

An Evaluation of the Teaching of the Use of English Course to First Year Undergraduate Students of the University of Jos, Nigeria

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Abstract. The paper focused on evaluating the teaching of the Use of in English course to first year undergraduate students of the University of Jos, Nigeria. The paper identified the fact that the Use of English course in the University of Jos is diversified to reflect the various needs for which learners need English. The paper further emphasised that teaching English for no obvious reason (TENOR) which was the earlier practice at the University of Jos, is counterproductive in the classroom. The paper identified several factors that militated against the teaching of the Use of English course in the University of Jos and then went on to discuss how the challenges were surmounted. The paper while not refuting or denying the challenges, posits that challenges to the teaching of the Use of English though real and fierce, can be overcome following the University of Jos experience.

Keywords: Evaluation, Teaching, use of English course and First year undergraduates. Students

1. Introduction

The Use of English is a main and compulsory course taught in the all Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions as stipulated by the National Universities Commission (NUC). The approach to its teaching in the University of Jos was general and not targeted particularly to any group of students due to the diversity in the students' academic pursuits and their varied language needs. However, recently, the teaching

of the course has been diversified to reflect the various needs for which the students need English in keeping with the maxim of ESP, "tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English you need".

The course is a two semester (one session) course with the aim of further improving the status of the language and boosting its mastery as a second language. Also, the course is to equip freshers with the requisite language skills needed to undertake higher education and achieve academic excellence. These are among the objectives of teaching the course. Freshers are taught how to take notes, develop the notes they have taken, engage in personal research and undertake independent studies at a higher level. Furthermore, students are taught how to use English language correctly in terms of grammar both in speech and writing. Being an English course, it is taught basically in the English language and in the University of Jos, it is codified GST 101 – Use of English.

In the past, at the end of the academic session when the course was examined, it was usually found out that the performance of students was not commensurate to the travails of teachers in the class as many students either out-rightly failed the course or managed to get border-line scores like 45%, 46%, 47% since the pass mark was (and still is) 45%. Discussions and informal interviews with the Use of English Co-ordinator at the University of Jos, Prof. J. Akosu Adeiyongo, revealed that "over 65% of the

students usually belonged to the border-line score bracket”.

Today, at the University of Jos, the story has changed as the factors responsible for under-performance were not only identified but arrested. The University of Jos experience in the light of how students’ performance in the Use of English gained grounds is therefore the focus of this study.

1.1 English Language in Nigeria

English language in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon given the fact that it is Nigeria's colonial heritage and her unbreakable link with the Western world. Perhaps it is in the area of formal education that English language has played the most significant role. It is basically the medium of classroom communication especially in tertiary institutions where students are required to do a lot of self-study. English language can therefore be said to be a friend of Nigeria politically, socially, educationally. It is the teacher's ally in knowledge impartation and an associate assessor or evaluator in measuring the extent to which classroom learning has taken place (Hoi, 2013).

English language has come to stay in Nigeria having assumed the status of Nigeria's permanent foreign language. With this permanency however, the English language now wears Nigerian colours in use, pronunciation, vocabulary, semantics and even syntactic structures. Giving credence to this, Mitchel (1992) noted that around the world, several millions of people use the queen's mother tongue every day, continually enriching it with imaginative additions and enlightened emendations. Furthermore, Spencer (1971) says:

The point about English in Nigeria is not just that it is different from British or American English. It is rather that there are several varieties of English ranging from something very near Standard English to the patois of the market place. (p.12)

However, Adejare (1995) says that English in Nigeria or Nigerian English is not based on errors nor is it entirely based on interferences.

Enighe (2017) notes that what today may constitute Nigerian English could actually be the consequences of the complexities of the English language. Over ninety percent of Nigerian university students are learners of English as a second language (LESL) or learners of English as a foreign language (LEFL). The remaining less than ten percent would be those children born in Britain or America by Nigerian parents but whose parents decided to 'come home' when the children were all grown up. These children may have English as their L1 but they are still not natives.

English language is an international language widely used in most countries of the world either as a first language (L1), second language (L2), foreign language (FL) or the other language (TOL). However, the language is fast becoming the world's lingua franca despite spirited efforts being made by other languages (like French) to woo the world and also efforts made to preserve local languages with which English has come in contact (Ugwuanyi & Omeje, 2013).

Some countries of the world use English as their native language (NL) while others use it as a second or official language. In Nigeria, English language is a second language and also an official language. As an official language, it is the language of commerce, law, the mass media, administration, classroom communication, etc. English is now the world's most important language and it is estimated that one out of five of the world's population speaks it (Jatau, 2017). This is especially so as it is the language of international commerce (trade), popular culture and the internet. Thus, the language holds an unassailable position among the world's major languages not necessarily with regard to the number of people who speak it but in terms of domain of use and international spread (Ogidi, 2018).

English is spoken as a first language in the United Kingdom, United States of America, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, some parts of Trinidad and Tobago as well as some parts of the Irish Republic and Jamaica (Adetugbo, 2000). Little wonder then that the language is now tagged the 'lingua franca of the world'

(Ugwuanyi & Omeje, 2013), Nigeria inclusive. Because of its place of pride in the global scheme of things, Nigeria cannot afford to be left behind in ensuring the improved learning and teaching of the Use of English. It is in the light of this that a state of emergency was declared in the teaching of Use of English at the University of Jos. The praise-worthy outcome of that declaration of state on emergency has informed this study.

1.2 Use of English at the University of Jos

Even though university students who take the Use of English course have been exposed to English language both in primary and secondary schools, their performance in national examinations in English-related courses, seems to indicate that their earlier exposure did them very little good. For example, WAEC Chief-Examiners Report (2016) shows that only 25% of the candidates that sat for the English exam that year passed. The Editorial of Daily Times (2015) attests to this as follows: "... and those who sat for the English language paper from Nigeria, more than half failed" (p. 1). According to WAEC News (2014), the West African Examination Council records the highest number of failures in English language. WAEC News went on to state that out of a total of 463, 567 candidates who sat for the exam in English in May/June 2005, only 81,153 passed with grades 1 – 8, representing only 17.50%, while 382,414 (82.50%) failed.

A similar situation used to be obtainable in the University of Jos where GST 101 (Use of English) often recorded the highest number of failures. The few students who performed exceptionally well, scoring A's and B's in the course were those whose performances the authors found to be linked to the primary and secondary schools they had attended. Most of these primary and secondary schools were private schools reputed for their high academic standards. This, the authors got from personal discussions with the exceptional performers and from the students' personal data forms domiciled in their various departments. The greater majority of the students are however not opportuned to attend such schools.

According to the Use of English teaching manual, teaching the Use of English course at the University of Jos is based on the communicative approach to language teaching geared towards communicative competence (comcom). The British Council in the 1980's trained teachers in the Use of English using the communicative approach. Ten (10) lecturers were trained and at the end of the training, the curriculum content for the course as well as the course text was developed. A national conference was also organised during which teachers of Use of English all over Nigerian universities discussed the curriculum content and went over the objectives for the course and these were generally adopted. However, most of those 'original' teachers of the course in the University of Jos have either passed on or are too old now but despite the fact that the baton was passed to the next generation of teachers of Use of English, there appeared to be a "yawning gap" in the performance of students in the course after the first, second, third and fourth generations of teachers (Doki, 2017). For the second, third and fourth generations, each under studied the previous generation until a lacuna occurred and the British Council training was jettisoned. Today, however, a return to the "good old days" has occurred and things are now looking up as far as the teaching of the Use of English is concerned.

Presently in the University of Jos, teachers of Use of English have responded to the clarion call to return to the 'ancient paths'. Students are now led to experience and create sentences through creative language exercises. In this way, the language flows and though there may be errors, the teachers' interest is usually the bigger picture of communicativeness.

At the secondary school level, students are taught to PASS English; they do not have enough experience in the four language skills and so their own use of English is limited. To address this, Use of English teachers flood the learners with a lot of extra reading in their own content areas; this helps the learners to acquire vocabulary, note spellings and understand the sentence structure they need to effectively use the English language. Furthermore, the students

are engaged in quizzes, group work, writing, etc and team teaching is encouraged not just to reduce work load but also so that the students can get the best of the teachers based on the teachers' areas of strength.

At the University of Jos as at today, teachers of the Use of English course are Ph.D holders in English who have been exposed to the Use of English developed by the first generation of teachers of the course who were themselves trained by the British Council in the 1980's. These present teachers are often taken through refresher courses both in content and methods. The contents have a lot of reading passages and exercises to engage the class in their own content areas. The lecturers of the course are also ESP practitioners who are trained for the specific purpose of teaching the course. One lecturer each is assigned to each of the twelve (12) faculties as lead lecturer to teach the course according to the needs of the learners. Each of these twelve also goes to take his or her topic of strength round the twelve faculties in a form of team teaching. The twelve faculties are Arts, Agricultural Science, Education, Engineering, Environmental Sciences, Law, Management Sciences, Medical Sciences, Natural Sciences, Pharmaceutical Sciences, Social Sciences and Veterinary medicine.

The first few classes are usually remedial in nature and involve taking the learner through some grammar, spelling, punctuations, oral/aural comprehension drills. This is to establish where the students are, what they need and how to progress in the teaching of the course.

2. Challenges to the teaching of Use of English and how the University of Jos overcame them

Like every other human endeavour or effort, the teaching of Use of English had several challenges. Some of these challenges were also faced or experienced in the teaching of all other courses while some were only peculiar to the teaching of Use of English. Some of these challenges have been identified by several authors such as Adejare (1995), Enighe (2017), Ugwuanyi and Omeje (2013). The challenges

specific to the teaching of the course were identified as follows: lack of experts to teach the course; lack of e-teaching; lack of textbooks; problem of large classes; lack of facilities; time factor, the complex nature of the English language; the crisis-prone nature of the University of Jos.

The paper will now examine each of the identified challenges and state how the University of Jos was able to surmount each.

Lack of Experts to Teach the Course: One of the most pressing concerns of Nigerian education is to reverse the falling standard of education which is obvious in the low level proficiency in the spoken and written English of Nigerian undergraduate students. Concern for improved performance in English language as well as maintenance of standards is however, a worldwide issue and not just a Nigerian concern. Since after the 1980's, the British Council has not engaged in training the Use of English teachers at the University of Jos neither is any native speaker presently involved in the teaching of the course. This was a problem at the University of Jos. According to Lavery (2010), getting students to use English in the classroom is one of the biggest challenges of teaching. Lavery went on to add that to get second language learners to effectively use English, the teacher should always present himself or herself as an English speaker right from the start and should not yield to the temptation to slow down. Lavery went on to suggest activities to encourage the use of English. Some of these activities are that teachers should engage the learners in a lot of speaking activities by asking for the time, date, how to get to places nearby, etc. Teachers should also involve learners in board work by asking a learner to write an explanation on the board and asking another to correct the mistake(s) on the board (if any). Teachers should also avoid asking questions like "do you understand?" instead, the teacher should try to get more comments with questions to check understanding. Asking for explanations will stretch the learners and help them learn better. Furthermore, the teacher should always refer to an English-English dictionary and encourage the learners to do the same. By doing this, the vacuum created by the absence of

experts would be filled by the English-English dictionary.

One of the requirements for the Use of English course at the University of Jos is an English-English dictionary and the earlier submission of Lavery (2010) is nearly exact with the original manual developed for the course. Today, Use of English instructors in the University of Jos are mandatorily required to adhere strictly to the manual and the course Co-ordinator or his/her assistant ensures regular monitoring and supervision of teachers' teaching and learners' learning. This has truly turned things around for the university. In addition, as has been stated earlier, teachers of the course are Ph.D holders in the area of English language teaching. These are people for whom English comes easy. They are certainly not natives, but their mastery and use of the language is not in question.

Lack of e-Teaching: This used to be a big challenge at the University of Jos but not anymore. Students are now encouraged to have a class Whatsapp group as well as submit individual e-mail addresses. General class assignments are posted on the group chat to which the teachers are added. Students do their assignments and submit via their own e-mails. The teacher corrects, scores and sends back. Since the teacher is also on the group chat, he can follow the group discussions, noting errors and mistakes which can be corrected generally on the platform or get to e-mail a student if the error requires the private attention of the teacher. This does not fore-close physical classroom contacts but ensures that students remain "in touch" with the course even after the class ends. The idea is that since students use their phones for recreation, why not for school work too? To fore-stall the problem of lack of funds for data and epileptic power supply, the university authority has dutifully ensured internet connectivity and the availability of a standard power generating set that can serve the teeming student and staff population in order to 'kill' the excuse of lack of e-teaching.

Lack of Textbooks: Because of internet connectivity at the University of Jos, students have access to a myriad of e-books from which they can get whatever information they need

with regard to the Use of English course. Of course text books in the course, written, edited and published by the General Studies (GST) Unit of the University of Jos abound. Contributor/authors of these books are the teachers of Use of English who write on topics of their strengths or interests. All the topics in the manual are covered in the books with each topic forming a chapter. The Use of English Co-ordinator then edits the articles and the GST Unit publishes it. At the point of registering for GST 101 – Use of English, a student is handed a copy of The Use of English. The book is revised biennially and if an author is retired or deceased, whoever replaces him/her makes an addition in the revised edition while allowing the 'original' work to remain. So lack of textbooks as a challenge to the teaching of Use of English at the University of Jos is now a 'historical relic'.

Problem of Large Classes: In the past, a typical Use of English class at the University of Jos would usually have about three thousand students (sometimes a little less or more depending on the total student enrolment for the academic session). According to Warren (2013), anonymity thrives in large classes and learning is usually adversely affected. This used to be the case in the University of Jos where the teacher would shout himself/herself hoarse in an attempt to be heard by each and every student in the large hall, usually, the university's main auditorium.

Recently, though, the music has changed. With the decentralisation of the teaching, each faculty now has its own teacher. In the past, all the one hundred level students gathered in the auditorium for the class with each lecturer coming in to take a different topic at his/her assigned time. The large classes are now manageable and there is no longer a daunting challenge.

Lack of Facilities: The University of Jos was badly hit by lack of facilities, especially structural and instructional facilities as a result of paucity of funds. However, with the federal government's Educational Trust Fund (ETF) intervention, more structures are now available and this has made the decentralisation of the teaching of Use of English possible. Also, the

university has mounted PA systems in the halls where the Use of English is taught. Now, not only are students seated comfortably in classes in manageable numbers, but audibility of the teacher's instruction and interaction is guaranteed.

Time Factor: The Use of English used to hold for two hours once a week. Now, it is held at the same time across the whole university. At the time of the class, no other one hundred level course would be scheduled. It also now holds twice a week. The complaint was rife that two hours a week was insufficient to cover the syllabus as well as address the peculiar needs of the learners for the language (Ugwuanyi & Omeje, 2013). Hoi (2017) further argued that the time when the course is taught determines the outcome of the learning. According to him, if the Use of English is scheduled for the afternoon on the timetable, students will not learn much as their brains would already be tired and their emotions stretched. To address this problem, the course is no longer taught for two hours once a week but is taught for two hours twice a week. This is still insufficient for a thorough job to be done (Jatau, 2017) but the extended classes through e-teaching and learning makes up for the non-classroom hours needed to teach the course effectively.

3. The Complex Nature of the English Language

This problem seemed to tower above other challenges at the University of Jos. The authors will therefore discuss this in more details than other challenges even though it has been ameliorated. In studying the causes of tertiary students' poor performance in the Use of English course in the University of Jos, it is imperative to determine concisely which learner problems are attributable to interference and which to irregularity or ambivalence to rule application in the target or foreign language which in this case is the language of classroom communication (English). For example, in the pluralisation of invariable nouns, certain errors of concord may occur in the syntagmatic axis or sentence chain.

Thus in the phrases:

The sheep is ...

The sheep are...

Morphologically, the noun is still the same and retains the same form, but in the sentence structure, one can determine whether 'sheep' is used as singular or plural. This contradicts the context where the noun changes morphologically to reflect plurality and cause a change in the verb chosen for purposes of concord within the sentence chain e.g

The cat is....

The cats are....

The invariable noun 'sheep' used earlier remains morphologically the same but a few tertiary students who already learnt English regular noun plural formation will consider 'sheep' as only singular. Thus, if the lecturer says,

The six sheep I bought are very costly,

these students would question why the lecturer should use 'are' after 'sheep' because as far as they are concerned, there is no 'plus-s', the morphological indicator of plurality. With this, it does look like English does not possess characteristics of vocabulary and grammar that render it easy of acquisition. The complex nature of the English language was thus, one of the major challenges of the teaching of Use of English at the University of Jos. Also, the distinction between, 'My husband isn't up yet' and 'My husband isn't down yet' seems to be without justification to some of the tertiary students drawing from the idea of 'up' as the antonym of 'down'. If the first means my husband is not awake yet, would the second mean the opposite?

A more confounding issue to freshers taking the Use of English course was the chaotic character of spellings in English and the frequent lack of correlation between spelling and pronunciation. According to Baugh and Cable (1963),

...theoretically, the most adequate system of spelling is that which best combines simplicity with consistency. In alphabetic writing, an ideal system would be one in which the same sound was regularly represented by the same character and a given character always represented the same sound. (p. 102)

This is not the case with English. For example, the English sound in 'believe' is in each case represented by a different spelling. Also, the

symbol /a/ as in 'father', 'hate', 'hat' and many other such words, has a variety of values. English consonants are not left out of this complexity as there are over fourteen spellings for the sound /tʃ/: shoe, sugar, issue, mansion, mission, nation, suspicion, ocean, nauseous, conscious, chaperone, schist, fuchsia, pshaw, inflexion, etc. One cannot therefore tell how to spell an English word by its pronunciation or how to pronounce English words simply by their spellings. This goes to show how far English is from the ideal 'simplicity and consistency' proposed by Baugh and Cable (1963). Similarly, in English language, too many phonemes share common features, for example, Jeno ate foofoo, Jeno ate well

While one can say, 'Foofoo was eaten by Jeno' or 'What Jeno ate was foofoo', one cannot say, 'Well was eaten by Jeno' or 'What Jeno ate was well'. So even though 'well' and 'foofoo' in the two sentences share the same features, they are different syntactically and even semantically.

Another confusion for freshers in the University of Jos was that boa constrictor, which is the name of a certain type of snake, is written as two words rather than one. 'Seaside' is one word while 'sea shore' is two'. 'Despite' is one word while 'in spite' is two. These are further reflections of the internal complexity of the English language.

Also, in the area of synonymy, English language usually presented a complexity that is second to none. For example, calf, baby, fingerling, puppy all overlap in that they represent young and immature. Woman, lioness, hen, bitch, heroine, queen also overlap, representing female. Murder, slaughter, assassinate, execute, all involve the notion of making to cease to exist or to kill. We have the word 'corpse' meaning the body of a dead human being; 'carcass', the body of a dead animal but no similar lexicon for a dead plant.

Mayes in Utoh (2004) sums the complex nature of the English language in a poem he edited, I plus I = I's

What language puts the plural of sheep as still sheep and would rather guard a flock of sheep?

Why then maintain a creep and never a crowd of creep?

Raji-Oyelade (2001) in an article titled, "Language Focus – Let's Face it", clearly concurs with Mayes as he says:

...There is no egg in the eggplant, no ham in the hamburger and neither pine nor apple in the pineapple...

If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what the heck does a humanitarian eat? If people from Poland are called 'Poles' why aren't people from Holland called 'Holes'?... (P.28)

University of Jos Use of English students are mostly Nigerians and in most of their languages, irregularity is not a prominent feature. This is because one spells words as one says them. Each sound of the spoken language has only one orthographic representation with no variants. All that is required is to learn the spelling system of the language in question by noting every sound and its orthographic equivalent. This is, unfortunately, not the case with English language where according to Banjo (1974), "...the spelling of every single word (apart, of course, from compound words), has to be learnt because there is all too often no systematic correspondence between the spoken word and its written form" (p.15). In this area of spelling, the complexity of the English language was identified to stem from four factors according to Banjo and Unoh (1976). These factors are:

Different pronunciation, same spelling (homonyms): for example, lead (verb) and lead (metal).

Same pronunciation, different spelling (homophones): for example, rain and reign; the final syllable in 'receive' and 'perceive' on one hand and 'believe' and 'relieve' on the other.

Different devices for showing long vowel.

Representation of so-called 'silent' sounds; for example, bomb, comb, climb, subtle, ballet, plumber, patois, lamb, leopard (the underlined letters are not pronounced and so are silent. If one pronounces them in speech, he is wrong; if they are omitted in spelling, it is also wrong).

The case here is that English language has a lot of complexities that militated against its mastery

in speech and in writing. Overcoming the complex nature of the English language therefore was an uphill task for University of Jos freshers.

University students use the English language to take notes in class during lectures, engage in group discussions or tutorials, listen to lectures, read notices on the notice boards, do assignments and write their semester and sessional examinations. However, according to Enighe (2010), in the freshers' daily use of the English language, phonetico-orthographical divergences occur which can be traced to 'English language as its own problem'.

The complex nature of the English language therefore has serious implications for its teaching, especially to freshers who offer the Use of English as a compulsory course. Firstly, in Nigeria, English has taken a lot of regional forms and so there are as many varieties of the language as there are speakers of it. The onus is now on the teacher of the Use of English course to University of Jos freshers to do the job of 'pick and drop'. This refers to picking out the correct forms in speech or in writing from the potpourri of existing varieties and insisting on this correct form while enforcing the dropping of grammatically unacceptable forms.

A close examination of any good etymological dictionary would reveal that English language has borrowed from other languages such as French, Italian, Latin, Hebrew, Chinese, Hungarian, the aboriginal languages of Brazil and even West Africa. Thus, English language is littered here and there with 'foreign identities' where words in the language are not really of the language. To confirm this, Baugh and Cable (1963) educate us that words such as skunk, hominy, chipmunk, moose, raccoon, etc, are borrowed from American Indian. Also, brandy, golf, wagon, measles, uproar, isinglass are from Dutch. Then balcony, duet, granite, opera, piano, umbrella, volcano are from Italian. From Spanish are words like alligator, stampede, tornado, vanilla, while from Greek (directly or indirectly) we have acrobat, anthology, barometer, chronology, catarrh, elastic, catastrophe, magic, tantalise, tactics, etc. From Russian come rubble,

vodka, steppe, and from Persian we have caravan, shawl, mogul, divan, khaki, paradise, jasmine, chess lemon, check, lilac, turban, etc.

Due to the complex nature of the English language, many University of Jos undergraduates who take the Use of English course used to express or present prepositional misuse, subject-verb incongruence, deviant tenses, confused noun pluralisation and several other grammatical inexactitudes. These were usually not totally the problem of teaching methodology, lack of teacher qualification or even the over-flogged issue of mother-tongue interference. The problem arose from the complex nature of the English language itself which makes the problem somewhat of a "double-tragedy". That is, having to learn a foreign language and that target language being fundamentally 'too complicated'. This, University of Jos freshers have labeled, "double wahala for dead body", a Nigerian pidgin expression which simply means 'double tragedy'.

To overcome the challenges of the complexity of the English language, the University of Jos makes it mandatory for students to possess or at least have access to an English-English dictionary. This, according to Warren (2013) could create an "immersion atmosphere" and give students a chance to share new vocabularies they have learnt and also correct mispronunciations, using the English-English dictionary as a guide. Also, the Use of English Co-ordinator endeavours to assign grammar-related topics to teachers whose classes the students understand and thoroughly enjoy for as Lavery (2010) suggested, if learners enjoy a teacher's lesson, their attitude to speaking English will improve over time and fears about the complexity of the language will be allayed to a large extent.

4. Conclusion

Use of English will always be difficult for non-English speakers irrespective of continent or what the learner needs English for. However, the University of Jos experience has shown that the difficulties can be ameliorated or lessened considerably. A hundred percent success has not

yet been achieved but the journey there is definitely on course. The success so far recorded is hinged on high quality of primary and secondary schooling, the teachers' focus on communicative language teaching, the ability of the teachers to 'simplify' the 'complexity' of the English language and the co-ordination and partnership the university administration accords the teaching of the course.

Since students are 'forced' and made inexcusable to experience the language through listening, speaking and reading, their written work is vastly improved. Today at the University of Jos, the percentage of high scorers in Use of English is often above fifty (50) and the percentage of failure is less than twenty (20). This is really more work on the part of the teachers but the result is so far well worth the effort.

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