

Beyond Disruptive and Challenging Times: Change and Innovation in the English Language and Literary Studies Ecosystem in Nigeria

Gabriel B. Egbe

Department of English and Literary Studies, Veritas University, Abuja

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Situating the disruptions and challenges

Throughout the ages, global pandemics have been momentous periods of great disruptions, chaos and challenges. Such disruptions and challenges have also paved the way for great changes and innovations. The current COVID-19 crisis is not an exception. The pandemic has exacerbated calls for educational transformation at both domestic and international levels. Besides the global COVID-19 pandemic, Nigeria has had home grown additional forms of disruptions which include intermitent labour disputes between teachers at all levels of the educational system especially higher education teachers with federal and state governments leading to loss of academic time for students. There have been reported cases of activities of terrorists, closure of schools for fear of kidnapping, and cases of outright raiding of schools by bandits who kidnap students for ransom in some parts of the country. As the spate of banditry increases with schools being prime and soft targets, Nigeria has become a country thirsty for blood with many hurting and bleeding; and the value for human life has become so low. The commercialization and commodification of criminal violence have become normal. The negative implications on the Nigerian educational system against these disruptions and challenges and the growing spate of insecurity in the country are painfully disturbing. Nigeria appears to be a country in a perpetual state of emergency requiring emergency responses all the time. It does seem that our response to the teaching of English Language and Literary Studies (ELLS) is a case of 'Emergency English in Emergencies' as the new normal (Egbe, Forthcoming).

These disruptions and challenges call for a rethink of how we should do and engage in the ELLS enterprise in Nigeria. Several questions are raised, some of these include:

- (i) How have we and how should we respond to prevailing disruptions and current challenges in the teaching and learning of ELLS in Nigeria?
- (ii) How can ELLS education respond to contemporary Nigerian/global realities and challenges as a subset of the Nigerian/global educational ecosystem?
- (iii) Shouldn't we rethink and transform the philosophies, perspectives, practices, and pedagogies and indeed, the learning outcomes, in the ELLS programme to create **access, quality, and relevance** within the local and global contexts?
- (iv) How do we appropriate higher order thinking skills (HOTS) in the delivery of ELLS education in Nigeria beyond remembering and recalling of information and concepts?

From the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated disruptions and challenges inherent in Nigeria, how do we sustain **resilience, relevance, and continuity** of ELLS in Nigeria while looking into the future? These are the broad questions this address will highlight, not necessarily in any particular order, to add to the discussions of the 37th Annual Conference of the English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (ESAN) on the theme: "English Language and Literary Studies in Nigeria: Realities of the New Normal".

Pre- and During COVID-19 Nigeria

Prior to COVID-19, most Nigerian higher education institutions were basically using face-to-face (chalk and board/pen and paper) instructional delivery mode with very little digital learning experiences especially in public institutions. Some higher institutions in Nigeria had made provisions for the use of digital platforms for teaching and learning though not robustly deployed beyond portals for course registration and processing of examination results. With the outbreak of the pandemic, especially during the first phase which came with nationwide lockdown, a good number of private institutions were able to transit to remote and online teaching and learning as well as assessment of students. While teaching and learning were completely disrupted in public institutions, most private institutions used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to innovate. The COVID-19 lockdown period also witnessed the active

utilization by many professional and academic associations of social media platforms for teaching and learning. There was high deployment of the WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Meet and Zoom apps to keep members active and engaged. The increasing deployment of virtual platforms/portals which support teaching and learning have become the new normal in a number of higher institutions in Nigeria especially, the private ones. Some private higher institutions have actually developed policy guidelines to make blended modes (online and in-person) institutional practices for teaching and assessment. For instance, in Veritas University, Abuja, a Directorate of Online Education was established. This has become the trend globally as nations respond with several initiatives one of which include the creation of the Blended and Online Learning Transformation (BOLT) initiative (2019-2022) by the Higher Education Authority in Ireland. Part of the trend of the new normal also, is the hosting and organizing of national and international conferences and workshops among academic and professional groups and associations both online and in-person, and the increased deployment of webinars.

Generally, the transition to online and digital learning platforms come with the challenges and barriers peculiar to the Nigerian environment and the peculiarities of individual institutions. Some of these include: absence of a national educational response strategy during emergencies, weak or absence of digital technologies for teaching and learning, poor internet infrastructure and connection, epileptic power supply, attitude of both staff and students, as well as identified institutional policies, support and resourcing to pedagogical innovation. What we should do post pandemic against the backdrop of change and innovation, how to sustain same, and the demands of the new normal will be considered in the remaining sections of this address within the context of the ELLS enterprise in Nigeria.

Rethinking and Transforming ELLS Philosophies and Perspectives

One of the cardinal lessons of the current challenges is the need to rethink our philosophies and perspectives of ELLS in Nigeria. In doing that, we need to look at the current philosophy of both the higher education programme in English Language and Literature -in-English in Nigeria. We shall restrict the discussion to the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes as captured by the regulatory agency of university education

in Nigeria, the National Universities Commission (NUC).

In the *Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for Undergraduate Programmes in Nigerian Universities*, the Philosophy of the English Language programme is anchored on:

... the need to devote greater attention to the achievement of *improved knowledge of English and the acquisition of adequate oral and written skills in it*. English graduates from Nigerian universities should be clearly and positively identified with *adequate proficiency in pronunciation, articulateness in speech, correctness of grammar and usage, elegance and style in diction (italics mine)* in the choice of an appropriate variety of English for use in the various administrative and professional job opportunities available in the labour market, in literary and creative writing domains, and in postgraduate studies in language and literature (NUC, 2014, p.63).

The same document provides that for the Literature-in-English programme, “the substance is the same, the emphasis being on Literature written in English” (p.63). And for the postgraduate programmes in English Language and Literature, the NUC BMAS provides that:

The philosophy of the M.A. and Ph.D. programme is to train and develop scholars whose critical inquiries into the use of the English Language as a medium of communication in L₂ situations in both regular communication and creative writing would reassert human values, and appreciate the complexity of human motivation and actions...The products of these programmes are therefore expected to acquire linguistic and critical analytic competences that would enable them exhibit a *higher proficiency in the use of the English Language on a variety of discourse situations (italics mine)*, as well as *interpret literary works in the English Language* (NUC, 2011, p.5).

A close look at the philosophy of both the undergraduate and postgraduate

programmes in English Language and Literature will reveal that the preoccupation seem to be in training students to be PROFICIENT in the use of English language and how to INTERPRET literary works in the English language. The questions are:

- (i) What kind of societal issues does proficiency in the English language and interpreting literary texts in the English language address?
- (ii) How does such a preoccupation prepare graduates in Nigeria for the post-COVID-19 world and the reality of the new normal?
- (iii) Could this not be the reason why the concern of most English and Literary Studies' teachers is on how their students should speak and write 'good' or 'standard' or 'proficient' English and use same in literary analysis?
- (iv) Why would someone in the 21st century go to the university to study how to be 'proficient' in English and more so, in a private institution, with high tuition charges?

To make matters worse, in some universities in Nigeria, we find a questionable tension and tussle among those who draw a dichotomy between those in the English Language section and those in the Literary Studies specialization such that often times, we leave the students confused and stranded in an intellectual oasis with a mind certified with sterile ideas. Added to the inability to understand the philosophy that should guide ELLS programmes in Nigeria, is what we think of the English language in Nigeria: whether to see and regard it as a 'colonial language'; whether to regard and teach it as a 'second language' or as a 'first language' of some Nigerians; whether we should regard and wholeheartedly accept it as a 'Nigerian language' by naming it 'Ninglish'; whether we should claim it as a 'national language' and put to rest the national language question; whether to just teach English as an 'international language'; or to continue to charge it for linguicide and therefore responsible for the endangerment and death of local languages; or live with the obsession of the Englishisation of the world. It is in considering these complex issues that I think a review of our understanding of what exactly is '*language*' and therefore '*English*

Language' is necessary as an imperative to rethink and transform the philosophies which should underpin the ELLS programme in Nigeria.

Beyond the Fiction of Language

The pandemic has taught us to question, challenge, and offer alternatives and preferred futures for students as well as teachers. That is exactly what the new normal entails. Therefore, we need to rethink the common (mis)conceptions about language.

First, when we define language, we often define it in terms of its use as a 'tool' of communication, that is, in terms of its function. Secondly, we might want to define it in terms of the structural components which make up language with regard to sounds, words, grammar, etc. It is this kind of assumption that makes some think that language is about 'rules' and so we focus so much on the rules and become obsessed with 'proficiency' and prescription in using the rules which inherently, do not constitute the essence of language. A quick way to test this misconception is to ask people around you to tell you what 'language' is in any of the Nigerian languages they speak without resemanticising the word 'language'. The responses will tell you that 'language' has little to do with the two assumptions (namely as a 'tool' or in terms of 'structures' and 'rules') highlighted above.

In order to come to a deeper understanding of what 'language' is, I resketch the four interrelated ways to define language as put forward by Mahboob (2021).

- (i) **Language is a semo-genic (meaning-making) system** which operates through sound (note that sign language and reading operate through sight while Braille operates through touch).
- (ii) **Language is a sociosemiotic inheritance**, that is, language evolves and is transmitted from one generation to another. Estimates put the evolution of language within 100,000 years ago. What this means is that language is not an object/material/biological which can be transferred across generations through DNA but rather through social engagement and interaction.
- (iii) **Language is science** in terms of being a system of classification and categorization based on taxonomies. Language provides us with words, phrases, terms to understand and do things by providing

humans with taxonomies to name and identify things.

- (iv) **Language is a complex dynamic system** which naturally is “unstable and constantly changing in ways difficult to predict and are influenced by numerous internal and external factors” (Mahboob, 2021, p. 466).

Mahboob (2021), referencing Lasrsen-Freeman (2016), identifies the following factors to account for the dynamicity of language:

- Emergence: New features of language may arise when the system is used.
- Open: As a system, language is open to additions and changes.
- Adaptive/Feedback Sensitive: Language assimilates and responds to use.
- Dynamic: Language is not static or restricted by 'rules'. Does this dynamicity mean we cannot write grammars of a language? We can, but certainly different grammars, for specific purposes and goals. No one grammar can be sufficient for all purposes, for all the time.
- Unfinishable: There is no end-point in what language is, nor do we ever stop developing a language.
- Inseparable from Context: Language is shaped by and in turn shapes our understanding of context.
- Variable: Variation is an inherent property of language and variation is always present across all strata of language (Mahboob, 2021, pp.466-467).

What the above illustrate, in the words of Pennycook and Makoni (2020) in agreement with Haugen (1972) is that

[t]he concept of language as a rigid, monolithic structure is false, even if it has proved to be a useful fiction in the development of linguistics. It is the kind of simplification that is necessary at a certain stage of science, but which can now be replaced by more sophisticated models (p.44).

Language as science has indeed come of age and our understanding of what language is needs to go beyond 'a useful fiction'. This is why when Mahboob (2021) defines language as a sociosemantic inheritance, the implication is that when people use signs to communicate, these signs are not “pre-assembled or agreed upon by mutual consent” (Pennycook & Makoni, 2021, p.44). Language is so deeply embedded in context that it cannot be separated from it as noted by Lasrsen-Freeman (2016). Language emerges through a process of abstraction and idealization of integrating 'first order' and 'second order activities' where the first order refer to real communicative activity and “the second order to the kind of abstractions that leads to the naming and claiming of languages” (Pennycook & Makoni, 2021, p.44). It is in the first order activities that the position of Fodor (1975, 1983) re-echoes the reference to 'the language of thought' and the 'modularity of mind' and what later Saeed (2007) calls 'mentalese' which underscores the fact that all humans have essentially the same cognitive architecture and mental processes even though we speak different languages. Thus, when humans use language, while the sensory systems are involved, the auditory and visual systems are activated from the various faculties of mind whether oral or written language respectively. So, when humans want to speak for instance, we translate from mentalese into spoken language (sensory/auditory), say English in a given context. However, the challenge comes when the second order reifications and abstractions are seen as what language is about. So, when we talk about 'English language', we understand it as *the language which belongs to a certain group of people called English who inhabit a particular location by whatever name*. Perhaps, this is the prompt for Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) to argue that rather than focusing on languages and their users, we would be better of focusing on the “acts of identity” involved in different interactions.

What we have tried to show is that languages are inventions; that languages are social constructs and that languages are inherently multimodal. Thus, the study of any language need to incorporate social activity, location, movement, interaction, and history, as well as, where possible, user's perspective (See Makoni & Makoni, 2009 and Pennycook, 2010). So, the English language in Nigeria should be used to facilitate our ways of knowing, being, and doing through contextualization and domestication, a reality which Chinua Achebe recognized almost six

decades ago. Therefore, the philosophy which should guide our perspective to English should be one that acknowledges that no one owns a language and that everyone who speaks a language can claim ownership of that language to the discomfort of certain groups who may lay claim to ancestral birthright of that language (Egbe, 2019). This kind of flexibility of thinking may fall into the confines of 'liberation linguistics'. But who is afraid of liberation when we all need one form of liberation or the other even in the choice and use of language including language teaching and learning. Infact, as Guerra (2021) aptly points out

... language teaching and learning has never been based on fixed and stable concepts and perspectives. It changes as societies and values change, attempting to provide the most favourable conditions for successful learning. Therefore... adapting to the international functions and forms of the English language and the linguistic and cultural contexts of use and interaction among multicultural and multilingual speakers should be a significant feature of the language classroom (p.4).

This kind of dynamism, of thinking globally and acting locally, should provide impetus for the rethinking and transforming of the philosophy of the ELLS programme in Nigeria for relevance rather than undue focus on grammatical correctness and interpretation of literary works in English.

It is on this note that I appreciate the dynamism of the subthemes covered in the 37th Conference Call of ESAN which shows the vitality and urgency to move the focus to what matters as categorized in the table below. It is also on this note that the various subthemes of previous ESAN conferences should redirect the preoccupation of ELLS in Nigeria and the need to reinvigorate the 'Special Interest Groups' (SIGs) of the English Scholars' Association of Nigeria (ESAN).

Table 1: Categorization of the 37th ESAN conference subthemes according to broad interrelated foci.

Philosophies	Perspectives	Practices and Pedagogies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The New Normal and Literary Expressions in Nigeria · English Studies in the COVID-19 Era · The New Normal and Gender Studies in Nigeria · Oral Literature in Nigeria · The New Normal and Children's Literature in Nigeria · Conceptual Issues in Nigeria · Pandemic and Post-pandemic Poetics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · The Globalisation of COVID-19 Realities in Nigeria (The Press, Social Media, etc.) · Nigerian English and The Discourse(s) of COVID-19 in Nigeria · Stylistic Forms of Internet Discourse in the COVID-19 Era · The Narratives of the Global Pandemic and the Social Realities of the New Normal of Nigeria · Conflict Discourse, the Internet and the New Normal in Nigeria · Trends in Language and Literary Studies amidst COVID-19 Pandemic · Linguistic (Im)politeness and Rudeness in the COVID-19 Era · "Infodemic" (Disinformation and Misinformation during the Pandemic) · The Sociolinguistics of the COVID-19 Crisis · Discursive Forms of Humour in COVID-19 Era · Linguistics of the Conspiracy Perception of COVID-19 · The Impact of Pandemics on Theatre Performance · Pragmatics of COVID-19 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Teaching English Language and Literature in Nigeria in the COVID-19 Era · New Norms in English Teaching and Learning

Engaging in Digital Practices and Pedagogies

One of the imperatives of the realities of the new normal in ELLS enterprise is the compelling need to transit to remote and online teaching and learning (see Egbe, 2019, 2020a and 2020b). Available statistics show that 4.39 billion of the world population read, write, and communicate online with about 5.1 billion mobile users and 3.484 billion active social media users around the world and these numbers will keep increasing exponentially (Warschauer, Jacob & Maamujav, 2021, p. 479). Fortunately, English is the de facto lingua franca for cross-language communication online. If our students spend more time online and leave a virtual life most of the time, it is only logical to meet students where they love to be and in the direction where the world is moving. It is therefore appropriate to adopt pedagogic practices and approaches which expose students to learning experiences that support 21st century living and equipping students with desirable soft skills and entrepreneurial mindsets for survival in a greatly uncertain and rapidly changing world.

It is important to underscore the fact that while there are the pros and cons of online teaching and learning and online Englishes for that matter, “there is no doubt that online Englishes are challenging prior notions of whom the language belongs to, whose voices are heard, and who contributes to knowledge formation and dissemination” (Warschauer, Jacob & Maamujav, 2021, p. 480).

The COVID-19 crisis should be a huge driver of innovation and a wake up call to transit from paper-based pedagogy to digital content ebooks and increased use of digital platforms for teaching and learning. Ability to revisit content, flexibility, access to different types of content, and self-paced learning are obvious advantages to appropriate digital practices and platforms for instructional delivery while not neglecting in-person interactions when and where possible.

What is emerging postCOVID-19 is hybrid learning, a blended mixture of both online and face-to-face experiential learning which will become the new normal globally. In fact, as Kigotho (2021) reports in *University World News*, “the traditional classroom, which focuses on static teaching and instils pressure on students to retain information predominantly by listening, is gone” and that “The future is a lab-based, tech-rich, collaborative learning environment led by a *coach (italics mine)*, systematically creating experiential spaces where students can thrive in real-world experiences,” (p.2). The concept of a 'coach' rather than a 'teacher' or the glamorous tag of a 'lecturer' is a reality of the future. While the presence of a teacher in face-to-face interaction is unquestionable, in the growing digital space of the new normal and the Internet of Things (IOT), the teacher's role may not be more than a driver for Bolt or Uber. In fact, while a Bolt or Uber driver can move one from point A to B, a teacher's recorded lecture can reach multiple users simultaneously. Following from the above, we need to reflect on the following questions:

- (i) Will the new normal still require the 'conventional' teacher of English and Literary Studies that is static and fixed in time and space operating within the confines of traditional structures?
- (ii) Will the traditional learning content in the ELLS curriculum in Nigeria remain the same with the same learning outcomes for the 21st globally competitive labour market?
- (iii) What should we do as ELLS teachers to produce world-class Nigerian human talents with 21st-century skills to thrive in the future world of work?
- (iv) How do we prepare students for the Fourth Industrial Revolution's world of work by enhancing student learning outcomes especially their soft skills and entrepreneurial mindsets?

These are some of the questions begging for interrogation amidst the disruptions and current challenges in Nigeria. Responses to these questions should inform the rethinking of the philosophies, perspectives, practices, and pedagogies of ELLS in Nigeria canvassed in this address.

Looking into the Future

The events of the COVID-19 and the prevailing experiences of the current Nigerian educational system both in the public and private sectors demonstrate that we need to start doing things differently for relevance in the 21st century digitally-driven world. Within the spheres of higher education, there is no doubt that the globalization and the internationalization of the university system has created in the words of Valcke (2020), “...an unrivalled invitation for learners, scholars and researchers to pool their collective creativity, knowledge and experiences for fostering new ways of thinking, seeing, and doing higher education' (p.260).

First, we need to revisit what the cognitive demands should be in line with Bloom's taxonomy as revised. In other words, the learning objectives and outcomes which we set for students should go beyond the rudiments of the lower levels of remembering, understanding, applying and even analysing, to concentrate on the highest level of creating change in ELLS programmes and classrooms as well as focusing on higher order thinking skills (HOTS). (See Fig. 1 below). Even in the postgraduate research, we need to move beyond analysis so that we don't succumb to the syndrome of 'analysis paralysis'.

Secondly, we need to broaden engagement in ELLS programme to include critical English pedagogy, include issues of global citizenship and the English language, critical literacy practices, issues in English in education

policies in Nigeria, digital humanities in the enterprise of ELLS, creating voice for teachers of English and literary studies in what we do in and outside the classroom. Indeed, the teaching of English and literary studies in Nigeria should go beyond classroom techniques, language proficiency, material development, communicative competence and out-come-focused professional development which are inherently practices of performativity to, as Troudi (2020) rightly points out, "...tackling language issues from the perspectives of critical applied linguistics, critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis and critical literacy" (p.2).

Thirdly, while in the past we have not engaged sufficiently with literacy issues in the ELLS programme and the integration of technology in ELLS curriculum, we need to do so now because literacy is not just about having a set of language-based skills. It involves understanding the ways language and literacy are used to accomplish social ends. For Dozier, Johnston & Rogers (2006), critical literacy, "...is for taking social action, an awareness of how people use literacy for their own ends, and a sense of agency with respect to one's own literacy" (p.19).

Conclusion

As we come to the last decade of the SDG 2030 targets, can we say what we have done in our ELLS programmes resonates with these goals and targets? It appears we have already lost the race in that direction. We need to begin to look in the direction of Agenda 2060. Many of us may not be there then. But we can sow the seed now and hope for the rich harvest as a memorial and as a gift to generations yet unborn. It is on this note that I wish to end this address with the words of Alan Maley (2017) in a poem entitled 'Teacher', a dialogue between a teacher and one who doesn't understand what a teacher does in order to redirect our thoughts in the ELLS enterprise for change and innovation in Nigeria.

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