



University Admission Requirements for the Study of ESL as Correlates to Students' Oral Proficiency in the English Language

Dr. Chinyere Henrietta Maduabuchi *

Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education,
Ebonyi State University, Nigeria

Abstract

Every university in Nigeria has an entry requirement for admission into every programme of study. These requirements are the prerequisites for admission and in most cases are not subject for negotiation. However, English is one subject that is required for admission into virtually all the courses offered in the universities. Therefore, every prospective student for admission into any tertiary institution is expected to obtain a credit pass in it. Based on this, most students strive to obtain excellent results for entry without commensurate functional knowledge in the use of the language. This study sought to establish the relationship between the entry requirements for ESL and students' proficiency in oral English. A sample of one hundred and thirty English students was drawn from 200 levels of ESL students of 2013 and 2014 sets. Oral examination in the English language was organized and their performances were correlated with their excellent results in WAEC and SSCE examinations. One research question and three hypotheses guided the study. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. Heterogeneous classes of male and female students were used and data obtained were analyzed with Pearson Moment Correlation coefficient. From the results of finding, it was observed that there is no correlation between the students' credit passes in WAEC and SSCE results and their oral performance in English language. Most of the prospective students of English as a second language, who had excellent grades in English could hardly speak correct English. Based on the findings, recommendations were made.

Keywords: Entry Requirements, Admission, ESL, Oral Proficiency, English Language

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The English language in Nigeria occupies an enviable position as an official language and as a medium of instruction in schools right from the upper primary level as provided in the National Policy on Education. "It serves the purposes of inter-ethnic and international communication" (Adegbite, 2009). Although it was meant to be complimented by other Nigerian languages as the language of conducting business in the national and states houses of assemblies in Nigeria, yet it still enjoys the monopoly of usage because most of such activities still take places in the English language. In the National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004), English language was meant to be

introduced to a child as a subject of study at the lower primary school, that is primary one to three and as a medium of instruction at the upper level of the primary education. However, this is feasible only in paper and not in practice.

The educational system in Nigeria has gone through a lot of reforms since the inception of formal education up until now. Presently, Nigeria has a 6-3-3-4 system of education, which started in 1988, but was recently modified into a 9-3-4 system. Ideally, every graduate of secondary education is supposed to be equipped with the basic skills in the English language usage, but it appears as if there is a serious disconnection between what a child is taught and what he/she exhibits. This is contrary to the situation in the education sector in the 60s and 70s, where a standard six holder is proficient in the use of English.

Olayide (2012) observing the importance of English to an average Nigerian in this 21st century, lucidly remarks that:

Nigeria requires a literate workforce in order to fulfill her vision to be one of the top 20 countries in the world by 2020... Beyond this, the country requires a population competent in the English language in order to keep up with the pressure of globalization which has led to the increasing use of the English language in all sectors as well as its continued use as the official language and medium of instruction. Thus, it is arguable that proficiency in English is one of the greatest opportunities that the Nigerian education system ought to provide children with (p. 5).

This incidentally is not the situation in Nigeria because many students lack the requisite knowledge required for proficiency in the use of the language. Upon completion of secondary education, many students still lack the required skills and competencies in the English language. There seems to be several factors responsible for this incompetency amongst most Nigerian students even though the country has one of the best Policies on Education. The National Policy on Education of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004) advocates for the use of language of the immediate environment as a medium of instruction at the lower primary school and The English language as a subject of study at the upper primary level. This model of language acquisition was designed and adopted to help Nigerian children adapt easily when they start school initially. The language of the immediate environment here refers to the 521 local languages (Euron Monitor International, 2010) of which the three major languages the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are spoken by over 70% of the population and serve largely regional functions (Ibekwe, 2006).

As earlier asserted in this paper, secondary school students are expected to be competent in the use of English by the time they get to the senior secondary school level and their performances in some summative examinations, such as the West African School Certificate Examinations and (SSCE) Senior School Certificate Examination were supposed to be a remarkable evidence to such expectations. The provision in the National Policy on Education and the consequent implementation of such in our various schools

were meant to produce competent users of this language. Akeredolu-Ale in Olayide (2012) reiterates that:

By grade 12, students are expected to be proficient in English and are assessed for English language 'competency' judged as the degree of closeness by standard British English. This assessment is conducted nationally by the West African Examination Council (WAEC) in a test of written, comprehension, and verbal skills for the award of Senior Secondary Certificate in English.

Sadly, this expectation seems to have repeatedly been dashed to the wall. The WAEC as a body has constantly lamented on the repeated failure of students in English language over the years. The rate of this failure has made people to begin to reexamine the causes and to conclude that factors such as: the education policies which are never implemented, pedagogical approaches, attitudes of both teachers and students, parental factors among others have been responsible for this abysmal failure rate. Further investigations have also blamed the emergence of the popular Nigerian English characterized by amongst others, the creative manipulation of syntax to suit traditional expression (Ajani, 2007) and usage errors normalized over time (Kerogi, 2010; Olayide, 2012).

This failure rate in the English language poses a great danger to this great country and the future of our youths. The status of English in the admission requirements of many universities has, therefore, made some students to cut corners by getting mercenaries, who write examinations for the sole aim of getting at least a credit pass in the English language since it is one of the prerequisites for admission in any higher institutions in the country. To make matters worse, these students find themselves in the universities where their nightmares deepen. The reason for the nightmare is obvious. A short cut was used for their admission, but a subsequent improvement during the program of study was difficult to attain because the foundation for entry is already faulty.

It is, therefore, pertinent to note that a credit pass in English is one of the requirements for admission into all universities in Nigeria (World Education Services, 2011). Incidentally, English remains the medium of instruction for virtually most of the courses offered in the universities except for language courses like French, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba and others, which means that any handicap in the comprehension of English is a hurdle in the comprehension of other content areas. English has an enormous benefit for all the sectors of society in this era of globalization, hence its indispensable qualities.

For the prospective students of English as a Second language (ESL) in the Faculty of Education, their entry requirements in the university are as follow:

Candidates for admission must satisfy the university minimum entry requirement. In addition:

(i) Candidates admitted by UTME must have passed English Language and English Literature at least at credit level in the WAEC examination or its equivalent.

(ii) Direct entry candidates must have passed with a grade of at least “D” in English Literature in GCE A/L or at an equivalent standard at the higher school certificates or at an equivalent examination like NCE.

These requirements are the criteria expected to be fulfilled by any candidate that wants to study ESL in most universities in Nigeria. Literature is also a required subject for entry because it has the potentialities of adequately exposing the learners to the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It also enables a reader to come in contact with functional varieties of English which is needed in actual communicative interactions. The demand for the use of the language of the immediate environment, as a medium of instruction at the early primary education level, was actually based on the growing research evidence that initial instruction in the mother tongue results in a more effective grasp of a second language (UNESCO, 2003; Heugh, 2011). Bab Fafunwa in his 6 years Ife project on the use of mother tongue, confirmed this assertion with remarkable performance of the students in his pilot group.

The university students are usually heterogeneous in nature comprising males and female students. Researchers in the past have always asserted that girls are better in language courses than boys. However, the debate has always remained inconclusive because a lot of surprises kept springing up with regards to gender and language learning. Therefore, there is a need to survey the influence of gender with respect to this research problem.

All the students, who are presently studying the ESL in the universities must have met the entry requirements before they were offered the admission. To the chagrin of the researcher and other stakeholders in English language teaching at the universities, there seems to be a very big lacuna between what the students flaunted as their SSCE results for entry into the university and what they actually are. There is obviously a disconnection from the results and the performance of the holders of such results. The entry requirement does not subject the students to any oral proficiency test of the certificates that they possess. The position of this paper is that there seems to be a lacuna between certificate and competence which seems to be widening by the day. Hence, the National Universities Commission (NUC) and various universities should revisit the entry requirements for students of ESL and include an oral proficiency examination for these prospective students. This examination could be given to the students as a post entry examination organized by the universities. It is the suggestion of the researcher that when this is done only competent and teachable students would be offered admission for such courses at the institutions of higher learning.

Having been teaching the oral aspect of the English language at the University for years, I observed that the students at the 200 level in their academic programme in my university always perform woefully when it gets to spoken English courses. This performance of students instigated this investigation so as to determine the relationships between the Entry requirements of the students and their oral proficiency. In other words, the researcher sought to establish the relationship between students' entry requirements and what they really know. This is because reading is the ultimate activity of students, which

is characterized by comprehension. Any student, who had studied hard and sat for an examination, should be able to recognize, comprehend, retain, and recall necessary information needed for success in such an examination. Specifically, the study was done with the 200 level students of ESL in one of the universities in Nigeria. The performance of the students of 2013 and 2014 sets were correlated for this purpose. One research questions and three hypotheses guided this study, which were tested at 0.05 level of significance. They are:

H₀₁: There is no significant correlation between students' WAEC / SSCE results in the spoken English examination in the university based on the admission requirements.

H₀₂: There is no significant correlation between male and female students in WAEC/ SSCE results for 2013 in the spoken English examination in the university based on the admission requirement.

H₀₃: There is no significant correlation between male and female students in WAEC / SSCE results for 2014 in the spoken English examination in the University based on the admission requirements.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a correlational study. One hundred and thirty students' (130) scores in oral English examinations for 2013 and 2014 academic years respectively were used for the study. The students were heterogeneous in nature and their results in oral English examination were correlated with their results in WAEC SSCE based on admission requirements. Data collected were analyzed using Pearson moment correlation coefficient.

RESULTS

What is the relationship between students' performance in oral English examination 2013 and 2014 and the WAEC results based on their entry requirements?

H₀₁: There is no significant correlation between students' WAEC / SSCE results in the spoken English examination in the university based on the admission requirements.

Table 1. Students' SSCE Results and their Results in Oral English Examination

	2013 Scores	2014 Scores
2013 Scores	1.0000 (46) P = .	-.2053 (46) P = .171
2014 Scores	-.2053 (46) P = .171	1.000 (64) P = .

The results on the table have a low and negative correlation because there is no proof of any relationship between the scores of students in the two years and their WAEC / SSCE results based on the admission requirements.

This result has a low correlation and the value of $P = .171$ is not within the ambit of $P = 0.05$ which is the level of significance. Therefore, there is no correlation between the students' performance in oral English and their WAEC SSCE results based on the admission requirements in the universities.

H02: There is no significant correlation between male and female students in WAEC/ SSCE results for 2013 in the spoken English examination in the university based on the admission requirement.

Table 2. Correlation between Male and Female Students WAEC / SSCE Results for 2013 and Spoken English Examination

	Male Scores	Female Scores
	1.0000	-.0859
Male Scores	(21)	(21)
	$P = .$	$P = .711$
	-.0859	1.0000
Female Scores	(21)	(21)
	$P = .711$	$P = .$

The result on the table portray the fact that both male and female students' WAEC/ SSCE results for 2013 and their spoken English results based on admission requirement is not significant because there is a very low relationship.

H03: There is no significant correlation between male and female students in WAEC / SSCE results for 2014 in the spoken English examination in the University based on the admission requirements.

Table 3. Correlation between Male and Female Students in WAEC SSCE Results for 2014 and Spoken English Examination

	Male Scores	Female Scores
	1.0000	-.1853
Male Scores	(31)	(31)
	$P = .$	$P = .318$
	-.1853	1.0000
Female Scores	(31)	(33)
	$P = .318$	$P = .$

The result on the table indicates that there is a negative correlation and no significant correlation in the male and female students' WAEC / SSCE results for 2014 and spoken English examination.

DISCUSSION

The results of the finding all show that there is a negative and no significant correlation in the WAEC / SSCE results of students of ESL and their spoken English examination based on their admission requirements. These results were not in consonance with the earlier assertion of Idialu (2013) who examined the correlation between students English language proficiency and their achievement in literature in English in southwestern

Nigeria and found a high correlation between English language proficiency and achievement in literature in English.

This study was incidentally triggered by the rate of decadency in the spoken English of the undergraduates of ESL of the Department. It was a misnomer to have a wonderful result in WAEC / SSCE and one is still unable to make a simple correct sentence. The findings of this study really provide evidence beyond every doubt that there is no correlation between what they have as their WAEC / SSCE results and what they could say correctly in the English language. It is also a confirmation to the earlier assertion by Adegbite (2009):

Despite the high status accorded the English language in Nigeria, competent speakers of the language remain few (about 5-10%) and majority speaks or writes it badly. Records of poor performances and usage are given at all levels of education and strata of communication in the society ... and the problems can be attributed to linguistic, psychological and socio- politico-economic factors. Some of these problems are... from the perspective of psycholinguistics: the learner, maturation problems of the Nigerian learner of L2 language data, the learning environment, aptitude, attitude and motivation.

What Adegbite (2009) feared in his findings is indeed the crux of this study. Many speakers of English language are faced with lots of challenging factors that have contributed immensely towards the further destruction of their oral English proficiency. Why has the quality of spoken English of our university students dwindled? There might be need to focus more on performance rather than on certification. Performance is seen in students' use of the language and when the certificates are incongruous with performance, it is a pointer to the fact that there may have been a foul play somehow.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this abysmally poor correlation between what the students flaunt as the SSCE results and their oral proficiency in oral English this paper recommends the following:

- The admission requirements of the students who apply to study English as a second language should be structured to involve oral examination in the given field of interest. The implication of this is that the departments who are designated to admit these students should administer an oral examination to prospective students as their post UME examinations.
- Respective universities should decentralize post UME examinations instead of handling it centrally. What this portends is that each department knows what is expected of the students and they should examine the prospective male and female students in those specific areas.
- Emphasis should be placed on the juxtaposition of oral and written examinations of students for maximum proficiency in the area of study. Where they are found wanting, a remediation programme should be proposed for the students. This is pertinent because certification without functionalism is the prevalent bane for lifelong learning.

REFERENCES

- Adegbite (2009). *The psycholinguistics of English language in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Krafts Books Limited
- Ajani, T. T (2007). Is there indeed a Nigerian English . *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 1910 Retrieved October 2, 2012 from <http://www.scientificjournal.org/journals2007/articles/1084.htm>
- Akeredolu-Ale,B (2007). Good English for what? Learners' motivation as a factor in declining learners' performance in English language acquisition and use in Nigerian schools. *Changing English* 14(2)231-245
- Butler, F.A., & Castelson-Weilington, M. (2000). Students' concurrent performance on tests of English language proficiency and academic achievement. In, the validity of administrating large scale content assessments to English language learners: An investigation from three perspectives. *National Centre for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Students' Testing*. University of California, Los Angeles
- Euron Monitor International, (2010). The benefits of the English language for individuals and societies: Quantitative indicators from Cameroon, Nigeria Rwanda, Bangladesh and Paskinstan. Retrieved October 3,2012 from <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Euromonitor%Report%20A4p>.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy on education*. (4th edition). Lagos, Nigeria: NERDC Press
- Heugh, K,(2011).Theory and practice –language education models in Africa: research design, decision –making and outcomes. In A Ouane and C Glanz (Eds). *Optimizing learning education and publishing in Africa: The language factor* (pp.105-158) Tunis Belvedere, Tunisia: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)/African Development Bank.
- Ibekwe, J. (2006). *English language policy in Nigeria: A critical analysis*. University of Connecticut.
- Idialu (2013). *English language proficiency and study habit as correlates of learning outcomes in literature in English in south western Nigeria*. A Post-Field Doctoral Seminar Paper. Department of Teacher Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria
- Olayide, T. (2012).*English language incompetency amongst senior secondary graduates in Nigeria A-801: Education policy analysis and research utilization in comparative perspective*. Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- UNESCO, (2003). The mother tongue –dilemma. *Education Today*. Retrieved from http://www.unesco.org/education/education_today/ed_today6.pdf
- World Education Services, (2011). The educational system in Nigeria. Retrieved November 15 from <http://www.wes.org/ewenr/11aug/practical.htm>