

## English in Tertiary Institutions and the Issue of Falling Standards:

### Expectations, lessons and challenges Modestus Fosu

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#### Abstract

*This paper dwells on the mounting problem of English language incompetence among a significant number of graduates in Ghana. This is an issue that has received and continues to attract wide discussion in academic and media circles. It is incontrovertible that many prominent people, most of them products of our institutions of higher learning, are unable to use English - spoken and written - in a contextually, socially and technically approved and desirable manner. This communication problem calls for concern because of the developmental role of information and communication in the economic, political, technological, and social challenges of today's global existence. The way English language - both as a school subject or discipline and as a competency to be mastered — is taught and treated with indifference at the pre tertiary and tertiary levels accounts for this unfortunate state of affairs. This paper, therefore, argues that the nation, tertiary institutions, and lecturers perceive this problem as a "crisis" and take definite steps that will strengthen the English language ability of graduates, irrespective of their specific courses of study.*

#### Introduction

Complaints about graduates from the tertiary institutions of Ghana having significant communication problems regarding the use of English continue to intensify as the years roll by. The media, for some time now, have been replete with concerns that graduates from our universities and polytechnics, etc find it really difficult using the English language functionally in industry. In the abstract to his article in the Language Centre Journal, Adika (2006) refers to pervasive complaints about fresh university students not living up to expectation on the job. He explains further that "This argument derives from the problem some employers have had with fresh graduates and the perception that public universities in Ghana are not doing enough to prepare students for the world of work." (p. 1)

It is true that the above reference borders on general ability. However, this paper argues that English is central to such complaints. Moreover, the English language problem is not limited to only public universities; the general consensus is that graduates from tertiary institutions in Ghana have English language difficulties. Even long before Adika's paper, Dako, Denkabe and Forson (1997) in a study on university students' knowledge of grammar noted that their work had been prompted by "...our observation over the years of a steady decline in the English competence of the products of our schools and universities. This has caused concern to be expressed especially among experts and also among the general public." (p. 53)

This unfortunate reality appears strange because tertiary education constitutes the last stages of formal knowledge acquisition where, because of the comparatively higher depth of study, academic independence, research, and scholarship, graduates are expected to come out relatively on top of everything within their scope of competence. And undoubtedly, one of the main areas where they are supposed to, or better put, expected to display high competence is in the use of English: speaking, writing and reading, etc. Needless to say, this expectation appears in many cases to be a huge paradox.

This developmental problem is more exacting on account of the place of English in our economic, social, political and educational life. Currently, English remains Ghana's official language, and there is no indication that this will change in the foreseeable future. English continues to be the dominant medium used in the most significant facets of our national life: Parliament, government, law, business,

etc. It is the medium of instruction in our schools from upper primary to higher institutions of learning. And now, it is the lingua franca in the country. In fact, there is no doubt that English continues to attract the prestige it bestows on users, particularly, those who use it well.

Additionally, the language is not only significant as an intra-communication mechanism; but also as a "global language", it commands more speakers or users than any other language in the world. English can safely be described as the first global lingua franca of the modern era. It is a dominant international language in communication, science, business, aviation, technology, entertainment, radio and television, and diplomacy. Thus, it can be argued that English is the foremost medium of international communication in all aspects of human endeavour and existence. This is why it becomes worrying if graduates from our tertiary institutions who are obviously to occupy leadership positions in Ghana and to play key roles in internal and external advocacy, policy formulation and implementation, as well as in global cooperation, are deficient in the use of the language.

According to Hackman and Johnson (1996), "Leadership is a process of using communication to influence the behaviours and attitudes of others to meet group goals" (p. 81). These writers note further that "Extraordinary leadership is the product of extraordinary communication" (ibid). Pearson, (2003) also argue that, "Leadership, then, is enacted through communication and persuasion and not through physical force or coercion." (p. 273).

From the above, it can be surmised that a leader is a person who influences the behaviour and attitudes of others through communication (ibid). Rothwell (2000) also underscores this correlation between leadership and communication in *In the Company of Others: An Introduction to Communication*,

...effective leadership, however, is ultimately a matter of communication competence...the most effective leaders are the most proficient communicators. (p.303).

These writers thus see communication, and rightly so, as the panacea to good leadership. Indeed, communication has many complex dynamics; nonetheless, it is my considered opinion that the most pervasive outlet for it is language. The point is that communication thrives largely on language, the focus here being English.

The point has already been made that there is widespread complaint about poor English among graduates from our tertiary institutions. This writer's personal experiences with countless graduates from diverse tertiary institutions corroborate this concern. Many such graduates indeed have English language difficulties. These can be categorised as follows:

- Grammatical shortfalls such as faulty application of concord, tense use, pronoun and prepositional use, article use, among others, in speaking and writing.
- Wrong spelling
- Wrong pronunciation and intonation
- Ambiguous sentences that do not communicate well
- Faulty sentence structures
- Wordiness, verbosity, redundant vocabulary, etc., that inhibit effective communication
- Faulty punctuation use
- Misplaced pragmatics, i.e., using contextually inappropriate linguistic forms
- Dangling modifications
- And many more

Unfortunately, there is paucity of research on the details of the specific English problems of graduates (already in the field, working) from our tertiary institutions. In his article cited above, Adika (2006) examines, to a large extent, the language skills required of fresh graduates for them to work effectively and efficiently with, or for, various institutions and bodies. The purpose of the research appears to be to tailor the English related programme run by the Language Centre of the University of Ghana, Legon (Language and Study Skills) to suit the needs of industry (p. 2). In fact, there have been many research works on various aspects of students' English ability (Adika, 1999; 2003; Dako, et al., 1997; Dako, 1997; Dzameshie, 1997; Gogovi, 1997, etc.). However, this paper notes that the issue transcends just students and fresh graduates; it covers many graduates already on the job, no matter the years of work. The issue also transcends what ought to be imparted on students for them to be effective on the job: It must also consider finding out the ultimate impact of such taught programmes as well as the specific language difficulties that working graduates exhibit.

Of course, many reasons have been adduced as to the causes of the difficulties in English use among students in general. Most of these reasons are immediate, dwelling on the fact that students of today do not read enough. This paper agrees with this position but goes on to focus on the graduate. It argues that there are many remote and serious linguistically debilitating factors resulting in the linguistic (English) incapacitation which becomes apparent at the critical time the graduate needs the language competence to function effectively for national development.

### **Teaching and Learning English in Pre-University Education**

Students gain admission to pursue tertiary education based on successes at the Junior High School (JHS) [previously Junior Secondary School, JSS] and particularly, Senior High School (SHS) [previously Senior Secondary School, SSS]. Thus a student generally will not enter the university or polytechnic without a pass in English and other required subjects depending on the tertiary institution in question and/or the course to be studied. A critical appraisal of the SHS English course and its expected teaching and learning processes appear to justify the assumption used to admit students into tertiary institutions-the assumption that a student who undergoes tutelage under the English course for the SSS, as it is expected of him or her, and passes the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examinations (WASSCE) English paper is expected to be proficient in the language. However, there are a few problems here.

First, it is common knowledge that the SSS course itself is so loaded that the majority of schools were hardly able to finish the syllabus before the students left school. The extension of the three-year course to four years in the current educational arrangement (i.e the SHS) appears to be a bid to solve this problem. Thus, in most cases before the introduction of the SHS, students finished school without studying some of the English topics they had to cover. It is yet to be ascertained whether the one additional year in the current arrangement will solve this problem.

Second, some of the teachers at that level may not be English specialists. In many parts of Ghana, it is common to hear people say that "everybody can teach English since everybody speaks it". It is true that the majority of experts in English do not go to the classrooms. Thus, in many cases, people of other specialisations end up as English teachers. Obviously, a teacher who has studied English to a high level would be in a better position to understand specific language problems of students and be able to teach and help them better. Meanwhile, it is common knowledge that the JSS/JHS and SSS/SHS periods are crucial as formative periods of students' knowledge acquisition. This explains why even at the tertiary level, for example, many of the students this writer teaches at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ) still define a verb simply as "a doing word": that was what they were told by

their "English" teachers. Such oversimplified concepts have become ingrained or fossilised, making correction difficult.

Third, the English course at the SSS/SHS (which is, of course, in the context of English as a second language) appears to focus more on grammatical competence, reading, and basic writing. It is everybody's expectation that students should be able to construct grammatically correct and acceptable sentences and utterances, express themselves well and easily, write well-organised essays, and read and understand what is read, and so on. However, the issue of communicative competence appears to be relegated to the background. Indeed, Dzameshie's phenomenal work (1997) effectively highlights the virtual absence of this very important aspect of language teaching and learning in our schools. He notes that an explorative survey of some schools is conclusive on this point. Establishing the correlation between grammatical competence and communicative competence, he argues that English teachers should adopt the communicative, skill-oriented approach to teaching

... whose ultimate goal and mission should be not merely to equip the learners with grammatical competence but more crucially, with ESL learners to communicate in socioculturally appropriate ways in English with both native and non-native users...  
(P. 173)

The above means that for better English language acquisition, learners must master the "communicative competence" suggested originally by Dell Hymes (1974). In fact, the issue of communicative competence has been a revolving one; it was further modified by Canel and Swain (1980) who classified it into four components: knowledge of linguistic features, knowledge of discourse rules, knowledge of language functions, and knowledge of sociolinguistic factors. The last component involves knowledge of appropriateness, which enables a speaker to know whether the language being used is suitable considering the specific (socio-cultural) context because as Silberstein (2001) argues, "Grammatical knowledge alone does not guarantee communication" (p. 103). Thus a linguistically useful way of teaching English in our schools ought to blend grammatical competence and communicative competence approaches.

The above points imply apparently that since this suggested teaching approach has not become a national educational policy in this country, it is not surprising that the SSS/SHS graduates have significant English difficulties after school. It is true that not all tertiary students are fresh secondary graduates. Nevertheless, such people are all products of the same Ghanaian educational system that does not systematically employ the communicative method of teaching English at the lower rungs. Thus, many of them would still have this English problem on entering institutions of higher learning.

The discussion so far is even not to suggest that the SSS/SHS graduate comes out with the required grammatical competence for life and higher education: that will be a ridiculous oversimplification. One only has to read the perennial Chief Examiner's Report on English regarding the Senior Secondary School Examinations to grasp the magnitude of the English language problem facing our future leaders. For example, in the Monday, July 21 2008 edition of the Daily Graphic, Africanus Owusu-Ansah (2008, p.11) on a similar mission as this paper notes that:

"The Chief Examiners' (sic) report on the July 2005 English language (Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination) listed the following as candidates' weaknesses: Poor knowledge of the basic rules of the English language. It was observed that some candidates were not firmly grounded in the English language. Some of their weaknesses were (a) the poor use of verbs, particularly the irregular,

transitive and intransitive; (b) wrong sequence of tenses; (c) errors of concord; (d) errors of the use of countable and uncountable nouns, direct and reported speech; (e) misuse of the articles and capital and small letters; (f) spelling errors. The above vividly captures the problem. Nevertheless, this paper emphasises that it is not 'some' of the candidates who have the deficiencies listed in the quote; it is many of the candidates.

### **English Teaching and Learning at the Tertiary Levels**

The point has been made that tertiary institutions in Ghana admit students based on the assumption that they have the English language skills needed for tertiary academic work. It is to this end that English, and other subjects-mathematics and science-are termed "core subjects" which one must pass well before tertiary admissions can occur. The assumption is that a student who has a credit grade in English at the West African Examinations Council (WAEC)-organised SSSCE/WASSCE is deemed to be proficient in the language. This point is significant because the tertiary institutions do not teach English usage to the students, no matter the course being pursued. Even students who register for English in the universities are, strictly speaking, not taught English usage; such students study the technical aspect of the language such as linguistics, grammatical analysis, language properties, semantics, and various literatures in English, etc.

But significantly, some tertiary institutions in Ghana, somehow, still indirectly acknowledge the need to be sure of admitted students' English competence. This is seen in a language-related course that some institutions run and make obligatory for all students to study and pass. This course normally runs during the first and/or second year of admission. For example, at the University of Cape Coast, the course is called Communication Skills (CS), while the University of Ghana refers to it as Language and Study Skills, and so on. A critical appraisal of the course content shows that the focus is even really not entirely on general English usage and use; it is mainly on academic writing. According to Adika, (2006):

Specifically, the course covers the following areas of academic writing: Understanding the academic discourse community; Process writing (pre-drafting, drafting, re-writing, and revising); Paragraph structure and the multiple paragraph text; Paragraph Unity; Completeness, and Coherence; Study reading strategies (scanning, Skimming, SQ3R, and evaluating evidence); Using the library and other sources; Note taking; integrating information into texts (summarizing, using quotations and avoiding plagiarism); Writing citations (basic forms for documentation, reporting verbs and critical voice; grammar and proof-reading. (p. 11)

For instance, at the Ghana Institute of Journalism, Accra, where this course - Language and Study Skills - is a two-semester programme, only one topic in the first semester has a direct bearing on English usage. This is proofreading. The topic prods the student to check common grammatical mistakes such as concord, capitalisation, tense, preposition use, and so on. Some discreet enquiries this researcher carried out at a few polytechnics showed that apart from students of the secretaryship course, no other programme studies any language course. Thus, students who enrolled for accounting, marketing, home economics, engineering, etc. never have any English brush-up.

Meanwhile, for those universities running the English related-programmes, it appears that the time for the course is just too short for any meaningful impact on the English of the students. The maximum number of contact hours is three(3) per week. And the semester has fourteen weeks for classes. Thus considering time for lectures and practical exercises as is best suited for this course, it becomes apparent that very little is achieved in class. The unfortunate reality (which is a hypothesis whose veracity is yet to be ascertained through research) is that the majority of students study this course perfunctorily; they just want to pass and forget it since it is "non-scoring".

### The Real Challenge

There are a number of real English language challenges confronting students at tertiary levels predisposing them to having serious English handicaps after their graduation. First, their English, on entering the universities or polytechnics does not measure up to the expected communicative level (see above). This implies that they should continue to have some more tuition in English, which does not happen. Second, even for the language course in tertiary institutions, the unrewarding grammatical approaches to language teaching (in the communicative sense) is what is employed to teach English. Additionally, the number of students per lecture does not make for effective teaching and learning. Language learning, and for that matter, English, especially in our context as a second language, ought to be practical, and learners should have the opportunity for practice and guided self-expression in class. However, this is best with small classes, an average class size of between fifteen (15) and twenty (20) or less per class. But due to lack of facilities, some classes in our tertiary institutions are over five hundred (500) students and the institutions appear helpless in this regard. Third, the level of English deficiency among tertiary students nowadays is really shocking. Indeed, the writing of even those who enter with good grades in English has unbelievable problems unbecoming of tertiary students. The evidence lies in the numerous concerns expressed about this day in day out. Meanwhile, the students themselves are not doing enough to remedy the situation. They are still following all the distractions such as video, music, mobile phones, computer games, etc. thereby neglecting reading, which is the best medicine for the canker.

### Grading

The grading of tertiary students in examinations is expected to reflect an overall aggregate ability. However, it is not uncommon to find graduates with first class or second class upper honours in, for example, administration, mathematics, chemistry, etc. who cannot express themselves well in English. The question is how did they obtain their honours? The only explanation, and in fact, the truth could be that many lecturers ignore English language handicaps of students. Such lecturers may claim that they are not examining the student in English. And indeed, it is a fair assumption that some lecturers themselves could have problems in English.

The following is the last page of a level 400 student's five-paged typed work:

... people who get income from trade, industry and big organizations. As a results the news is sold to such a class **who** he calls **the buying the public**. According to lippman, the press will be killing itself **if is** to alienate such people. He suggests the press build loyal readers as a means to fund the paper, as a paper that depends on the loyalty of readers is as independent as ever. He also discusses the role of editors in the newsroom, the work of a reporter and **its attedant** pay and what readers want from the press.

In all Lipmann argues that the quality of news about modern society is an index of its social organizations. The better the institutions, the more all interests concerned are formally represented, the more objective criteria are introduced, the more perfectly an affair can be presented as news. At its best, the press is a servant and guardian of institutions; at its worst, it is a means by which **few** exploit social disorganization to their own ends. The book ends on a philosophical note with quotations from Plato and other Greek scholars, which gives hope to people. It also tells **you** to respect authority 'as one cannot navigate a ship full of sailors if they do not see that I am the man to steer, I cannot help it' - PLATO.

In summary, this piece of work can best be described as excellent. Lippman brings

maturity and experience to bear in discussing the theories **elicited** in this book. His borrows from a number of fields - history, theology, political science, psychology, sociology, philosophy among others. The literature is also pregnant with ideas from authorities of various fields of endeavour especially great philosophies like Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau among others. Contributions from different authorities **makes** the book **was well** researched. I will recommend this book to every student irrespective of his or her course. I believe is a revelation for politicians and people in information gathering and dissemination industry. I believe **is** a must read for journalists **as well as it discusses newspaper industry in detail**. However, the book at a point becomes very complex - some of the thoughts are so in-depth and full of big words that **you** constantly have to **consort** a dictionary or encyclopedia to **better** appreciate it. Despite years after publication, the theories and views in this book are still relevant to today's world - stereotyping, agenda setting, stimulus response, public opinion, democracy among others. information gathering and dissemination industry. I believe **is** a must read for journalists **as well as it discusses newspaper industry in detail**. However, the book at a point becomes very complex - some of the thoughts are so in-depth and full of big words that **you** constantly have to **consort** a dictionary or encyclopedia to **better** appreciate it. Despite years after publication, the theories and views in this book are still relevant to today's world - stereotyping, agenda setting, stimulus response, public opinion, democracy among others.

The work was a semester paper given as an assignment. The italicised portions in bold are some language mistakes or errors gleaned even at a cursory glance; there are others involving facts, logic, aptness of words, etc. Obviously, some of the mistakes emanate from the sort of carelessness unexpected at this level; but the majority reflect deep seated inefficiency in the language. A few examples will do here.

- the press will be killing itself if is to alienate such people (missing subject of the clause "if is to ..."; it should be "if it is to ...")
- It also tells you to respect authority (informal expression "you")
- Contributions from different authorities makes the book was well researched (subject-verb agreement error and illogical predication)
- I believe is a must read for journalists as well as it discusses newspaper industry in detail. (missing subject and lack of clarity)

This student, who has now graduated, was in a very renowned public tertiary institution. The lecturer graded the work as excellent, awarding 36/40 for it, which translates as 90%. Considering the number and nature of errors on just this page, one wonders if such a student is an excellent material since it is apparent that he or she cannot communicate effectively, at least in written English. What is disturbing is that, the lecturer in question ignored most of the numerous errors and did not indicate in the work that they are English language mistakes.

### Conclusion: The Way Forward

The alarm that continues to be raised by concerned people about the general English problems of our tertiary graduates is legitimate and "timely". The problem is real and should bother any well-meaning Ghanaian. Our graduates are supposed to have been trained and prepared to be at the helm of leadership at various levels. And the quality of their leadership and the impact they make in the national and global contexts depend, to a large extent, on their command over the English language as a communication tool. Being able to communicate well gives confidence, and people are able to influence and affect others through effective communication in English.

Therefore, this paper posits that tertiary institutions regard the English language problem as a "national crisis" in this world of competition; it is a crisis that requires a revolutionary approach to solution on account of the challenges. In the light of the above, tertiary institutions in Ghana should consider running mandatory English language courses in addition to any existing language related programme. The English language courses could run parallel with students' real or designated programmes, and students should be compelled to pass the English courses in order to graduate. The institutions would then have to deploy facilities and resources, employing good teaching methods to make such programmes effective. This stance hinges on an interesting scenario at the Ghana Institute of Journalism (GIJ).

The Institute runs two programmes under Communication and Media Studies: diploma and degree. The diploma is two years while the degree programme is four years for SSS entry and three years for advanced level and mature admissions. The diploma students undertake English language (grammar and writing skills) each of the four semesters they spend at the Institute. But the degree students take only a two-semester language and study skills course. Meanwhile, the criteria for admission to these two programmes are basically the same. The only difference may be that the BA students have lower SSSCE aggregate scores. Thus it is possible that there could be two students with the same SSSCE grade in English language, one reading for the diploma, the other for the degree. Indeed, it is my considered opinion that the English competence of the first year students of GIJ, whether BA or diploma, is about the same. The point being pursued here is that the BA students could as well take the English course the diploma students take. The above scenario should replicate same in almost all the tertiary institutions in this country. It would appear that the various first degree, diploma and other equipment professional programmes in Ghana irrespective of the institution(s) running them, do not perceive English language as critical to the overall moulding of the learners. The reality of the repercussion is that our institutions of higher learning are producing knowledgeable graduates who lack communicative and effective expressive abilities in English. Indeed, there are many "prominent" people, most of them degree holders, who cannot just write confidently and flawlessly in English-talking about reports, business letters, presentations, essays, among others. All they can produce are mainly strings of unclear, verbose and redundant expressions riddled with ambiguities. This reality, this paper reiterates, should inform policy on tertiary education in this country.

Additionally, this paper is of the view that lecturers seriously consider students' language as they mark or grade the students' work, no matter the field of study. This measure will no doubt urge students to take their English language much more seriously. It will also ensure that a student who graduates will really be worth his or her calling so far as communication is concerned.

## Notes

In his work "Towards A Communicative Approach To Teaching English As A Second Language" in English in Ghana, (Kropp Dakubu, ed, 1997), Alex Dzameshie (1997) has adequately explained what communicative competence is and laments its absence in English teaching in our schools (p. 173ff). In the study he describes as a small scale explorative survey, Dzameshie (Ibid) discovers that English as a second language teaching in Ghana emphasis grammatical competence to the exclusion of communicative competence. The survey involved two schools each of Primary, JSS, and SSS (p. 175).



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