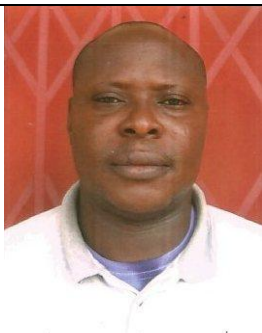**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

ORDINARY LEVEL ENGLISH IN NIGERIA: ON ASSESSMENT AND FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

Failure in Ordinary Level English has become a front-burner educational discourse. This paper focuses on the basic principles for effective assessment of the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) English Paper 1 as well as the factors responsible for failure that characterize assessments, hinging on the Nigerian context as evident in the results of the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO). In Nigeria where the English Language is a language of officialdom and formal education, the incessant high rate of failure in English at the School Certificate Examinations calls for serious concern. Studying twenty dummies labeled dummy 1-20 which are composition scripts of students who sat for the Ordinary Level Examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) from 2009 to 2013, and hinging on debates in the literature of language study, the paper concludes that there is a need to pay attention to the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors that inform failure in the Ordinary Level Examinations.

Keywords: Ordinary Level English in Nigeria, School Certificate Examinations, assessment, failure

INTRODUCTION

The incessant failure recorded in the Ordinary Level English examinations in Nigeria has become worrisome. Parents, school authorities and the examination bodies are still in the race of finding a solution to the problem, particularly because the subject is crucial in the career of the students irrespective of the disciplines to aspire to take up when they get to tertiary institutions. This paper explores the literature of education as touching assessment principles and procedures, the literature of sociolinguistics that borders on the Nigerian English discourse as well as the literature of contemporary English usage as touching grammar, vocabulary and punctuation, to elucidate the situation of the Nigerian students who study English in a formal instructional setting before writing the Ordinary Level English examinations. The Senior School Certificate Examinations in Nigeria features three papers which test discrete language skills: Paper 1 is divided into three sections: Section A (which focuses on continuous writing, that is, letters and essays), Section B (which is comprehension) and Section C (which has to do with summary writing). Paper 2 is multiple choice questions (objectives) and Paper 3 is Test of Orals. We acknowledge the importance of all the papers and sections of the

examination, but for the purpose of our study, we concentrate on the basic principles for assessing Paper 1 as well as the factors responsible for incessant failure in it; our choice of Paper 1 is justified in the sense that continuous writing reveals students' strengths and weaknesses in English Language, besides being an area in which more failure is recorded year after year. We analyze selected scripts (dummies 1-20) of students and make critical submissions which are of pedagogical relevance.

Assessing Ordinary Level English: Procedures and Principles

"Assessment" (or continuous assessment), "measurement", "evaluation" and "Test" are concepts which illuminate one other, so we shall discuss them in this paper.

Assessment is a fact-finding process which explains the present state of the phenomenon, person or object being assessed. It presupposes data-gathering, arrangement and interpretation, and the process is essentially variable-dependent. In education, the term describes the progress made by the learners as far as certain time-defined pedagogical objectives are concerned. It is restricted to the explanation of the underlying reasons for performance and does not make recommendations. In a formal instructional setting, assessment refers to all the processes and products which are used to make descriptive statements on the nature and extension of students' learning, bearing in mind the relationship between learning situation and the goals of teaching. Scholars in the domain of education have contended that the terms "assessment" and "evaluation" are different, although they are erroneously used interchangeably in scholarship. They posit that while "evaluation" is generally used when the referent is not human, but the success of a teaching task, "assessment" is commonly used for ascertaining human qualities (students' achievements, learning environment, total number of students).

Continuous assessment (CA) has classroom function, guidance function and administrative function. To ascertain the progress of the learner, CA is periodically administered. It may be administered daily, weekly, monthly as applicable to the teaching objectives. It helps in tackling individual differences, record-keeping and motivational teaching. Despite these advantages, CA has some set-backs: the large classroom is ineffectively handled, teachers tend to ignore it to concentrate on teaching so as to cover a bulk of curriculum, thus leading to ineffective teaching, there is often variation in the standard and quality of the tests and in the parameters for scoring, thereby rendering the results unreliable.

Measurement does not transcend giving quantitative meaning to a quality. The process does not include making value judgments on the learners' abilities; the teacher does not state whether or not the learner had Weak, Credit, Fail or Excellent grades besides merely declaring that the learner scored 6o%.

Making value judgments are part of evaluation process. Based on the findings, certain objective remarks are made on the effectiveness of a phenomenon. This presupposes making recommendations for possible actions. According to Oguniyi (1984), educational evaluation is carried out from time to time for the following purposes:

I.   to determine the relative effectiveness of the programme in terms of students' behavioural output;
II.   to make reliable decisions about educational planning;
III.   to ascertain the worth of time, energy and resources invested in a programme etc.

Evaluation is viewed in two levels: "programme level" and "student level". Each of the two levels can involve either of the two main types of evaluation: "formative" and "summative".

Programme evaluation ponders on whether or not a programme was successful. On the other hand, student evaluation evaluates students' performance in a programme. Formative evaluation examines post-learning behaviours of the learners. Its ultimate goal is to help students perform well at the end of a programme. Summative evaluation makes a broad evaluation of learners', achievements in terms of the broad goals of a particular programme of study such as the Ordinary Level examinations.

Tests, whether elaborate or not, are administered to find out whether or not the learner has achieved certain teaching objectives. Assessment is broader than test, although the concept is occasionally used to mean test as in when a teacher tells his students, "I shall assess your performance in the subject". The types of tests known in education include: Discrete Point Test, Integration Test, Placement Test, Achievement Test, Diagnostic Test, Aptitude Test, Predictive Test, Standardized Test, CA Test and Teacher-made Test. A good test instrument must possess validity, reliability and accuracy. Also, it integrates both Discrete Point and

Integration Test procedures and captures the goals of teaching. There is a need to construct good test instruments. This presupposes planning, ascertaining the goals, preparing the content and test blue-print.

Assessment in SSCE Paper 1

Examiners apply the principle of aspectual marking in grading essays and letters according to their types. The term COEMA is used in grading candidates' scripts. Below are the considerations in each of the letters that constitute the term:

C- Content: This aspect examines the relevance of the content of the composition to the topic. Besides being relevant, the candidates' compositions must be adequately developed for a good score in this section.

O- Organization: The Examiner examines whether the parts of the composition are complete (formal features for the different types of letters and essays), and whether such parts are chronologically arranged. The arrangement of ideas is also considered in this section.

E- Expression: Language is supposed to be germane to audience, purpose and topic. In this section, the candidates' selection and manipulation of the repertoire of English in continuous writing is assessed and graded.

MA- Mechanical Accuracy: This aspect has to do with the assessment of the use of grammar, punctuation and spelling.

Methodology

We do not propose strictly scientific method for the study by administering Questionnaire; we choose an integrative discursive approach.

RESULTS

We studied twenty SSCE essays and letters (Dummies 1 to 20) from 2009 to 2013 and merely produced the results as follows. However, we did not choose to present the sentence, punctuation and grammar errors as they occurred in each of the dummies:

(A) Sentence Errors

Sentence errors observed in dummies 1, 3, 7, 12, 13, 16, 17 and 20 include: misplaced modifier, dangling modifier, run-on sentence, redundancy, sentence fragment, faulty parallelism and faulty predication.

For insights on the English sentence in terms of structure (SPC, SPA, SVOA, etc.), communicative functions (commands, questions, requests, etc.), typology (simple sentence, compound sentence, complex sentence, etc.), properties (coherence, unity, effectiveness), sentence errors, (redundancy, faulty predication, run-on sentence, misplaced modifier, etc.) see Adegbija (1999), Stockwell (1975) , and Tomori (1977).

(B) Errors of Punctuation

Punctuation errors in dummies 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 16 and 19 included: using the comma instead of a semi-colon to separate like and unlike items in a list (to mark lists within lists), using the comma where a full stop should be, omission of the comma after a subordinate clause, combination of British and American quotation marks in a composition, using the semi-colon to introduce a list, using hyphens and dashes interchangeably, omission of hyphens in compound words and using question marks in rhetorical questions.

(C) Grammatical Errors

Grammatical errors in dummies 1 to 20 included: error of concord, omission of articles, wrong plural formation, wrong use of phrasal verbs, faulty splitting and amalgamation, wrong use of prepositions, wrong use of modal auxiliaries, ungrammatical quantifies, incorrect possessive forms, wrong tense formation, shift in subject, errors in comparative construction and the misuse of reflexive pronouns.

(D) Expression Errors

We chose to present expression errors as they occured in each of the dummies:

(i) The car's colour (instead of "… colour of the car") is attractive.

(ii) Scrabble is an indoors (instead of "… indoor") game.

Dummy 6

(ii) I was at the bookshop to buy some stationary (instead of "… stationery").

(iv) The firm let (instead of "… rent") the house out for so many years.

(v) I will borrow (instead of "… lend") you my pen.

Dummy 10

(vi) More <u>grease</u> (instead of "… power") to your elbow.

(vii) We searched <u>nooks and corners</u> (instead of "…nooks and crannies") of the room.

Dummy 13

(viii) Since water is <u>inflammable</u>, (instead of "…non-flammable") it cannot result in fire outbreak.

(ix) We shall <u>pull</u> resources (instead of "… pool") together to help the poor.

(x) <u>Round up</u> (instead of "round off") the discussion so that the students can leave the hall.

Dummy 14

(xi) The participants were from all <u>works</u> (instead of "…walks") of life.

(xii) Ade passed the exam <u>owing</u> (instead of "…due") to his diligence.

Dummy 19

(xiii) They ran for <u>their dear</u> life (instead of "…dear life").

(xiv) They are birds of <u>the same feather</u> (instead of "… a feather").

Dummy 20

(xv) We have the right to <u>hair</u> (instead of "… air") our views.

DISCUSSION

The errors observed in students' scripts, draw attention to some pertinent questions: Is Nigerian English not too poles apart from British English it aspires to approximate? Are students, parents, culture and the educational system not partly instrumental to the poor performance of the Nigerian learner of English? It is logical to view the dummies studied in this paper as corpora of Nigerian English (NE) at different levels of linguistic analysis, including grammar and diction. Scholars contend that there is lack of uniformity in the Educated Model of Nigerian English, since the pedagogical process is bedeviled by the teaching of substandard English, by teachers who lack proficiency in whatever is regarded as Standard Nigerian English or Standard British English. For more illuminating insights on Nigerian English discourse, see Akindele & Adegbite (1999), Bamgbose (1995:9-26), Babajide (2001:1-13), Adegbija (1992), Olateju & Oyeleye (2005), Alo (2004:192-210), Mbisike (2007) and Ayodabo & Acheoah (2014).

The literature of sociolinguistics is replete with the discussion of the factors responsible for the disparity in standards of English being taught in formal instructional settings. There is a need for the government of Nigeria to liaise with language experts in finding solutions to the ugly trend. The relationship between phonology and grammar (part of the concern of this paper) is no longer a debate. Unfortunately, only a few secondary schools in Nigeria have language laboratories, yet the best place to teach Standard Nigerian English or Nigerian English, is the language laboratory. Surprisingly, many private and government-owned tertiary institutions in Nigeria either do not have language laboratories, or have language laboratories that are not functioning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are the recommendations of the study:

   I.   Since many teachers of English in secondary schools do not mark SSCE, they should have access to the Chief Examiners' Reports after the marking, to enable them teach the subject effectively;

  II.   Creative Writers' Clubs should be operative in schools, and vernacular speaking should be prohibited;

 III.   Essay competitions that involve prize-giving should be part of academic activities in schools;

  IV.   More periods should be allocated on the lecture time-table for the teaching of grammar in secondary schools;

   V.   There should be workshops for teachers of secondary schools to improve their mastery of the subject as well as their delivery;

  VI.   Classes should not be overpopulated so that individual attention can be given to students where necessary.

 VII.   Those who teach English in secondary schools must be qualified to do so.

CONCLUSIONS

With the increasing level of literacy in Nigeria, education remains a vital tool for measuring proficiency in English in ESL (English as a Second Language) context. Because of the prestige attached to the

language, it is given a "directed" place in Curriculums. A speaker is considered an illiterate if he or she cannot speak fluent English or write communicatively. In conclusion therefore, the issues examined in this paper are also of relevance to the non-SSCE readers. This paper discusses the factors responsible for failure in Ordinary Level English in Nigeria as well as the remedies to the problem. The recommendations could make students achieve success after assessment. Conclusively, there is a need to put an end to the different factors which account for students' failure in SSCE: extra-linguistic factors (the poor state of the education system, norms and values); and linguistic factors (divergence between Mother Tongue and the target language (English).

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