

Influence of English Language Performance at Primary Education on the Attainment of Educational Standard in an Esl Situation

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the numerous indigenous languages in Nigeria, English language has carved an important position for itself virtually in all sectors. It has become the language of health, politics, business, diplomacy, to mention a few in the country. Its importance equally extends to the educational domain where it is the language of instruction, a school subject at all levels of education and also a basic requirement for students seeking admission into any institution of learning. State and national curricula have been crafted by the joint effort of educational planners, schools and the government to reflect access to learning this language that is not native to the country. Despite early exposure to English language and constant interface with the language over the course of the 9-3-4 educational system that undergraduates go through, the quality of English is a far cry from the norm neither does it meet proficiency standard. This paper thus seeks to review primary education goals and its effect on achieving high language proficiency or meeting acceptable standard and its overall relevance to the academic performance of 360 students proportionately sampled from six Nigerian polytechnics.

Keywords: Primary Education, Language, Proficiency Test, English Language, Nigeria

I. INTRODUCTION

English Language Proficiency (ELP) is an indispensable and critical element in contemporary society. The language itself currently holds an indisputable position and status amidst the world's major languages (Obiakor and Malu, 2020). Being able to speak, read, write and listen in English are much needed and advantageous skills because the language is widely spoken and taught in nations of the world. It is also the official language of several

countries; and the dominant language in many international organizations such as UNO, OPEC, WHO, WTO, UNESCO, ECOWAS, NATO, etc. This has earned the language designations such as 'the world's lingua franca', 'a global language'.

Also, the progressive nature of globalization, technological innovations, communication, especially social media, have equally contributed to the indispensability of the language. It is used in science, commerce, trade, international diplomacy, politics, mass entertainment, telecommunications, internet, education, literature, news. Most scientific publications are penned in this language. English language has made the world a global village, that is, accessible and well-interconnected.

In Nigeria, English language is the common language. It serves as a unifying factor amidst the many indigenous languages and cultures. The national language question has similarly heightened the need, use and status of English in the country. A chief use of this language in Nigeria is as a means of communication within the nation and with those outside the boundaries of the nation. Fakeye (2006) identifies that English language is geared towards intra-national and international (global) communication.

Aside communication, there are several other functions that the language is used for in the country such as education. The current educational system in Nigeria, which is 9 years of basic education, 3 years of senior secondary education and 4 years of tertiary education, is crafted around the use of the language as the medium of instruction for all school subjects and courses except indigenous languages. The language is also a mandatory subject at all levels of education (Obiakor and Malu, 2020). Its importance is most felt in that admission into any tertiary institution

requires a credit in English alongside any other four subjects that tally with the desired course of study as stipulated by National Universities Commission (NUC).

Within the confines of tertiary education, English is also a mandatory course that has been stipulated as a must for polytechnic and university students to offer in the form of General Studies (GNS)/'Use of English'. Anidi, Anibueze and Amuta (2020) aver that aside post-basic education where English is taught as a subject throughout the 6 years of secondary education, English language is offered as a foundational course in tertiary institution, usually at the first year of study.

Anidi, Anibueze and Amuta (2020) state the prominent roles that English plays in Nigeria especially as a basic condition for educational and career advancement in the 21st century. This has a huge impact on the teaching and learning of the language. Anidi (2018) and Bamgbose (2001) as cited in Anidi, Anibueze and Amuta (2020) emphasize this that being proficient in English opens the world for an individual to grow economically and career-wise. The status of English in Nigeria combined with the many roles it plays, induces the average Nigerian to learn and to speak it (Malu and Obiakor, 2018).

Beyond learning to speak and understand the language, being proficient in the use of written and oral forms of the language is another form of prestige. Although most Nigerians have acquired the language, their proficiency level performance is averagely poor. The inadequacy is noted by the falling standard in examinations that has to do with English language courses and other courses that use English as a medium of instruction.

Fakeye (2014) avers that this poor use of English has contributed to the sharp decline in academic achievement and educational standard in Nigeria. This failing cuts across all levels of education. Also, the inadequacy is noted in communication of Nigerian students which is fraught with poor syntax, infusion of content and function words from their mother tongue, incorrect pronunciation, loose sentences, grammatical and semantic errors, and direct translations/transliterations. In formal essays, poor use of English expressions mixed up with abbreviations and slang expressions is usually evident.

Overall, these deficiencies in the proper use of English affect students not only in English language courses but in all courses taught with this language because a good foundation in the language of instruction goes a long way in aiding in the success of knowing the content and subject

matter of the course under study. That is, deficiency in the language of instruction leads to poor academic performance in the different school subjects/courses taught in the target language, which is English language Feast (2002).

The impact and relationship that exists between English language proficiency and academic performance have been reviewed by several scholars over the years. Anidi, Anibueze and Amuta (2020) carried out an analytical evaluation of the Use of English curriculum as offered by tertiary educational institutions in Enugu State, Nigeria. Fakeye (2006) also looked at the use of computer assisted instruction in language development and academic achievement in some senior secondary schools in Ibadan. Fakeye (2014) assessed how EFL students' proficiency in English language in Nigeria predicts their level of academic achievement. Ajibade (1993) considered how English language proficiency and certain affective factors predict the academic achievement of some senior secondary schools students in French. Idialu (2013) equally studied the relationship that exists between English Language proficiency of students in South Western Nigeria, their study habits and academic achievement in Literature in English.

This study aims to fill a gap by reviewing the inception of the introduction of English language into the national curriculum. Education is key to national development in the modern society. It starts from the cradle to the grave. In terms of formal education, there are several stages and each stage builds on the initial or last level. These stages are pre-primary, primary, post-primary/secondary, and post-secondary/tertiary.

In Nigeria, the main educational goals revolve round building and developing mental, physical and social competencies, abilities and skills. For every stage of learning, there are goals guiding it. The focus of this study centres on primary education, which is the education given to children between the ages of 6-11+ (NPE, 1998). This stage serves as the basis on which the entire educational system is laid. The success of this stage will ensure to a great extent the successes of the other stages. Similarly, this stage is designed as a preparatory ground for higher learning. The National Policy on Education (1998) states the objectives of primary education in Nigeria as:

1. To inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and the ability to communicate effectively.
2. To lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking

3. To give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society.
4. To mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child.
5. To develop in the child the ability to adapt to his changing environment.
6. To give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable him to function effectively in the society within the limits of his capacity and
7. To provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.

The achievement of these objectives relies on a strong curriculum that includes subjects such as English, Mathematics, Civic Education, Agricultural Science, Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning, Home Economics, Physical and Health Education, Writing, Religious studies, Music, Creative Arts, French, Language of the immediate environment. Likewise, the achievement of all, of a strong curriculum for all of these subjects except indigenous and foreign languages, relies on a strong curriculum designed for the language of instruction (English). This curriculum should cater for English as a subject and English as a Language of Instruction (LOI).

STATE OF THE PROBLEM

The multiplicity of Nigerian languages gave rise to the use of English as a lingua franca. This language also has great importance in the educational system as the major medium of instruction and core subject. Despite this, it has been noted that Nigerian students at most levels of education are characterised by inadequate proficiency in the use of English which affects their performance in school subjects/courses and subjects dedicated solely to the study of the use of English; General Studies (GNS). The study thus reviewed the English language proficiency of selected tertiary learners in relation to their academic performance in a mandatory English course in the polytechnic and how their language proficiency stems from Nigerian primary educational goals.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In ascertaining the impact of primary education on academic achievement and English language proficiency of selected tertiary students in an ESL situation like Nigeria, the following research objectives were the focus of the study:

1. Examine the tertiary learners' level of proficiency in English language.

2. Relate their level of proficiency in English language to their academic performance in English (GNS).
3. Examine the relation between primary educational goals with their level of English language proficiency and their academic performance.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study examined 360 tertiary students' proficiency in English. The study restricted itself to 3 Polytechnics each from Kwara and Osun States. The study evaluated the students' academic achievement in General Studies (GNS) only and didn't concern itself with other tertiary courses.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A population of 360 students from 6 polytechnics in Nigeria was studied. 60 students each from Federal Polytechnic, Offa; Kwara State Polytechnic, Ilorin; Lens Polytechnic, Offa; Federal Polytechnic, Ede; Osun State Polytechnic, Iree and Igbajo Polytechnic, Igbajo. The major research tool employed in this study was English Language Proficiency Test designed to evaluate the students' language skills in Reading and Writing. Also, the research employed the use of Questionnaire.

The Proficiency Test features questions on reading comprehension, grammatical structures, vocabulary, and writing. The study took place over the course of seven and a half (7½) weeks. The questionnaire was first administered after which the students took the Proficiency Test designed to assess their use and comprehension of the English language.

The proficiency test has 5 band scores where Level 1 (Novice Competence) signifies the user's poor and minimal handle of the language. It is just a bit above outright incompetence in the language. Level 2 (Basic Language Competence) shows a foundational form of competence and highly restricted or limited use and understanding of information whether spoken or written. Level 3 (Intermediate Language Competence) demonstrates the use of the language but with some difficulty. The user has a moderate command of the language, that is, can functional reasonably in spoken or written context and can understand social conventions of the language but with great efforts. Level 4 (Advanced Language Competence) demonstrates a good command of the language in accuracy and fluency. The user is able to function in variety of settings and exercises a good command of linguistic and pragmatic resources.

Level 5 (Expert Language Competence) signifies a high degree of precision in the use and understanding of the language. The user is flexible, fluent and has a high degree of accuracy with a wide range of linguistic, discursive and pragmatic resources.

The students' marks in the test was used to gauge their level of competence and linked with their performance score in General Studies, a mandatory course for Polytechnic students.

III. RESULTS

1.0 Gender Distribution

GENDER	FREQUENCY	%
Male	163	45.3
Female	197	54.7
Total	360	100

Table 1.0 shows the gender distribution among the 360 students who participated voluntarily in the study. Both genders were adequately represented in the study wherein the

male participants were 163 out of the 360 population and the females were 197. The former are 45.3% and the females were 54.7%.

1.1 Age Distribution

Age	Frequency	%
16-19	79	21.9
20-23	152	42.2
24-27	126	35
30-33	3	0.83
34 and above	0	0
Total	360	99.9

Table 1.1 reveals the age distribution of the sampled population. 21.9% of the 360 fell in the age bracket of 16-19, 42.2% are between the age groups of 20-23, 35% are between the age

bracket of 24-27 and 0.83% are categorized under 30-33. There were no students who fell under the age group 34 and above.

1.2 Students' Proficiency Level

Level of Performance	Competence	Frequency	%
0-25	Novice	51	14.2
26-45	Basic	89	24.7
46-65	Intermediate	148	41.1
66-85	Advanced	58	16.1
86-100	Expert	14	3.9
Total		360	100

Table 1.2 reveals the student's proficiency level. Out of the 360 sampled students, only 14.2% can be categorized as having poor handle of the English language, 24.7% had highly restricted or limited use or understanding of the language. 41.1% demonstrated a moderate command of the language with difficulties. These were categorized

as intermediate learners. 16.1% a good command of the language and a meagre number of 3.9% made the expert level cut. A total of 224 students had an above average score while 76 students can be seen has having a flexible, somewhat moderate understanding of the oral and written forms of the language.

1.3 Students' Performance in their GNS

Level of Performance	Grading System	Frequency	%
0-39	F	66	18.3
40-44	E	38	10.6
45-49	D	25	6.9
50-54	CD	71	19.7
55-59	C	49	13.6
60-64	BC	34	9.4
65-69	B	40	11.1
70-74	AB	19	5.3
75-100	A	18	5.0
Total		360	99.9

Table 1.3 shows the students' performance in their General Studies (GNS). The Polytechnic academic grading system which is similar to that employed by WAEC was used in categorizing the sampled students' academic performance. 18.3 % of the sampled population failed their GNS course, 10.6% had an E with a performance level ranging between 40-44, 6.9% had a D with a performance level ranging between 45-49, 19.7% had a CD with a performance level ranging between 50-54, 13.6% had a C with a performance level ranging between 55-59, 9.4% had a BC with a performance level ranging between 60-64, 11.1% had a B with a performance level ranging between 65-69, 5.3% had an AB with a performance level ranging between 70-74, 5% had an A with a performance level ranging between 75-100.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the study showed that there is correlation between proficiency in English language and students' performance in their General Studies. The questions designed for the proficiency test reflect foundational knowledge that should have been garnered from the primary education stage. A poor understanding of the language will affect the learners' understanding of the question in itself. The result showed that 52 students out of the 66 that failed their GNS fall under the novice level. The remaining 14 fall under the basic level. The results also revealed that the 19 students that had AB and 18 that had A in their GNS are all members of the expert level. The 10 out of the remaining 11 are in the Advanced level while 1 made the intermediate level. This reveals a strong relation between academic success in this course and their understanding and use of English. The findings also showed that poor language skills also affect students' academic performance.

The study showed that some of the tertiary learners that fell in the basic and novice categories had problems majorly with comprehension skills, pronunciation, spelling and syntax. These aspects reflect poorly on their primary education stage where the basic knowledge to this ought to have been imbibed.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

English as a global language has gained momentum that keeps increasing daily. In a world where English has gained a foothold at the forefront, ability to speak and write fluently is a needed arsenal. In today's world, English is the currency of virtually all functions and skills. A poor proficient speaker of the language may be encumbered from achieving certain potentialities. Hence, the curriculum, especially primary school curriculum should be reassessed by the government and educational bodies to reflect necessary knowledge that a potential students must have before proceeding to other stages of educational level.

The study thus recommends that there should be increased oral training at the primary level to enable correct pronunciation of the sounds and words of English language. Most Nigerian schools especially public schools do not have diction classes to take care of distinguishing between the English sound. The curriculum should be assessed to incorporate this.

Grammatical classes and structures should be redefined in the primary school curriculum for English language. The practice of the four learning skills should be added into the curriculum. More often than not, the classroom caters to the theoretical aspect of learning the skills. The study recommends that there should be practical session

that will reflect the process of reading, speaking, writing and listening.

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