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## COMBATING THE NEGATIVE INFLUENCE OF THE INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE WRITING SKILLS IN NIGERIAN STUDENTS.

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### ABSTRACT

*Writing is an important productive language skill whose development has been under serious threat by some education – related factors. With the emergence of the information Communication Technology (ICT) facilities, the situation appears to have worsened. This paper examines the present situation of writing among Nigerian students, using a recent research. The paper also identifies the ICT facilities that are responsible for the degenerating writing ability of the present crop of Nigerian students. In addition, the paper offers some suggestions that will help to stem the negative influence of ICTs on the teaching and learning of writing in our schools.*

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of writing well can never be over-stated and the importance of developing the writing skill in the young Nigerian students can never be emphasized enough. The ability to express ideas and emotions reasonably well in writing is a key factor in a student's educational career and, later, in his professional development and empowerment. Imparting this productive skill, which makes a full man, according to Francis Bacon, has not been easy as a result of severed factors (Ogbuehi 2001:75-79). Language teachers have been contending with these factors all these years. However, the emergence and spread of the Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) on the Nigerian scene has made the situation worse. Generally, writing is the most tasking activity of all the language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing. Anybody who had once attempted to write, including professional writers, will readily admit the complexity and rigour of the writing process. Otagburiagu (1991:VII), expressing similar views, cited Barnett and Stubbs (1986) who note as follows: It is a universal law that given two tasks, one of which is writing, a person will prefer the other task. The same opinion has been expressed by Ogbuehi (2002:vii), Taylor (1989:4) as cited by Ogbuehi (2001:75), and by Joseph Conrad, who was cited by Taylor (1989:4). Although the written communication process is generally challenging, there is a world of difference between the difficulty referred to by accomplished writers like Conrad, Taylor, etc. and the problems faced by the Nigerian students. The students are linguistic tyros in a second language milieu, who are struggling to acquire the use of the English language amid a plethora of linguistic and pedagogical difficulties. The rest of the paper, therefore, assesses the present state of writing among Nigerian students, investigates the negative influence of the ICT facilities, and suggests measures whose careful application will counterbalance the negative influence of the ICTs on the development of the writing skills among the students.

### Nigerian Students and the Writing Skill

We will begin this section by making a reference to the Guardian (March 18, 2001), as cited by Ogbuehi (2001:74) in which a reporter writes as follows: One banker told us that he cannot sic get five correctly drafted sentences in one paragraph from recent university graduates.... Some graduates who were recruited as senior managers cannot (sic) write a memo of three paragraphs. Apart from underscoring the importance of the mastery of the written communication skills, this reference paints an ugly but the exact picture of the poverty of the writing skills among students and university graduates. Okebukolo (2004) as cited by Okoro (2006:3) paints the some ugly picture. He notes that, "If poor English expressions were to be bullets, bullet-proof vests may be needed when holding conversation with some undergraduates or interacting with their written materials by way of essays, letters and other forms of written communication. To further illustrate this picture, let us look at the result of a recent study on the writing skills of 2006/07 pre-degree students of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State. The 900 students used for the study were graduates from 531 secondary schools, which are from 29 states of the federation, including the Federal Capital Territory. The students were admitted to the programme, having passed five subjects (including English) at credit level in their O' level certificate examinations. In the study, students were asked to write letters. Two samples of the letters are presented below; they are typical of most of the letters and therefore quite revealing.

**Combating the Negative influence of the information Communication Technologies on the Development of the Writing Skill in Nigerian Students.**

Sample I: This is a letter to a brother, advising him not to marry a beautiful girl he had introduced to the family.

Dear brother.

Complement of the sesean. how about children and also your wife.

I hope there are all fine. Let me go stright to my point. Well. I kank you for you concien of my life. I also kank you for the beautiful girl you introduced to me and the familly.

But brother. I am oppostion you decision to marry a very beautiful girl. because I am a mature man. although I have chooes my girl by my selfe. One reason that I will not marry beautiful girl is. because she is a beautiful girl. she will be attracting men arund her. because now body hets bad thing.

Two reaons. is that girl you introduced to me is so much beautiful. she is much attractive and you know that all men well want to tuk with her. and I can trululate that because I can have a woman in a hose and men will bringing problem to me and her....

( sic )

thanks yours faithful

Sample II: This is a letter to the manager of a bank, explaining why the writer failed to attend an interview for a job in the bank.

Dear Sir.

With due respect to you why I missed the last conducted interview in the bank. was that I had a report that my house burnt down. I had to get home to see how it was, and also see my family where they was anything happening to the because of the incident. And with that. Sir it was a triirable act of incident. all my where burnt down by the fire and my original credential where consum by the fire. and know I am only with the photocopy of it and even my shirt. my shoes and my remaining part of money that it was in shierve as part of my transport to tans back for the interview. I tried all my best to get they but all my plans proves negative. this is why I couldn't be they.

Mover over. as I get home. I have another encounter problem that my brother had fital accident this was also the problem that constitute to my not attending the interew.

Inconclusion I mention above have been enable to give reason why I did not attend the interew.

Yours faithful

( sic )

The purpose of this paper is not the analysis of the mechanical, structural and lexical blunders which are straddling the scripts and staring the reader in the face. but suffice it to say that such errors are legion. As regards the overall performance of the students. the result is presented in the table below.

No. of Students	Scores	Percentage
14	0	2
4	1	4
110	2	12.2
266	3	30
269	4	30
165	5	18.3
66	6	7.3
6	7	.7
-	8	0
-	9	0
-	10	0

The table above shows that 14 students could not write anything meaningful, and that the writing ability of 663 students, representing 75 percent, is below average. Yet this is the set of students who were declared

“champions” in their secondary schools and who will soon become freshmen in Nigerian universities, where they will certainly have little tutorial in the Use of English courses before graduation. Another revelation from the study is that the students lack the capacity to produce a sustained written discourse of a reasonable length. It is evident in their scripts that drought of ideas and expression difficulties are repressible for that. The students spent, at least, 45 minutes in the exercise, and in the end managed to write the number of foolscap pages indicated below.

No. of Students	No. of Pages	Percentage
429	Less than a page	48
334	One page	37
137	More than a age	15

The table indicates that 48 percent of the population could not write up to a page, 37 percent wrote only a page, while 15 percent wrote more than a page. Having made the picture vivid, let us turn our attention to the ever-expanding ICT facilities in the country.

### The Impact of ICTs on the Development of Writing Skills

The ICTs are in three categories: information technologies and computers, telecommunications technologies, (telephones, fax, radio, television), and networking technologies (internet, mobile phones, etc.) Arolasafe, 2006:3). It is important to observe that those technologies are still expanding and proliferating. Arolasafe hints that many are still in their infancy while Jochen (2000:xv) asserts that what is available today as mobile technologies “is only the beginning. It is not doubtful that the ICTs -those concretised ingenuity of the human brain – can facilitate language education. But it will be wrong to perceive them as the panacea for every language problem. As regards the acquisition of written communication skills, the ICTs’ influence is largely negative among young Nigerians. We will, therefore, briefly discuss the ICT – related activities and facilities that impede the development of the ability to write well. First, the use of mobile telephones has almost banished the art of letter writing from the consciousness of the people, especially students. Phone calls, phone sex and text messages have replaced ordinary and love letters. The style and manner the text messages are couched debase writing. Here are some samples:

Sample I: PLS LET ME HAVE UA HANDOVA OTE SO THAT UA SUCCESOR CAN FUNCTION

Sample II: Thks 4 ur swt sms . May the spirit of luv, the beauty of hope, the blessing of peace b ur gift this Easter season. God’s blessing, Br B and my swt Ch. Lv & miss u.

Sample III: Thanks and Jesus + blexng. 2u tn. ur family. 4rm Viv.

Sample IV: Wishing you d bst at ds Easter Season & may d death & resurrection f our Lord brng peace t every family & our country @ large HAPI EASTER.

Sample V: GD DAY SIR, MAY D BLESSING OF GOD BE UNTO U AMEN. PLS SIR, AM BAK 2 SHC. & I WAT 2 SAY HELO BUT UR NO’S NT GOING I DECIDED SEND U TEX: MX REGARD 2 UR FAMILY

A set of people accustomed to thinking and writing in such slipshod manners, as indicated by the samples above, will surely detest assignments in thought – provoking composition, and will perform badly in such assignments. At the heart of writing is the logical composition of ideas, and vivid expression of emotions; text notes as presented above cannot promote them. Secondly, the internet has marginally constituted a cog in the development of the writing skills. In the first place, students spend hours in the internet looking for material to plagiarize, and also gazing at frivolous pictures. For them, any idea they do not find there does not exist in the world. So, there is a total reliance on the internet for ideas. This attitude weakens the creative and imaginative faculty that is central to thoughtful writing. With the internet, the rigorous process (but a rewarding one) of thinking out and expressing ideas is often circumvented since ready –made ideas are easily available. The internet, in other words, makes students lazily busy in the mental sphere. A student once wanted to find out where else she could find material on an aspect of an essay writing competition topic she

could not find in the internet. The answer given to this student was "Ferret out the remaining ideas from your brain". Another facility of the internet is the e-mail. This, again is the reason for the abandonment of letter writing skills. It has reduced mail communication to a kind of note or memo. There is no known decree limiting the number of words permissible in e-letters, but experience shows that inter-personal e-mail is usually short. Perhaps the cost of the service, and inefficiency in manipulating the computer keyboard might be responsible for the brevity of most e-letters. Among students, the brevity syndrome is nothing but a sign of lack of ideas, for even in their examinations, the same syndrome has been their bane. Thirdly the video compact discs (VCD) and related technologies have replaced novels. Up until 1980's novel reading was a kind of epidemic among secondary and university students. The CD technology was not existing in this part of the world then. So, students unconsciously developed themselves linguistically through extensive novel reading. 'Reading' as Francis Bacon puts it, "makes a man"; this is because a man who reads is likely to be a man of ideas, and it is these ideas that are expressed in real writing. This is a way of stating the know fact that reading and writing are interrelated. It is not only the CD technology that has corroded the reading appetite of the Nigerian youth, the television also has. Local and foreign addictive news, sport, film etc. channels abound and are accessible in the home and at the school. A good number of the youth can spend the whole day or keep awake the whole night watching films, or football matches, but cannot spend an hour on a novel. Also, the present emphasis on computer literacy is contributing to the widening ignorance of the conventions that guide writing. Increasingly the letters "i" and "j" are no longer dotted by students. The use of the margin lines, division of words and paragraphing are also affected. So, addiction to the use of the computer, without proper language instruction, can increase the disregard for those vital conventions in long hand, as evidenced by students' writings nowadays. Finally, we want to observe that the advancement in technology is encouraging the use of multiple-choice questions only for testing students in examinations, including the use of English examination, in our universities. This practice is the consequence of large student population (Adebija 2004:3) and the need to process and publish results in time. In order to meet this need, computer machines are used to produce and assess the multiple-choice questions. The practice is anti-writing and, in the words of Adebija, "many university students are deficient in basic communication skills," as a result.

#### Measures to Stem the Negative Influence of ICTs on Writing

In his *AN Easy on Criticism*, Alexander Pope notes, among other things, that "True ease in writing comes from art, not chance as those move easiest who have learned to dance." Williams (1990:170), Oji (1991:Vii) and Ogbuehi (2002:23) echo the same opinion. Orji warns that "unless the children are made to read and write, the rules on how to write will avail them of nothing". The pedagogical implications of the above views are obvious and should be taken seriously. So, to combat the negative influence of the ICTs on the art of writing among Nigerian students, teachers at all levels should, from the beginning make their students realize that the ICTs are the products of the human brain and should be seen as tools that facilitate tasks. Students should not be allowed to harbour the erroneous impression that the ICTs, especially the internet, are the beginning and end of everything. This is because the internet reduces students to a mere receptacle of information but suppresses their ability to develop critical thinking and imaginative power. In view of all this, teachers should consider the measures outlined below.

- a) Novel reading should be introduced in the English curriculum of the Use of English courses in tertiary institutions. In the secondary school, it should be made compulsory for all students from the first to the last year. Novels with rich ideas and good styles should be recommended. To ensure that the novels are read, exercises should be based on them.
- b) Short essays, a page, or half a page, can be used to test lexis and grammatical structures after instruction. This method has been successfully used at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State. It involves asking the students to write an essay or letter on a given subject matter and instructing them to reflect the structure taught in the composition.
- c) Because of the large student population, students may be required to outline their essay points and to develop two or three of them in full.
- d) It is also suggested that guided essay writing should sometimes be administered. This involves the provision of some of the points that are relevant to the topic and asking them to supply and develop the remainder.
- e) The teacher should adopt the practice of reading and discussing model essays and letters in the classroom. Good essays by the students can also be read and discussed. With the model essays, he can stress and comment on, such rhetorical qualities as unity, coherence, emphasis, style and grammar. This

practice will encourage the students to read model essays critically and also to ape the good qualities of those essays.

### CONCLUSION:

We have established that many of our students cannot write reasonably well, as a result of lack of the writing skills. We have also discussed the undue influence of the ICTs on the art of writing among the young minds, technologies that have kept the eyes and ears of the young students so busy that their hands become limp and unable to hold the pen. In addition, we have offered mainly teacher – centred measures to combat this crippling and ever-growing influence of the ICTs. The point that has been made is that the teacher is the key factor, not the ICTs, in the imparting and acquisition of written communication skills. It is only the teachers that can salvage this unsatisfactory writing situation. Their number, quality, delication and motivation are integral factors that will form a strong foundation on which they will function effectively. The students, certainly, have their own part to play in this process. By any means the students should be made to do writing exercises frequently. Through this means they will be greatly empowered linguistically and consequently make great contributions towards national and global empowerment, say, as bankers or engineers.

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