

TERTIARY ESL WRITING: BEYOND THE CONFINES OF GRAMMAR TO THE EPICENTRE OF STYLE

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Abstract

This paper examines the place of grammar and style in ESL tertiary writing. It puts writing in perspective vis-a-vis other language skills and submits that writing is the most arduous, exacting and complex language skill which requires the deployment and utilisation of knowledge and skills from listening, speaking and reading. It is the writer's position that grammar is crucial to writing as it encapsulates the rules of usage but good and effective writing transcends the frontiers of grammar to the bosom of style. An attempt is made to define style not in the literary sense but as it pertains to writing. Organization, diction, tone, selection of syntactic structures, consideration of purpose and audience are some of the ingredients of style that must be delicately balanced with grammar to achieve good writing. The writer suggests a pedagogical re-orientation from the traditional staple to grammar teaching for effective writing, to a result-oriented, deliberate instruction in elements of style. The two should be taught in tandem; the teaching of style should predominate.

Introduction

It is belabouring the obvious to say that the English language has become synonymous with western education in Nigeria. It may also be trite to state that whoever wants to make any headway in the educational system must evince some competence in, if not a mastery of the language no matter the vocation or profession they would like to pursue. So, the learning of the language virtually begins from the first day at school to the last. For better or for worse, the average Nigerian learner of English does not encounter the language for the first time in school as he would have incidentally and informally heard the language being used in his environment, since English is used as a second language in Nigeria. In many cases, many Nigerians have been listening, and some 'speaking' English before they enter the school system.

Of course, the four basic language skills are introduced at the pre-primary and primary schools with emphasis on reading and writing at the secondary and tertiary levels. Reading a language is getting exposure in it and encountering language deployment in diverse contexts and purposes; it enables the reader to see the elasticity of words, their malleability, tentacular meanings as well as their uncanny mobility. Indeed, reading automatically engenders some competence in writing. Reading is a receptive language skill that triggers the productive writing skill. However the capacity to read does not necessarily bestow writing competence as writing is a more exacting and intricate skill.

The Enterprise Of Writing

A mastery of writing skill is the ultimate virtue that the ESL user should cultivate and acquire. One could learn to listen and talk as one learns to crawl and walk but writing is a skill that requires the utilisation of all that has been acquired in a language. Competence in it is the crowning glory of the language acquisition and mastery journey. As Unoh (1982:19) puts it:

... writing is one of the surest ways by which we demonstrate our intellectual development and maturity. A shoddy piece of written communication, a poorly-organized and illogical essay or dissertation, an article or a book that is full of contradictions, inconsistencies, misleading generalizations and irrelevant quotation and references may well provide ample evidence of a writer's maturity and cognitive ability.

ESL writing at the tertiary level is very demanding as the student is expected to communicate with his teacher, reader, co-students and the society at large. He has to harmonize his thoughts, concepts and ideas and come out with a text that must be intelligible and comprehensible. There has been public outcry about the standard of English of students in secondary and post-

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secondary schools. Every year, it is always a tale of woe as most students who sit public examinations *II* English perform abysmally. It would appear the GS or ESP programmes being run in tertiary institutions have not provided the expected relief as performance plummets by the day.

Grammar And Writing:

Many think that Nigerian users of English do not do well because they lack grammatical competence. They attribute the problem to scholars and theorists who think that grammar can be jettisoned for communicative competence. But is grammar all that is needed?

The Greeks see grammar as the art of current speech and the understanding of the great poets of the time. To them grammar is a prescriptive, if not a legislative device, and it ensures current writing. But as Banjo (1983:4) puts it, "no self-respecting modern linguist would wish to be associated with the notion of prescriptive grammar". Brooks quoted by Yankson (1990) compares grammar to anatomy:

We must recognize tht grammar is to a language what anatomy is to the human body. Every living body and even a dead one is bound to have anatomy. The same is true of language and grammar. To say that grammar can be brushed aside as inconsequential or irrelevant is of course, nonsense.

Politzer and Politzer (1972) note tht linguists are not agreed about the place of grammar in language learning and use, but they doubt whether a withdrawal of grammar will bring about better performance. Some linguists insist tht grammar should be deliberately taught in school in order to get good performance from English learners and users. In fact, some affirm that the neglect of grammar teaching in our school has resulted in poor performance in English. Banjo (1983:8) recommends tht grammar should not formally be taught in primary school but "at the secondary school level, the learning of the language ought to be rule-governed, adding that revision grammars which will state the rules of the language more explicitly should be used. They will give learners the chance of comparing such rules with those "in the system which they have internalized inductively at the primary level". This is in spite of the transformational grammarians' view that the grammar of a language has been internalized by the native speaker. Banjo says that even the native speaker needs to learn the grammar of his language to perform well. He states:

... every native speaker of a language has internalized the grammar of his language; this does not automatically make him a grammarian or linguist. Such knowledge is subliminal and can only be brought to the conscious level by putting the native speaker through a formal study of the grammar even of his own mother tongue (Banjo: 1983:14).

To Adejare (1995:164) there has been a decline in English usage over the years because the teaching of grammar has been neglected for the "fad" that is called communicative competence. Even university curriculum in English has been lean on language content and structure. He notes tht the abandonment of grammar is a naive overreaction to the 1964 Grieve Report w'hich criticized over-emphasis on grammar. He stresses that communicative competence is not anti-grammar, and concludes:

Grammar is thus a necessary condition for use and the core of communicative competence. There can be no grammatical competence without linguistic competence and there can be no communicative competence without grammatical competence.

Adesanoye (1995:175) points out the appalling English of graduates produced by Nigerian universities as exemplified by application for employment written by them - applications which are characterised by bad spelling, grammar and fractured sentences. He notes that the graduates generally deserve the charge of i l literacy.

From the bosom and ancestral home of English have come lamentations about the standards of written English by graduates of their universities. Hosbaum (1984:66-72) bewails the state of literacy in British society, remarking, "that "the standard of literacy among those deemed to be

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educated is worse than it was a hundred years ago, remarking that the level of written English is awfully poor because students no longer have a latinist or grammatical background. What they write is therefore characterised by “grammatical misconstructions, stylistic clumsiness and logical blur” as well as “crocodile sentences, floating participle, tenuously related clause resulting in “obscurity, uncontrolled ambiguity and undue repetition”. Hudson (1992:41) concurs. He observes that the study of grammar has been abandoned for “communicative efficiency”, noting that the Crown prince shares the view that the study of grammar has been fatally neglected. He refers to the Prince's article in the *Guardian Weekly* of 7/1/90 in which he stated inter alia:

... We have seen the abandonment of learning the rules of grammar and the parts of speech as boring and irrelevant. ... the idea of English as something really to be learnt by effort and application has been abandoned.....

It is however curious that Mohammed (1995) could attribute, poor performance in English by secondary school leavers to the fact that the curriculum is grammar-oriented. He posits that there is too much on grammar which may lead to “grammar fatigue as students are unwittingly exposed to the harmful effects of direct grammar teaching which may cause them to “know more about the language” and less about how to use it.

It is the view of this writer that a knowledge of grammar is a sine qua non for good writing. One can hardly over-emphasise that the mastering of grammatical rules does not guarantee effective writing.

It would appear that many teachers wallow in the fallacy that once the grammar is right, all is right in writing. Apart from observing the rules of grammar, punctuation and spelling, which are crucial to good writing, a major and indispensable pillar in the writing edifice is style. It is one of the few cornerstones of writing.

The Place Of Style

Leech and Short (1981:10) define “style” as “the way in which language is used in a given context by a given person for a given purpose”. They further state tht it pertains to parole since it involves the “selection from a total linguistic repertoire”. The style “proclaims the man as it is a writer's “linguistic thumb-print”. Style does not refer to what is said but to how it is said, it is a matter of manner rather them matter; it has to do with expression, not content. The English language is so rich of words, idioms, synonyms, antonyms, polysemy, homonyms and homophones that one idea can be expressed in different ways depending on the audience, occasion, purpose, message and context. For example, a principal’s commendation of a brilliant student can be put in any of the following ways:

- The principal commended the brilliant student.
- The principal praised the brilliant student.
- Praises were lavished on the brilliant student by the principal.
- The principal extolled the academic qualities of the brilliant student.
- Encomiums were poured on the brilliant student by ..
- The brilliant student was given the thumbs up by the principal.

These sentences are all grammatical as they obey all the syntactic and morphological rules, but they are not all interchangeable in all contexts. The imperatives of context and extralinguistic factors of rhythm, euphony and balance will determine the appropriate sentence.

So, writing goes beyond grammar. Oluikpe (1979:47) is of the view that good writing transcends the observance of grammatical shibboleths, and it should be free of all “grammatical misdemeanours”. To “produce grammatical sentence, is not to produce effective prose”. He quotes Willis who say that “you do not need a full knowledge of grammar in order to write well”. Many excellent writers have the foggiest understanding of grammar. He quotes Sophers who states that:

But it must not be forgotten that grammar is concerned primarily with the form of the language and not with the effective use of the language. A knowledge of grammar, however, thorough, will not by itself enable a student to write and speak well.

He contends that undergraduate's writing is appalling because they lack a good knowledge of the stylistics of English which would have cured their writing of the disease of lack of organization, wordiness, vagueness and monotony. Odejide (1971: 67) remarks that the Nigerian student's writing is blighted by inappropriate use of words, the use of a plethora of poly-syllabic words, convoluted structures and a recourse to the melodramatic and the didactic.

Landy (1976: 122) would prefer "effective writing" to correct grammatical writing. He observes that most undergraduates writing is dull and drab; lacking lucidity and vigour which are the vital ingredients of effective English, and points out that lucid and vigorous writing does not sprout from the void. It flows from a mind that is lucid and vigorous and such mind sees its subjects *without* blur, lights up its hidden corners, cuts like a laser beam through areas that had seemed impenetrable. And a mind is vigorous if it is insatiably curious about seemingly dull subjects. He stresses the point that effective stylistic use of English is superior to correct grammatical usage and that students should strive to use the language effectively and stylistically, adding that correctness is over-rated. He puts the relationship graphically by saying that many of the rules of writing (grammar) are like the rules of etiquette which one does not have to worry about to enjoy a good meal but one must observe them if one wants "a seat at the captain's table". Between grammaticality and stylistic lucidity Landy would vote for the latter:

Language that is lucid and vigorous, even if grammatically incorrect, is always preferable to language that is misty and dull, for the same reason that a tasty, nutritious meal consumed in a hut is better than a plate of junk food at the Hotel Presidential.

Stressing Aspects Of Style:

Organisation, diction, tone, syntactic structure, purpose and audience for writing as well as coherence are aspects of style that must be deliberately stressed and cautiously taught if one's writing is to pass muster. It is pertinent to note that the English language is a language of varieties and words from the language are chosen and used because of the purpose and audience of writing. Thus, the good writer must draw a distinction between the spoken and written, the formal and informal, the familiar and the polite and these will determine what to say in what message form and in what situations. As Okoh (1998:105) put it, "every word has a particular when of use", and "our writing or speech will run riot if we do not watch our "drinks" that is, if we unwittingly mix such varieties as formal and informal, standard and non-standard...".

Words should be stylistically selected and they should meet the criteria of clarity, simplicity, brevity, and precision. If a writer does not resist the temptation to use arcane, recondite, abstruse and furtive words in his writing, he risks being a monologist, instead of a communicator. By so doing, he might have arrogantly sentenced his hapless readers to avoidable bewilderment and unwarranted frustration because of their inability to decode the signs of a self-communicator. The reader deserves the writer's consideration, sympathy and courtesy. Good writers should prefer the familiar word to the farfetched, the concrete to the abstract, the monosyllabic to the polysyllabic and the vigorous to the dull. A writer should be conversant with the lexical spectrum of formal, informal, technical, colloquial, slang and the utter vulgar usage. Words may refer to the same concept but they are not used interchangeably. The following illustrate the point:

Provoke	taunt.	annoy,	bug
Strumpet	prostitute	hooker	lay
Assassinate	eliminate	kill	zap
Indigence	destitution	poverty	need
Inebriated	intoxicated	drunk	soake
Recapitulation	summary	bottom line	gist.

A writer must note that abbreviations and stump-words belong to the colloquial and should be avoided in serious writing. Idioms belong to informal usage and should be minimised in formal writing. Slangs are taboo in formal writing.

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For the style to be right, heed must be paid to register as every profession or discipline has its own register i.e. words and expressions used in it. To write well, therefore, the writer must have a smattering of the registers of many fields without going into the nittey-gritty of their technical jargons. So, words, must be judiciously mobilised and be intelligently and dexterously deployed according to meaning range, register and purpose of writing.

Words are the raw materials of sentences and those who write good and vigorous sentences, are those who communicate effectively. An essay filled with simple, choppy sentences is as bad as one riddled with complex, cumbersome sentences. A good syntactic style is one which uses a variety of sentences, that is, blending the simple sentences with the complex and the compound. The simple sentence could be arresting and dramatic, the complex could be tuneful and the compound could be used to achieve stylistic balance. A good style is free of the weakness of writing identified by Egbe (1979). This weakness is characterized by uncoordinated clauses, tortuous sentences and clumsy expressions.

If the proclivity to write only simple sentences or only the double makes essays suffer from the incubus of monotony, the habit of writing elongated and Dickensian sentences may make what is written to suffer from the cancer of incomprehension and meaninglessness.

Sentences are the building blocks of paragraphs. For stylistic accuracy, sentences within a paragraph must be unified, orderly and coherent. Topic sentences should be the linchpins of paragraphs. One paragraph should lead to the other and all paragraphs in an essay must be logically and semantically linked. A good style abhors the production of ‘newspaper’ paragraphs, in which every sentence constitutes a paragraph.

Coherence is another cardinal feature of style. Coherence has two aspects: text-based coherence and reader-based coherence. Whilst the former is associated with the internal structure of the text itself, the latter has to do with the meaningful aspect of writer-reader interaction. According to Piki (1986:45).

The context of a text must be consistent with the reader’s pragmatic knowledge or his expectation based on his world knowledge. The writer must conform to the communicative principles by being informative, relevant and sufficiently clear.

It must be emphasised that coherence straddles the domains of words, structures and paragraphs and even beyond. The writer should take notice of it and ensure that ideas and concepts are mechanically, structurally and conceptually blended and that his product is read as an integrated, organic whole.

Tone is another vital aspect of style that can bear highlighting. Tone is the writer's attitude to his readers and his topic. One can maintain a subjective, instructive or objective tone, it could be impersonal, personal or intimate. The subject matter and audience always dictate the tone used by a writer. Odejide, after noting that many Nigerian writers prefer the melodramatic and didactic style, quotes Green who observes that many errors are not due to grammar but to style as some candidates “begin an examination essay with the invocation of the deity or a heart-rending plea to the examiner”, noting such indulgence may be more prejudicial than many grammatical errors and portrays the student “not merely a foreigner, but a nincompoop as well”.

Conclusion

We have noted that writing well goes beyond dogmatic adherence to the rules of grammar. It is observed that grammar has its place in language usage, in fact, it is the anatomy of a language. It is certainly the case that good writing must transcend the frontiers of grammar, indeed, it should make its foundation. There is therefore the need for a pedagogical sea-change. Teaching the features of style must be brought to the front burner just as grammatical features must be taught. Current texts should be reviewed to take cognisance of the imperative of style in primary, secondary and tertiary schools. It is the suggestion of this writer that the teaching of style should get more time than grammar in the classroom. If this is done, Nigeria will reduce drastically the rate of failures in public examinations, teachers of English can smile and the society will be the better for it. This is one of the surest solutions to the problem of poor performance. It will bring cheer to all learners, users and teachers of English.

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