (would) is needed to replace (aii).

The verb “advise” is to replace the noun “advice” in (aiii). In addition, “rung” should replace “rang” in (aiv) because perfect tense auxiliary markers (has, have, had) should be used with past participle (past perfect) forms of verbs.

(b)When any member of staff completes Study Leave, the HOD must toi inform the Registry that the member of staff concerned has resumed duty. It is high time academic and non-academic members of staff obeyii the University’s rules and regulations.

Bare infinitival verbs in English include “must”, “let” and “make”. They do not take “to”¹. Therefore, the verb phrase “must inform” should replace “must to inform” in (b). In contemporary English grammar, the expression “It is high time” should be followed by the structure: subject (noun or pronoun) + past tense. This means that the past tense verb “obeyed” should replace the present tense “obey”.

(c) All such documents supposedi to be filed. Some Departments used to doii the right things, and they have not stopped doing so. The authority is looking forward to screeniii Units and Departments. A Department or Unit looseniv respect if it does not conform to directives.

The correct use of “supposed” in English predication is:

Subject +Auxiliary + Supposed

The following are sentential examples:

- We are supposed to know that it was prepared by Tom.
- John was supposed to take some fruits home yesterday.
- The children were supposed to take their lunch before leaving.

To correct (ci), the sentence should be “All such documents are supposed to be filed ...”

It is common to find speakers of English using “used to” for a habitual action instead of using it for an action that no longer takes place. For a habitual action, English accepts the use of “normally”, “always” or “usually”. The second clause of (cii) shows that the Departments concerned still do the right things².

The expression “looking forward to” is to be followed by a present continuous tense; “screening” should replace “screen” in (ciii).

“Loose” is an adjective which means “not tight”. It is also a verb which means “to make free from tying”. “Loosen” is a verb which means “to make not very tight”. “Loose” is a verb which means “not to be in contact with something or someone anymore”. “Lost” is the past tense of “lose” while “loosed” is the past tense of “loose”. “Loss” means “to part with something e.g.:

Hannah lost her uncle. The loss is painful.

To correct (civ) “looses” should replace “loosen”.

(d) We were able to achieve our goals owing to the fact that we did the right things at the right time. The third agendum comprises ofii things you all know. We shall discuss aboutiii the things here.

The adverb “owing to” is used with a clause that makes a negative remark; to achieve goals as contained in the first sentence of (d) is not a negative remark. The writer can write thus:

- We were not able to achieve our goals owing to the fact that we did not do the right things at the right time.
- We were able to achieve our goals due to the fact that we did the right things at the right time³.

Prepositions do not immediately follow certain verbs – such verbs take direct object. As far as contemporary English grammar is concerned, (dii) is not grammatical. English accepts the form: “consists” + Preposition (e.g. “consists of”) whereas the verb “comprises” takes a direct object. For the second sentence of (d) to be correct, it should be re-expressed as “The third agendum comprises things you all know”. Like “comprises”, the verb “discuss” should be used with a direct object. Therefore, to correct (diii), the writer should write the third sentence thus:

- We shall discuss the things here.

(e) Although the interview held, yeti the expected results could not be achieved. I observed that those interviewed previously are more betterii.

The ungrammaticality of (ei) is clear – the conjunction “yet” cannot be used with “although” (a clause which functions as an adverb of concession). The second sentence, that is, (eii) is a grammatical error known as double

comparative. In the grammar of English, monosyllabic adjective words form their comparative and superlative degrees with the -er and -est suffixes respectively, whereas words with two or more syllables use more and most to form their comparative and superlative degrees respectively. However, there are exceptions to these rules. For example, the comparative and superlative degrees of the adjective “good” are “better” and “best” respectively. This makes the addition of “more” to form “more better” extraneous and ungrammatical.

(f) We should all be ready to cooperate with each otheri. Cooperation has been our pillar sinceii.

The use of “all” implies that the predication concerns more than two people, in which case “each other” is an ungrammatical choice in the sentence. The reciprocal pronouns “each other” and “one another” have grammatical principles for their use. The former is used with two persons whereas the latter is used with three or more persons. Examples are as follows:

- Hannah and her cousin are ready to cooperate with each other.
- Hannah and her two cousins are ready to cooperate with one another.

Besides (fii), (fiii) is also ungrammatical because in the grammar of English, “since” is used with the time an action started e.g.:

- Cooperation has been our pillar since the institution was established.

(g) I have to use this forum to congratulate the Faculty fori the great success recorded. Do not lossii the spirit that has been sustaining the Faculty.

Prepositions are the smallest words in English, but they perform important grammatical functions in the language. They are complex, and are used even in phrasal verbs. Prepositions are used with appropriate parts of speech (words classes). As a verb, “congratulate” is used with the preposition “on”; therefore, “for” as in (gi) should simply be replaced by “on”. Other examples of the prepositions which certain parts of speech are used with are underlined as follows:

- desist from;
- instrumental to;
- insist on;
- abide by/with;
- conform to.

It is obvious in (gii) that the writer does not understand the difference between “loss” and “lose”. “Lose” means “to stop being in possession of something unwillingly”. The past tense and past participle is “lost”. Loss means the noun form of “lose”. Examples are shown below:

- It is shocking to lose a close friend.
- Although the woman lost her father during the war, she was still emotionally stable until she lost her husband the following year.

(h) The meeting eventually took place. The members held a meeting to discuss how to grow such flowers in my office (hi). Although water is our problem in this University, arrangements have to be made to ensure that the flowers get regular water supply (hii). This was part of the unanimous recommendations of the Committee.

The writer of (h) lacks knowledge of the grammatical rules that govern the construction of the English sentence4. Indeed, while (hi) is a sentence error known as “faulty predication”, (hii) is an error known as “misplaced modifier”. Sentence errors include:

(1.) *Faulty Predication*: This is when the sentence makes a predication that is not true – as in (hi) in which we can say that water – which is useful to humans – cannot be a problem whereas lack of water can be a problem.

(2.) *Misplaced Modifier*: This is when the modifying part of a sentence is misplaced to convey an unintended message. For instance, the writer of (hii) ended up saying flowers are to be grown in the office whereas the intended message is that the meeting took place in the office. The sentence should be reconstructed thus:

- The members held a meeting in my office to discuss how to grow such flowers.

(3) *Dangling Modifier*: In this kind of sentence, the modifier does not modify any part of the sentence. E.g.:

When going to school, a dog was barking⁵.

(4) *Faulty Parallelism*: A sentence of this kind presents elements that are not similar. E.g.:

The issues are political, economical and socially.

(5) *Run-on Sentence*: In this category of error, the absence of a full stop makes the sentence run into another. E.g.: We could not accept the offer, they presented it too late⁷.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this section of the paper, we present the findings, discussion, conclusion and recommendations.

RESULTS

Below are the results of this study:

- i. Many incompetent teachers teach English at all levels of formal education;
- ii. Although many university Lecturers are qualified to teach the Language, they do not work hard enough to impact meaningfully on the undergraduates (learners);
- iii. It is only through concerted efforts on the part of students, lecturers, educational institutions and the government (State and Federal Governments) that performance in English can be enhanced;
- iv. English is widely believed to have developmental potentials in Nigeria;
- v. The credentials of the English Language in nation-building is not a debate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To ensure adequate mastery of the discrete skills of the language, the different level-based Curriculums of formal education emphasize teaching of vocabulary, writing, grammar, etc. Unfortunately, these skills are not adequately mastered by Nigerian learners. It is unfortunate that schools teach English Language towards literacy rather than proficiency. If the government does not provide incentives for teaching English towards both literacy and proficiency, poor use of English will remain a trend among the Nigerian working-class adults. Facilitators of effective teaching and learning of English Language include: proficient teachers, well prepared curriculums, proper test instruments, positive attitudes, adequate and conducive classrooms, laboratories, efficient monitoring of activities by school authorities and sincere pragmatic government involvement.

Indeed, it is unfortunate that Nigerian so-called literates speak English with little or no trace of native-like control of lexical, grammatical and phonological components of the language.

Indeed, competence in the use of English Language also presupposes having adequate speaking, reading and writing skills. The project of enhancing linguistic competence in English studies has been abandoned in Nigeria. So long as success is the aggregate of inputs, goal-driven approach towards locating the place of English in

nation-building will facilitate the teaching and learning of the language, and the resultant effect will be that working-class Nigerians (and other Nigerian learners of English) will be competent in the grammar, lexis, phonology and other aspects of skills in the language.

Different factors account for poor teaching, learning and assessing of English in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in the country: many learners are not serious; many teachers are incompetent; schools lack facilities; test instruments are not appropriate; inimical attitudinal and environmental factors bedevil the pedagogical process; and there is weak government participation. This study strongly holds the view that the age-long problem of poor performance in the use of English among working-class Nigerians can be curbed if the following steps are taken:

- i. There should be periodic workshops for teachers at all levels of formal education, to update their knowledge of teaching techniques;
- ii. Class population has to be significantly reduced for result-oriented teaching and learning of English Language, bearing in mind, the uneven academic abilities of the ESL (English as a Second Language) learners;
- iii. Education should be affordable, so that the teeming population of Nigerians who need proficiency or literacy in English to thrive in their respective careers will have their desires met;
- iv. Test instruments in English Language should be reliable;
- v. The English Curriculums of different levels of formal education in Nigeria should be reviewed periodically;
- vi. The government should be actively involved in school management or administration by evolving productive policies and providing incentives at all levels of formal education (cf. Acheoah and Adeoye *ibid.*).

Realizing the importance of English in Mass Literacy, nation-hood and national transformation, the government of Nigeria formulated Adult Education policies; literacy in English is not outside the objectives of such policies. However, the extremely low literacy level in English became a major set-back in the pedagogical process. Despite the general awareness that many Nigerians do not write effectively in English, concerted, goal-driven efforts are not made to put an end to the ugly situation. This study acknowledges the fact that poor performance in English among workers in Nigerian Universities is a picture of what operates in other occupational settings in the country. By the time Credit Pass in English became compulsory requirement to study any course in tertiary institutions the chunk of the Nigerian workforce had already had poor English backgrounds. The Nigerian work-force is characterized by people who are bereaved of the basic skills for effective performance in the use of English. So long as English is still Nigeria's National Language or language of officialdom, competence in the spoken and written forms of the language is not negotiable. With conscious efforts on the part of the government, language planners and all Nigerian learners of English as a Second Language, competence in English beyond grammar, can be achieved.

NOTES

1. The verb "make" takes "infinitive to" in its passive form. The sentences below illustrate the correct use of the verb:

Do not make me to hate you. (Incorrect)

I was made to hate you. (Correct)

2. This clause declares that they have not stopped doing so.

3. "Due to" can be used with both positive and negative remarks.
4. The term "sentence" is understood better when one considers the notion "syntax". Olujide (1999:46) cites Lyons (1970:21) who opines "that syntax which derives from a Greek word that means 'placing together' refers to the level at which the linguist accounts for the way words are put together to form sentences. The sentence is the highest grammatical unit in the Linguistic Rank Scale. It is a group of words which:
 - makes complete sense;
 - has a subject and a predicate (a two-fold division).

It should be noted that When the English sentence has a covert subject, the verb (imperative) serves as a sentence. Consider:

Come. (with implied subject "you")

Stop. (with implied subject "you")

5. We do not know who was going to school.
6. The last element (socially) is an adverb whereas "political" and "economical" are adjectives.
7. The comma is too weak to replace the full stop in the sentence.

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