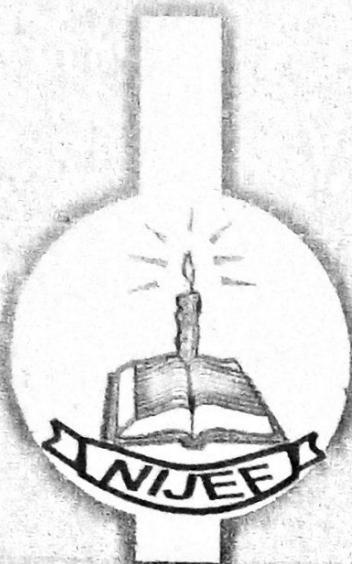




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AN EVALUATION OF LONGMAN'S 'NEW PRACTICAL ENGLISH'

By

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Abstract

Procuring the right textual materials for the teaching and learning of English, as a Second Language has been a matter for concern to applied linguists. Consequently, criteria have been suggested to guide teachers and others that are interested in language teaching. The Nigerian secondary school teacher in particular requires sensitivity to the criteria in order for him/her not to drift in the face of the intense pressure from book publishers. The 'New practical English' by the Longman Group is one of the numerous publications for the Nigerian Secondary Schools. The present writer used the established criteria to assess the New Practical English series. It was found that the course-books satisfied most of the criteria. Suggestions were made as to removing the few lapses observed.

Introduction

The English Language came to Nigeria through businessmen, missionaries, politicians, and educationists. Since its advent, the language has been engrained in the Nigerian system, gradually, and persistently (Bamgbose, 1971). English has become so relevant to the country's public life that Alabi (1994) believes that it enhances national unity and promotes bilateral relations. In order that the development of the language may not be haphazard, the National Policy on Education (1981, revised) requires that English be taught as a subject, and used as a medium, as from the fourth

year in the Nigerian primary school. By the time the pupil gets into the secondary school, his/her requirements of English language skills become more serious, which places greater thrust on the teacher.

The role of the teacher of English language in an ESL context, such as Nigeria, has been given some attention (Bamgbose, 1971; Ihebuzor, 1991; Olajide, 1995). Specifically, Ihebuzor (1991) has identified textbook selection and general designing as a crucial task for the teacher of language. These days, Nigerian schools are barraged with textbooks of all sorts. Such textbooks pose great challenges to the teachers: parents have limited resources within their disposal, and would want to allocate the scarce resources as efficiently as possible; they therefore rely on the guide by the teachers.

On his part, the teacher must be armed with what Ihebuzor (1991) describes as 'valid criteria' (p.121) in order to perform the textbook selection task. The considerations advanced by applied linguists, like Dechant and Smith (1977), Williams (1983), Stern (1990), and Ihebuzor (1991) should be taken while attempting to select textbooks to be implemented on a group of language learners. The considerations include that:

- * The book must conform with the existing educational philosophy.
- * It must be appropriate to the user's psychological age.
- * The book must follow the current linguistic theory and practices.
- * It must be socially and culturally relevant to the learners.
- * The textbook has to be useable by the teacher and pupils; as such, it must be well bound, handy, boldly printed, well illustrated and annotated.
- * It must be readily available.
- * The cover price should be appropriate.
- * The textbook must enable the learner to practise on his/her own, by being accompanied with workbook, practice book, tapes, etc.
- * It must have the teacher's guide, scheme, etc,
- * The book should also contain a consistent method of evaluation.

Why the 'New Practical English'?

This writer chose to evaluate the 'New Practical English' textbooks because the series are recurrent on the Nigerian market. The older edition- Practical English -has been subjected to comparative analysis by Ihebuzor (1991) and found not to be strong in terms of:

'Closeness of events and characters to the learners' interest ... Legibility of print and quality of paper ... Frequency and quality of illustrations and diagrams ... Motivation properties ... Extent to which learner can use the text for self- teaching ... Adequacy of coverage of listening skills ... '(p.124).

Method of Text Analysis

The analysis of the book was done by the present writer. The pupils' Book One in the Junior Secondary School Series is important for being introductory. The transitional nature of Junior Book Three also makes it significant. That the Senior Book Three is terminal and preparatory also makes it worth paying attention to.

Results and Discussion

The Junior Book One presents the learning experiences in three terms to constitute one academic year. It is easy for a teacher to break the experiences into lessons to allow for emphasis and effective coverage. The lessons are expected to be spread across the weeks that make up a term and in the light of the hours available for English. In the Book, every lesson is introduced with a comprehension passage the contents of which seem suited to the learner's psychological, social, cultural and linguistic experiences. The passage on pages 1-2 is developed around the familiar theme of 'baby'. The story is a folklore, presenting actions, gestures and moods that are African and would appeal to the average Nigerian secondary school learner.

There are only few multi-syllabic lexemes, with most nouns denoting objects that the pupil can physically see, feel, hear, or touch, e.g', 'trees', 'mother', 'under', 'visitor', and 'baby'. The verbs relate to actions that are also common, such as 'go', 'begins', 'sees', 'burning', and 'singing'. The other content words ('adjectives' and 'adverbs') should also yield meaning to the pupil with little or no difficulty. The sentences are mainly simple and compound, such as found on pages one and two.

The story is further illustrated with the picture of a mother with her baby. The utensils being displayed by the woman and the entire setting gives the idea of a home from the Northern part of Nigeria. Thus, the story has relevance for the Nigerian learner. The questions set on the passage are dichotomised into 'memory' and 'harder' ones, thereby ensuring that there is the progressive evaluation of pupils, conforming to the suggestion by Stern (1990) and Ihebuzor (1991) that a worthwhile instructional material has to maintain a sound system of evaluation.

The memory questions mainly require the learner to show literal mastery of the content of the passage, but the harder ones also task him/her to infer. The literal and inferential types of comprehension are what learners of that age can effect best. They cannot engage in higher order comprehension exercises an awareness that seems to be consistently demonstrated throughout the book under discussion.

Vocabulary is important in reading comprehension. It is the total number of lexemes that a learner can spell correctly and use communicatively in a given language (English, in our case). The Longman writers have ensured that the issues of vocabulary follow reading comprehension exercises, throughout Book One, in order to illustrate the centrality of word power to the pupils' language performance. In presenting experiences in vocabulary development, the authors pay attention to word structure and reading. The dictionary is specially referred to by the writers. Incidentally, the Longman Group also has what appears to be an adequate Junior Dictionary which the parents can be persuaded by the teacher (through the school administration) to procure for the pupils.

The dynamic teacher of English vocabulary, utilizing the written discourse forum, can always approach the issue via pre-reading activities, where the pupils are made to guess (or anticipate) words in the passage based on the topic or theme of the passage. The presence, in the passages, of guessed words will give the pupils sense of achievement, while the absence of such words can be turned to good point of learning, if the teacher actually helps the pupils to provide the relevant contexts for them to use the words.

Also, pictograms are used (e.g., p.4) in the book to enrich the pupils' forms of imagination, and cause them to learn specific grammatical features.

The elements in the pictograms are always familiar objects that should induce the pupils to do controlled conversation and/or writing naturally. The effective teacher should not find difficulty in leading the pupils to produce acceptable simple sentences as demanded by the pictogram on page 4 which involves household things-dog, cow/bull, lam, camera, pump, and fan. The pictogram could lead to activities in the four language arts-listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Detailed but well-directed grammatical exercises are also presented in every lesson in the book. At times, the exercise involves the limited substitution tables which are intended to guard pupil performance. This practice is in line with Tiffen (1969) who suggests that pupils in the early secondary classes be put under varying forms of control in the language learning activities.

The urge to conform with the existing linguistic principles also possibly makes the writers of the Book to use the substitution table to introduce the pupils to oral and written composition. Each table has been constructed to help the teacher to teach specific aspects of composition at a rate suitable to the pupils' psychological and linguistic ages (see p. 9). The writers appear justified in approaching composition writing from speaking because speech is natural to the normal pupil while writing is a skill that is acquired at school. As such, the pupil finds it easier to write on a topic after the topic might have been properly discussed orally in the class. Another feature of the Longman writers' style is that writing is made to capture speech on paper, a pupil writing composition talks to himself alongside. He first thinks about the ideas as orally discussed before putting pen to paper. Ample opportunities are given the pupils to talk before, and after composition writing.

Throughout Book One, composition writing is controlled to varied degrees. For example, whereas "limited substitution table" is used by the writers to teach oral or written composition on p. 9, the outline, the "true for each one type", is employed for the same purpose on p. 144. Both approaches to composition writing seem appropriate for the target pupils. The approaches allow the teacher to control the pupils for specific aspects of English Grammar without preventing them from being original in thoughts. Controlling the pupils at the Junior Secondary level in composition writing is essential

because the pupils are rather too young for "free composition" where ideas are expected to come naturally from the writer's wealth of experience, and he is expected to show ready knowledge of format.

Each lesson in the book further stresses speaking by being concluded with speech work exercises. This should be considered an opportunity for the teacher of English to enhance the spoken English of their pupils. Particular segmental and supra-segmental aspects of English are illustratively presented in the Book. In order that the teacher can evaluate the pupil's performance in ~~the~~ each speech work, a conversation exercise is provided at the end of the lesson. Children usually converse with one another on matters that are of significance to their age group. Thus the New Practical English Pupil's Book One presents graded topics that can be used for classroom conversations that will be appropriate to the socio-cultural contexts that the learners may find themselves. The pupils Book One ends with a wordlist (pp. 248-290) that is intended to guide the learners not only in vocabulary development, but also in grammatical constructions. There is also the phonetic symbols introduced to consolidate the speech work already undertaken in the class. This pattern of presentation by the Longman writers persists through the Junior Books Two and Three.

Learning experiences become more demanding in the Junior Book Three. The passages are now longer and structurally more complex, although visual aids are provided by putting target vocabulary items in warmer colours (pp 112-114). The 'memory' and 'harder' questions may also task the pupils more comprehensively. The Book offers a striking mode of evaluation, comprising practice, re-practice, and testing exercises. The learners are thus helped effectively in their preparations for the Junior School Certificate Examination. The Book will enable the learners to practise on their own as recommended by Ihebuzor (1990).

The aspects of English Language use, like the quantifiers (pp. 19-29), models (p. 116), prepositions, and agreement (pp. 125-129), punctuation (p. 241), and idioms (pp. 211-213) that do pose serious problems to the learners are given attention. Summary writings are treated in the context of reading comprehension. The passages involved are of adequate readability level, in line with Jegede's (1991) suggestion. Later in the Book, the learners are introduced into letter writing. They are exposed to the various types of

letter that a learner can write in English. Model summaries and letters are provided that can sensitize the learners, and cause them to write desirably.

The Senior Books One to Three build on the Junior ones, and are aimed at causing the learners to use the language increasingly. The appendices made to the Senior Books provide support to the teachers and learners alike. For example, the Senior Book Three that is the last and, of course, the most demanding in the series treats the Formal Grammar-part of speech (pp. 152-55), phrases (pp. 155-156), clauses (156-160), and the figures of speech, especially those frequently tested by the West African Examinations Council. From the Junior to the Senior series, the New Practical English Books' grammatical structures are graphically marked out using bold colours. The practice can stimulate the learner-reader and help him/her place the structures concerned under focus. It also helps learner and teacher to locate and relate learning experiences with ease. The portion of Senior Book Three tagged 'Special Vocabulary' (pp. 162-162) summarises the vocabulary exercises in the earlier Books in the series. Indeed, items, many of which have been presented in the Junior and Senior series, are represented for focus and emphasis (pp. 165-175). Such items can now be re-practised under the guide of the teacher, or privately with the aid of a good dictionary. Incidentally, the Longman Publishers also offers a dictionary that can be useful in this direction. The teacher can use the vocabulary items to teach spellings to the pupils. Cross-referencing is facilitated by the alphabetical arrangement of items.

The Senior Book Three appears to give the greatest emphasis to essay writing, summary writing, and comprehension, besides grammar. In the process, test items that are similar to those that the candidates are likely to face in the Senior School Certificate English papers are posed. This practice has been foregrounded in the Senior Books One (pp. 213-217) and Two (pp. 208-229).

Presenting the test items spirally through the Senior Books conforms with Tyler's (1949) recommendation that learning experiences in a curriculum should be sequentially and integratively presented. Thus, if the teacher and pupils faithfully follow the provisions of the Senior series of the New Practical English, with the teacher taking the extra pains to supply relevant supportive experiences from the other sources, the learners may not perform poorly in

the Senior School Certificate Examinations in English.

The series are backed with such materials as the Teachers' copies which not only give answers to the questions raised in the pupils' Books, but also state how every aspect can be taught. The aim is also to guide the teacher in preparing his/her lesson plan- one duty that often causes disaffection between the teacher and the school authorities. The Pupils Practice Books help the pupils to practise the experiences provided in the course books privately or openly with (out) the guide of the teacher. To ensure that this happens, the pupils practice books have been tailored to the pupils textbooks.

In addition, the Pupils' Books are well-bound, with attractive covers that have communicative imports. The textbooks are handy and should be durable. The prints are bold and the paper seems qualitative. Generally, the 'New Practical English' seems to have addressed most of the lapses that Ihebuzor (1991) observed in the 'Practical English'.

Nevertheless, the coursebooks do not seem to give sufficient focus to listening, a set of skills that are crucial to human communication. Providing oral exercises and learning experiences alone does not presuppose that listening will be automatically taught and learnt. Besides, it is yet to be ascertained whether Longman, the publishers 'New practical English', have produced the necessary accompanying tapes that can facilitate the teaching and learning of the oral aspects of the books. Also, the lessons in all the Books should have been put into smaller, possibly daily lessons, to prevent poor truncation by the teachers.

Conclusion

Thus the 'New Practical English' series appear to be adequate textbooks for the target readers. The learning experiences provided tend to conform with the syllabuses involved. Considerable efforts have been made by the writers to facilitate the use of the textbooks by the teachers and the pupils. Apart from the learning experiences being spirally arranged across the textbooks, there are textual, pictorial, and other graphological devices to support the use of the materials. The textbooks are also well-structured, and inter-spaced with evaluative devices, which make it easy for the learners to practise on their own.

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