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Unlearning as a Process of Learning: Practical Aspects in Teaching English in a Second Language Setting

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Abstract
This paper addresses pedagogic issues relating to the teaching of English in a second language setting. It argues for a descriptive and functional approach to language teaching and learning and insists that traditional approaches, which tend to be mainly prescriptive, are no longer adequate for addressing the communicative needs of today's language learners. Specifically, it opines that learning English entails "unlearning" the discomfort we are taught about such things as double negatives. It proposes a dynamic, interactive and collaborative approach to English language teaching and learning. Results of actual classroom experiments are presented to illustrate how instructors can determine the actual language needs of students and thus tailor their instructions to address these. The experiments also support the central argument in this essay that predetermined department-based syllabi might need to be regulated to make them functional to the needs of specific students. As the results of the experiments show, a failure to make such functional alignments could produce students who are only notionally educated but functionally empty.

Key Words: unlearn, second language, ESP, ESL, pedagogy, chalkface, e-learning

Introduction

The term 'unlearning' is borrowed from McWhorter (2001) and as used in this paper can take place by means of replacement, readjustment or enlargement. The paper addresses the misguided but persistent sustenance of describing English grammatical structures based on classical languages of antiquity, such as case marking and double negatives. It also examines the tripartite relationship between spoken and written language and language description, especially as it creates a constant tension between prescriptive rules and descriptive rules. The question raised in the paper is: How does the teacher of English reconcile this tension and decide what to functionally transmit to learners of the language? The last point relates to the institutional or systemic assumptions that underlie the formulation of English language curricula in a second language environment. The paper presents results from research carried out using Final Year undergraduate students of English from the University of Jos as respondents. The study tested the listening and writing skills of the students. The errors returned ranged from punctuation, spelling, grammar and logic. This raised the questions: At what point in the language study of the respondents should these language weaknesses have been discovered and addressed? How should the teacher of English as a second language deal with such challenges? Is there a problem with the "planned/intended" curriculum, or with the "enacted" curriculum, or, indeed, with the "experienced" curriculum? (Marsh and Willis, 1995).

From the Languages of Classical Antiquity

In her adventures in wonderland, Alice fell into a deep pool of her own tears, so the story goes, and then met a mouse:

"O Mouse, do you know the way out of this pool? I am very tired of swimming about here, O Mouse!"

Alice thought this must be the right way of speaking to a mouse: she had never done such a thing before, but she remembered having seen her brother's Latin Grammar, "A mouse-of a mouse-to a mouse-a mouse- O mouse!" (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*).

Like other children of her time, Alice had been brought up to believe that not only Latin but also English has six cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative and ablative.

How this came about is quite obvious. In those days, grammarians worked within traditions that were based on the classical languages of antiquity. So

when they first began to examine English, they encountered a language without nominal case marking. Accordingly, they concluded that the Latin cases were there—invisible. As it turns out, English nouns are marked for the genitive only, though personal pronouns are marked for the nominative, the accusative and the genitive. As Huddleston (1984) observes: "A common criticism of traditional grammars of English is that they distort the description by foisting onto it analyses which are perfectly valid for Latin and Greek (and perhaps for Old English) but irrelevant to Modern English. . .

One commonly-cited example concerns the system of "case" (72-73). Another is that traditional grammarians (including many teachers of English in Nigeria) wearily insist that English has a future tense, as Latin has. English has two tenses only, the present and the past. Of course, there a number of possibilities of denoting future time, such as by means of modal auxiliaries or semi-auxiliaries, or by simple present or progressive forms. (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, Svartvik, 84, 87).

Today, the discipline of linguistics is more enlightened, we think we now know better, at least in the case of case. But such erroneous assumptions still persist in the way we learn, and handle language, and some of these are barely perceptible to the uncritical observer.

For example, the prestige of writing as the vehicle of education and its physical constancy in contrast with the ephemerality of a mouthful of air mean that we tend to conceive of written language as the prototype of "language" itself, as how language "should" be; although a hundred years ago, Saussure made spoken language primary. The existence of a language in writing tends to lead its speakers, if most of them are literate, to reconceive spoken language as a kind of pale, sloppy reflection of the "real" language on the page. Changes in the spoken language are regarded as a kind of shaggy entropy, a defacement of something considered set and eternal, the alteration of which constitutes desecration. This is our tacit sense of what "English" is, for example—but this is a highly contingent affair (Mc Whorter, 222).

Language seems orderly when it is found in novels, plays, and news broadcasts, but much less so when it is heard in cafés, classrooms, and offices. Take this exchange between two British academics:

(1) Peter: And he's going to go to the top, is he?

Reynard: Well, Mallet said he felt it would be a good thing if Oscar went.

This is an example worthy of a playwright, but what Peter and Reynard actually produced was this:

(2) Peter: and he's going to. go to the top, is he?

Reynard: well, . I mean this . uh Mallet said Mallet was uh said something about uh you know he felt it would be a good thing if u:h . if Oscar went, (Herbert H. Clark, "Pragmatics of Language Performance" p. 366)

Notice that in his answer, Reynard decides what to say as he goes along. He takes first one direction ("Mallet said something about") and then another ("he felt it . . ."). Along the way he replaces phrases, makes clarifications (with *I mean* and *you know*), and introduces delays (with *uh*). Reynard's utterance looks anything but orderly, and yet he succeeds in coordinating with Peter on what he wanted to say. And we are able to identify with this as typical; it is not strange to us. Whereas the carefully scripted dialogue we mentioned first is PREPLANNED, NON-INTERACTIVE, the present exchange is SPONTANEOUS, INTERACTIVE LANGUAGE. As students of language, we must account for this spontaneous, interactive language used in cafés, classrooms, and offices. After all, language evolved before people could read or write, attend plays, or watch television. Even today, the primary setting for language use is conversation.

So the sense that the written variety of a language is "primary," is due not to anything inherently superior about that version, but to the seductive power that anything has by sheer virtue of its having been there first, as long as the means are available to keep its image available in perpetuity.

But once a society falls under this kind of impression, change as rapid (that is occurring within a generation or two) as that between Old and Modern English or between Proto-Polynesian and Hawaiian becomes impossible. Instead, generation after generation are taught that the "real" language is that variety enshrined on the page and that the changes taking place in their speech are "mistakes" rather than natural developments of the very sort that turned Latin into French or some lost language into Japanese and Korean. This tutelage cannot eliminate language change entirely, but it does put a

major brake on the process. According to this view, standardization and widespread literacy, for all of their obvious advantages, retard language change.

Of course, writing does not freeze a language in place. There is an extent to which spoken language simply develops apace, leaving the recidivist written language behind. When this happens, it creates two versions of the language, the unwritten one and the one on the page. For example, one of the underacknowledged pitfalls in learning to speak French, Arabic or Yoruba for a foreign learner is gradually realizing that the distance between the written language and the way it is actually spoken colloquially even by educated people is vaster than textbooks generally acknowledge.

One learns, for example, that the way to express *we* is the pronoun *nous,* with its corresponding ending *–ons,* as in *nous faisons* for *we make.* Yet in reality, *nous* has not been used much in casual French for centuries. Instead, it has been largely replaced by *on,* which began as the impersonal third-person pronoun used as English uses *they—on dit qu'il est malade* "they say (that is, it is said) that he is sick." Textbooks will mention that *on* is "often" used in place of *nous,* such that *nous faisons* is "often" *on fait,* but they rarely make it clear that the actual situation is that one simply *cannot* engage in a casual café conversation in Paris using *nous,* anymore than one can speak casual English without using contractions.)

How this gap retards language change is that the very existence of the written variety has a way of keeping the spoken language from moving along as quickly as it would otherwise, even if it does advance somewhat as spoken French has. "Standard English as we know it, for example, is, properly speaking, an embalmed dialect held back from ambling down paths that speech varieties throughout the world have gaily taken to no general misery or discomfort." (Mc Whorter, 226)

Literacy and Language Change

We are always told that "two negatives equal a positive" and that therefore a sentence like *He didn't see nothing* is "illogical." This is one of many "rules" that must be hammered into us in school—the real reason being that the "rules" have been imposed on the language from without, rather than arising naturally within them. (*Billy and **I** went to the store* is another such rule). In the words of Mc Whorter, "the pox on "double negatives" is surely the most utterly silly of these rules, for the simple reason that "double negatives" are

the usual situation in many languages throughout the world, all of which surely cannot be branded as dwelling in "illogic." (**Nunca** *he visto* ***nada*** "never have I seen nothing" a Spaniard would say for *I have never seen anything.* This is a double negative and yet would not be out of place in the language." Of course, there are languages which have single negatives, such as Arabic, German, Greek, Igbo, Italian, Latin, Russian, Swedish, Tiv and Yoruba. McWhorter concludes that learning many other languages entails "unlearning" the discomfort we are taught about double negatives.

When it came to double negation, the 18th Century grammarians Lowth, followed by Murray, decided that its prevalence in almost all English varieties and its optionality in the London variety was founded on a pervasive fault of logic endemic to the English population, supposedly neglecting that, as he put it, "Two negatives in English destroy one another, or are equivalent to an affirmative." This notion was based partly on the fact that Latin did not allow double negatives—but modelling English on Latin made no more sense than declaring that cats ought not to meow because dogs don't. Unfortunately, double negation was nevertheless taught as improper to write and thus, never seen on the page where the purportedly "real" English was enshrined. This situation remains to this day.

Left to its own devices, Standard English would most likely allow double negation as an emphatic strategy, along the lines that Falstaff, a character in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (4:3.97) used it. Falstaff said: "There's never none of these demure boys come to any proof." Double negatives were also found in the writings of Chaucer. Non-Standard English speakers everyone embrace it—Cockneys, Appalachians, colloquial Singapore English ("Singlish") speakers, Black Americans (or African Americans), Britons from the Midlands, etc (see also Jowitt 2008:17).

The point being made here simply is that this natural feeling that double negatives are wrong is, according Mc Whorter, "an *arbitrary* imposition tracing back to underinformed pronouncements made more than two hundred years ago by disproportionately influential people." (229). It has nothing to do with "logic," which language grammars worldwide gleefully contradict with abandon. For instance, why don't we say *Amn't* I" instead of *Aren't* I"

We can therefore say that spoken language, rather than being a pale reflection of written language, is actually a distinct realm, with its own structures and

aesthetic standards. Stylistics of spoken language represents the patterns that spoken language takes in all of the world's societies.

For example, when humans talk, they tend to partition units of information into brief packets (one analysis indicates that the average is seven words).These packets are typically run together with *and* or *so* or simply juxtaposed rather than linked and layered by strategies such as *Having had lunch, she proceeded to go to the ATM machine.* People just don't talk like this casually, regardless of education level.

Also, in spoken language, a moderate degree of redundancy and repetition is a communicative plus, rendering dramatic contour and calling attention to the concepts the speaker wants to stress. In speech, one can simply name one's subject—"Little boy"—and then jump right to something the boy says—"All I've got is a slingshot"—because gesture and intonation make the meanings clear. Writing requires us to be more explicit.

Clearly, spoken language was not "waiting" for written language to come along and "tighten it up." Rather, written language conventions—and the tendency for educated speech to then mimic them—are an artificial add-on to human language, designed for the specific and highly historically contingent task of transcribing speech effectively into writing. Indeed, people heavily exposed to written language tend to acquire the capability of expressing themselves in this variety and use "written" strategies in their speech more often than people without education do. This is what is known, in our "tall building" (or so-called civilized) cultures as "articulate" speech or "language skills."

What is the point for us as students of English? This: That, as a rule, we speak in "idea packets" using linguist Wallace Chafe's term, into which people apportion their utterances. When we try as much as possible to sound like a book, we do so based on an unintentional illusion that the conventions of writing are somehow "real" language (although in our lives this is socially necessary in many contexts and many of us are so used to doing it that we barely have to think about it).

Ultimately, if you have ever tape-recorded yourself and your friends talking casually and then listened to it later, you would notice just how few complete sentences of any length we actually tend to utter, how contrary our daily utterances are to the idealization of language we are constantly bombarded with on the page. We speak in "idea packets" or, better yet, when we try to

spin out longer propositions, we risk being interrupted because our subconscious rules of discourse are founded on an expectation that people will talk in spurts. As a rule, in casual conversation human beings do not, and never have, spoken in tightly constructed sentences and carefully bounded paragraphs.

This is one thing distinguishing real life from plays, in which characters stand around making five-minute speeches while the other characters just sit and listen. If anyone does try to talk in chapters in real life, it's a little annoying. Our conclusion is that the written style of language is a gloss on human expression, not its pinnacle. Our realization, and practical demonstration of this fact in the way we handle language, would show that we are truly learning to conquer the English language, and lead it as a slave to accomplish the multitudinous roles in our fast changing world.

Implications for the Teacher of English in a Second Language Setting

There are many myths enshrined in grammar books, and some of these are still being taught religiously by instructors in many institutions. Some are, in truth, not rules of grammar, but are stylistic rules that may have originated from a desire among teachers to persuade children to use a certain style rather than others, which ended up appearing as rules of right and wrong. For example the rule "you must not start a sentence with 'but,'" which eventually extended to 'so,' 'because,' and 'and,' may have originated from a desire among teachers to link up sentence fragments that they tend to write. Evidence abounds in the writings of respected and educated native speakers of English to show that this myth is not a rule of English grammar. Jane Austen for example begins sentences with 'but' on almost every page of her books, and occasionally uses 'and' in the same position in the sense of 'furthermore.' In *Mansfield Park* (1814) we have the following use of 'but':

> She had two sisters to be benefited by her elevation [marriage to a social superior]; and such of their acquaintance as thought Miss Ward and Miss Frances quite as handsome as Miss Maria, did not scruple to predict their marrying with almost equal advantage. <u>But</u> there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them. (text extract courtesy of Martin Cutts 1995)

The reality is that 'but,' like most sentence connectors, signals a shift in pace and direction. It may help in starting an argument or in stating a point of

view. In the reality of language use then, one can start a sentence with any word he wants, as long as the sentence hangs together as a complete statement.

There are other myths such as:

> You must not put a comma before 'and.'
>
> You must not end a sentence with a preposition
>
> You must not split your infinitives (based on the rules of Latin grammar)
>
> You must not write a one-sentence paragraph

You should write as you speak (You should write the way you speak, which contradicts the 'primacy of writing' argument)

You should test your writing with a readability formula.

Cutts relates a story that a business writer once told him, that her English teacher ordered her "never to begin consecutive paragraphs with the same letter of the alphabet." According to Cutts, after following this non-rule for thirty years, this former student said she was beginning to wonder if there was any justification for it. (94).

Most language teachers today know that by and large these are simply myths and are nonsensical. They have nothing to do with proper writing. All they do is seek to sustain age-old views that have been passed on as authority. But, as Bolinger once said, "authority is fine when not made of whole cloth and trimmed with lunatic fringe" (56). This means teachers of English as a second language in higher institutions of learning ought to be aware of which grammar and writing rules are extant, and which ones are merely residues in the development of the language.

More important, teachers of English in a second language setting ought to seek innovative ways of evaluating the existing knowledge of their students in the language. This will help them avoid making assumptions that often do not hold. It will also help them in preparing or adapting the institutional syllabus into their enacted syllabus that would reflect what Marsh and Willis (1995) call "chalkface realities" and thus functionally address the core language needs of their students.

Some Popular Assumptions about What Students (Should) Know

Institutions make certain assumptions regarding candidates they admit, and these assumptions account, in part at least, for the curriculum that is drawn—usually in advance. For instance, if the candidate intends to read a course leading to the award of a degree in English, it is assumed, among other things, that such a candidate has acquired a certain level of knowledge in English, which is why a credit pass at the School Certificate examination or its equivalent is an entry requirement. Indeed, in most English-speaking countries, it is taken for granted that anyone offered admission to pursue a programme that would lead to the award of a degree should be able to communicate intelligibly in Basic English.

Consequently, the teacher of English at university level, whether he is teaching English as a second language (ESL) or a course in writing, grammar, or other feature of the language, would usually take it for granted that the students already understand and speak basic English; can read and write in the language; and already have an idea about certain elements of the structure of English, such as the difference between "no," "know," "now," and "a noun"; and that most would recognize a verb if they see one. Their very admission presumes such knowledge. But most teachers of English in tertiary institutions would testify from years of classroom experience, or in the words of Adamson (2006:611) "the chalkface realities that they face," that these basic assumptions often do not hold. That is why when language courses are designed and taught based on these assumptions, only a few of the learners benefit, a majority fail to acquire the rudimentary language skills they need in order to function competently in society.

The results of a test administered to final year undergraduate students in an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) class at the University of Jos in 2005 show what students actually know, and the results also reveal why instructors should go beyond following a department-wide or university-wide syllabus in teaching course units on the English language.

What Students Know

Following is a text that was administered to test two out of the four communication skills—the listening and composition (written expression) of final year students of English who registered for the ESP course in 2005.

The Original Passage		
A thirty year old Englishman fell off from the sixth floor, and was found 3 hours later, dead. An autopsy conducted on the second day revealed that he had burst his rectum and broken his pelvis. His death was announced five times on the local radio station, and three times on one of the TV channels. Sixty-five people phoned-in their condolences, but only 15 were present for his funeral a fortnight later.		
Versions Reproduced by Students following a listening and writing skill exercise		
1. THE DEATH OF AN ENGLISHMAN The passage talks about the death of an English man who happens to fall from the window. The death witnesses sympathizers from different places both in proxy and persons. In other words, people visited the scene to condole the deceased while others phone in for condolance.	2. A 30yr old English man had an accident and was taken to the hospital. The man had been unconscious all the way to the hospital	3. The language use in the passage portrays the notion of English for specific, occupational or professional purposes. That is language of sciences This is because of the professional terms such as ortopsy corpce etc.
4. A 30 year old man that died through an accident. He fell off from a city Hall, which led to his death. The people that went to condole his family and who signed the condolence register where sixty five. And the number of persons	5. A 30-year old English man fell from a tall building and died his death was announced on the Tv several times. He died and fell from a tall building and his death was announced on the television. The language used is	6. A 30 year old English man felt down from a story building and. He broke nees, his orbituary was announced, 65 came for condolences 15, for burial

who attended the funeral service was fifteen.	language used to convey the meaning and also pass the message of his death across.	
7. A thirty-year old Englishman fell from a tower and was picked by a group of people. The middle-age Englishman had an accident involving a fall from such an altitude to the basement of the building. Eye-witnesses rushed to the scene to rescue the casualty, who of course, needed an urgent medical attention.	8. A fifty years old man fell from a building and his death was announced five times. On the other hand it was only 15 people that pay him his last respect.	9. A thirty years old Englishman fall from the first floor of an up stears building and was found that he was dead. An ortopcy conducted shows that he has broken his back bone as reported over the radio
10. A thirty year old man who was announced to have died was seen at a local Tv station. An Autopsy reveals that he has died in which 65 people phoned in their condolences and only 15 attended the funeral.	11. A 30year old man fell off from the sixth an autocy carried out on the next day	12. A 35-year old man died in a hospital. Only about hald of those who came to see him at his sick bed were around for his funeral which was conducted two weeks after his death.

A quick comparison of the 12 responses of students with the original passage in italics demonstrates clearly the weaknesses of the students, even at 400 Level. Following are spelling errors: in 1 condolance [for condolence], in 3 corpce [for corpse]; in 6 nees [for knees] and orbituary [for obituary], in 9,

stears [for stairs], in 3, 9 and 11, ortopsy, ortopcy and autocy [for autopsy], and in 12 hald [for half].

Similar observations can be made with respect to problems of punctuation, syntax and discourse, but space limitations forbid an analysis at these levels. To illustrate, in 10, the first impression one gets is that the man did not actually die, for we read: "A thirty year old man who was announced to have died was seen at a local Tv station." However, in the very next sentence, we are told: "An Autopsy reveals that he has died." Here it is not clear whether he was already dead when he was seen at a local TV station, or whether he died thereafter, or indeed, whether he was seen at the station before, during, or after the autopsy. Note also the mix up in tense (from 'was seen' to 'has died'), the upper case in 'Autopsy' and the lower case in the abbreviation 'Tv.' In 5, the second sentence distorts the sequence of events. The cause and effect is muddled up: "He died and fell from a tall building and his death was announced on the television." As here presented, the fall did not cause his death, since he had already died before he fell from the building. Evidence of poor writing skills can also be seen in the needless repetition in the first and second sentences. The discourse of 11 is simply meaningless, but it is not surprising, since the linguistic ability of the respondent can be deduced in part from the spelling of 'autopsy' as 'autocy.'

Seen side by side, it is clear that the majority of the samples were far from what the original text actually said. The questions for the teacher of English in a second language setting are these: could these weaknesses have been detected earlier in the career of the students and addressed? Would the teacher of English consider his/her training a success graduating students with this output (the respondents were only three months away from obtaining their B.A. Honours Degree in English)? In 5.0, we suggest an alternative pedagogical approach.

In another test a questionnaire was administered to the same respondents. One of the questions was: "Please list two of your favourite pastimes." Sixty three respondents filled out the questionnaire. Out of this figure, only 35 had an idea what a "pastime" was. Some listed as their favourite pastimes, eating and sleeping. But these were much better than the 28 who had no idea what a pastime was. Responses to this question included the following: "My 20th Birthday 09-01-06," "The day I got engaged, that is I was proposed 20th-08-2006," "the time I got admission into [sic] university," "when I met my life partner," "when my elder sister gave birth," "my sister's wedding," "my

brother's last two months wedding," "the day I met my husband," "when I received Christ as my personal saviour," "my wedding day," "the Christmas of 2004," "examination," "my birthday," "parents reunion," "my first encounter with my girlfriend," "100 level," "200 level," "secondary school life," "the first day I drove a car," "date of conversion," "the day of our matriculation ceremony," "my mum's visit," "my child's birthday."

Similar studies have been reported (Wu & Stansfield, 2001; Basturkmen and Elder, 2006:681). Marcel, distinguished between the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), a distinction which was viewed as important in later approaches that placed communication at a premium, and investigated ways of structuring learning with a focus on meaning (Roberts, 1999).

An Alternative Pedagogical Approach

The problems responsible for poor performance in English Language by university students are many and varied. A poor background during the formative years at the primary and secondary school is one, and this is likely a symptom of the general decline in the educational system in Nigeria and perhaps elsewhere in Sub-Saharan Africa. How that would be addressed is a complex issue and is outside the scope of this paper. But what can be done to mitigate such lapses once students get to the university? Pennycook (1994) calls for a radical pedagogy concerned with the creation of "counter-discourses," "insurgent knowledges," "common counter-articulations" so that "critical English language educators" (English teachers) will join the struggle for "a critical, transformative and listening critical pedagogy through English" (quotes as cited in Bolton (2006). These counter-discourses, insurgent knowledges or critical, transformative and listening critical pedagogy could include engaging students more in text creation and de-emphasising theory. In this approach, the teaching of English would not be limited theory laced with a few examples, but would consist mainly of practical applications of introduced theories. Students would be required to repeatedly demonstrate their understanding of new concepts by practicing their new skills through the production of text. This approach has long been recognized by educators (See Carter 1997). But this is not practiced in most Nigerian universities. The main reason is the shortage of manpower in the face of a bourgeoning, even escalating student population. Such a scenario makes assessing students texts as suggested here impractical. The answer to this challenge, we submit, is to adopt educational technology, using the

blended e-learning approach. This approach enables educators to facilitate engaged students across a range of conversational spaces, including online discussion forums, chat rooms, wikis and blogs, for debate and shared knowledge construction. In turn, it addresses the problem of large classes; as such technology encourages text creation in a variety of ways and makes it easier to quickly and effectively assess students' submissions. Whereas chats require synchronous online communication and may be a challenge to sustain in many parts of Africa, forums, blogs, wikis and other online spaces are asynchronous. As such, they mitigate the problems of infrastructure shortage and power challenges common in many developing economies. When such blended elearning is introduced early in the academic programme of students, instructors are able to identify students' weaknesses and effectively give individualized attention, providing the regular feedback that students need to improve.

Above all, such transformative and listening critical pedagogy could also include 'unlearning' some of the rules which we have held for many years as rules of grammar, but which are in fact "an *arbitrary* imposition tracing back to underinformed pronouncements made more than two hundred years ago by disproportionately influential people" (229).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that in many respects, many prescriptive grammar rules, or what Bolinger (1980:2) calls the rules of "the Shamans," are routinely disobeyed by language users, basically because they are out of touch with the realities of how language actually works. Other modern ELT experts (Phillipson, 1992, 1999; Pennycook, 1994, 2001; Tollefson, 2002; Eggington & Wren, 1997) also submit that the rules grammarians lay down are not followed in practice and suggest a more tolerant attitude to "errors." However, if we adopt this approach, or this point of view, how do we evaluate written work which, even when produced by final-year English students, is seriously deficient in various respects, going far beyond one or two "errors"? As the results from the micro study for this paper have shown, the problems of Nigerian learners of English go far beyond mere problems with double negatives or unrealistic prescriptive rules. They include difficulties with punctuation, spelling, structure and logic of thought. How this is addressed is a challenge for the TESL.

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