

A MEASUREMENT OF ENGLISH AS AN INDEX OF THE LOWERING STANDARD OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR NATION-BUILDING

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Abstract

More often than not, complaints concerning the observable lowering standard of education in Nigeria have to do with the use of the English Language. Hardly does one hear complaints concerning other disciplines such as Chemistry, Physics, Religion, Commerce, Literature, Fine Arts etc. , as if their standards are never lowered in form. Prospective employers and recruitment institutions or professional bodies who assist candidates into procuring employment into the various cadres of the civil service, business and industry complain that many of our university graduates, for instance, hardly enunciate the language correctly and coherently. They also complain that many of them hardly can write a sentence that is structurally grammatical and meaningfully readable and intelligible. This work contains a brief consideration of the English Language in Nigeria, a concept of nation-building and a statistical measurement of the language vis-à-vis other disciplines, especially mathematics, at the Senior Secondary School level. It is concluded that a very good mastery of the language is a pre-requisite for educational, social, political, religious, scientific and linguistic essence of nation-building and/or national development.

Keywords: English, Nigerian English, measurement, statistics, meaning, nation-building, education, national development, failure and WASSCE.

Introduction

Profound statements are often made by several people in government, education, business, industry, politics, religion etc. concerning the relevance of the development of education to nation-building. Some of these statements are from the positive- connotative perspective such as: 'education is the bedrock of civilization/development', 'education is knowing your left from

your right', 'education means self-realisation', 'education is knowledge', 'it is the antidote for ignorance', 'educate a female child and you liberate the entire nation' and, 'education makes a people easy to lead, possible to govern and impossible to enslave' etc. From the negative-connotative perspective, we may have 'educated illiterates', 'the fruit of education takes a millennium', 'education enables the educated man/woman to stand on the head of the uneducated', 'education is for the male folk alone', 'only science education can transform a nation', 'if education is expensive, try ignorance'.¹

Beyond the profound statements are the following three standard definitions of education from *Random House Dictionary* (2013:1&2):

Education is the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgement, and generally or preparing oneself or others intellectually for mature life.

and

Education is the development of the abilities of the mind or practice, usually under supervision, in some art, trade or profession. It is an aspiration toward, and an appreciation of high intellectual and aesthetic ideals.

The two definitions above contain salient wordings and expressions that bring clarity to the concept of education. These are, for the first one, process, knowledge, powers of reasoning and judgement, intellectual and life. For the second, we have development, mind, supervision, profession, high intellectual and aesthetic ideals. Incidentally, the two definitions have the word *intellectual* in their compositions. The two can be put together this way, succinctly: education is a means of the attainment of knowledge for the development of one's mind, towards making good judgment in life. It is crystal clear that all of the profound statements above form, therefore, a part of the three definitions in one way or another.²

The salient wordings and expressions demonstrate the importance of education in the life of an individual as a member of the immediate community and the larger society. When its development has problems or when its quality is lowered, the entire society is duly affected in terms of nation-building or development. It has such an effect that is observable in the use of the

English language in Nigeria. My focus in this work is on the statistical measurement of the language in the secondary or high school – a mid-educational level between the elementary school and the tertiary institutions.³ A credit pass in the subject provides the minimum qualification for entrance into the university, and its good understanding forms the foundation of good performance in whatever course of study that one is offered in tertiary institutions. This is owing to the fact that it is the major tool of instructions in almost all tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

It is important to mention, nevertheless, that a few people do not believe that the standard of education is lowered in Nigeria. The factors often advanced for its being lowered such as the absence of qualified or the presence of many unqualified teachers, poor funding of education by governments, poor infrastructure, poor salary/remuneration for teachers, large classes etc., are set aside by such people. Instead, they believe that times and events have changed since they left primary and secondary schools especially as many learners are more privileged to have modern technology – television, internet etc.⁴

The English Language in Nigeria

A good account of Nigerian English (NE) ought to contain its historical contextualization⁵ even if briefly. Perhaps the earliest significant and detailed publication concerning the English language in Nigeria is the seminal work by Spencer (1971). In his contribution to the edited work (Spencer 1971:1-2), he asserts:

When the English language was first heard along the West Coast is not possible to discover with certainty. According to Hakluyt, Wilham Hawkins the Elder made three voyages to Brazil between 1530 and 1532, each time calling at the Guinea Coast *en route* for the New World. In 1555-6 William Towerson made the first three trading voyages to the Guinea Coast. The Portuguese had a monopoly of Guinea Trade, however, and it was not until 1631 that the first English fort was built at Cormantine on the Gold Coast.

Concerning the origin of the English in West Africa, William Hawkins and William Towerson came on voyages to the part of Africa of the continent in the mid sixteenth century. From the period, the language became established as they built forts along the coastal region from the

Gambia to Lagos and some parts of the Cameroons. As early as this period, Africans had been sent to England to learn the language so that they could assist them as interpreters during their trading expeditions (Daramola 2004a:140-141). Awonusi's (2004a) report is significant to our knowledge of when the English language might have been introduced to Nigeria *per se*. I quote *inter alia*:

...Thomas Windham (an English sailor) was reported to have visited Benin in the company of Nicholas Lambert (the son of an English major) in 1553, although the (Lambert) returned to England in a hurry as a result of malaria attack. However, he left other English men seamen behind (p.48).

By the seventeenth century, a number of African interpreters working between English and some African languages had evolved. In the eighteenth century, there was the traffic in slaves between West Africa and the West Indies, Great Britain and the United States of America. In 1791, the Freetown Community had been established for the 'Nova Scotians' who had escaped from the slavery of the Southern States of America. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the community had begun to serve as the nerve centre of educational and missionary (e.g. Church Missionary Society [CMS]) activities in West Africa. This period became significant in the history of the language because it became established as the language of salvation, civilization and success to business and civil life. Schools where English Language, Book-keeping and Elementary Accounts and Commerce were taught especially by missionaries developed. The twentieth century witnessed a form of administrative and political control over many English West African countries including Nigeria. In 1914, the Northern and Southern parts of Nigeria were amalgamated by the British and colonial rule became firmly established. The language then became institutionalized in many areas of life of Nigeria. In 1960, Nigeria attained independence from Great Britain and became a republic in 1963. The language became the factor of unity in the country amidst many, about five hundred, indigenous languages.⁶

Today, it may be very difficult to quantify the importance of the language without a mention of its essence as the pillar of unity in Nigeria. It is not only almost an indispensable vehicle of unity among the various ethnic groups, but also functions effectively in education, politics, religion, most of the mass media, business, science and the major tool of interpersonal communication etc. In educational settings, it is the mode of instruction even, in most cases, in the teaching of

leading indigenous languages such as Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Internationally, Nigerians use the language effectively as they travel all over the world particularly in the native-speaking nations of Great Britain, United States of America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and part of the West Indies. In former British Colonies in Asia, Africa etc. where it is used as second language, Nigerian are among the best users (see Adetugbo 1977, Bamgbose 1982, 1995, Awonusi 2004b, Adeniran 2005, Daramola 2008).

The Wherewithal of English in Nigeria

The instantial meaning of the wherewithal of English in Nigeria goes beyond a description of its history and relevance to the country's educational, political, religious, most of the mass media, scientific and the major tool of interpersonal communication etc.

It is concerned with the situational appraisal and the contextualisation of the language by scholars of the language in Nigeria. This mode of contextualization has to do with its relevance in the educational system. In this regard, the place of Nigerian Pidgin and its characterisation vis-à-vis the Standard British English (SBE) is always the concern of language scholars. The concepts of its intelligibility and acceptability form the hallmark of its development and study. One may be able to understand the concern of scholars whenever there is an observable lowering of its standard as a subject in the schools' curricular. Banjo (1995:207) observes:

“Yet, there was a considerable amount of disquiet over what was seen to be a fall in standards of English expression among pupils in the schools, a phenomenon that had been brought about, in part, by the change in attitude to the language from the assimilationist one of the 19th and early 20th centuries to the nationalistic one which set in, in the second half of the 20th century, during the run-up to national independence. Matters reached such a point within five years of national independence that the West African Examinations Council began to wonder whether English should continue to be a compulsory subject in the School Certificate Examination.”

It was in relation to Banjo's observation above that the Grieve's report of 1966 became very relevant. The report was basically concerned with the reliability and validity of the English Language paper. His suggestion of the adoption of the endonormative model saved the paper

from being relegated to an optional paper. A debate ensued, however, among scholars of the language over the desirability of substituting an endonormative for an exonormative model. In particular, Banjo (1967) suggested that the core content of the Examination should be its Composition and Comprehension aspects. Furthermore, he suggested that the *Precis* component should be substituted for *Summary*. He was very critical, however, concerning the suggestion of an endonormative model instead of an exonormative one. These debates and many more among the scholars of language were aimed at using the language as a developmental tool for the country.

A Concept of Nation-Building

Many scholars versed in the concept of nation-building (Riemer 2005; Stephenson 2005) believe that it means different things to different people. They also believe that the concept is evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Evolutionary refers to the concepts of developmental process. Revolution, as against developmental, is sudden, and may be destructive. To understand the concept of nation-building, one may need to offer, first of all, a definition of the word *nation*. It is often used to refer to a group or race of people who share history, traditions and culture and sometimes religion and usually language. The people of a nation generally share a common national identity and/or ideology. Some people distinguish between an ethnic nation, based in race or ethnicity, and a civic nation based in common identity and loyalty to a set of political ideas and institutions, and the linkage of citizenship to nationality.

The concept may be examined both from its narrow and broad perspectives. Narrowly, nation-building involves a decision to end a conflict either in victory, defeat, armistice or peace accord. In this regard, solutions to a conflict are often derivable from events which began the conflict, its process and its end. It refers, therefore, to the restoration of law and order to the community of people that are in a conflict. A government structure might be put in place because there is none; infrastructure and security forces might be reestablished where necessary. Again, the concept may involve the transfer of power or authority from an interim authority to a formal one. We may refer to nation-building in this sense, therefore, as the enforcement of peace after a conflict has been restored. State failure refers to different degrees of a breakdown of central authority of state particularly in post-conflict situations (see Riemer, *op. cit.* p. 369).

From a broader or wider perspective, the concept might be examined from the strategies put in place by a people or government to attain the level of development by another group of people. In this regard, Riemer (op. cit. p. 376) provides a list of the aspects of it broader perspective:

1. The support of modern forces within an entity,
2. The creation of a certain educational level,
3. The promotion of women,
4. The improvement of the societal role of women,
5. The support in creating modern infrastructure,
6. The support for a democratic landscape of political parties,
7. The support for free elections,
8. The support of a freely-elected government, and
9. A peaceful regime change from inside.

Riemer (op. cit. p. 377) further suggests that such a group of people might be faced with one type of dilemma or another such as:

1. security
2. efficiency
3. legitimization
4. participation
5. social justice
6. reconciliation
- and
7. confidence building.

One is easily tempted to contextualize the broader or wider perspective of nation-building, as identified above, in the socio-political, economic, ethnic, religion and linguistic challenges or problems of Nigeria. Nation-building is, therefore, associated with democratization, modernization, political development and peace-building.

Sections on *Introduction*, *The English Language in Nigeria* and *A Concept of Nation Building* are to contextualize an understanding of the language and the problem of its lowered standard in the educational development of the Nigerian polity. In Riemer's list above, number 2 captures the place of education succinctly as I examine in this short paper – the adoption of a certain educational level in the performance index – the secondary school. Below is the section on the report of students' performances in the language within a given period, 1996-2006. Its source is The West African Examination Council's Annual Report in between 1997 and 2007.

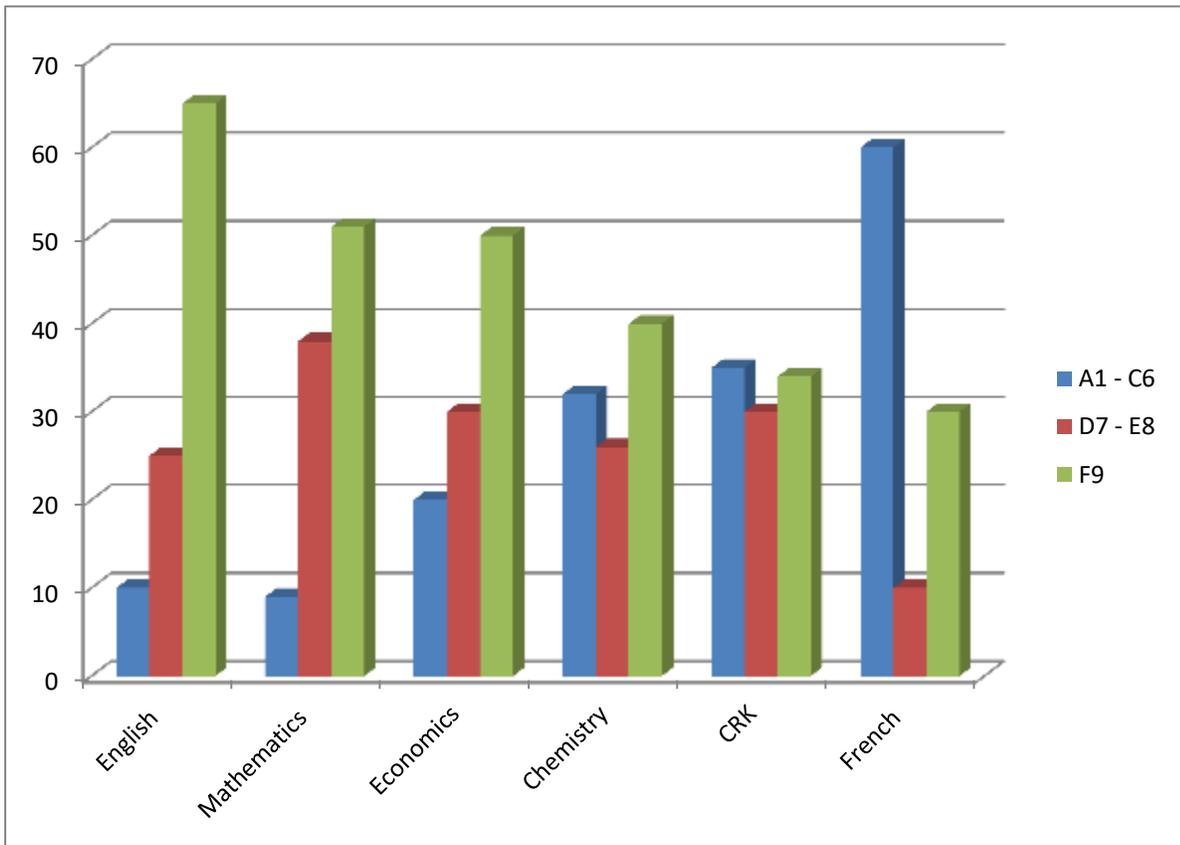
A Measurement

Table 1:

Subject	Absent	Total No. of Candidates	Total Credit % 1 – 6	Total Pass % 7 – 8	Fail % 9
English Language	4,471 0.6	516,196	58,533 11.3	124,049 24.0	333,614 64.6
French	2 1.3	143	84 58.7	15 10.3	44.30.8
Economics	5,565 1.1	484,508	94,740 19.6	145,160 30.00	244.608 50
Chemistry	2,748 11	144,990	48,514 19.6	39,162 30.00	57,314 50
CRK	7,623 3.9	187,187	68,013 36.3	55,862 29.5	66,312 35.4
Mathematics	4,814 0.9	514,342	51,587 10.00	190,899 37.1	272.356 53.0

Source: The West African Examination Council, Annual Report 1997.

Table 1 in some similarity with other results contains, among others, as shown on the table, Total



Number of Candidates, Total Distinction and Credit Passes in

1-6, 7-8 and Fail.

Figure 1: Bar Chart of WASSCE in 1996 Showing Performance in Six Courses

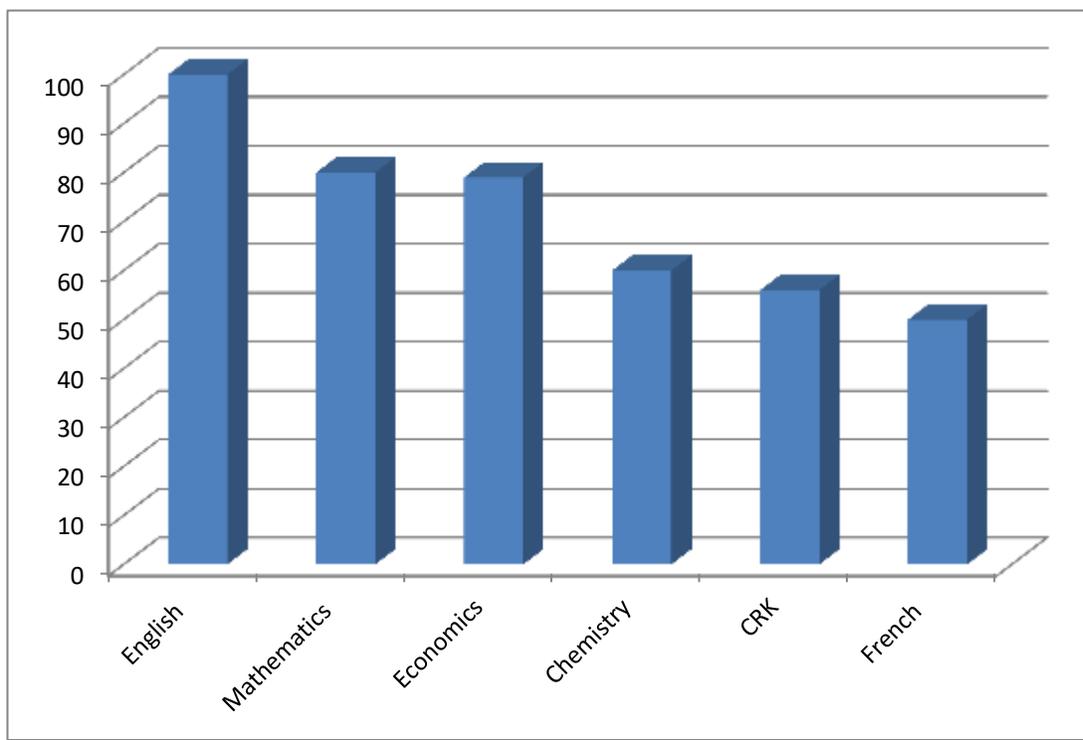


Figure 2: Bar Chart of WASSCE 1996 Showing Descending

**ing Order of Failure in
Six Courses.**

Table 2:

Subject	Absent	Total No. of Candidates	Total Credit % 1 – 6	Total Pass % 7 – 8	Fail % 9
English Language	10,946 3.0	345,183 96.92	34,856 10.09	132,477 38.37	177,850 51.52
French	326 42.5	440 57.44	228 51.81	53 12.04	189 36.13
Economics	21,055 6.1	324,013 93.89	139,822 43.15	117,117 36,14	67,074 20.70
Chemistry	10,734 8.50	114,513 91.42	47,437 41.42	32,025 27.96	35,051 30.60
CRK	29,338 21.1	109,301 78.83	68,401 62.58	24,774 22.66	16,126 14.75
Mathematics	17,316 4.8	337,767 95.12	110,191 32.62	146,456 43.36	81,120 24.01

General Certificate of Education (GCE) – October/November in 1996

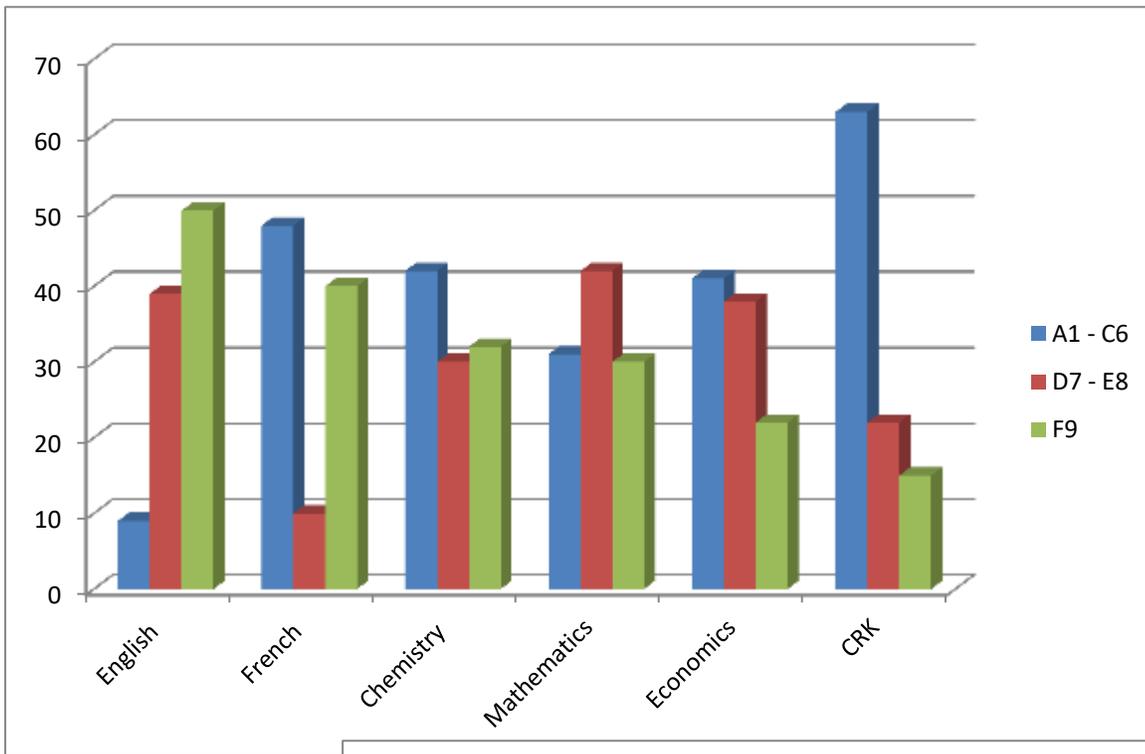


Figure 3: Bar Chart Showing Performance in Six Courses in GCE 1996.

Figure 4: Bar Chart Showing Descending Order of Performance GCE 1996

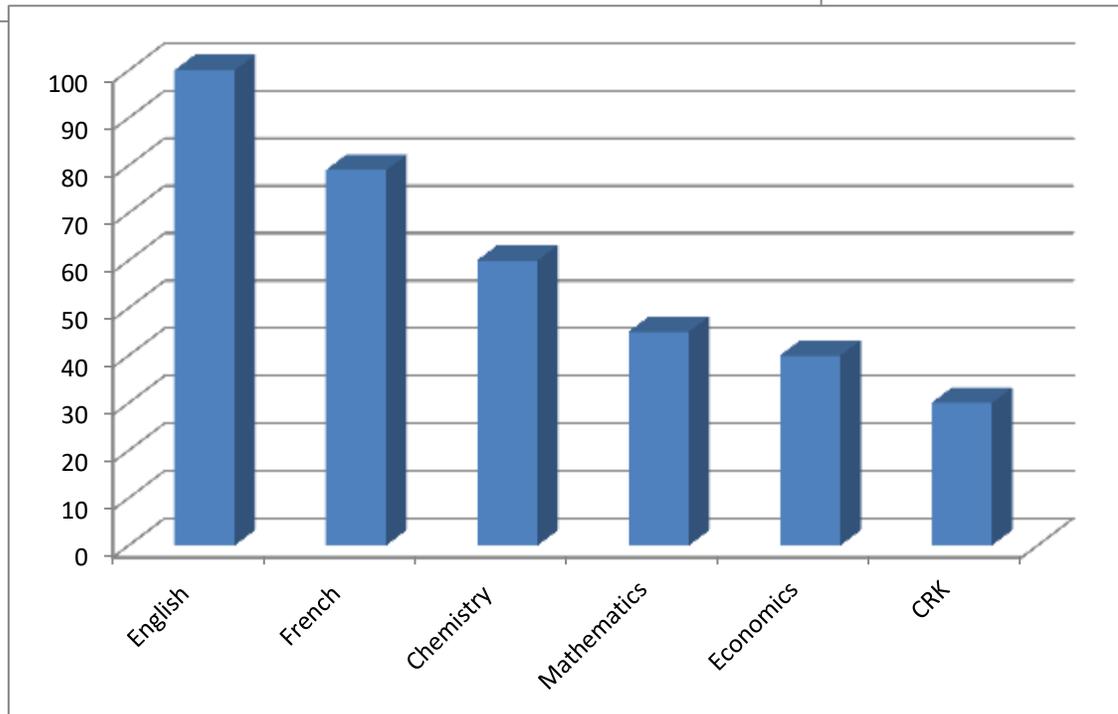


Table 3:

Summary of the Statistics of Achievement of Nigerian Students in English Language May/June WASCE (1997 – 2006)

Year	Total Entry	Total Sat	Total Credit A1 – C6	Total Pass D7 – E8	Fail 9	Absent

1997	622433	618139 (99.3%)	40,488 (6.5%)	165,533 (26.8%)	412,118 (66.7%)	4,294 (0.7%)
1998	640626	636777 (99.4%)	53,990 (8.5%)	136,873 (21.5%)	417,312 (65.5%)	3,849 (0.6%)
1999	761060	757233 (99.5%)	73,531 (9.7%)	171,098 (22.6%)	491,593 (64.9%)	3,827 (0.7%)
2000	643378	636064 (98.9%)	68,792 (10.8%)	159,029 (25.0%)	408,243 (64.2%)	7,314 (1.1%)
2001	1040104	1025027 (98.6%)	267,251 (26.1%)	316,767 (30.9%)	441,009 (43.0%)	15,074 (1.4%)
2002	925289	909888 (98.3%)	223,568 (24.6%)	298,562 (32.8%)	387,758 (42.6%)	15,401 (1.7%)
2003	939507	929271 (98.9%)	269,824 (29.0%)	320,185 (34.5%)	314,225 (33.8%)	10,236 (1.1%)
2004	844540	833204 (98.7%)	252,271 (30.3%)	257,054 (30.9%)	323,879 (38.9%)	11,336 (1.3%)
2005	1080162	1064587 (98.55%)	272922 (25.63%)	371095 (34.85%)	393201 (36.93%)	15575 (1.44%)
2006	1170523	1154266 (98.61%)	375007 (32.48%)	39994 (34.13%)	342311 (29.65%)	16257 (1.38%)

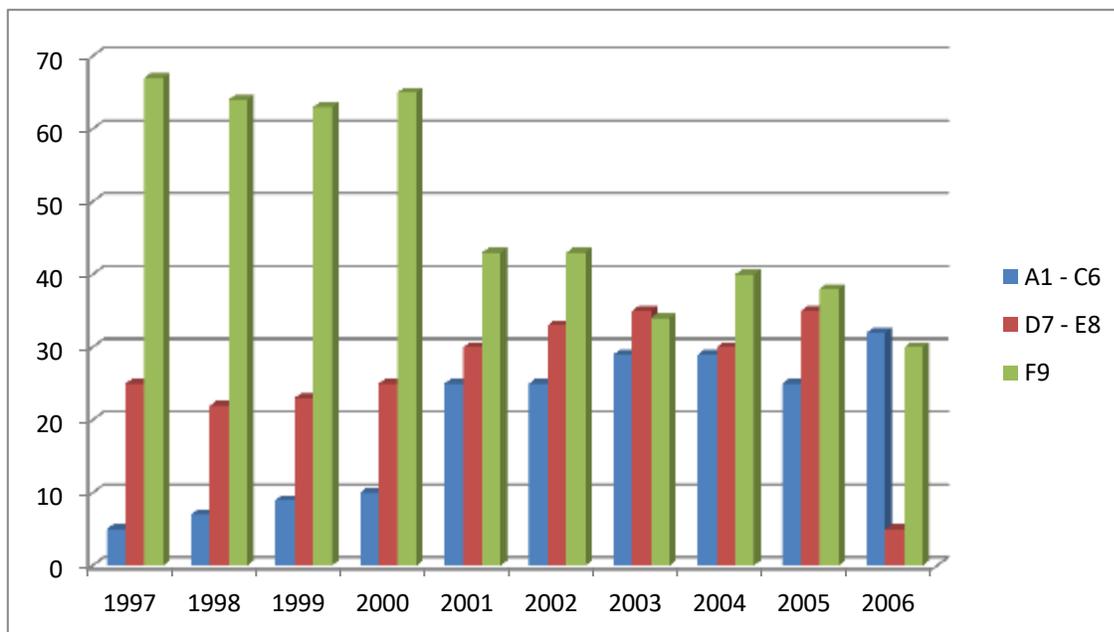


Figure 5: Bar Chart of Summary of Achievements

ement in1997-2006.

In the May/June Examination of 1996, 516,196 students offered English, 58,533 (11.34%) had credit passes, 124,049 (24.03%) had P7 and P8, while 333,614 (64.63%) failed. 143 students sat for French, 84 (58.74) had credit passes, 15 (10.49%) had P7 and P8, while 143 (30.77%) failed. Of the 484508 students who wrote the Economics examination, 94,740 (19.55%) had credit passes, 145,160 (19.55%) had P7 and P8, while the remaining 244,608 (50.49%) failed. Chemistry had 144990 candidates, out of which 45,514 (33.46%) had passes at the credit level, 39,162 (27.01%) had P7 and P8, while 57,314 (39.52%) failed. Of the 1187,187 students who wrote the Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) examination, 68,013 (35.76%) students had credit passes, 55,862 (29.37%) had P7 and P8, and 66,312 (34.87%) failed. 514,842 students took the Mathematics examination, with 51,587 (10.02%) passing at the credit level, 190,899 (37.08%) had P7 and P8, with the remaining 272,356 (52.90%) failing.

345,183 students offered English in the 1996 October/November, 34,856 (10.09%) had credit passes, 132,477 (38.38%) had P7 and P8, while 177,850 (51.52%) failed. 470 students sat for French, out of which 228 (48.51) had credit passes, 53 (11.28%) had P7 and P8, while 189 (40.21%) failed. 324,013 students who wrote the Economics examination, 139,822 (43.15%) had credit passes, 117,117 (36.15%) had P7 and P8, while the remaining 67,074 (20.70) failed. Chemistry had 114,513 candidates, out of which 47,437 (41.42%) had passes at the credit level, 32,025 (27.97%) had P7 and P8, while 35,051 (30.61%) failed. Of the 109,301 students who wrote the Christian Religious Knowledge (CRK) examination, 68,401 (62.68%) students had credit passes, 24774 (22.67%) had P7 and P8, and 16,126 (14.75%) failed. 337,767 students took the Mathematics examination, with 110,191 (32.62%) passing at the credit level, 110,191 (43.36%) had P7 and P8, with the remaining 146456 (24.02%) failing.

As seen in Figure 1, the failure rate in English (64.6%) is higher than that in any of the other subjects under consideration for both May/June and the October/November examinations. In the May/June examination, English is followed by Mathematics, then Economics, Chemistry, CRK and French in that order. For the October/November examination, English is again the subject with the highest percentage of failure, followed by French, Chemistry, Mathematics, Economics and CRK in that order.

The trend is apparent in Figures 3 and 4 where we have plotted the bar-chart of percentage failure with respect to English. For effect, the subjects have been arranged in descending order of percentage failure with respect to English Language.

In the 1996 examination, 516,196 students sat for English Language. 58,533 (11.33%) had credit passes, 124,049 (24.03) had P7 and P8, while 333,614 (64.63%) failed.

In the 1997 examination, 618,139 students sat for English Language. 40,488 (8.55%) had credit passes, 165,533 (26.78%) had P7 and P8, while 412,118 (66.67%) failed.

In the 1998 examination, 636,777 students sat for English Language. 53,990 (8.48%) had credit passes, 136,873 (21.49%) had P7 and P8, while 417,312 (65.54%) failed.

In the 1999 examination, 757,233 students sat for English Language. 73,531 (9.71%) had credit passes, 171,098 (22.60%) had P7 and P8, while 491,593 (64.92%) failed.

In the 2000 examination, 636,064 students sat for English Language. 68,792 (10.82%) had credit passes, 159,029 (25.00%) had P7 and P8, while 408,243 (64.18%) failed.

In the 2001 examination, 1,025,027 students sat for English Language. 267,251 (26.07%) had credit passes, 316,767 (30.90%) had P7 and P8, while 441,009 (64.63%) failed.

In the 2002 examination, 909,888 students sat for English Language. 223,568 (24.57%) had credit passes, 298,562 (24.57%) had P7 and P8, while 387,758 (42.62%) failed.

In the 2003 examination, 929,271 students sat for English Language. 269,824 (29.04%) had credit passes, 320,185 (34.46%) had P7 and P8, while 314,225 (33.81%) failed.

In the 2004 examination, 833,204 students sat for English Language. 252,271 (30.28%) had credit passes, 257,054 (30.85%) had P7 and P8, while 323,879 (38.87%) failed.

In the 2005 examination, 1,064,587 students sat for English Language. 272,922 (25.64%) had credit passes, 371,095 (34.86%) had P7 and P8, while 393,201 (36.93%) failed.

In the 2006 examination, 1,154,266 students sat for English Language. 375,007 (32.49%) had credit passes, 39994 (32.49%) had P7 and P8, while 333,614 (64.63%) failed.

Discussion

In Figure 5, the failure rate in English Language over a period of 11 years shows an increase in the success rate of students. However, this is no indication of an improved performance in English.

On the one hand, the Bar Charts of Performances and Descending Order of failure in 1996 WASSCE and GCE show, vividly, that the English has the largest number of failure among other subjects. These poor performances by candidates may be traced to Primary schools as both effects (primary and secondary) are reflected in students' performances in tertiary institutions. On the other hand, Table 3 above shows performances of students in the English Language alone between 1997 and 2006. The percentage of failure is abysmally high. The weaknesses of candidates regarding their performances in A1-C6, D7-E8 and Failure if compared demonstrate, still, a large amount of poor performance.

These performances must of necessity be related to complaints that many so-called educated Nigerians neither speak nor write the language properly – poor pronunciations by under-differentiation and over-differentiation of certain sounds and syllables of English, sloppy and wrong applications of grammar in sentences, fragment or run-on sentences, meaningless and clumsy sentences. All of these poor performances may be pivoted against the claims by Federal and State Governments that education is well-funded at all levels in the country. They argue that teacher-education is developed and that the training and re-training of teachers, education counsellors and administrators are guaranteed in the day-to-day management of education.

Another factor is that learners are taught in over-crowded classrooms. How much attention can a teacher give to a class of eighty or more students in a lesson of forty minutes? They do not read books assigned to courses even when parents have money to purchase them. Many parents don't buy books for their children and wards. All that they do is make sure that they go to school each day. Of late, the advent of smart phones, the widespread of the internet and web-facilities have woArmed learning processes. The students cannot afford to buy standard texts and journals on line. The contents of topics that they get on line are clearly insufficient to guide them to success in examinations.

Conclusion

In the paper, I have provided the basis for an understanding of the state of students' poor performance in English. Such a significant failure can be seen or measured in consonance with the importance of the language in Nigeria. The language contributes immensely to self-

realisation in Nigerian polity. One's ability to use the language effectively builds one's positive personality. It contributes significantly to one's mobility in one's job or profession. It is regarded as the most useful window to peep into the international community because it is used by most of the developed and powerful countries of the world. Our various governments cannot continue to pay lip service to its development in Nigeria. Our educational planners ought to work earnestly to arrest the evidentially lowering standard of the English language in Nigeria. Both its spoken and written forms are in such deplorable conditions that some actions have to be taken by the Federal, State and Local Governments. Teacher-training programmes such as the nation experienced in the 1960s and 1970s whereby scholarships and bursaries were awarded to students in teacher-training institutes, colleges of education and the faculties of education should be re-visited. Learners may be motivated to learn the language through the use of modern techniques of teaching the subject. Perhaps the most important object of motivation is to make education free at all levels in the country.

Notes

1. Some of the positive and negative perspectives may be seen otherwise or exaggerated. For example, to 'educate a female child and you liberate the entire nation' may not be true all of the times. Its metaphor originated from the consideration of associating female with motherhood. Another example from the other side is 'the fruit of education takes a millennium. It might be considered an exaggeration, especially to individuals rather than the nation.
2. There are, of course, innumerable definitions of education by practitioners. The three definitions here obviously serve our purpose.
3. It could be measured in primary and tertiary institutions/levels as well. That is, it is not limited to only secondary schools.
4. They certainly scored some points because we see things differently as adults. More than being adults, differences may occur on the scale of professionals versus non-professionals.
5. At times, its re-contextualisation may be necessary.

6. Unfortunately, some scholars still quote two hundred and fifty (250) languages as many scholars quoted in 1970-1980. Latest researches conducted by United Nations indicated about five hundred and sixteen (516).

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