

---

---

**AFRREV LALIGENS**  
An International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies  
Bahir Dar, Ethiopia  
Vol. 1 (1) March, 2012:44-51  
ISSN: 2225-8604

---

---

**Communicative Competence and General Studies in  
English in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria**

**Anyadiegwu, Justina C.**

*Department of English Language and Literary Studies  
Nwafor Orizu College of Education, Nsugbe, Anambra State, Nigeria*

---

**Abstract**

*It is no more a hidden fact that students admitted into our universities and other tertiary institutions are quite deficient in the use of English. The incidence of examination malpractice is so glaring in our secondary school system that the result from the various examinations conducted in these schools are everything but reliable. For this reason our universities and tertiary institutions have no faith in the certificates these crop of students flaunt. Moreover, the role, status and functions of the English Language in Nigeria as the national language and the lingua franca in a multi-ethnolinguistic society and the role of the English Language as the language of instruction and examination have placed much emphasis on the mastery of the English Language by students. It is this perception of the realities on the part of our universities and tertiary institutions that the General Studies in English courses are introduced as compulsory courses for our students.*

**Introduction**

The English language is undoubtedly the most important legacy bequeathed upon Nigerian by their colonial masters. The language is the language of



government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature, etc. It is the national language, the lingua franca in a multi-ethnolinguistic country as Nigeria. Consequently, the average Nigerian's access to the culture and scientific knowledge of the world is largely through the English language. In our educational system, the language is the medium of instruction at all levels of education in different subjects except of course, the indigenous languages and other foreign languages like French. Apart from being the medium of instruction, the language is taught as a subject/discipline in all Nigerian schools except those with strict religious inclinations like the Arabic schools found in the northern part of Nigeria.

The ordinary level examination is no more a good measure of language proficiencies of our students admitted into our tertiary institutions. Boadi (1991) of quoted in Aliyu (2002) notes that "the examination is an attainment examination and not a competitive one and its English language syllabuses were prescribed with specific educational objective in view and do not anticipate all the requirements of university work". For this reason, he contends that the students who enter our tertiary institutions are ill equipped to use and understand English adequately, as they read texts laboriously and are unable to use basic English structures correctly; they are quite incapable to manipulate language with competence, hence the introduction of General English Studies in our tertiary institutions.

### **General Studies in English**

The Use of English or General Studies in English was first introduced in our tertiary institutions in 1966 by the University of Nigeria Nsukka and in 1968 by the University of Ife (Akintola (1992) in Ayodele (1998). The course was aimed, according to him, to remediate the problems of the English syllabuses at the secondary schools level and develop in the students the language skills they require in their academic pursuit. He observes the correlation between the poor performance of students in other subject areas and their performance in the English language, as good performance in other subjects are contingent upon the students' adequate knowledge of the English language. Moreover, these students are expected, in the course of their study, to use English to describe structures and processes, compare, hypothesis, synthesize, analyze, refer, evaluate academic research and debate, etc. Failure in their academic work is therefore, failure in English, thus revealing the connection between communicative competence in the English language and educational performance generally. The General Studies in English therefore, has the

aims and objectives of ensuring the acquisition of communication competence needed by our students both for academic purposes and to function affectively in a country where the English language is the official language and the lingua franca and as well use the language with international intelligibility.

### **Communicative Competence**

The term, communicative competence, was coined by Dell Hymes (1966) in reaction against the inadequacy of Noam Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance. Competence according to Chomsky is the native speaker's intuitive knowledge of the system of his language which enables him to produce an infinite number of sentences which are both grammatical and acceptable in his language. Performance on the other hand, is the native speaker's language behaviour which is determined by his linguistic competence, it is the actual use of the language in speech situations. Hymes however, is of the opinion that speakers of a language have to have more than linguistic competence to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community. He points out that Chomsky's linguistic competence fails to consider the most important linguistic ability of producing and comprehending utterances that are both grammatical and appropriate to the context of use. Thus, he elaborated and extended Chomsky's monolithic, idealized notion of linguistic competence to communicative competence which includes both linguistic competence and contextual/sociolinguistic considerations of language use. Linguistic competence includes the acquisition of phonological rules, morphological rules, syntactic rules, semantic rules and lexical rules; while contextual/sociolinguistic competence includes the considerations of the pragmatic aspects of speech acts such as the cultural values, norms and conventions. However, Canale and Swain (1980) classify sociolinguistic competence to include the following: sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Sociolinguistic competence to them refers to all the social contexts that exist in the use of language such as topic, participants, their relationship social status, sex, age, etc. These influence linguistic choices, styles and registers of speech.



Discourse competence includes the knowledge of cohesion and coherence in various types of discourse as they are quite crucial in interpreting utterances particularly when the literal meaning is at variance with the speaker's intention. Strategic competence is the verbal and non-verbal strategies that compensate for breakdowns and at the same time enhance effectiveness of communication such as discourse structure, background knowledge, ambiguity, etc. Strategic competence is associated with the interlocutors' ability in using communication strategies (Lin, 2009). Therefore, communicative competence in the context of second language teaching is "a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse" (Canale and Swain, 1980).

In the teaching and learning of the English Language, the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has been advocated by applied linguists. The emphasis on language teaching in this approach is on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures. It is an integration of grammatical and functional teaching. Communicative language teaching ensures the use of procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem-solving tasks. It adequately takes care of the learners' unique interests, learning styles, needs and goals and these are reflected in the design of methods of instruction.

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent are the objectives of teaching the General Studies in English in tertiary institutions in Nigeria achieved?
2. What factors militate against the effectiveness of the General Studies in English in inculcating communicative competence amongst students of tertiary institution in Nigeria?

### **Methodology**

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The target population for this study comprised all the second year students of the Faculty of Education, University of Nigeria Nsukka, Nsugbe Campus; and their General English Studies/Use of English lecturers. Through the stratified sampling technique the sample population for this study consisted of two hundred and forty (240) undergraduates drawn from the class lists of the



twenty-four departments of the faculty. The lecturers for the study were the four most senior lecturers in the General English Studies Unit of the institution. Instruments for data collection were of three types: (i) the students' cumulative scores for their first year examinations on General Studies in English I and II (GS101 and 102); (ii) an English Language Performance Activity (ELPA) which consisted of writing in not more than 450 words on "A Memorable Day", and (iii) a structured questionnaire in which the lecturers were asked to assign 1-5 points to six (6) possible factors raised by the researcher which are inhibitory to the effectiveness of the General Studies in English in inculcating the much desired communicative competence in our students. The scores were derived from the multiple-choice questions administered to the students for these examinations. The advantages include quick grading, objectivity in marking and a wider coverage of language knowledge. Gu and Lu (2002) believe that in spite of these advantages, the validity of multiple-choice questions in testing communicative competence is doubtful as such method of testing divides language into separate language points/units as grammar vocabulary, etc and test them separately. On the contrary, language in communication is a synthetic form integrating all aspects of grammar and language skills. For this reason, focusing on testing students' receptive ability while neglecting their productive ability makes the validity of the test doubtful (Han et al (2004); Gu and Lu (2002). Moreover, Anderson et al (2000) have proven that students who take multiple-choice tests can significantly increase their scores "artificially".

For these reasons, the ELPA was equally administered to the students to assess their language productive ability. The ELPA was scored based on content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy. The scores from the multiple-choice questions and the ELPA were correlated and analyzed using the simple percentage. The responses of the teachers were analyzed using the summated rating scale.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Research Question One**

To what extent are the objectives of teaching General Studies in English in tertiary institutions in Nigeria achieved?

Findings from the study as shown in table one reveal that a total of one hundred and forty-seven (147) students representing 61.2% of the population



scored below the pass mark, while a total of ninety-three (93) students representing 38.8% of the population scored pass marks. This therefore shows that the objectives of teaching the General Studies in English, a summary of which is to inculcate communicative competence in the English language in our students is far from being achieved.

### **Research Question Two**

What factors militate against the effectiveness of the General Studies in English in inculcating communicative competence amongst students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

Using the summated rating scale the responses from the lecturers as seen in table two show that class size rates highest (22) as a factor militating against the effectiveness of the General English Studies in inculcating communicative competence. This is quickly followed by method of teaching (21), attendance to class by students (16), lack of drills and practice (10), poor foundation in the English language (9), and lack of language teaching facilities (4).

### **Conclusion**

This study reveals that the noble objectives of the General English Studies in Nigeria's tertiary institutions are yet to be achieved. Chief among the factors militating against the effective teaching of the course and the achievement of the objectives are the class size, cover population and the method of teaching. There is the need therefore to ensure a balanced lecturers- students ratio to 1 to 50. This would facilitate the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach to language teaching which is highly contextualized by the teachers. The lecture method ought to be jettisoned as it has proven ineffective. The CLT approach encourages regular attendance to classes and drills and practice. Equally important is the need for a review of the course content to give it a notional/functional grammar outlook rather than its mere structural outlook.



## References

- Alderson, J.C., E. Nagy and E. Overges (Eds) (2000). *English Language Education in Hingary, Part II, Examining Learners' Achievements in English*. The British Council.
- Aliyu, J.S. (1995). *Improving your Performance in English*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.
- Ayodele, S.O. (1998). "The Problem of Language for Educating Nigeria Learners". Faculty of Education 4th Annual lecture, University of Ibadan.
- Canale, M and M. Swain (1980) "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second language Teaching and Testing" *Applied Linguistics* 1/1:1-47.
- Chomsky, Noam (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass. MIT Press.
- Gu, Waping and Lin Juan (2002). "Test Analysis of College Students' Communicative Competence in English". *Asia EFL Journal Vol 1, 2/7*.
- Han, Baocheng; Manchun Dai and Lifang Yang (2004). "On the Problems of CET, *Foreign Languages and their Teaching*" 2:17-23
- Lin, G.H.C (2007). A Case Study of Seven Taiwanese English as a Foreign Language Freshmen Non-English Majors' Perception about Learning Five Communication Strategies. Boca Raton, Florida.
- Hymes, D. (1972). "On Communicative Competence" in J.B Pride and J. Holmes (Eds). *Sociolinguistics*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Education 269-93.



Table One: The Cumulative Scores of Students on Multiple-Choice Questions and ELPA

Scores	No of Students	Percentage	Letter Grade
1-9	16	6.6%	F
10-19	36	15.0%	F
20-29	44	18.3%	F
30-39	51	21.3%	F
40-49	48	20.0%	E/D
50-59	24	10.0%	C
60-69	15	6.3%	B
70-79	6	2.5%	A
80-89	0	0.0%	A
90-100	0	0.0%	A

Table Two: Teachers' Ratings on the Factors Militating against the Effectiveness of the Teaching of General English Studies

	Factors	A	B	C	D	Total
1	Attendance to class by students	4	3	5	4	16
2	Class size (over population)	6	6	4	6	32
3	Lack of drills and practice	2	4	1	3	10
4	Lack of language teaching facilities	1	1	2	2	6
5	Poor foundation in the English language	3	2	3	1	9
6	Method of teaching	3	5	6	5	21

