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RESEARCH ARTICLE

INCONSISTENCY IN THE USE OF VARIETIES OF ENGLISH AMONG ESL LEARNERS: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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Manuscript Info Abstract

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Satisfactory evidence has shown that the real problem with the increasing use of English as a global language, particularly the spread of American influence in former British colonies, is the acceptable variety to be used in teaching and examination between British English and the American variety. This study therefore, investigated the problem(s) associated with the adoption of different models of varieties for use in teaching and examination. GST 101/201 students of 2009/2010 session of IBB University, Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria were used for the study. The sample consisted of two hundred and forty (240) students randomly selected from six (6) departments in the university. Descriptive survey design was adopted for the study. The instruments used were students essay (composition) scripts drawn from assignments and examination. Descriptive frequency and chi-square statistics were used for analysis. The research findings revealed that students use these varieties interchangeably, leading to inconsistency in their written English. The study suggested the possibility of recommending a single model of the older varieties (British/American) for use in teaching and examination in Nigeria. However, teachers and language education practitioners should insist on consistency and strategise acceptable standards in language teaching and learning. Teachers can also help students distinguish between the various uses of language, for example, formal and informal language.

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Introduction

The English language was first introduced to the Americans by British colonization which began in 1607 in Jamestown, Virginia. Similarly, the language spread to numerous other parts of the world as a result of British trade and colonization elsewhere and the spread of the former British Empire, which, by 1921, held sway over a population of 470–570 million people, approximately a quarter of the world's population at that time. Over the past 400 years the form of the language used in the Americas—especially in the United States—and that used in the United Kingdom have diverged in a few minor ways, leading to the versions now occasionally referred to as American English, British English and even New Englishes. Differences between these include; pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary (lexis), spelling, punctuation, idioms, formatting of dates and numbers, although the differences in written and most spoken grammar structure tend to be much less than those of other aspects of the language in terms of mutual intelligibility. A small number of words have completely different meanings in the two versions or are even unknown or not used in one of the versions. One particular contribution towards formalizing these differences came from Noah Webster, who wrote the first American dictionary (published 1828) with the intention of showing that people in the United States spoke a different dialect from Britain, which metamorphosed to a regional dialect.

This divergence between American English and British English has provided opportunities for humorous comment, e.g. George Bernard Shaw said that the United States and United Kingdom are "two countries divided by a common language" and Oscar Wilde wrote "We have really everything in common with America nowadays, except, of course, the language" (*The Canterville Ghost*, 1888). Henry Sweet incorrectly predicted in 1877 that within a century American English, Australian English and British English would be mutually unintelligible. It may be the case that increased worldwide communication through radio, television, the Internet and globalization has reduced the tendency of regional variation. This can result either in some variations becoming extinct (for instance, *the wireless*, being progressively superseded by *the radio*) or in the acceptance of wide variations as "perfectly good English" everywhere. Often at the core of the dialect though, the idiosyncrasies remain. Although spoken American and British English are generally mutually intelligible, there are occasional differences which might cause embarrassment—for example, in American English a *cookie* is usually interpreted as a *biscuit* and a British *coffin* refers to the American *casket*, thus showing some dialectal differences.

While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American English and British English are the two varieties that are taught in most ESL/EFL programmes. Generally, it is agreed that no one version is "correct" however, there are certainly preferences in use. The three major differences between American and British English are:

- Pronunciation - differences in both vowel and consonants, as well as stress and intonation
- Vocabulary - differences in nouns and verbs, especially phrasal verb usage
- Spelling - differences are generally found in certain prefix and suffix forms

The most important rule of thumb is to try to advocate for consistency in usage. If someone decides to use American English spellings then he should be consistent in his spelling (i.e. the color of the orange is also its flavour - color is American spelling and flavour is British), this is of course not always easy - or possible. An American student state thus;

I grew up in the SF Bay Area, and I had a mostly private education, except for State College. It seems I grew up learning a more "British" spelling. It wasn't until I started using online dictionaries and MS Office, that I realized that there existed another variation. As a child color was colour. I still try to spell fulfill as fulfil. Neither was I aware that ageing should be spelt aging in American English, when were the standards changed? My peers would find that to be incorrect. Who writes dialog? I've always said learnt and dreamt, but only write dreamed and learned. Only recently have I heard someone say dreamed, and that person spoke English as a second language. Perhaps, these changes have come about to accommodate non-native speakers of English? Although, I have heard differences in tense even here in California, I had thought that people speaking that way were undereducated. So while I might say, I just lost my pen, or I've just lost my pen

This distinction could lead to not only deviation but also confusion. Therefore, expression such as:

- 1a. She honors (**America**) the programme (**British**)- inconsistent
- 1b. She honours (British) the programme (**British**)- consistent
- 2a. Mary went through the flyover (**British**) to the mainstreet (**America**) - inconsistent
- 2b. Mary went through the flyover (British) to the highstreet (**British**)— consistent
- 3a. John used a lorry (**British**) while on vacation (**America**) - inconsistent
- 3b. John used a truck (**America**) while on vacation (**America**) – consistent
- 4a. The family used a truck (**America**) to travel for a holiday (**British**)—inconsistent
- 4b. The family used a lorry (**British**) to travel for a holiday (**British**) – consistent

Show the standard and non-standard forms of using varieties of English. However, the Non-standard forms occur because of the intuition of imprints from electronically -mediated communication such as text messages, computer based lexicon and home video cinema which clearly express the peculiarly Nigerian experience and perspective in ways that do no serious damage to Standard English structure or affect international/intranational intelligibility.

The following guide is meant to point out the principal differences between these two varieties of English.

- American English - hood
British English - bonnet
- American English - trunk
British English - boot
- American English - truck
British English - lorry
- American English - math
British English - maths
- American English - motorcycle
British English - motorbike
- American English - parking lot
British English - car park
- American English - driver's license
British English - driving licence

Impacts and Implications on Language Instruction

English as the language of wider communication (LWC) does not support the spring up of deviational variants other than the acceptable standards. These 'unfortunate inappropriate' forms nevertheless have negative impact on students' proficiency in the target language and also international intelligibility. The researchers found out that the possible sources of this deviation include:

1. The effect of SMS text messages
2. Effect of home video movies.
3. Microsoft word experience.
4. Effect of predictive texting

Students may continue to find it difficult to produce coherent and meaningful texts as long as these inconsistencies on written texts continue. These show that there are many unresolved issues as to the identification of standards in Nigerian English usage. Hence, learners are still evaluated based on their ability to perform or manipulate a wide range of structural features perfectly, so also, their ability to perform several language functions appropriately received minimal attention.

Theoretical Construct

The researcher observed that the formal inconsistencies found in the system of English contributed to the prevalence of these deviational forms, for instance, inconsistency in spellings, lexis, phonology, etc. Hence, the system of the L1 differs from that of the target language. Lexical errors may be influenced by learners' L1 (Swan 1977). The mother tongue may play a role in the cognitive process of the L2 language learning and use.

Problem Statement

Poor writing skills of University students have led to the investigation. On the other hand, students are not able to differentiate between dialectal differences between American and British English

Aim

To investigate the way in which ESL learners apply varieties of English in their written texts and to detect the kinds of errors made by the students with a view to prescribing solutions to such errors

Scope of the Study

Language is made up of complex components that operates independently and at distinctive levels; morphology, phonology, syntax and lexis. It will be inappropriate to undertake the study of all these levels of

English language in a single study of this nature. Therefore, the study has limited the investigation to the lexical aspect of language only.

Research Design and Methods

The research design is error analysis which involves the examination of the use of varieties of English in students' written texts and to compare their performances in homework and examination. The study involved GST 101/201 students in the departments of English, History, Biochemistry, Mathematics, Accounting and Business Administration drawn from the Faculties of Arts and Education, Applied and Natural Sciences and Management and Social Sciences of IBB University Lapai, Niger State, Nigeria. A simple random sampling was used to select 120 GST101 Students and 120 GST201 Students, totaling 240 students. The data used were students' essay (composition) scripts in which questions were validated by language lecturers who are experts in that field. The study used simple frequency for data analysis and to determine students' performances.

Results

The following tables present results of categories of student in homework and examination.

Table 1: Difference between GST101 and GST201 Students' Errors in Homework

Errors	GST101 Students	Percentage	GST201 Students	Percentage	Total	DF	X ² cal	X ² tab
ESTM	66	56.4	51	43.6	117			
EHVM	48	52.7	43	47.3	91			
EME	65	56.5	50	43.5	115	3	80.5	
EPT	31	55.4	25	44.6	56			
Total	210	100	169		379			

P<0.05

Key:

ESTM	Effect of SMS Text Messages
EHVM	Effect of Home Video Movies
EME	Effect of Microsoft Word
EPT	Effect of Predictive Texting

On table 1 above, the X² calculated of 80.5 is greater than the X²critical value of 8.56. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. The result showed that the difference between errors among GST101 and GST201 students in homework is significant because the former manifested more errors than the latter.

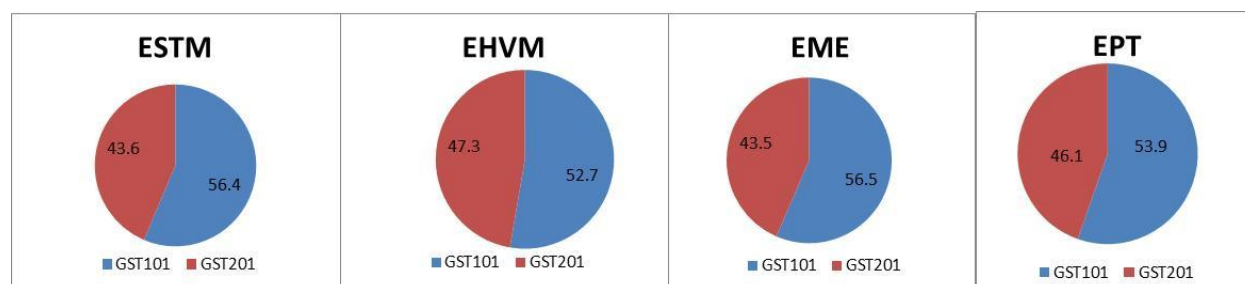


Fig. 2: A percentage comparison of errors in GST 101 and GST 201 on a pie chart for homework.

Table 2: Difference between GST101 and GST201 Students' Errors in Examination

Errors	GST101 Students	Percentage	GST201 Students	Percentage	Total	Df	X ² cal	X ² tab
ESTM	71	52.5	64	47.5	135			
EHVM	48	59.3	33	40.7	81			
EME	68	55.3	55	44.7	123	3	127.6	
EPT	41	53.9	35	46.1	76			
Total	228	100	187		415			

P<0.05

Table II shows a calculated X²value of 127.6 as against the critical X²value of 8.56. Since the X²cal is greater than the X²tab, the null hypothesis is rejected. It is consequently concluded that during examination, a significant difference exists between errors patterns found among GST 101 and GST 201 students.

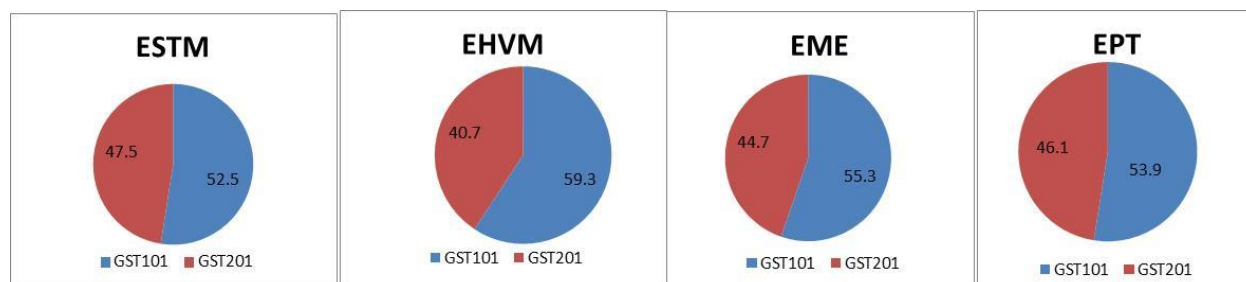


Fig. 3: A percentage comparison of errors in GST 101 and GST 201 on a pie chart for examination.

Implications of the Investigation

The study showed that the GST201 students outperformed the GST101 students with fairly lower percentage manifestations of errors (see table I and II). This could be as a result of the fact that some errors diminish among students as they rise by promotion examination to the higher classes.

Findings

The research discovered that;

- Frequent use of SMS Language negatively influences their mixture of British and American versions of English
- The use of SMS language by students negatively affects their choice of vocabulary.
- Frequent use, interaction and familiarity with home video movies greatly influence their inability to distinguish the variance of these varieties of English.

- Students' familiarity with the Microsoft word also negatively affects their ability to discriminate between American variety of English and British variety of English i.e. *favour/favour, labor/labour, dialogue/dialogue, aging/ageing, centre/center etc*
- Predictive texting is a process where words are suggested automatically by your phone or computer when you are typing or writing a text or text message on it. Consequently, many students cannot comprehend the differences between the varieties of English. Hence, the computer is America based.

Discussion

British and American English are the reference norms for English as spoken, written, and taught in the rest of the world. For instance, member nations of the Commonwealth where English is not spoken natively, such as India, often closely follow British English forms, while many American English usages are followed in other countries which have been historically influenced by the United States, such as the Philippines. Although most dialects of English used in the former British Empire outside of North America and Australia are, to various extents, based on British English, most of the countries concerned have developed their own unique dialects, particularly with respect to pronunciation, idioms and vocabulary. Chief among other English dialects are Canadian English (based on the English of United Empire Loyalists who left the 13 Colonies), and Australian English, which rank third and fourth in number of native speakers.

The challenge is that students sometimes blur the lines between formal English and the very informal language. This causes them to make a lot of spelling and grammatical errors in their assignments and tests, and makes it hard for teachers to decipher between what they are trying to say. Academic study suggests that as soon as students can distinguish between British English and American English, it does not affect their literacy. In this study, a group of 16-to-22-year-old students were tested, and there is inconsistency found between the varieties of English they use and their spelling scores, sentence formation, grammatical construction etc. The figure below gives a face value of the error types influenced by inconsistency in their choice of variety of English as shown in the study.

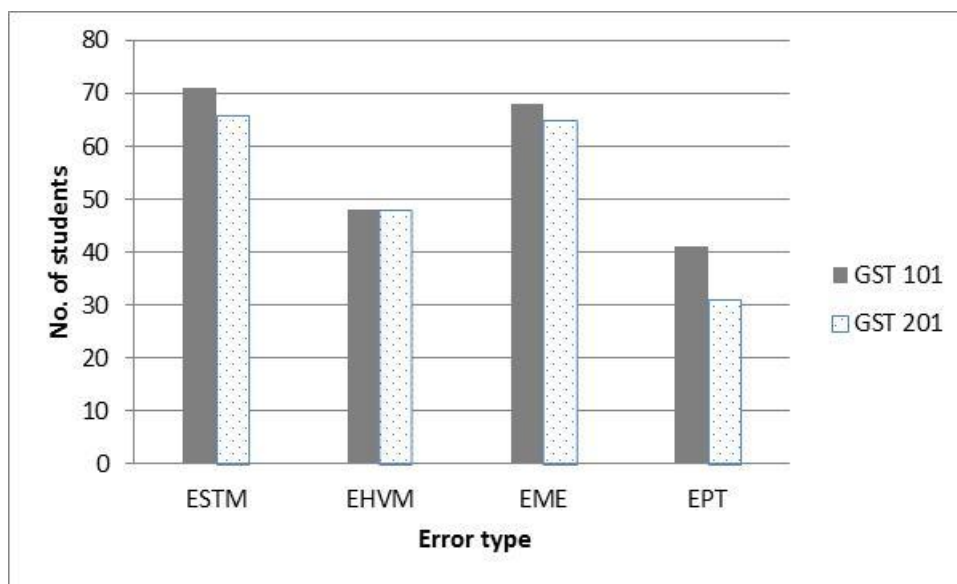


Fig. 4: A side by side comparison of error types by both students of GST101 and GST201

‘When informal language does pop up in papers, I definitely am going to correct it,’ she said. ‘But it’s part of our job as teachers to help students move in and out of formal and informal language.’ ‘One of the standards for teachers of English Language Arts is to educate students on the difference of and appropriate use of formal and informal language’ (Hubert, n.pg).

Conclusion

In most International exams, both varieties of English are accepted. However, while writing for an international exam (or writing in English generally) students should remain consistent. That means if they favour (or

favor) American spelling or grammar, they should stick to that convention for the whole piece of writing. The study discovered that inconsistencies in the use of varieties of English round the globe has negatively impacted on the writing proficiency of the students. This fact is drawn from the performance and the errors committed in their continuous writing (i.e. essay exams/homework). With these findings, it would be advisable that the lecturers (teachers) teaching in the GST classes should guide the students in and out of formal and informal language. They should also gear their teaching towards meeting the lexical needs of the students.

Recommendations

- There should be proper awareness and orientation on the purpose and limitation of adopting both varieties of English in one piece of writing because it would result into a state of confusion.
- Vocabulary learning strategies can be effective and should be introduced into the classroom so that students can find means of coping with such problems.
- Undergraduate students should be trained on how to use dictionaries effectively.
- Teaching should be learner-centred and communication - oriented.
- More time for teaching vocabularies should be allocated on the time table.
- Students should be discouraged from buying uncensored literatures popularly called 'hungry authors' in Nigeria.
- Government should provide teaching materials and improved educational facilities i.e. modern libraries.
- Students should be encouraged to get used to reading papers (newspapers), magazines and listening to National and International news to improve on their vocabularies/grammar and listening skills.

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