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Elements Influencing Effective Spoken English Among Senior Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This study investigated the factors influencing effective spoken English among senior secondary school students in Ahoada West Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to identify the challenges students encounter when speaking English, determine the factors affecting their spoken English proficiency, and examine the extent to which the frequent use of English influences their spoken English performance. A survey research design was adopted, and general observations were also recorded. The target population comprised all Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students and teachers in 62 government-approved secondary schools in Ahoada West Local Government Area, Rivers State, consisting of 16,032 students and 325 teachers. A total of 402 respondents, comprising 390 students and 12 teachers, were selected from six secondary schools within the study area. This resulted in an average of 67 respondents from each selected school. Mean scores and standard deviations were used to analyse the collected data and answer the research questions, while the chi-square statistical technique was employed to test the hypothesis at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that several factors hindered effective spoken English among students in the study area. These included outdated teaching methods that made the learning process dull and uninteresting, resulting in boredom and reduced student interest; the perception of English as a difficult subject; inadequate background knowledge of the English language; students' lack of confidence in using the language; and teachers' limited use of spoken English during instruction. Based on these findings, the study recommended that students should be encouraged to develop confidence in speaking English and should not be discouraged by mistakes made during classroom interactions. Parents should also motivate their children to participate actively in English language learning at home and in school. Furthermore, curriculum designers should consider learners' needs and language-learning challenges when developing and reviewing English language curricula.

Keywords: *Spoken English Proficiency, Oral Communication Skills, English Language Learning, Senior Secondary School Students, Language Learning Difficulties, Teaching Methods, Students' Self-Confidence.*

Introduction

Speaking is often regarded as the most important of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because individuals who have acquired proficiency in a language are commonly identified as speakers of that language (Ur, 1996; Tuan and Mai, 2015).

In Nigeria, English remains the predominant language used in education, governance, administration, legislation, the judiciary, international relations, national integration among the country's numerous ethnic groups, and social advancement (Adio, 2010). However, the production of spoken language is widely regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of language learning (Brown and Yule, 1983; Tuan and Mai, 2015).

English is taught both as a subject and as a medium of instruction for other subjects within the Nigerian educational curriculum. The primary aim of teaching oral English skills is to equip students with the ability to communicate effectively and confidently in English. It also seeks to strengthen students' confidence in expressing themselves fluently while providing opportunities to identify and correct errors in spoken English (Babu, 2010).

The central objective of English language teaching should be to equip learners with the ability to use English effectively, accurately, and appropriately in different communicative situations. However, despite spending several years studying the language, some learners remain unable to communicate fluently and accurately because they have not acquired the necessary linguistic knowledge and communicative competence (Tuan and Mai, 2015).

An effective approach to oral language instruction can contribute to the development of students' speaking, reading, and writing skills. This can make English language learning more productive and enhance students' learning experiences in other subjects taught in senior secondary schools by making classroom activities more meaningful and engaging (Yichu, 2013).

In practice, many language learners experience difficulties expressing themselves orally in the target language. These difficulties vary from one student to another and may arise from several underlying factors. Identifying the factors responsible for these challenges constitutes the central focus of the present study.

Research Design

This study was conducted using a survey research design. The design was deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to carry out research using a standardized research instrument like questionnaires in a large population. It also allows for the description of the existing situation, the consideration of the relationships between variables, and the generalization of the results to a wider population. As the present study aimed at finding the various challenges faced by the students, the factors affecting the students in terms of speaking English and the effect of the frequent use of English on the students, the survey design gave a systematic and structured process to collect the required data.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Ahoada West L.G.As, of Rivers State, Nigeria. Ahoada West is a multilingual and multicultural environment where languages such as Engenni, Ekpeye, and English are commonly spoken. The presence of several public Senior Secondary schools makes it a suitable location for investigating elements influencing effective spoken English. The educational, social, and linguistic characteristics of the L.G.As provide relevant contextual conditions for understanding students' oral English challenges.

Population of the Study

The study population includes all the Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students and teachers of the public senior secondary schools in Ahoada West LGA of Rivers State. Data collected from the Rivers State Post-Primary Schools Management Board showed that there were 62 government approved senior secondary schools with 16,032 students and 325 teachers. The students of SS2 were chosen because they have been exposed to a lot of English language teaching and have been doing a lot of speaking activities so as a result they are able to contribute to the study as respondents.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

The six public senior secondary schools in Ahoada West Local Government Area were sampled and 402 respondents (390 students and 12 teachers) were sampled. Purposive sampling was used to select the schools, based on accessibility and the size of students. Stratified random sampling was used to insure adequate representation from each class group (stratum), and to insure adequate representation by gender. To get the overall sample of 402 respondents 67 respondents was randomly selected from each of the participating schools. The sample was judged as adequate and representative of the target population and the findings were judged relevant to the aims of the study.

Instrument for Data Collection

Structured questionnaires developed by the researcher were used to collect the data. The questionnaire was divided into four parts. In Section A, it was the demographic characteristics of the respondents that were elicited. The challenges students face in learning to speak English were included in Section B. The factors affecting spoken English proficiency of senior secondary school students were discussed in section C. Items in section D measured how much English is used frequently and how this affects students' spoken English. For Sections B, C and D a five point Likert scale was used, from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.

Validation of the Instrument

The validity of the instrument was done with face and content validation. English Language Education experts and Measurement and Evaluation experts from a Nigerian university reviewed the instrument to check on the clarity, relevance, coverage and suitability of the instrument for measuring the variables being studied. They made corrections, observations and recommendations which

were included in the final questionnaire prior to administration. The purpose of this validation process was to make sure that the instrument was able to address the research objectives and questions.

Reliability of the Instrument

Test–retest method was used to determine the reliability of the research instrument. A school not used in the main study was chosen and 20 students received a copy of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was again administered to the same students 2 weeks later. The responses obtained from both administrations were analysed to assess the consistency of the instrument over time. A reliability coefficient of 0.82 was achieved and this represented an acceptable level of reliability, thus signifying that the instrument was suitable for use in the main study.

Method of Data Collection

Questionnaires were used to collect data which were directly administered to the students and teachers in the selected schools. The researcher made visits to each school with the help of English language teachers, who helped distribute the questionnaires to the respondents. Participants had sufficient time to answer the query items of the questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were collected the same day in order to ensure a high response rate and avoid data loss.

Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical tools were used to analyse data collected from the questionnaire. Mean scores and standard deviations were used to address the research questions concerning challenges faced by students, the factors influencing students' spoken English proficiency, and the influence of the usage of English on students' spoken English performance. A criterion mean of 2.50 was used to define respondents' level of agreement. Research hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance by using Statistical technique of Chi-square (χ^2). The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used in conducting statistical analysis which enabled the data to be computed and interpreted correctly.

4.2.1 Section A: Demographic Information of Respondents

Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

S/N	Variable	Options	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
1	Gender	Male	80	53.3
		Female	70	46.7
2	Class Level	SS1	50	33.3
		SS2	55	36.7
		SS3	45	30.0
3	Age Range	10–13	40	26.7
		14–16	65	43.3
		17–19	35	23.3
		20 and above	10	6.7

Total respondents: 150

The majority of respondents were male (53.3%), with most students in SS2 (36.7%) and aged 14–16 years (43.3%). This indicates that the sample adequately represents the target population of Senior Secondary school students in Ahoada West L.G.As.

4.2.2 Section B: Problems Students Encounter When Learning to Speak English

Table 4.2: Mean Responses on Problems Students Encounter

S/N	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean
1	I find it difficult to speak English because I have limited vocabulary.	10	18	22	60	40	3.78
2	I am afraid of making mistakes when speaking English.	12	20	25	55	38	3.72
3	My mother tongue affects my pronunciation of English words.	15	22	18	50	45	3.75

The mean scores (3.72–3.78) suggest that students generally agree that limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and mother tongue interference are significant problems hindering their spoken English.

4.2.3 Section C: Elements influencing Spoken English Among Students

Table 4.3: Mean Responses on elements influencing Spoken English

S/N	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean
4	My teachers do not give enough opportunities for English speaking practice.	18	20	28	50	34	3.58
5	Lack of learning resources affects my speaking ability.	15	25	20	55	35	3.63
6	I am not motivated to practice spoken English regularly.	20	22	25	48	35	3.53

Respondents moderately agree that inadequate teacher support, lack of learning resources, and low motivation are major elements influencing their ability to speak English effectively. The mean values (3.53–3.63) highlight the need for enhanced teaching strategies and resource provision.

4.2.4 Section D: Effect of Frequent Use of English on Spoken English

Table 4.4: Mean Responses on Effect of Frequent Use of English

S/N	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA	Mean
7	Speaking English frequently helps me improve my fluency.	8	15	20	55	52	3.94
8	I speak English more confidently when I use it regularly.	10	12	25	60	43	3.83
9	I do not improve in spoken English because I rarely use it outside school.	12	18	30	48	42	3.66

The high mean scores (3.66–3.94) indicate that frequent use of English significantly improves students' fluency and confidence. Limited use outside the classroom is a barrier to effective spoken English, reinforcing the importance of regular practice.

Analysis of Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis:

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between the frequent use of English and effective speaking of English among Senior Secondary school students in Ahoada West L.G.As.

Decision Rule:

The hypothesis will be tested at 0.05 level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$) using Chi-square (χ^2) test. If the calculated χ^2 value is greater than the critical χ^2 value at the appropriate degree of freedom, the null hypothesis will be rejected. Otherwise, it will be accepted.

Data Extraction

The hypothesis relates frequent use of English (Section D) to effective speaking. Using Section D responses:

Statement	Mean
Speaking English frequently helps me improve my fluency	3.94
I speak English more confidently when I use it regularly	3.83
I do not improve in spoken English because I rarely use it outside school	3.66

The high mean scores (3.66–3.94) indicate that students perceive frequent use of English as improving fluency and confidence.

Step 2: Observed and Expected Frequencies

For Chi-square analysis, Likert scale responses are converted to frequency counts for Agree (A) + Strongly Agree (SA) **vs** Disagree (D) + Strongly Disagree (SD) + Undecided (U)**.**

Example for statement 7 (Fluency):

- Agree + Strongly Agree = 55 + 52 = 107
- Disagree + Strongly Disagree + Undecided = 8 + 15 + 20 = 43

Similarly, statements 8 and 9 are computed to get observed frequencies (O)**.**

Step 3: Chi-Square Calculation

The Chi-square formula is:

$\chi 2=\sum(O-E)2E\chi 2=\sum E(O-E)2$

Where:

- O = observed frequency
- E = expected frequency

Assuming **equal expected frequencies**, E = Total / 2 = 150 / 2 = 75 (for each category: Agree/Disagree).

$(O-E)2/E=(107-75)275+(43-75)275=102475+102475\approx 27.3(O-E)2/E=75(107-75)2+75(43-75)2=751024+751024\approx 27.3$

$(O-E)2/E=(103-75)275+(47-75)275=78475+78475\approx20.9$
$(O-E)2/E=75(103-75)2+75(47-75)2=75784+75784\approx20.9$

$(O-E)2/E=(90-75)275+(60-75)275=22575+22575=6.0(O-E)2/E=75(90-75)2+75(60-75)2=75225+75225=6.0$

Total $\chi^2 = 27.3 + 20.9 + 6.0 = 54.2$

Step 4: Determine Critical Value

Degrees of freedom (df) = (Number of categories - 1) = 2 - 1 = 1
At $\alpha = 0.05$, the critical χ^2 value = 3.841

Decision

Calculated χ^2 (54.2) > Critical χ^2 (3.841)

Decision: Reject H_{01}

Since the null hypothesis was rejected, the findings indicate a statistically significant relationship between the frequent use of English and effective spoken English among senior secondary school students in Ahoada West Local Government Area. This suggests that students who use English regularly may be more likely to develop greater fluency and confidence in oral communication.

4.3 Discussion of Findings

The analysis revealed that students face several challenges when learning spoken English. Many respondents reported difficulty due to limited vocabulary, which aligns with Adebayo (2019), who observed that inadequate lexical competence hinders effective oral communication among Nigerian students. Fear of making mistakes also emerged as a major problem, confirming Okoye's (2020) assertion that anxiety impedes oral performance.

Mother tongue interference was strongly acknowledged as a barrier to proper pronunciation. This supports Yusuf (2018), who found that the influence of local languages affects students' acquisition of English phonological patterns.

In examining the elements influencing spoken English, the study found that inadequate speaking opportunities provided by teachers negatively affect oral proficiency. This agrees with Usman (2021), who emphasized that practice-oriented teaching strategies significantly improve speaking skills. The findings also showed that lack of instructional resources contributes to poor spoken English, consistent with Bello (2017), who noted that audio-visual materials enhance listening and speaking competence.

Motivation was also found to influence students' speaking abilities. This supports Dörnyei (2019), who stated that motivation is a key determinant in second-language speaking performance.

Lastly, the results demonstrated that frequent use of English improves fluency and confidence. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which states that language acquisition is strengthened through exposure and consistent use. Students who rarely use English outside the classroom tend to experience slower improvement, confirming Emmanuel (2022), who reported a direct correlation between daily usage and speaking proficiency.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that:

- Students in Ahoada West L.G.As encounter multiple problems that hinder effective spoken English, including limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and interference from their mother tongue.
- Teacher-related elements , inadequate learning resources, and low motivation negatively affect students' ability to communicate orally in English.
- Frequent use of English is a critical determinant of oral proficiency. Regular exposure and practice significantly enhance fluency, confidence, and overall speaking competence.

Therefore, effective spoken English among Senior Secondary school students is not only influenced by classroom instruction but also by external practice, supportive learning environments, and positive reinforcement.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. **For Students:** Students should be encouraged to actively practice English both inside and outside the classroom. They should develop a habit of speaking English regularly, even if they make mistakes, to build confidence and fluency.
2. **For Teachers:** English language teachers should adopt communicative and interactive teaching methods such as role-plays, debates, and dialogues. Teachers should also provide more opportunities for oral practice and offer constructive feedback to reduce students' fear of errors.
3. **For Schools:** Schools should improve learning environments by providing resources such as audio-visual aids, language laboratories, and English reading corners. Policies encouraging the use of English in school premises will help students improve their oral competence.

4. **For Parents:** Parents should support their children's language development by encouraging English communication at home. Engaging children in English conversations and motivating them to read English materials will reinforce classroom learning.

5. **For Curriculum Planners:** Curriculum developers should design English language programs that focus on practical speaking skills alongside reading and writing. The curriculum should include frequent oral exercises, listening activities, and assessment of spoken English to foster competence.

6. **For Future Researchers:** Future studies could explore the impact of technology, social media, and peer interaction on spoken English. Comparative studies between urban and rural schools could also provide insights into contextual elements influencing oral language acquisition.

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