

***Research Paper***

# **Common Errors in Oral and Written Communication of Nigerian Undergraduate Students: A Study of Joseph Ayo Babalola University Undergraduates**

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Some errors varying from grammatical to spellings are usually discovered while marking scripts of undergraduate students either school based assessments that we often refer to as take home assignments or the summative assessments-the final examination. This precipitated the writer to bring to the knowledge fore in this paper, which highlights the places of oral and written forms of communication and certain common errors usually associated with them. Experimented methods of administering take-home assignments and on the spot tests; and class seminars were adopted involving 78 respondents in a Writing Composition course. These errors are clogs in the wheel of communication process and this paper deems it fit to identify these errors and also proffer solutions to them. The students were allowed to go over the tests with corrections already made (pre-test and post test) and in another session, using the same questions, the students showed evidences of studying the scripts. The methods helped in reinventing studying strategies of students particularly in higher institutions. The post-test mechanism helped reveal to students the need to read wide, take notes of correct use of spoken and written words and the need to build vocabularies to enhance both spoken and written skills.

**Key words:** Written communication, Oral communication, Electronic writing

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Western civilization brought along the art of writing besides speaking, which is a unique gift that nature has endowed mankind with. Writing then came into being as another major means of communication; and nowadays, writing has gone beyond ink, pen and paper; today we write through our telephones and with our computers to initiate our intentions, send information, contribute to global issues and with a supersonic speed of sending,

receiving and even more interestingly withdrawal or retrieval (Olugbamigbe, Udofia, and Bulya, 2008). Today's genre of written communication has dumped the era of typewriting, it has moved up to the era of electronic writing, electronic mail, (e-mail), e-governance, internet chat, Facebook chat, telephone handset texts etc. Written communication has helped the humans' document imaginations to illustrate, inform, communicate and

initiate ideas, like the art of writing proposals and bringing up issues of life that they agitate for through the newspapers, magazines, journals and other written means of communication.

Oral and written communications are forms of communication that are inter-related. In the past, reading was regarded as passive, while writing as active; however today reading is as active as writing, because reading demands concentration in order to ensure comprehension, which is equal to feedback in communication process. Again, an attempt at decoding (reading) meaningfully what was encoded (written) could nothing be less than active! (Arua, 2009, Onukaogu and Ohia, 2003).

In every facet of life, both living and non-living are involved in communication. This could be explained, particularly talking about non-living or something like a chair, for example, the communication or the language between man and a chair is that the chair is capable of offering a seat; and if a chair does that, the chair "communicates". This means that beyond speaking, writing and body gestures, communication means getting along with anything that may present or offer itself usefully to the user. When the radio, TV, phone, computer all work effectively with us, it could be said that these equipments are communicating with us. This is an abstract form of explaining communication and language. An example is to say that the communication and language one has with a chair is to provide a seat.

This then underscores the fact that communication remains a basic and an all round cycle in the human society. Human beings communicate round the clock except perhaps only when asleep and even the animals also communicate but could not speak, but animals make all manners of sounds and the ways they relate usually suggests that they express feelings like hunger, satisfaction or even anger. When a dog wags his tails and does something like a dance we know that such a dog is being friendly and if a dog tugs his tail in between his legs, it suggests a sense of fear and caution and when a dog barks and charges furiously at someone, we know what communication is on-going.

Humans communicate either by speaking, writing, or use gestures to inform, indicate a desire, initiate an idea, suggest and to respond or react to issues. Hence we need many skills to be proficient in communication and two of the obvious skills are writing and speaking. (Lewis 1987:61)

Achieving successful decent reports and giving decent oral presentation are susceptible to proficient skills of both oral and written communication. The human society today in this hi-tech era is extremely a verbal communication system oriented. Our opinions are shared and raised through the newspaper, magazines, journals, Radio, TV and lately through the internet.

## Communication

Communication is an act or instance of transmitting verbal or written message. It is also a process by which meanings are exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols (Webster's Collegiate Dictionary). Taking a closer look at the second sentence, it talks of meaningful exchanges between the initiator of messages and recipients. This also shows that for communication to have taken place, the exchanges and transactions should involve and elicit mutual understanding.

Webster's Dictionary also referred to communication as the technique for exchanging ideas effectively, either through speaking, writing or through any modern means of technology that can transmit information from one place to another. In this definition, effective communication stands out as the major pivot on communication process. What makes communication effective? There are some elements that make communication effective, these elements must be operated effectively to achieve effective communication. Shannon and Weaver, two communication experts, claim that communication is a means of transmitting messages from one person to the other. They identify the processes from the initiator of communication called the sender or source. From this point, the sender must be effective about his personality, the sender is as sure as confident about the move he is initiating in the communication process. (Wikipedia.org)

Another element in the process or chain of communication is the message; the message must be clear, precise and understandable. The message element is the central point in the communication process. Message is also the content and as such the language of the message/content must be presented in a way that should also elicit and guarantee understanding. Another effective element is channel/medium. The means through which a message is sent is the channel or medium, in the past we mail letters through the postal agency, but as time goes on, telegram came and today we have the e-mail, which guarantees that the message reaches the recipient in a flash of a speed so swift regardless of the distance.

The next element is the receiver. The receiver too must be available, otherwise communication reaches nowhere; the receiver is the destination of the message and as such the receiver must be available and alert to understand the message encoded. Very close to the receiver is the feedback element, this element is the reaction of the receiver to the message received and the receiver's reaction whether positive or negative shows how far the message goes by understanding.

The last element in the process is noise. Noise is an impediment that could interfere with the free flow of the message. Right from the message, the sender must

ensure that noises like grammatical or environmental (conduciveness) or physical (lousy environment) are avoided to ensure that communication actually took place.

Another look at Wallzlawick and Beaver's definition of communication is quite phenomenal to this study; they said: communication is information shared, exchanged and translated. This claim is synonymous to the communication's scale and pyramid. The first scale on the pyramid situates intrapersonal communication, which is the processing of information within oneself. It is also a type of oral communication, when one soliloquies or in monologue without talking to another party and often times it is spoken or verbalised. This is information not shared with anyone but yet one is communicating to oneself. Such questions like, "where do I go from here?" directed to the speaker by himself is raising a self-reappraisal, which is communicative and always effective to the speaker.

Next to intrapersonal communication is interpersonal communication which is actually shared and exchanged form of information and communication, this involves two or a couple of people, another is intragroup, which involves more than two or family members and/or classroom situation, amongst the students. Intergroup communication involves a whole speaking community, like the head of a clan interacting with the members of the village or community at the market square or the village hall. We also have institutional/organizational communication; this is a systematized formal means of communication in offices, business, industrial institutions etc, while down at the pyramid is the society-wide communication, which involves the help of the mass media to really reach the entire society.

### Language and Communication

Language is the main ingredient in communication process. We either write or speak through a certain language to communicate our thoughts or idea. Each country has its languages and language is the main distinguishing feature that humans use to interact meaningfully amongst themselves. Language is also that property that separates the humans from the animals in the communication process.

Language is the 'conveyor belt' humans employ to communicate, initiate, negotiate and to make their intentions known. Language is innate, particularly the mother tongue that is called L1, the first language the child grows up with in his immediate language community. Even though the language could still be learnt but mysteriously the child grows with this language and a quite a level of proficiency is acquired as the child grows.

The second language, the L2 is acquired by the child

by learning through formal means of the classroom. The L2 is usually, the adopted official language that always helps multi ethnic setting like Nigeria. Nigeria has well over 250 ethnic groups that speak close to 500 languages. The English Language, which is also the L2, comes in very handy here as a language that cuts across in helping information dissemination easy officially.

Often times, language could be non-verbal. Humans use gestures to communicate by using eyes, snapping of fingers, waving of arms and whistlings or hissings to express reactions to certain perceived information. Hands are waved to say goodbye or when both hands are placed on the head, it suggests tragedy or calamity; this gesture is found to universal expressed in practically all human culture.

### Forms of Communication

There are various forms of communicating our intentions. The first form is verbal which is divided into two; oral and written communication. Another is non-verbal, which is demonstrated by gestures and other use of our parts of the bodies without necessarily talking. We also have formal /informal communication; these two do not mean the same thing. Formal is a deliberate official form of sending information like serious communication like business/official letters like memos, letters of application, proposal letters etc; while informal is such information that are friendly or with some level of acquaintanceship devoid of any formality. Other forms of communication are intentional and unintentional. As the term implies, there are certain information that we have deliberately programmed to send, while in unintentional communication, something just happen without notice.

### Oral Communication

Oral communication, according to *freedico.com* is communication by word of mouth. The word, spoken with the mouth marks out the basic feature of oral communication and, oral communication is defined as a process in which a speaker interacts verbally with a listener to influence the receiver's behaviour (Lewis 1987:64). Lewis emphasized verbal interaction which was corroborated by *freedico.com* as word of mouth. In order to avert error, the speaker should choose how best to reach the listener, present the message and the extent to which the receiver translates or receives the message heard is dependent upon the speaker's choice and use of words. The communication skill of the speaker and the listening skill of the receiver are very important in any given oral communication situation. Another definition says, oral communication is a form of communication that is connected with the two basic skill of language-listening

and speaking. Speaking involves thinking, because one thinks before saying something. Oral communication involves the use of oral cavity which includes the mouth and other vocal organs like the lips, teeth, lungs and the tongue. It also involves uttering of words through the mouth to elicit some information. It is an expressive means of communication. Various forms of oral communication are storytelling, classroom teaching, lectures, seminars, folktales, newscast on radio and television, discussions/talk shows, dictation, monologues, soliloquy, etc.

Another website, *answers.com*, describes oral communication as any type of interaction that makes use of spoken words. It is also a very vital and an integral part of the modern business world.

Oral communication is face-to-face (generally), while written communication is impersonal. Telephone conversation is though oral, but it is a kind of voice communication, it is not face-to-face, to verify the exact personality of the other party one is speaking with on phone, it is pertinent one recognises the voice at the other end of communication. Without excellent oral communication skills, there would neither be meaning nor communication in any given setting of oral communication. In order to achieve success in oral communication, the following understated are essential:

- Selecting the subject/message: whether the topic is simple or complex, the speaker should make some research efforts on the topic in order to know the basics of the subject and how to address it.
- Gathering the material: While doing the research on the topic, materials on origin, statistics that explain how, why and where and frequency of the related topics must be gathered for presentation.
- Arranging and outlining the parts: Deliberate drafting of the skeletal structure of the presentation should be done thematically.
- Practicing the speech: There should be a rehearsal of the presentation, a mock presentation, where if need be could be done aloud.

### Presenting the oral text

Some research questions like, how do I begin or introduce my topic? How do I phrase the main points? How do I appeal to the listener's interests? And How can I use gestures and body language to communicate?, always agitate the mind of an impending speaker.

Some tips on presenting the oral text are provided below:

- Opening/Introduction: It is very important and pertinent, how a speaker opens the discourse. The opening should be very convivial, very exciting and warming. It should arouse the interests of the audience. The speaker could start with a current issue in a comic manner. At introduction, a speaker may refer to a previous occasion, use a personal reference, a quotation or tell a relevant joke.
- Phrasing major points: This is where factors of coherence, unity and objectivity, positivism, emphasis and readability set in. The main points are phrased around the characteristics listed.
- Appeal to the listener's senses

### Written Communication

This is the documentation of information, ideas and intentions through the use of accepted codes and symbols. Written communication is an expressive form of communication, as through the means of writing we express our thoughts, feelings and ideas by documenting them in a text for posterity and reference purposes. It could also be receptive as it could elicit the receiver's feedback and reactions. Written communication are letters, memos, notes, narratives documented in prose, essays, short stories, novels, plays, poems, newspapers, magazines articles, on-line texts, books, journals etc.

Written communication is the deliberate attempt at 'arresting' one's thoughts, ideas, and intentions into coded and documented form in order to inform, record and communicate for posterity. What if great writers like Professor Chinua Achebe never documented (or captured) his imaginations on *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) into written form of communication? Obviously we could not have had the iconoclastic master piece called TFA.

Before doing an analysis on errors of written communication, it would be convenient to identify the basic skills of language and communication. These skills would lead us to the process of writing as writing just did not occur from the blues, some things apparently should occur before writing. These skills of language and communication are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Recently, thinking is gradually being added to the four skills as thinking or what is known as thought-flow is also a process of either speaking or writing. Like speaking or oral communication, one thinks deeply before, during and after writing.

Writing has also been described as "a process of discovery to be approached with care, commitment and energy". Writing is a very careful venture, it gets printed and documented for future references and so a lot of industry and vigour are put into it with very careful preparations. (Buscemi 2002: viii).

### Problems/Errors of written communication

Some errors identified as plaguing the process of written communication are stated below:

- The appearance of the content of communication: The content of communication must be well planned, neatly typed and a favourable impression should be created by the physical compartment of the communication content.
- The choice of words: The expressions of words should be simple and self explanatory. Definitions of concepts should be stated clearly in simple terms.
- Correctness: Coherence, Unity and Accuracy must be achieved. The sentences must agree with the focus of the topic.
- Conciseness: There should be brevity and exactness of presentation of facts and ideas. The topic sentences must easily be located, while ambiguous and unclear statements must be avoided.
- Completeness: There should be a holistic treatment of the subject. The whole import of the subject must be addressed. The what, who, why, where and when should all be wholly considered.
- Language: Whether oral or written, the state of courtesy or politeness is very important

### The Written Communication Process

While taking into consideration the above nuggets to be taking care of, three major steps should be considered by the writer before clinching the final draft. Failure to adhere to these processes is also tantamount to errors or failures of written communication.

The three processes or stages are:

- Careful Drafting: This stage involves the pre-writing time of researching the topic, consideration of the audience or the reader and the exact purposes of the topic. An outline on the topic is considered relevant at this level on various issues garnered from the research.
- Revising: After the first draft, the writer attempts a revision of all the ideas gathered by revising all information documented and seeing to which ones could be added or removed.
- Editing/Proof-Reading: The writer could give someone else to help re-read the draft, edit the draft and proof read the entire concept in order to arrive at a presentable final draft.

### METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted with the administration of take-home assignments, on the spot tests and class seminars involving 78 students. The seminars had 14 students address the class in oral presentation because the entire 78 were grouped in 10, the group leaders and assistant group leaders made oral presentations.

The tables were details of findings in the study and errors discovered both oral and written forms of communication.

The Table 1 data shows that majority of students have problem with conjugation nouns or subjects with the appropriate predictor or verbs that should go along with it. The post-test sessions helped correct these anomalies. After scripts were shared to the students, the students were asked to make corrections and made to study together in their various study groups; and at the other sessions, students with such defects were asked to write the correct sentences on the board and to verbalise them as they wrote.

The table 2 was administered to test spelling and vocabulary knowledge of the students as they were asked to also give meanings of the selected words. The students were earlier instructed not to alter any of their attempts; they were given 3 minutes each to ponder on what should be the correct spelling and the exact meaning of the words. Sample 1-Critique, was deliberately tested to see if students could differentiate it with-critic. This was to test the students on the usage of the two words, because of common errors likely to occur. The researcher emphasized the place of phonetics and phonology in pronunciation and also directed the students to refer to their pronouncing dictionaries for accurate reference purposes. It was discovered that these hints helped a great deal, when students reclined to their various study groups. The data also revealed that the randomly drawn words were not known to the students. A very few percentage knew the words while overall average of 65% neither knew the meanings nor correct spellings of the words while –lampoon was not known by 50, representing 65% of the whole class never knew about the word.

This revelation has prompted the writer to do another test by drawing some words from the two prose texts the students are to study for a particular course. This would reveal whether students read at all and/or take into cognizance the words they encounter while reading and also to prove if they bothered to comprehend the meaning as the words were used by the author. (Table 3)

It was discovered that the students could speak better than writing, even though logical presentation was a bit shaky, yet the group leaders delivered averagely well. It was noted that group 10 with a minimal number of participants performed creditably well. They also formed

**Table 1:** Grammatical Errors (Subject + Verb Agreement, Punctuation, Spellings)

Total Number/Error type	Frequency of Errors/%	Difference/%
78-Subject+ Verb	58-74%	20-16%
78-Punctuation	36-46%	42-54%
78-Spellings	39-50%	39-50%

**Table 2:** Dictation Test

Sample of Dictated Words	Total number of Students	Frequency of Rights Responses/%	Frequency of Error/%	Indifference
Critique	78	35-	40	3
Didactic	78	20-	50	8
Paediatrician	78	10-	45-	23
Lampoon	78	05-	23	50

**Table 3:** Oral Presentation

Serial Number	Total Number	Performance	Time Accuracy	Initiative	Overall Score 10	Diction
Grp. 1	9	Below Average	Exceeded time limit of 4minutes	Average	4	Average
Grp. 2	10	Above Average	Within time limit	Above Average	6	Very Fair
Grp.3	10	Good	Within time limit	Well above	7	Good
Grp.4	9	Fair	Within	Average	5	Fair
Grp.5	8	Good	Before time limit	Above	7	Very Good
Grp.6	7	Fair	Above	Average	5	Fair
Grp.7	7	Fair	Within	Average	5	Fair
Grp. 8	10	Good	Within	Above	7	Good
Grp.9	8	Fair	Within	Above	7	Good
Grp 10	7	Exceptional	Within	Well above	8	Excellent

the crop of students that performed well in the written exercise; this was a shortcoming of the study, because the students would have been deliberately mixed with those who are average and below average performing students. This discovery also precipitated another study as earlier mentioned with students being tested with words drawn from a particular text of study. Some French words that are often used in everyday use of English like *debut*, *coup de tat*, *a la carte*, were also tested to discover pronunciation skills and spelling skills.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Speaking and writing are interrelated and this also means that errors or brick walls relating to the two are common features that could be juxtaposed. Like in writing, the pre-writing stage is synonymous to oral. In oral communication, the speaker brainstorms about the topic and relies on the outline drawn before addressing the topic. A seminar, for example is a typical form of oral and written communication, during the conceptual stage, the speaker or the writer does a lot of research before putting the pen on paper.

With the topic in mind, the speaker /writer also takes into consideration the kind or make-up of the audience. He considers whether the audience are neutral, hostile or favourable. Another error or shortcoming is avoiding non-proficiency. Whatever language of choice in communication, one must be proficient in the language, while other errors like grammatical noise, phonological noise and coherence and unity noise must all be avoided. Incidences of bad use of subject + verb agreement must be avoided. An example is the common error of saying or writing, “‘ I sees it coming’ instead of ‘I see it coming’ or ‘they watches home video everyday’ instead of ‘they watch home video everyday’.

Public speaking act needs some tact and finesse. The speaker should be eloquent by having a firm understanding of the topic, should be bold to face crowd and ensure inter-personal communication by ensuring he maintains eye contacts with his audiences. While in written communication, the thought-flows are arranged in paragraphs, which are made up of sentences built from simple, compound and complex sentences.

Right from the inception, the introductory paragraph should be so immersing and also present and locate the thesis statement and the topic sentence.

When writing news releases, the first paragraph should reflect the inverted pyramid principle, this is the thesis statement. The first paragraph should ‘tell the news’ by telling us who did what, and when, where, how and why. When a writer fails to do this, it presents s a major error.

Written communication like news release, features and articles should reflect interesting and fascinating flairs that would make the reader to read again; at this point, clichés, slang and other freer words are allowed, but in academic papers, journals, seminars and business and official memos, clichés are cut-off because the language here is strictly academic and official. Another error to avoid is wrong spellings and this is also reflective of phonetics and phonological knowledge of the writer. During the pre-writing or drafting stages, one is expected to reference the Dictionary and Thesaurus and/or on-line dictionaries and Thesaurus for correct spellings.

Good writing skills could only be sustained by writing. After writing, a good writer hands over the piece of writing to another fellow to proof-and edit constant writing with a good editor at hand makes a goof prolific writer. The Reading and Elocution Centre (RVEC) just established in Joseph Ayo Babalola University (JABU) has a central mandate of making better speakers and writers of students.

Elocution is the art of effective public speaking; in order to achieve eloquence, one should observe all the rules of effective speaking by saying the words in appropriateness and applying the meaning appropriately.

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