

## **Using Needs Analysis to Develop a Learner-Centred Use of English Curriculum for First Year Students in a Nigerian University**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is a survey of the language and communication skills required of first-year students in a Nigerian university. The survey was done with a view to using the information gathered to revise the Use of English curriculum to conform to the specific needs of first-year students at university. Data was gathered from (1) observations of the authors who are experienced Use of English instructors, (2) responses to a questionnaire administered to 320 first-year students and (3) answers from unstructured interview sessions with 30 lecturers across academic faculties on the linguistic and communicative skills required by first-year students at university. The questions asked during data gathering centred on the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The data was analysed, using simple percentage statistics. The findings reveal that English usage by contemporary Nigerian first-year university students is greatly influenced by colloquial and non-standard forms. The results further show that the linguistic and communicative needs of the present generation of first-year Nigerian university students differ markedly from those of their predecessors. Therefore, there is the need to review the Use of English curriculum to meet their specific needs. The authors of this paper use the findings to highlight the need to review the Use of English curriculum, to make the course more relevant for the present generation of Nigerian university students. They conclude that making the course more student-friendly will enhance first-year Nigerian university students' communicative competence in English.

*Keywords:* Curriculum, use of English, Needs analysis, Learners' needs, communicative competence.

### **1. Introduction**

Generally, first-year students, irrespective of whether they are native or non-native users of English, often come to university with poor skills in English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The attention that has been paid to improved use of English and communication skills, especially in countries where English is non-native, is an outcome of the challenges posed by globalisation and internationalisation of university educa-

tion, on the one hand; and the increasing prominence given to English as the default language of education worldwide, on the other. To meet global demands for improved communicative competence in English in both academic and professional contexts, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course designers have continued to explore opportunities for helping to improve university students' proficiency in the basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These skills, which fall squarely within the purview of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), are reflected in one way or another in the curriculum of Use of English and Communication Skills in Nigerian universities.

English for Academic Purposes (EAP), according to Johns and Swales (2002), encompasses a complex set of skills required for advanced language learners to function as independent researchers in a university context. EAP is literally located in English-medium universities and universities worldwide. EAP in the UK, for instance, arose in response to the increasing internationalisation of tertiary education (Jordan, 2002). In India, the term Communication Skills is widely used; but, in Singapore, terms such as English for Business or English for Engineering, among others, are commonly used in order to situate the course in specific disciplinary contexts. EAP, therefore, plays a preparatory and catalytic role for first year university students, thereby ensuring a smooth transition to the university level (Bock, 1993; Drury & Webb, 1997). However, universities in Africa generally use labels such as Communication Skills, Communicative Skills, English for Communication Purposes or Use of English. While these differences in labels demonstrate the differences in curricular and philosophical orientations, they point to the increasing role of English as an "academic lingua franca" worldwide (Duszak, 1997, p.21).

According to Jordan (2002), many changes have occurred in the last two decades in the curricula, methods, technology and financing of EAP in both the UK and the USA. For instance, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) observe that issues bordering on critical use of language, plagiarism and cultural conventions have been given more serious attention in the EAP curriculum in these countries. This observation brings to the fore the need to review Use of English curricula in non-native English settings such as Nigeria, to meet the changing needs of the new generation of university students. Afful (2007) proposed a change in EAP curriculum in a Ghanaian university, which has an identical sociolinguistic setting with Nigerian universities. Afful argues that the revised curriculum should address issues such as remediation, study skills and discipline-specific writing skills. According to him, the main issues in the Communication Skills programme in Ghanaian universities are summarised below (Afful 2007, p.145):

- Note-taking and note-making (from lectures and textbooks)
- Reading (e.g. skimming, scanning and summarising)
- Conventions of Usage (spelling, grammar, punctuation, documentation etc)
- Writing (sentence patterns, clause patterns, paragraphing, types of essays, introduction, body and conclusion).

The Use of English course was incorporated into the curriculum of Nigerian universities by the Nigerian National Universities Commission (NUC) to boost the proficiency of Nigerian university students in English, the country's official language and language of education. Paying close attention to course content and teaching methodology in the course curriculum has become more critical in view of strident complaints by major Nigerian employers about poor linguistic and communicative competence of too many of the country's university graduates. According to Adegbite

(2012, p.2), Use of English is mounted as a course in Nigerian tertiary institutions, not only to enhance the communicative competence of students, but also to enable them “learn their courses well and perform well in academic and social situations.” The ideal when designing a Use of English course for Nigerian university students is that its objectives, course contents and learning materials should not only meet the demands of communication in the university, but should also fulfil the expectation of their prospective employers or clients, if they opt for self-employment. It is also important that Use of English instructors identify relevant language skills required by the students to promote all-round competence in the target language. Consequently, aside from exposing learners to the grammar of the language, the use of English curriculum should focus essentially on the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing.

University studentship entails writing essays and term papers in academic English and presenting projects and research activities clearly and accurately. The language skills required to achieve the above exceed sheer knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. The skills also highlight the ability to engage in academic discussions, take notes, ask questions and answer examination questions to earn good grades at the end of the learning period. Undergraduate students also require appropriate reading skills to get the best out of academic articles, books and other materials in their areas of specialisation. Regrettably, the use of English course is often viewed by many Nigerian university students and lecturers as a bother at worst or a course with limited relevance at best. This is compounded by the fact that it does not carry credit units in many Nigerian universities; therefore, students and course instructors often handle its teaching and learning with levity, which partly explains why many Nigerian university students today have poor communicative competence in English. In view of the above observations, it is our considered opinion, in this study, that university authorities, lecturers and students should collaborate in updating the Use of English course content, so that it can achieve optimum benefit for the present generation of Nigerian university students.

In addition, the advent of multimedia has made it appropriate and indeed mandatory for Nigerian universities and colleges to revise their approach to the teaching and learning of Use of English, so that the course can be made more accessible to the new generation of learners, who have been aptly described by Raji-Oyelade (2014, p.15) as “netizens” or “digital citizens”. The foregoing raises a number of questions on the use of technology for teaching and learning Use of English in Nigerian universities:

- To what extent is the use of technology incorporated in the Use of English curriculum?
- How equipped are Nigerian Use of English instructors in the use of multimedia to supplement their teaching?
- Are Nigerian university lecture rooms adequately equipped for the use of multimedia for teaching and learning Use of English?

Pennington (1996) observes that learners gain more self-confidence, take more risks and are more spontaneous when they use the computer on their own for the purpose of language learning. Also, Kramsch and Anderson (1999, p.31) surmise that the use of computers brings the target language and culture as close and as authentically as possible to the students in the classroom. Effective English learning by the present generation of Nigerian university students should, of necessity, entail the use of technology.

Consequently, appropriate facilities should be provided in universities to make language learning more accessible to students.

## **2. EAP in an ESL Setting**

The Use of English course in Nigerian universities falls within the ambit of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in view of the need to design it to meet the specific needs of homogenous groups of learners. Specifically, the course can be classified under English for Academic Purposes (EAP) because it caters for the needs of learners in an academic setting. According to Shing and Sim (2011, p.2), the growth of EAP derives from the awareness that university students possess different learning needs that cannot be fulfilled by teaching the same type of English to all categories of students. Indeed, EAP, according to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.10), gives priority to the language forms students would be exposed to in their studies; it gives low priority to forms they are not likely to be exposed to. In view of the function of English as Nigeria's official language and language of education, in addition to addressing relevant EAP skills and sub-skills, the course curriculum should also accommodate issues relating to the acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL).

According to Wei and Flaitz (2005), EAP has a key responsibility to assist ESL students to develop a level of proficiency in English that will enable them to succeed both in their present academic endeavours and their future professions. Mo (2005) observes that optimum exposure of EAP skills to pre-university students (exemplified by first year Nigerian university students) will give the students a strong academic English background that will enhance their ability to learn more effectively at a higher level. Liyanage and Birch (2001) opine that the content of any English course designed to prepare students for the demands of university study has to be different from the content of general ESL courses that emphasises mainly everyday interaction. Liyanage and Birch claim further that the EAP curriculum has to build on students' awareness towards a particular language of the academy and certain ways of talking, reading and writing about ideas and texts. Consequently, the inclusion of various language and study skills in the content of an EAP course would help students to develop literary abilities that would continue to be applied to the complex set of skills that they would need to excel in their studies.

Orr (2001) observes that the content of ESP is not fixed, but is enriched according to the requirements of the learning context. Aside from addressing the linguistic needs of specific disciplines, Teoh (1995) suggests that a well-designed EAP course should be able to enhance students' ability to work on their own. In this way, students would become better and more independent learners; and they would be able to take more responsibility for their own learning. Underlying the Use of English curriculum for Nigerian universities are EAP and ESL perspectives on linguistic and communicative competence, as well as issues on the basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

### **Linguistic and Communicative Competence in Second Language Acquisition**

The notion of linguistic competence was inspired by Chomsky (1965) in reaction to the behaviourist underpinnings of Structural Linguistics, which favoured audio-lingualism (or habit formation) as a pedagogical approach to language teaching. According to Chomsky, a language skill is innate; therefore, children are born with an

understanding of the way languages work. Described as Universal Grammar, the theory has instigated a series of research activities, and stimulated developments in second language acquisition. Cook (2003, p. 42) summarises linguistic competence as follows:

Chomsky's idea is that the human capacity for language, as illustrated by a child's acquisition of the language around them, is not the product of general intelligence or learning ability, but an innate, genetically determined feature of the human species. We are born with considerable pre-programmed knowledge of how language works, and require minimal exposure to activate our connection to a particular language around us. In this view, the new born infant's brain already contains a Universal Grammar (UG) which forms the basis of competence in the particular language the child goes on to speak. (Cook 2003, p.42).

The competent user is one who knows when, where and how to use language appropriately. The term 'communicative competence' was initiated by Hymes (1966) as a deliberate contrast to Chomsky's (1965) notion of linguistic competence. Hymes (ibid) observes that a person who has only linguistic competence would be unable to communicate effectively. Such a person would produce grammatical sentences quite alright, but such sentences would be unconnected to the situation in which they occur. Hymes suggests that four types of knowledge are needed for successful communication: possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and attestedness. Possibility refers to what is formally possible in a language; whether an instance conforms to the phonological and grammatical rules of the language. Feasibility refers to the extent to which a grammatical expression is realistic, practical, tolerable or acceptable. Appropriateness refers to the relationship between language and context. It concerns conformity to social convention, saying the right thing at the right time. Attestedness has to do with whether an instance of language use has antecedent. Has it been used before and how frequently?

The concept of communicative competence has greatly influenced the popularity of the communicative approach in English language teaching, especially to students in non-native contexts. The approach focuses on the use of games, debates, role playing and other real life practical activities in language teaching. According to Canale and Swain (1980), communicative competence has four components; the first component is grammatical competence, which entails vocabulary, word formation, meaning, sentence formation, pronunciation and spelling. Sociolinguistic competence has to do with the status of the participants, the purpose of an interaction and the norms or conventions of the interaction. Discourse competence refers to the ability to combine and connect utterances and sentences into a meaningful whole. Strategic competence involves the manipulation of language in order to meet communicative goals. In line with Canale and Swain's approach to second language teaching, Use of English course designers in Nigeria often focus on opportunities for enhancing not only students' linguistic competence, but also their communicative competence in the language.

## **2.2 Needs Analysis in EAP**

Needs analysis is described by Brown (2016) as the "cornerstone" of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) without which it could not exist. It can be described as the gap

between a current state of affairs and a desired goal. According to Brown (1995, p.36), needs analysis is a sum of the “activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students.” Wei and Flaitz (2005) observe that it entails the collection of data to identify the tasks that students will encounter in university classrooms and the skills they need to perform such tasks successfully. It is an umbrella term that embraces many aspects, incorporating learners’ goals and backgrounds, language proficiency, reasons for taking the course, teaching and learning preferences and the situations in which the learners will need the language to communicate, within and outside the university. Needs analysis, therefore, can be described as the most crucial of all the steps in curriculum design because all the other steps are based on it.

Given the focus of this paper, the desirability of updating the contents and methodology of Use of English, the concept of needs analysis is central. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.54), needs analysis in EAP consists of the procedures designed to gather and analyse information about the language skills for a specific group of learners in an existing or proposed setting so that inferences about curriculum can be drawn and informed decisions can be made. Therefore, needs analysis in EAP; or, specifically, Use of English, entails collecting, collating and assessing information relevant for effective design and delivery of an appropriate course for learners. The ideal is to have slight modifications for Use of English sub-skills for learner groups with different specialisations, interests and goals.

Needs analysis, in relation to Use of English, involves what learners already know, should know or wish to know. The outcome of a needs analysis should help to articulate teaching objectives, develop lesson plans, assemble materials, engage students in activities and carry out appropriate tests for students. Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p.60) use the term ‘present situation analysis’ (PSA) to draw attention to what students are able to do at the beginning of a course and what they need to do at the end of it. Consequently, use of English course tutors and designers should endeavour to identify their students’ present situation with a view to motivating them and taking them to the level of competence expected of them in English usage.

Needs analysis involving students is a learner-centred bottom-up approach that makes the learner the centre of attention instead of the traditional top-down process where all powers are vested in university authorities in the determination of students’ linguistic and communicative needs. According to Long (2005), it is vital to be aware of learners’ needs when designing courses and lesson objectives, especially in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Ananyeva (2014, p.11) advocates the merging of boundaries between instructional designers, material developers and students in order to encourage ESL instructors to go beyond their disciplines so as to enhance their students’ success in today’s dynamic world. When students are involved in needs analysis, there is the advantage of making them better motivated and more attentive in class since they are taught what they want to learn. Likewise, when tutors are aware of the specific needs of a particular group of students, they would make decisions that would lead to better assessment and pedagogy (Tarone & Yule, 1989).

A needs analysis aimed at enhancing the teaching of Use of English in Nigerian universities should entail an accurate interpretation of the vision and goals of the course as stipulated by the Nigerian National Universities Commission (NUC), aimed at identifying students ‘wants’ and ‘lacks’ as observed by lecturers in their respective areas of specialisation. Consequently, needs analysis for Use of English in a non-native setting like Nigeria can be achieved through formal and informal means, such as structured or unstructured interview, the use of questionnaires and students’ test

scores. The information gleaned could, then, be used to update the Use of English course and ultimately enhance students' communicative competence in the target language.

Essentially, Use of English for Nigerian university students focuses on grammar, the receptive skills of listening and reading; and the productive skills of speaking and writing. Emphasis is too often on remedial English, which is dominated by vocabulary and grammar topics, because it is perceived as the bedrock on which reading and writing skills are taught and learnt. Many needs analysis studies such as Kim (2006), Bacha & Bahous (2008) and Liu, Chang, Yang & Sun (2011) focus on the immediate language needs of students, while others such as Crosling and Ward (2002), Deutch (2003) and Gea-Valor, Rey-Rocha & Moreno (2014) investigate needs that extend beyond the classroom up to students' professional careers. Brumfit (1984, p.69) distinguishes between mono-skills and integrated skills, while Candlin (1981) makes a distinction between macro and micro language skills. Price (1977, p.26) discusses the need for study skills, which include listening to lectures, note-taking and note-making, in the Use of English curriculum.

Much research work has been carried out in the past three decades or so on needs analysis in EAP in both native and non-native settings. As observed above, Tarone & Yule (1989) surmise that awareness of the specific needs of homogenous student groups enables instructors to make better decisions for pedagogy and assessment, while Teoh (1995) suggests that a well-designed EAP course would enhance students' ability to study independently. Liyanage and Birch (2001) observe that an EAP curriculum has to build on students' awareness of specific ways of talking, reading and writing in academic contexts. Hence, Ananyeva (2014) advocates encouraging EAP instructors to go the extra mile to enhance their students' success in today's dynamic world. Afful (2007) argues for the revision of the EAP curriculum in Ghanaian universities, to meet the specific needs of ESL learners.

In spite of the plethora of studies on needs analysis in both native and non-native settings, scholars have paid little or no attention to the input of first year university students and the views of lecturers in their respective disciplines when reviewing the Use of English curriculum in Nigerian Universities. Too often, scholars base their revisions mainly on the field experience of the Use of English instructors, which is not necessarily conclusive. This is the gap this paper intends to fill. The paper, therefore, aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the specific language needs required by the present generation of first year Nigerian university students?
- (2) What are the sub-skills that should be included in the Use of English curriculum for first year Nigerian university students?
- (3) What are the practical approaches that can be adopted for teaching and learning Use of English in Nigerian universities?

### **3. Methodology**

This study used the survey approach because its aim was to gather detailed information about a phenomenon by collating and describing responses about it; and analysing and interpreting such responses to generate accurate generalisations for application to cover a larger group. The data for the study was collected from Bowen University, Iwo (BUI), in south-western Nigeria. The data was gathered from three primary sources. The first was through participant-observation method by the authors who are Use of English instructors at BUI. The other two sources were questionnaire and in-

terview to first year students and lecturers from all the six academic faculties at the university. Only a single university out of almost 150 Nigerian universities was selected for the survey in view of the status of the research as a pilot study. Secondly, first year BUI students were considered to be sufficiently representative of Nigerian university students because they possess the same characteristics as their counterparts in other Nigerian universities. Such characteristics include a large and mixed population of first year students (usually running into thousands), with diverse specialisations, as well as comparable sociolinguistic and demographic variables.

The first step taken at the inception of the research was to present the university's Use of English course outlines for the last three academic sessions to some first-year students and lecturers from all the six academic faculties in BUI. The comments of the students and lecturers on the strengths and weaknesses of the course outlines were used to compose statements used to generate responses from a questionnaire that was distributed to the students and the interview questions posed to the lecturers. What makes this study unique is the fact that it was anchored on the responses of both the Use of English students and the lecturers who interact with them in domains beyond the Use of English classroom. This approach made it possible for the authors, as Use of English instructors and course designers, to include the input of stakeholders (students and lecturers) in their review of the Use of English curriculum.

The questionnaire was used to obtain information about the expectations of BUI students from the Use of English course. Three hundred and twenty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to students randomly selected from all the six faculties at BUI: Agriculture, Basic Medical Sciences, Humanities, Law, Science and Science Education, and Social and Management Sciences. The study was done at the beginning of the second semester because the students were expected to be better equipped to respond accurately to the questionnaire, after having been exposed to the Use of English course for a full semester. The questionnaire contained 20 statements on the four basic language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. The students were expected to tick one of the three options of 'Yes', 'No' and 'Don't know' in response to statements relating to the four language skills. Each statement began with: "I expect my learning of Use of English to ...". The elicited responses were expected to reflect the students' expectations from the Use of English course in respect of the specified sub-skills.

Thirty lecturers, five from each of the six academic faculties in the university, were interviewed to know their views about the linguistic and communicative competence of their students and the benefit that their students were expected to derive from the Use of English course. The information gathered from both students and lecturers was expected to form the basis for revising the Use of English course content so that its teaching and learning could meet the real needs of the present generation of Nigerian students. At the end of the exercise, 309 copies of the questionnaire were returned; and these formed the basis for the data analysis presented below.

#### **4. Data Analysis**

This section is a summary of the data analysis comprising the lecturers' responses to the interviews and the students' responses to the questionnaire. The following is a breakdown of the returned questionnaire in respect of all six faculties at BUI: Agriculture: 44, Basic Medical Sciences: 39, Humanities: 49, Law: 46, Science and Science Education: 68, Social and Management Sciences: 63; making a total of 309. The students' responses to the topics they would like to be included in the Use of English

curriculum for first year university students are presented in Table 1 below. The section also explains the students' and lecturers' responses to the questionnaires and interviews, respectively.

(a) *Research Questions One and Two (merged): What are the topics that should, appropriately, be included in the use of English curriculum for the new generation of first year Nigerian university students?*

Use of English teaching in Nigerian universities focuses, too often, on vocabulary, grammar, summarisation, comprehension, essay writing and other sub-skills associated with reading and writing, to the detriment of listening and speaking skills. Table 1 below summarises the responses of first year BUI students to questions on topics that should, appropriately, be included in the Use of English curriculum for first year BUI

S.N	Topics Students want	Yes	No	Don't know
<b>1.</b>	<b>Listening Skill-related Questions</b>			
(a)	Effective listening skills	83%	9%	8%
(b)	Note-taking skills	76%	14%	10%
<b>2.</b>	<b>Reading Skill-related Questions</b>			
(c)	Effective use of the dictionary	72%	19%	9%
(d)	Improving reading efficiency	84%	11%	5%
(e)	Improved study reading skills	82%	12%	6%
(f)	Summarisation and comprehension skills	84%	9%	7%
<b>3.</b>	<b>Speaking Skill-related Questions</b>			
(g)	Correct pronunciation of English sounds	77%	12%	11%
(h)	Fluency in international spoken English	78%	16%	6%
(i)	Public speaking skills	76%	14%	10%
(j)	Vocabulary development	81%	12%	7%
<b>4.</b>	<b>Writing Skill-related Questions</b>			
(k)	Word formation in English	62%	28%	10%
(l)	Distinguishing between British and American English	70%	18%	12%
(m)	Essays, letters and report writing skills	79%	11%	10%
(n)	Spelling and punctuation skills	82%	9%	9%
(o)	Correctness in English usage	83%	8%	9%
<b>5.</b>	<b>E-Learning and Creative English Usage</b>			
(p)	Identifying appropriate literary texts to help improve English usage	77%	16%	7%
(q)	Using the Internet for English learning	53%	23%	24%
(r)	Gender sensitivity in English usage	61%	24%	15%

students:

**Table 1: Summary of First Year BUI Students' Responses to Needs Analysis Questionnaire**

*1. Listening Skills*

The focus on listening skills is often overlooked in the teaching of Use of English in many Nigerian universities. The lecturers interviewed did not emphasise the importance of this aspect of the course; therefore, there was no significant response from them in respect of listening-skills-related topics. Table 1 shows that an average of 79.5% of BUI students expressed their desire for the inclusion of listening-skills-related sub-skills in the Use of English curriculum. As stated in the introduction to this paper, Use of English teaching in Nigerian universities transcends merely helping to boost students' linguistic competence. It is often used as an opportunity to transmit important learning skills exemplified by critical listening skills and note-taking. Most first year BUI students fall within the age brackets of 15 to 17 years; as a consequence, their youthfulness often makes them easily distracted during lectures. Therefore, topics on listening skills would enhance their ability to derive optimum benefits from lectures and other teaching and learning sessions. The students' response underscores their appreciation of the need to give a greater measure of prominence to the receptive skill of listening in the Use of English curriculum for first year university students.

*2. Reading Skills*

Good reading skills form the foundation for improved performance in examinations and the expansion of university students' knowledge base. The lecturers interviewed in this study were generally effusive about encouraging students to devote more time to intensive and extensive reading instead of their widespread practice of spending inordinate amount of time on less-productive activities exemplified by prolonged visits to social media sites. Table 1 summarises the students' responses to reading-skills-related statements in the questionnaire. The statements centred on the use of the dictionary, improving reading efficiency, study reading skills, as well as summarisation and comprehension skills. On the average, 80.5% of the students responded positively to the inclusion of the four reading-skills-related topics in the Use of English curriculum for BUI students. University studentship entails extensive reading on different subjects. Indeed, the present generation of first year BUI students belong to the digital age that has endless volumes of reading materials on all subjects. This category of students would benefit from some guidance on reading speed, reading comprehension and note-making skills, among others.

*3. Speaking Skills*

Also, Table 1 contains a summary of BUI students' responses to spoken-English-related questions. The students' positive responses, of 78% on the average, shows that they expect the Use of English course to help to improve their spoken English skills. Being second language learners, BUI students, like their counterparts in other universities in Nigeria, often require spoken English skills to help refine their pronunciation of English sound segments and the supra-segmental features of stress, rhythm and intonation. However, the effective teaching of topics in spoken English remains a daunting challenge in Nigerian universities. Apart from the absence of language laboratories that could effectively meet the needs of hundreds and sometimes thousands of students taking the course in each university, there is also the problem of authentic models of international spoken English that would be a source of motivation for the students. There is a limit to the extent to which many Use of English instructors can serve as models of spoken English for Nigerian students. Notwithstanding these and other chal-

lenges, a good Use of English curriculum should ideally include topics in spoken English. Therefore, Use of English instructors should explore opportunities of using available audio-visual equipment to expose their students to basic spoken English skills.

#### *4. Writing Skills*

Largely, writing-skills-related topics in Table 1 reflect traditional Use of English topics; therefore, the students' general positive response of 75.5% is not too far below expectation. However, the reduced enthusiasm reflected in the 63% "Yes" response for word formation and 70% for distinguishing between British and American English points to the students' limited knowledge of the importance of the two skills. Notwithstanding, both skills qualify for inclusion in the Use of English curriculum, in view of their importance in advanced English usage. Writing skills subsume topics in grammar, word formation, continuous writing, spelling, capitalisation and punctuation. Lecturers complain emphatically about the poor quality of the written English of their students. Indeed, some of them observe that some of their students use 'textese' (the informal language of text-messaging on mobile phones) in their written assignments and examination answer scripts. This reality brings to the fore the need for a new approach to the teaching of writing skills in the Use of English course in Nigerian universities.

#### *5. Opportunities for E-learning and Creative English Usage*

Table 1 shows that 77% of the students were positively disposed to the inclusion of a literary text in the Use of English course materials. However, they did not seem very enthusiastic about using the Internet for language learning; neither did they fully appreciate the benefits of gender-sensitive usage in contemporary English. A modern Use of English course should give students ample opportunity for improved English usage through e-learning. Also, Nigerian university students should explore avenues for exposure to contemporary English usage, through extensive reading and other informal learning avenues, such as watching entertaining videos, documentaries and news broadcast on both national and international audio-visual media channels. Teaching and learning Use of English at BUI entails the use of a recommended literary text in view of the well-known benefits of literature in second language acquisition. Aside from using the literary text to learn the target language independently, students acquire vocabulary and other practical applications of the rules of the language through informal learning sessions.

#### *(b) Research Question Three: What are the practical approaches that can be adopted for teaching and learning Use of English in Nigerian universities?*

Language learning today has moved from traditional or classical methods to more generic and constructive methods. The traditional methods of teaching Use of English is basically teacher-centred, whereby tutors pontificate on how to use the language; and the students, in turn, conform accordingly. However, with the new generation of students, tutors have to modify their teaching methods to enable them to guide the students towards optimum performance in the language. Hutchinson and Waters (1987) talk of a learner-centred approach which employs the use of formal and informal audio-visual materials that learners find much more interesting for language learning. However, this approach poses a great challenge to language teachers who need to continuously update themselves, especially in the area of material selection and testing, to meet the demands of the new generation of Nigerian university students.

Current approaches can be broadly split into two models which are the Communicative Approach (or Communicative Language Teaching) and the Post-Communicative approach. The communicative method includes the Functional or Notional-Functional Approach (Wilkins, 1974). The salient features of this method are termed the 3Ps – presentation, practice and production. Here, tutors present the target language through everyday situations, permit sufficient time for practice, and allow learners' independent production of the language in appropriate situational contexts. This method allows teachers to recreate real-life social and functional situations in the classrooms, since it aims at learners' communicative, sociolinguistic and strategic competences, not just mere linguistic competence. This methodology embraces three basic principles of communication, task and meaningfulness.

Task-based language learning is grounded in cognitive theories and cognitive processes, such as memory, attention and recall. The approach enables language learners to apply their communicative competence whenever they are called upon to undertake a selection of tasks in the language learning process. Under this method, language learners are given tasks or instructions that must be accomplished within a stipulated period. The tasks, which may be closed or open-ended, can be assigned to individuals or groups with the ultimate goal of boosting their communicative competence in the target language.

## 5. Implications and Conclusion

The opinions and input of both students and lecturers form the basis for updating the course contents and methodology for the Use of English course for Nigerian universities, particularly in the following regards:

*(a) Course Content:* A good Use of English course should strike a healthy balance between receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Of course, writing would still take the bulk of the course content, but sufficient hours must also be dedicated to the skills of speaking, listening and reading.

*(b) Class Size:* The Use of English class should not be a typical lecture where the instructor would make his or her presentation with minimal interruptions in the form of questions and contributions from students. Adopting Nunan's (1991) related views, to facilitate the required balance between teacher talk time (TTT) and student talk time (STT), it is essential that the Use of English class has a manageable number of students. The ideal number for each class is 25, but where there are insufficient numbers of tutors, it could be up to 30. At BUI, it took the intervention of the vice chancellor to aim at Use of English classes not exceeding 25 students per class. Aside from the obvious advantages of the small class, the tutor is able to have more one-on-one interactions with more students than he or she would have done in a class of 60 or more students, which is the norm in most Nigerian universities.

*(c) E-learning Opportunity:* Today's generation of students belong to the internet age. Many of them visit the social media regularly, and spend a lot of time toying with their phones. They could be encouraged to form *WhatsApp* groups that forbid the use of non-standard English as one of their house rules. To boost their fluency in spoken and written English, they could be made to download and share interviews and news broadcasts from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and other reputable media organisations. The tutor could bring such materials to class, and share them with

his or her students. This would achieve the purpose of making Use of English teaching and learning more interesting and, consequently, boost the interest of the students in the course.

*(d) Other Informal Learning Opportunities:* The communicative approach to language learning entails the use of informal activities like role play, classroom debates and short narrations. If such activities are included in the curriculum, they would help to develop students' confidence and boost their communicative competence in the target language.

*(e) The Role of Literature in ESL Acquisition:* The role of literature in ESL acquisition cannot be overemphasized. Therefore, it is beneficial to include, at least, one literature text in the Use of English reading list. The instructor could introduce the text early in the course, and give the students individual or group assignments on the material.

In summary, this paper has addressed the growing desirability of updating the contents and methodology of the Use of English curriculum in Nigerian universities. This desirability is predicated on the fact that the universities are operating in an age where technological advancement plays a great role in learning. A revised Use of English curriculum for first year university students should be technologically driven. In addition, it should aim to strike a balance between the receptive skills of listening and reading and the productive skills of speaking and writing. These four skills make a difference in the ultimate performance of the students at the end of their study. It is very crucial, therefore, that the course contents and approach to teaching and learning Use of English should be innovative and as motivating as possible for the new generation of first year university students.

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