

# Marginalized labeling: An evaluation of English speaking Africans classified as ESL students

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**Abstract:** How should we view African students whose first language is English and their mother tongue? Should English speaking African students be placed in an ESL classroom with students whose English is not as proficient as theirs? This paper examines the essays of Nigerian students placed in an ESL class to determine if they are scholastically capable of opting out of the ESL classes required for international students. It also reflects on the classification system for English speaking Africans and their viewpoints on the use of the English language.

**Keywords:** ESL and African College Students

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## 1. Academic Classifications in ESL

In 1986 I was enrolled in an ESOL Program (English for Speakers of Other Languages) at a local elementary school. I was a new student in a foreign land in a foreign territory. I remember matriculating into the American education system at the age of five. Prior to arriving in America, I was enrolled in a system in Nigeria where the education curriculum was far more advanced in the teaching of math, English, and science. It was very common to learn your multiplication tables at the age of five and have a reading level similar to that of a second grader in the American system. However, although I may have been academically advanced compared to most of my peers at the same grade level, unfortunately due to my Nigerian English accent, I was placed in an ESOL program in order to improve my English. Traditional writing classes were not working for me. My second grade teacher once wrote this comment on my report card in November 1987:

*Bukky is working below grade level in reading. Please go over her words with her daily. Also review the spelling work daily. She is doing well in math." By April 1988, she further wrote, "Bukky has produced wonderful work. She has just moved into a higher reading group (level 2). Although some of the work is hard for her, this group seems to be a more appropriate placement.*

Hence, my separation from traditional classroom to a personal one on one session with my ESOL teacher produced these comments from my ESOL progress report:

*Bukky always is enthusiastic and participates often in ESOL class. She has showed an improvement in her use of verbs and pronouns. Bukky tries very hard in ESOL class. She needs to pronounce the letter "h". Please encourage her to read. Bukky tries so hard in ESOL class! She worked very hard on the present tense and really knows it now! Bukky will not need ESOL next year! She has worked very hard this year and has learned so much English. Please encourage her to read over the summer.*

After one year of ESOL, I never took another ESOL class again. I was no longer pulled out of my traditional classroom; I was no longer considered the foreign student. Although English and Yoruba were my first language; however, the American educational system concluded that my Nigerian English was not proficient enough for the American educational system. This leads me to two questions:

- 1 How should we view African students whose first language is English and their mother tongue?
- 2 Should English speaking African students be placed in an ESL classroom with students whose English is not as proficient as theirs?

My issue with the English language in elementary school was not the inability to understand the language; it was the labeling perception that I could not speak the language.

When I was a student in Nigeria, English was my best subject instead of math. Ironically, the previous comment made above stated that math in America was my best subject. My question now to academia is “Are we as educators labeling African English speaking students with an English deficiency because they come from a different world where we assume they have not mastered the grammatical structure of the English Language? Take for instance a country like Nigeria. Its official language is English. The educational system, governmental offices, newspapers, and television programs are all conducted in the English language. English is embedded within the culture. The English composition is similar to that of the British system. It is common to find words such as “organized” spelled as “organised”. Yet, within my ESL classes at a local community college in the fall of 2011, I had a significantly large population of Nigerian students combined with other African French speaking students who were taking my class.

During my interview for my ESL (English as a Second Language) classes, my director stated that Nigerian students were apprehensive about taking a class that was not necessarily beneficial to them since English is considered their official language in Nigeria. To the Nigerian students, the ESL classes are not needed. They tend to grumble and feel a bit slighted having to pay for extra classes and more than often, they were grouped with students that could not speak or write English proficiently. It is an enigma to them. However, when I was in a similar position, I felt a bit like the outsider who was constantly pulled out of class to meet with my ESOL teacher as it was referred to at that particular time rather than the ESL terminology that is popular now. In my case, I secretly, welcomed the close attention that was given to me and the discovery of books such as *Ramona Forever* by Beverly Cleary. Ramona may have taught me a thing or two about the American society; however, I wonder if my ESL students are reading similar books in order to assimilate into the American society like I did.

### **1.1 Developing the Study**

Through this evaluation of my ESOL experience, I decided to research my Nigerian ESL students in my Advanced Reading college class. The students take the Michigan Test which is an assessment test used to determine their grammar and reading comprehension in the English language. Based on their scores, students are placed into their respective ESL classes which are categorized as beginning to advanced ESL classes. Students receiving anything less than a ninety percent will be placed in an ESL class. A ninety score will ensure that a student is exempt from ESL classes. I had twenty one students from different parts of the world. The class consisted of two Asian students and an array of African students ranging from countries like Sierra Leon, Ghana, Cameroon and Nigeria. I focused on Nigerian students because their official language is English.

However, Nigerians tend to speak more than one language depending on how many languages are taught within the household. Additionally, Nigeria is a multifaceted country with many ethnic tribes speaking their own native language. What binds all of them together is the official language, English. English is also the method of instruction for all schools. In hindsight, the other African students within my class are not instructed in the English language nor are they expected to learn it in their every day usage like Nigerians. The other African students spoke French and their native language as their first language. The French speaking students, based on their assignments and my personal interactions, had more grammatical issues with the English language in terms of speaking and writing. On the other hand, the Nigerians were able to speak grammatically uninterrupted in the English language.

In my Advanced Reading class, I decided to have the students work on their presentation skills as well as their reading skills. I knew that most of the students felt more comfortable with doing an assignment and answering it without necessarily presenting it to the class. Most of them were good at answering the reading questions. They were quite surprised when I informed them that they would have to do a PowerPoint presentation in the class. Majority of the students were not familiar with the program and were anxious about presenting. I showed them several examples of PowerPoint slides and gave them some tips on how to create one, and we practiced in the computer lab. The topic for their presentation was based on an excerpt I found on the Internet about interracial dating. As a class, we discussed issues such as the one-drop rule during slavery time and interracial dating in American society. The students were not familiar with the one-drop rule ideology which identified and classified any racially mixed individual who is mixed with African American and Caucasian blood as a black person. They found it interesting that such a rule existed since majority of the students were used to tribal affiliation rather than race affiliation. The students were responsible for answering four questions for their presentation:

1. How would you define interracial dating and same race dating?
2. What problems or social issues do interracial couples experience in America?
3. What problems or social issues do same race couples experience in America?
4. Based on social definitions of interracial dating, do you think it is a problem in America? (You can use personal experience.)

Each student was given a student to critique. The students were responsible for writing a one page essay on the person that they chose. They had to describe their classmate’s presentation based on these factors:

- Organization of presentation & layout
- Answering audience’s questions
- Staying on topic/content
- Student’s presentation/professionalism

The students were graded on how well they were able to do a critical analysis of the presentation, grammar, and written content about the four points mentioned above. The following essays were an evaluation on how well the Nigerians were able to communicate their thoughts in the English language. Based on these essays, my goal was to examine whether these Nigerian students were making mistakes similar to that of native English speakers or rightly placed in the proper ESL classroom.

In order to get a better understand of my students' educational background, I had them fill out a form which gave me some insight into their background. The questions are as followed:

1. Name, Age, Ethnic Tribe
2. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?)
3. Where did you go to High School?
4. Have you studied in any other colleges/university?
5. Where were you born? (location, place)
6. What language did your teachers use in school?
7. How many languages do you speak?
8. Is English your first language?
9. What is your major?
10. How long have you been in the United States?
11. How do you view your English language?

I interviewed the six Nigerian students in my class and asked their permission to use them in my study. The following answers will detail the students' responses. Their first name will only be used to identify them.

**Name: Nnamdi**

Age: 21

Ethnic Tribe: Igbo

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *12 years*
2. Where did you go to High School? *Grundtvig International Secondary School, Nigeria*
3. Have you studied in any other colleges/university? *Yes/Covenant University, Nigeria*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Houston Texas*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (Igbo & English)*
7. Is English your first language? *Yes*
8. What is your major? *Respiratory Therapy*
9. How long have you been in the United States? *5 months*
10. How do you view your English language? *"My English is easy to understand."*

**Name: Iyabo**

Age: 46

Ethnic Tribe: Yoruba

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *4 years*
2. Where did you go to High School? *St. James Grammar School, Osogbo Osun-State Nigeria*

3. Have you studied in any other colleges/university? *No*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Osogbo, Osun-State, Nigeria*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (Yoruba & English)*
7. Is English your first language? *No*
8. What is your major? *Nursing*
9. How long have you been in the United States? *11 years*
10. How do you view your English language? *"Not bad, I do not find it difficult since I started my education in English from my elementary school."*

**Name: David**

Age: 17

Ethnic Tribe: Yoruba

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *Elementary school 6 years/High School 6 years*
2. Where did you go to High School? *Nigeria*
3. Have you studied in any other colleges/university? *No*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Ilorin, Nigeria*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *British English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (English & Yoruba)*
7. Is English your first language? *No, Yoruba*
8. What is your major? *Accounting*
9. How long have you been in the United States? *5 months*
10. How do you view your English language? *"I think my English is ok because in my country (Nigeria) I was taught how to speak the British English because we were colonized by the British and British English is one of the best English. Also, I have never have problem in my English classes and I think I have a good background in English."*

**Name: Nene**

Age: 31

Ethnic Tribe: Igbo

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *10 years*
2. Where did you go to High School? *Abia State Nigeria*
3. Have you studied in any other colleges? *Yes/Institute of Management and Technology in Enugu Nigeria*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Abia State, Nigeria*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (English & my dialect)*
7. Is English your first language? *Yes*
8. What is your major? *Nursing*

9. How long have you been in the United States? *4 months*
10. How do you view your English language? *"Fairly good. I would say a bit above average because sometimes I am quite embarrassed about my grammar, my spelling, upon I came from English speaking country."*

**Name: Victor**

Age: 35

Ethnic Tribe: Yoruba

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *12 years*
2. Where did you go to High School? *Ekimogun Community High School, Nigeria*
3. Have you studied in any other colleges? *Strayer University, USA*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Lagos Nigeria*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (English & Yoruba)*
7. Is English your first language? *No (Yoruba)*
8. What is your major? *Nursing*
9. How long have you been in the United States? *14 years*
10. How do you view your English language? *"Not bad I can write pretty well, other words I can construct a well good introspective essay."*

**Name: Chinele**

Age: 17

Ethnic Tribe: Igbo

1. How many years of school have you had? (Any other degrees?) *"I've been in school since I was 4 years old without a break-starting from pre 1 to primary 5 that is 6 years in the primary school continuing to the secondary for another 6 years."*
2. Where did you go to High School? *Mea Mater Elizabeth High School in Ojiagu Agbani in Engu State Nigeria*
3. Have you studied in any other colleges/university? *No*
4. Where were you born? (Location, Place) *Silver Spring, Maryland*
5. What language did your teachers use in school? *English*
6. How many languages do you speak? *Two (English & Igbo)*
7. Is English your first language? *Yes*
8. What is your major? *Pre-Med*
9. How long have you been in the United States? *The student left for Nigeria at the age of 4 and has traveled back during vacation time to the United State. She lives in the United States to attend college.*

10. How do you view your English language? *"My English is good and very much understandable to everyone I speak to."*

The students' profiles ranged from young to old. Each Nigerian student's educational background shared one common trait, all were educated in English. Although Victor and Iyabo stated that English was not their first language; however, it is fair to state that all of them were exposed to the English language at an early age. Their exposure to the English language also indicates their ability to communicate effectively or ineffectively in the English language, which will be examined in their essays. The essays have not been changed. Each essay is in its original format.

#### **Nnamdi's Essay**

*Tawfiq's power point presentation was good. It had pictures which helped illustrate his points and described his examples. His power point presentation slides were organized and he did not skip and slides. It was colorful and moderately attractive. I think he could do better in adding more bullet points and better coloring to his slides.*

*His professionalism was lacking a bit of confidence because he did not how to get his points across properly. he missed some important details. He also repeated points over and over again. Sometimes he did not know the right words to use or how to describe what he was trying to push across to the rest of the class. I think he should prepare better next time with a full idea of what he is going to talk about. He had the correct ideas but did not just know the easiest way to convey his lecture.*

*He answered his questions the same he spoke during the lectures. He lacked the ability to express himself clearly. He just needs to work on his presentation skills. I believe his nerves got the best of him because he had the correct points and ideas but didn't know how make others understand what he was trying to say.*

*He stayed on the topic most of the time. He only strayed a bit when he did not know which words or phrases to use to express himself. Tawfiq explained every point in little details, I just think he had a fairly good presentation. His presentation was good, he just needs to fix some minor issues, prepare ahead of time and also get over his nerves.*

#### **Evaluation of Nnamdi's Essay**

Nnamdi's situation is a bit different from the rest of the Nigerian students because he was the only student with a British accent. I assumed he was educated in England; however, to my surprise, he traveled there frequently while he was studying in Nigeria. He spent his vacations in London and then he would return to Nigeria to continue his education. He was born in Houston Texas but moved back to Nigeria after his birth. He was educated in the Nigerian system. His speaking and writing skills are advanced. He made minor mistakes which may be due to lack of revision. Grammatically, some of his sentences were written similar to that of a native speaker. On the other hand, some of his sentences were incoherent due to missing words or word

order. Some examples are “*He answered his questions the same he spoke during the lectures. He had the correct ideas but did not just know the easiest way to convey his lecture.*” Additional grammatical issues consisted of capitalization problems, missing prepositions, paragraph indentations, and missing punctuations.

### **Iyabo’s Essay**

*Teke presentation on interracial dating in America was a good presentation. I think he had a lot of good points in the way he analyzed his points, but the points were not organized. His mannerism was not appropriate for a class presentation, for example the way he responded to class in a very negative tone. Another he was not fully prepared for his presentation, so he took an aggressive stand against students who ask questions. Next he did not talk clearly, so the audience could not understand what he was saying. For example, he was repeating himself over and over again that did not make sense. Above it all, Teke was dressed unprofessional.*

*He talked about the problem facing people who had interracial dating. Problems encounter by same race couple dating each other. He talked about society views about interracial dating and concluded it very good. According to Teke interracial dating has both positive and negative effects on those who involved in it. To him it depends on how an individual takes it or believes in their relationship with others.*

*In conclusion, I would like you to take these in to consideration. First, try to be bold and be well prepared to face the audience. Secondly, do not be distracted by the side talk of the audience especially your friends and those whom you are so familiar with. Next, try to be focus and avoid repeating the same thing over and over, and be diverted from your good point. Furthermore, talk clearly so that the audience can get your point at once; face the audience and not the board. Lastly, answer question clearly and with respect. Do not use unacceptable languages to your colleagues. Talk like a mature student. Be more professional. Wishing you good luck on your career.*

### **Evaluation of Iyabo’s Essay**

Iyabo shows a good command for the English language. She was able to use transitional words within her essay. Her structure and sentence length showed that she was aware of the numbers of sentences needed in a sentence. She made minor mistakes that may have been found if she had carefully read her essay out loud or had a reviewer to look over her paper. Some of the mistakes she made were the possessive form, missing articles, subject verb agreements, and incomplete sentences such as “*Problems encounter by same race couple dating each other.*”

### **David’s Essay**

*I think Kandeh Muhammed’s power point presentation was one of the best presentations in class. Kandeh came out and was well organized and also confidence, he spoke out loud and I think they were not well spoken of but he had some good example to support his points. Kandeh was also to compose himself even when he was confused about some of the question he was been asked. The beginning of his presentation was little bit confusing but getting to*

*the middle of the presentation, he was able to get himself together which made the presentation to be much better. Kandeh was smart and also sharp during the presentation and he was also serious while presenting his presentation but also made the audience to laugh once a while during the presentation, which made his audience to listen to him carefully when he is serious and not just to bore the class, he also made some joke to makes his presentation to be lively. Speaking of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, I think that Kandeh didn’t make any but he can make more improvement on them. Kandeh was able to give good answers to the questions he was been asked and also a very good example or experience of interracial dating.*

*Kandeh’s power point presentation was good but can be better with some few adjustments. His power point needs to be worked on, that is he should have more designs and animations on his power point. He also needs improvement on how to explain his points well because his points were not well spoken on. He needs to also put more demonstration while presenting not just standing in one position. He needs to work hard on the beginning of his presentation because the beginning was a little bit confusing and also not as good as the end of his presentation. And finally, he needs to be presentable while making his presentation that is well dressed, organized and decent.*

### **Evaluation of David’s Essay**

David made a lot of grammatical mistakes. He wrote long sentences which may contribute to his grammatical mistakes. He also had problems with the parts of speech. He is confused about verb usage, “*Kandeh was also to compose himself even when he was confused about some of the question he was been asked.*” He left out articles and commas where they were needed. He was able to construct some grammatically correct sentences at certain points within the essay. He did meet the requirements specified for the essay and had the proper length of paragraphs for his essay. Aesthetically, his paper looked well organized but had issues with proper sentence construction.

### **Nene’s Essay**

*PowerPoint presentation is a very powerful tool to convey information and messages to your audience. It is a collective of data, in order to structure the presentation and make a good plan for delivery.*

*Nnamdi’s presentations are of higher quality. His presentation has a lot of right information. He has the ability to communicate and speak clearly. He is not shy speaker. He possesses a confident and strong personality. He has self confidence speaking in public without bogging.*

*He listens to the questions after his presentation. He answers period and straight to the point. He always maintains control of the speaking situation during the question time.*

*During his presentation, he was focused from the beginning to the end. He explains each of his points. His presentation was not boring; he keeps the audience engaged because his presentation was interested and smooth.*

*Nnamdi did very well but his PowerPoint does not include creative images.*

### **Evaluation of Nene's Essay**

Nene had issues with structuring her essay. She did not have a strong command for what a typical paragraph contained, as seen in her essay structure. She did not indent her paragraphs. Her first paragraph had two sentences. Her second paragraph had six sentences and then she wrote three sentences for another paragraph. Her last paragraph only consisted of one sentence. She did not meet the essay length and organization for a one page essay. She wrote very simple sentences which might have reduced her chances for making grammatical mistakes. Some of her sentences were grammatically awkward such as "He answers period and straight to the point." She used the wrong adjective to describe her classmate's presentation. An example is "Nnamdi's presentations are of higher quality." She also used the wrong parts of speech in some of her sentences.

### **Victor's Essay**

*There is so much to write about Marie's presentation, but first let me begin with commending her voice. I like her voice because it has the simplicity of a little child. I was impressed with her transcendent walk to the front of the class but obviously her walk does not walk the talk. Even though she spoke with eloquence, she was a little bit intimidated and overwhelmed. For her next presentation, she needs to combat the challenges of stage fright in order to enhance her performance.*

*Professionally, she was clean, kind and unique. But her posture or the position of her body was like that of a model or an artistic figure. Her next presentation must change a range of perception and doubts. This will include courteous, firmness, and an informative speech.*

*At the beginning of her presentation, she almost forgot the topic of the presentation but after a few seconds she remembered. Thereafter she was pretty much okay. I like her occasional smile throughout her presentation. Although she has a little problem pronouncing some words, but the presentation was honest.*

*At the end of her presentation she looked and feels tired to answer questions. But when the questions were finally asked, she answered very well. And what i will like to add with her presentation is that she should be more prepared, act on her own and not be acted upon, in other words disregard people laughing at her, be positive and convey her points to the audience.*

### **Evaluation of Victor's Essay**

Victor has a strong command of the English language. He was able to construct sentences that were grammatical sound. However, he did make some mistakes involving capitalization, commas, and the present and past tense. Some of his sentences were unclear in their meaning: "Her next presentation must change a range of perception and doubts. This will include courteous, firmness, and an informative speech. Some of his minor mistakes may be due to careless oversight. The essay he wrote did not follow the requirements giving to him. He wrote half a page, single spaced. In his first paragraph, he had five sentences.

The second paragraph had two sentences. The pattern continued in this manner.

### **Chinelo's Essay**

*Manuela had a very nice power point presentation. The use of the graph made it more interesting and explanatory that it was able to differentiate the difference between the years of agreement and disagreement of interracial dating in America. She also had good bulletin points during the presentation with instances that followed them accordingly. Though she was quite scared and shy in the beginning of her presentation she was able to warm up, get comfortable and also express herself freely as she really wanted. Distraction was not an obstacle to Manuela during her presentation for she had her mind set on concentration and seriousness. Answering her questions after her presentation was another thing that she took very seriously and was able to answer correctly and also explained her answers to further understanding. She was very confident answering her questions knowing that she cannot make a mistake because she what exactly she was talking about and also presenting. She was always on track of her topic; she didn't get distracted by anything that caused her to move away from the topic. The entire presentation give by Manuela was on track without out any diversion of any sort.*

*Manuela should keep it up because she had a very nice and interesting presentation for someone that was giving a presentation for the first time. She could also do better in the next presentation now that she knows what it's like to give a presentation and that she has also gotten comfortable with speaking in front of people and in front of the class.*

### **Evaluation of Chinelo's Essay**

One of the issues that Chinelo had with constructing sentences was her usage of wrong word choice. As a Nigerian, I am aware that most compositions in Nigeria tend to be wordy and lengthy. Most students in Nigeria are told to elaborate on their sentences before getting to the point. Chinelo depicts similar writing styles in which her sentences are lengthy and elaborated. She had problems with the proper parts of speech as demonstrated in this sentence: "Distraction was not an obstacle to Manuela during her presentation for she had her mind set on concentration and seriousness." On the surface level, Chinelo was able to construct sentences that were mostly functional; however, she had issues with proper word choice. Additionally, she needed to work on her essay structure. She had eight sentences in one paragraph and two sentences in another paragraph.

### **1.2 Reflective Thoughts**

There are many factors that are considered when placement is evaluated for international students. Many of the international students are placed into ESL classes due to their educational background, mostly meaning that those who were not educated in the United States are more than likely to be placed into an ESL class. Then there's the thin line between students like Chinelo and Nnamdi who were born in the United States but migrated back to Nigeria at an early age. Unlike most international students, Chinelo was

exposed to the American society because of her holiday travels, and Nnamdi was exposed to British English by traveling to England. Moreover, all of the Nigerian students may not have been born in the United States, but they have been exposed to the English language at a very early age.

Based on the essays written by the students, would it be fair to have placed them in the ESL classes? The answer is debatable. If what we are measuring is English proficiency in terms of understand and speaking English, then I would say that these Nigerian students should not have to take ESL classes.

Subsequently, the Nigerian students who were in my class did not have an issue debating, presenting, or expressing their thoughts because the language was not foreign to them. The language did not ask them to translate their thoughts from their native language into the English language. The English language is already part of their lexicon. Intrinsically, Nigerians may speak many other languages, but English has always been a way for them to negotiate with the outside world. It is a world that they are linguistically familiar with, but when they are forced to relearn that same language all over again, they feel a sense of linguistic. The English that they once considered theirs becomes foreign and no longer part of their personal voice. This is the constant sentiment that resonated throughout my classroom. I would often hear my Nigerian students state, "We speak better English than Americans." In some cases, this may be true. Unfortunately, there will always be those students who cannot pass the placement test perhaps based on cultural differences or sociolinguistic references to the American society which does not always connect with their own lived experiences. In essence, for this reason, they are seen and labeled as an ESL recipient.

In retrospect, perhaps with some proper writing tutoring, not necessarily an ESL class, the students could produce a grammatical free essay. However, I do not think they should have to go through multiple ESL classes to have a good command of the English language. I believe that the students, whose national language is English, should be evaluated on a different scale when it comes to ESL classes. Although some may possibly need the special attention that ESL classes afford them like Nene who was the weakest writer of the group, majority of the students are capable of surviving in a typical traditional class. As the population of

community colleges and universities continue to grow and expand exponentially, educators are going to be forced to reevaluate what is considered the typical ESL student. We are no longer dealing with students who are not exposed to the American culture or language, we are dealing with a generation of international students who are cognitively prudent, technological savvy, and linguistically gifted. Iyabo's in her final quote stated, "to me personally, speech part of ESL is not for Nigerians since we had all our education in English." This quoted is quite loaded in its meaning and in a way defines the nostalgic sentiments felt by my Nigerian students.

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