

Ghanaian English and its implications for academic writing

A Case Study of English on the Navrongo Campus of University for Development Studies, Ghana

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Abstract

The paper first presents the language situation and the place of English in a multilingual setting as in Ghana. It then looks briefly at Ghanaian English and finally focuses on the use of English among first year students of Navrongo campus of the University for Development Studies, Ghana. The main methods of data collection were a review of literature, analyses of sentence construction in students' communication skills and African studies class exercises and examinations, observations and personal interaction in English with students. The main findings of the study indicate that English in Ghana has developed to have its own phonetic, phonological, semantic and discourse features which are shared by the students. Ghanaian students have no problem in comprehension when interacting with each other or with other Ghanaians in English or during lectures but do have problems in writing standard English. Recommendations include the teaching of basic grammar, particularly, sentence construction, agreements and homonyms. It is also recommended that the syllabi of English and communication skills in the University should include reading, comprehension and more engagement of students in written exercises.

Keywords: Ghana, English, language, students, communication

1. Introduction

Ghana, like many African countries have several ethnicities recognizing themselves as ethnically different from each other. In some cases, some groups may speak languages that are mutually intelligible and could be classified as dialects of the same language but for reasons such as different cultural practices and different locations, some of these language groups identify themselves as different. In Ghana, there are about 60 language groups (Quaye, 1991). In other recordings, one would find forty-two (Dolphyne, 1995). These figures differ because of the problem of dialects. It is argued that there are forty-two different languages with several dialects. Some of these language groups have a few thousands of speakers, accounting for very small percentages (less than 5%) of the country's population of twenty-four million, two hundred and thirty-three thousand four hundred and thirty-one (2010 Population and Housing Census).

All the languages in the country are recognized by the government but only ten are used as local languages in formal education. Government has supported and continues to support the development of materials in these languages for formal education. The development of other languages has been done by private institutions such as the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT), Ghana.

The language policy for formal education in Ghana has been unstable at the implementation level. At some point in time, it was stated that the mother tongue, which actually implies one of those developed for formal education be used as the language of instruction for the first three years of school while English is taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English should be used as the language of instruction and the mother tongue taught as a subject. Good spoken English for many Ghanaians is evidence for a school to be considered a good school and so teachers disregard this policy and start teaching English as early as in the kindergarten. This resulted in the agitation to start with English from kindergarten. Different schools implement this policy differently.

English has come to stay as the official language of the country and is used as the main medium of instruction in schools, and a means to conduct government business. It is used in parliament, in court, civil service, in the media and in the army and for preaching by many Orthodox Churches, especially in urban areas. (Dolphyne, 1995, Darko, 2006).

2. Ghanaian English

As would be expected, English underwent and continues to undergo indigenization as a result of language contact with the Ghanaian languages. This has resulted in what is described as Ghanaian English. This study has made no attempt at looking at varieties of Ghanaian English but observations of speakers of English in Ghana suggests that there are differences in the use of English between highly educated Ghanaians, the averagely educated Ghanaian and those who have no formal education. This observation confirms earlier studies of Ghanaian English (Sey, 1973) According to him, there is a correlation between the level of education and the type of English spoken, He identified four levels, ranging from what they described as close to Standard British English to be spoken by the highly educated people to pidgin English spoken by non literates. In current times, Pidgin English is also spoken by many young school leavers of secondary, polytechnic, universities and other tertiary institutions. Regardless of the type, there are expressions and lexical items that are used by speakers of all levels and can be described as Ghanaian English. Some of these expressions are directly translated from different local languages while lexical items are borrowed and used directly as if they were original English words. Besides lexical items and expressions, there are accents that are considered Ghanaian. Dolphyne (1995) talks about a distinct accent that can be identified as Ghanaian when one considers the spoken language. In his study on Ghanaian English, Darko (1991) found that Ghanaians themselves feel that there is Ghanaian English. There are also some non-standard grammatical forms such as “she is having a baby with him”, “she returned back” and “we have many furnitures” etc.

The situation in Ghana is not very different from most places where English is a second language. Stevens (1980) refers to these varieties of English as local forms of English (LFE) and because they are local, Ellis and Tomlinson (1980) recommend that teachers should ‘tolerate’ errors that do not create incomprehension. Their idea is not new. As early as in the 1960s, there were already arguments as to whether to accept or reject non-standard varieties of English. While Labov advocated for the acceptance of such local varieties, others such as Quirk were against it. Scholars in favour of the acceptance of local forms argue that a shared language does not mean a shared culture, therefore non-standard English lexical items and syntactic variations are inevitable. The use of such varieties or forms within their localities make sense but when work is done in English for international readership, then there is a challenge. It is in this light that Mepepuo (2000) argues that for international intelligibility, adherence to a common form or variety is needed.

3. Problem Statement and Questions

In recent times, there is complaint from teachers of the secondary and tertiary institutions that the level of English of students has fallen. What is surprising is that these students have had several hours of contact with the use of English, supposed to be the kind of English that is close to the Standard British English as the language of instruction, yet these students make many unaccepted mistakes both in spoken and written forms.. This study therefore sought to find out the aspects of English that the students have problems with and why this is so. In order to achieve this, the following questions were explored.

The main research question is to find out what accounts for the poor English of the students at the tertiary level. Specific questions are the following:

What are the different kinds of mistakes made by the students?

What is the frequency of the different kinds of mistakes?

Why do they make those mistakes?

How can students overcome such mistakes?

4. Research Objectives

The two objectives for the study are to:

- identify and analyse mistakes made by the students
- suggest ways of overcoming those mistakes

5. Methodology

A number of different methods were used for the study. Firstly, a brief review of literature on Ghanaian English was done. Later, a study of examinations and continuous assessment scripts of students in Communication Skills with observations of students’ interaction with each other and with lecturers for two years were done. For the observation,

there were no specified numbers of first year students- As many first year students as possible were observed. The study was not intended to do a typical error analyses or contrastive study. Instead, it looked at what is standard or not standard even in Ghanaian English and the effects of that for academic work.

A systematic random sampling technique was used to choose the sample. The sample was chosen from an overall total of 2,320 students' exam and continuous assessment scripts of first year students of the 2008/9 and 2009/10 academic years. The 5th script in every envelope of exam scripts (usually an average of 50 scripts) and every 5th paper in the pile of continuous assessment scripts (160 for 2009 and 280 for 2010). In all, there were 464 scripts.

6. Findings

This section presents the analysis and findings of English spoken and written by first year students of Navrongo Campus of the University for Development Studies (2008/2009 and 2009/2010 academic years). Rather than present several sentences in this paper as constructions of students in English, the most common phenomena are exemplified by a few sentences or lexical items. The English spoken and written by these students was used to check with the public in Navrongo to find out if their variety of English is typical of the students of the campus or their English could be described as Ghanaian English and to find out if those were acceptable Ghanaian English constructions. This is because one of the assumptions of this study is that their mistakes are as a result of "Ghanaianisms" (Darko, 2006).

Mistakes of the students were classified into five categories (Table 1 below).

Table 1 Categories of mistakes made by students (n=464)

Type of error	No. of students	% of students
Phonetic/Spelling	274	59.0
Grammatical	315	67.8
Lexis/vocabulary	165	35.5
Idiomatic usage	185	39.8
Culturally determined usage	265	57.1

Source: Field data, 2009

From the table above, more than half of the study population constructs sentences with phonetic/spelling, grammatical and culturally determined usage errors. In addition, more than one-third of the study population made mistakes in their use of words and idiomatic expressions. Below are examples of the different kinds of mistakes that were made by the students.

6.1 Phonetics-Consonants

- The final consonants of some words in English are either not heard or weak. As a result, students write what they hear (e.g You are suppose to come with us. We were ask to answer all the questions. We were encourage to learn hard)
- Some words sound very similar or the same but are used differently. (People turn (tend) to work hard during exams. We need you to contribute for a worthy course (cause). I wet (whet) my appetite. You may have to use the telephone boot (booth). He is very fun (fond) of me.
- Use of /t/ and /d/ for Inner Circle /θ/ and /ð/. (He tanked (thanked) her. These (deez are the boys., Dey (they) come from Efiduase. Dat (that) was a good story (mistakes here are only oral not written).

6.2 Phonetics-Vowels

- In English like many other languages there are short and long vowels. These differences are not made by many of the students (lose/loose, bid/bead). This results in the use of wrong words. (e.g We shall not loose today's football match. The opposite of tight is lose. Girls in Ghana wear bids).
- Like the consonant sounds, some vowels sound the same or very similar (cite, sight, site; tag, tug; shirk, shake, touch, torch etc.). This is another reason for the use of wrong words. (He showed us his cite plan. I did not site (means to see) him. Don't torch him. Many parents shake their responsibilities). The students write what they say thus having basic spelling problems.

6.3 Grammar

6.3.1 Prepositions as verbs

Students were given different contexts in which they had to give orders on stopping an engine, putting or tuning on and off a machine or light. The following were the commonest mistakes:

(Of the light! On the light! On the fan! and Off the engine!)

6.3.2 Use of wrong possessive pronouns

(Your own is different from my. Her own is the same. This is mine own and My is the right answer).

6.3.3 Subject-verb agreement

(He don't have any money. She have everything she wants. The data we got from the field is good. The questions that Dr. Mahama set is very tricky. These changes is necessary. Ishmael don't want to lose. It is not you who is the leader. Cooking in the farm also create bush fires. He always try to shirk his responsibility)

6.3.4 Passive constructions

(We were ask to come. I was ask to see the "course rep." I was confuse. She was compel to leave the village.)

6.3.5 Use of stative verbs (describe long term or permanent states) in the progressive tense (used as action verbs):

(I was having a friend. I am loving you. In the case of auto mechanics, no union is existing. She is hearing you. We are smelling the food.)

6.3.6 Non count nouns as count nouns

(We have a lot of furnitures in our laboratory. She complained of her lost lugguages. We need more equipments for the computer lab. We get different informations from the media.)

6.3.7 Reduplication for emphasis

(I need to get there quick quick. We are managing small small. She was ask to go fast fast. She made it fine fine).

6.3.8 Vocabulary: New words to describe Ghanaian institutions and culture

- You have to do *the knocking* before paying the bride wealth. (announcement of intention to court a lady)
- *Enstoolment /enskinment* .

The chief was enstooled last year.

The Bolga-Naba's enskinment was a grand event.

The 'stool' or "skin" refers to the associated ceremonial stool/skin and depending on where the event is taking place in Ghana, one of the words becomes more appropriate. In Northern Ghana, chiefs sit on skins and so enskinment is used while chiefs in Southern Ghana sit on stools and so the word enstoolment.

- *Outdooring*:

Everywhere in Ghana babies have outdoorings on the eighth day.

You are invited to my brother's outdooring.

Outdooring is very common with Moslems.

- *Face-the-wall*

- I am running out of funds so I have resorted to "face the wall" these days. (Face the wall is a semi-solid food made from cassava, usually eaten with soup but regarded as a less expensive food).

- *Mosquito sprays and coils*

- We bought mosquito sprays and mosquito coils. Mosquito sprays and coils are insect, more precisely mosquito repellants. It is also believed that these sprays and coils also kill mosquitoes.

6.3.9 New meanings for old words and expressions

These words are about existing English words that are used to mean something else other than the meaning in English.

- That was a *brutal* film Brutal translates as ‘exciting’ in this construction.
- The newcomer is very *wild* in class (intelligent)
- *Would you like tea, coffee or Milo* (hot chocolate). Any. All three are used to mean a beverage for breakfast(tea).
- After bathing, I rubbed pomade (apply cream on the body)
- I did not have money to stay in a hotel so I put up with my friend. (stayed with)

6.3.10 Vocabulary- introduction of entirely new words and expressions

A number of lexical items have undergone semantic change in Ghanaian English. Many words from different languages have been adopted and modified to fit their new situations while others are formed. Darko (2003) refers to this group of words as Ghanaianisms: The following are some examples from the students’ work.

T.Z is the staple food of the north. (TZ is an abbreviated Hausa word “tuo” (thick porridge) and “zafi” which means hot). We Akans like “fufu” a lot. Fufu is pounded cassava, plantain or a combination of the two or yam) Red-red is the favourite of all students. (Red-red is fried ripe plantain served with beans cooked with palm oil). We have two gates in our chieftaincy. Gates here imply lines of succession.

New expressions were also found. Some of them have English words but used differently from their usual usage. Some of the common ones used by the students included the following;

He gave him a *piece of advice*.

If the Deans do not act promptly, we shall *advise ourselves*.

We *celebrated his funeral* recently.

I am *after* my son (looking for).

Accra always has *go slow*. (traffic jam).

6.3.11 Other expressions-tautology

The food is not *adequate enough*

In my opinion, I think that he is right

The book is *red in colour*.

You don’t have to *return back*

You should *re-examine* your decision *again*

Well, you can *refer back* to what she wrote.

Give *two different reasons* why he should not be here

Should in case he comes late, tell him to see the class rep (representative).

6.3.11 Culturally determined usage and literal translation

- Please give me a *chewing stick*. A “chewing stick” is a piece of particular wood or shrubs that is softened by chewing and used to clean the teeth.
- Is your mother not in the house? *Yes, she is not there*. (affirmative for negative responses)
- You are invited (to my meal). (does not necessarily mean come and join me) It is only cultural to say that.
- He is my brother (for cousin)
- I’m coming (to mean just a minute).

7. Student English versus Ghanaian English

Since one of the assumptions was that English spoken by the students is influenced by Ghanaian English, the sentences above were read to 50 educated Ghanaians of different backgrounds (teachers, nurses, Assembly workers, traders, and Prison officers).

All 50 listeners found no problems with pronunciation of the words with the consonants and vowel sounds mentioned under phonetics. Since they were not written, they were understood. Similarly, most of the grammatical mistakes above were seen as correct by a majority of listeners (73%). However, some of the constructions were considered incorrect. These were the subject-verb constructions and non count nouns as count nouns, mainly by teachers and nurses. The passive constructions were accepted as correct by 82%. All listeners (100%) accepted the use of stative verbs as correct. Except “face the wall” in the examples of new words used to describe Ghanaian institutions and culture, all others were accepted as correct English. Seventy-four percent (74%) of the people accepted all the sentences under new meaning for old words and expressions as correct. The new words were accepted as English words. It must be stated however, that 17% of the listeners could not decide on the ungrammatical constructions, 10% found them incorrect. Eighteen per cent (18%) of the people found constructions for new meaning for old words, and the passive constructions as incorrect. Of the eight sentences under tautology, only “You don’t have to return back” and : “Should in case he comes late, tell him to see the class rep”. were recognised by some people (8%) as repetition. As many as ninety two percent (92%) of the people accepted the rest as correct. The conclusion here is that most of the constructions of the students and lexical items are Ghanaian English. These analyses could allow us conclude that the English spoken by the students is influenced by Ghanaian English.

As can be seen, there was no comprehension problems of the constructions of the students in public use because the words, expressions and ungrammatical constructions are familiar. They are accepted and used by most Ghanaians. The Ghanaian street English does not focus on constructions close to British Standard English but on a cultural context. English is not learnt only in classrooms but also on the street. Consequently, many people use English for social interactions regardless of whether it is correct English or not. It seems that what matters here is if people can understand.

Street English is different from English for academic work but the students seem not to make distinctions in their use of English, so when it comes to written aspect, especially at the tertiary level, academics and highly educated people do not accept street English. The dilemma is whether to simply accept Ghanaian English and allow it grow or allow it for informal reactions and require the variety that is described as “close to the Standard British English” for written English. It is clear from the above that the students are unable to make a difference between written and oral English or for that matter the “Standard British English” and Ghanaian English.

8. Causes of student mistakes and poor writing skills.

An attempt can be made to explain or assign causes to the poor English that the students write. Aliu (1995) (cited in Bagbomse 1995) talks about the West African Examination Council attributing this incompetence to poor quality of English teachers and lack of suitable teaching materials. In many secondary schools in Ghana, teachers of different subjects (and not necessarily English teachers) are asked to teach English. This is in line with Hodges’ idea of English teaching in such contexts. “In the past, there has been a tendency in secondary schools for language studies to be seen as the domain of the English department despite long-standing calls for people to realize that every teacher is a teacher of English because “every teacher is a teacher in English” (Hodges, 2000 :44). It is assumed here that anybody, particularly graduates from universities can teach English but many of such graduates apart from not having the skills of teaching the language also make the same fundamental mistakes and are therefore not in position to correct them.

Observations show that many senior high schools either do not have school libraries or do not make use of the books they have in the libraries. Students have not acquired reading habits. Consequently, they are unable to improve their English through reading. In the university, English is taught as part of communication skills and it is taught only for a trimester. The time allocation is too short to have any significant positive effect. Most students therefore learn expressions from colleagues and other people since they hardly ever read story books. Interactions with these students in class revealed that in a class of 1,205 students there were only fifty-two students who claimed that they have read up to five story books during their Senior High School (of three years).

Writing is a skill that must be learnt and in some places such as the USA, first year students of many universities have time allocated to writing skills. What this means is that even where people use English as their first language and have a lot of contact with the language, this skill has to be learnt. The lack of inclusion of writing skills at the university is a factor contributing to the poor academic language use. Besides the common mistakes made, academic writing requires particular styles that are generally and internationally accepted. While non-academic writing could have more use of varieties, academic ones may require a more standard one. This implies constructing grammatically correct sentences, using the right words and being mindful of explaining new words that are created due to the cultural context. Above all, expressions and vocabulary used must be straight to the point and very clear.

9. Conclusions

As has been found in many studies on Ghanaian English, Ghanaian English has developed to have its own phonetic, phonological, semantic and discursal features. At the oral level, it will be difficult to teach students to distinguish between all the different sounds although this is possible. Efforts should be made by English teachers to teach students the correct pronunciation and contextual use of these words. What should be done is to emphasize differences in the use of words that sound or look similar since students write what they hear.

The current teaching methods are very teacher-centred and this has contributed to why students are generally unable to express themselves in good English, especially in written forms. Teachers decide what to teach rather than drawing from students' needs. Looking at the examples presented in this paper, students have used vocabulary and patterns that are characteristic of English in Ghana. Looking particularly at their lexical items (Ghanaianism), their choices of lexical items are appropriate in the contexts in which they are used. It is therefore not surprising that the students write the kind of English they do. The socio-cultural background of an individual plays a significant role in both the acquisition and use of language. Mpepuo (2000) writes that "the syllabus in countries, where English is a second language is designed to enable learners to communicate successfully in the language for personal, social and educational purposes" (2000: 150). It is easy to achieve the individual and social but quite hard to achieve the academic competence. Many Ghanaians in Navrongo had no problem in understanding the sentences that were read to them in the context in which the students used them but the main problem with this variety of English is that of acceptability. "Acceptability in the context of educated usage must be defined not only in local terms but also in international terms, where the point in dispute is not only cultural but also formal" (Adejare, 1995; 175). Similarly, Mpepuo (2000) argues for adherence to a common model. Since the public in Navrongo had no problem understanding the sentences read to them, the oral aspect may be alright but problematic when it comes to the written form. For academic writing, it may be necessary to emphasize grammar, intelligibility and international acceptability. These are necessary for clarity, which is key to writing.

English in Ghana has been altered to suit the Ghanaian environment. It has been nativised and acculturated to adopt some language features such as intonation patterns, new sounds, sentence structures, new lexical items and expressions. This has resulted in creating a different linguistic environment. The adaptations make the Ghanaian English unique, good for non academic work. Many students do not know the differences between spoken and written language but this is crucial for academic work. Written English must transcend national borders and cultures to meet the level of Standard English as academic writing has an audience much bigger than the local environment.

10. Recommendations

If it is natural that when a language comes into contact with another in a different socio-cultural context, some changes are likely to happen to the language to allow it respond to its new socio-cultural contexts, then it may be alright to accept Ghanaian English as the Standard Ghanaian English but in order that this may be accepted and known by Ghanaians there will be a need to do another study of Ghanaian English (see Sey, 1973) and come out with the variety of Ghanaian English that should be accepted since from observations highly educated people speak Ghanaian English almost void of the local languages. May be as suggested by Banjo, "the choice of an appropriate model should be based on the twin criteria of social acceptability and international intelligibility, on the assumption that such a model, given the second language situation, should possess a high prestige at home and reasonably easy intelligibility abroad" (1995: 209).

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