

An Investigation of the Level of the Acquisition of Aural-Oral Skills in English by Selected Upper Primary School Pupils in Nigeria

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Abstract

It has been observed that problems of illiteracy and language acquisition have been attributed to failure in Nigerian educational system. In order to address this unsatisfactory and deplorable state of education in the country, especially at the basic level, which serves as the foundation for other forms of education, many researches have been carried out and solutions proffered. As part of the efforts towards ensuring the effective acquisition of the English language at the primary level and for all round educational development, this study investigated the level of acquisition of aural-oral skills by upper primary school pupils with a view to determining their preparedness/readiness to receive instruction in English in order to facilitate the learning of other subjects across the curriculum. The data were drawn from 20 pupils in Michael Otedola International Nursery and Primary School in Epe Division of Lagos State, Nigeria, using purposive random sampling procedure. To examine their level of acquisition of aural-oral skills, three different exercises drawn from the primary four course book were administered on the pupils: 10-item dictation exercise, listening comprehension with 10 questions and oral composition. The findings revealed that the pupils were grossly deficient in the oral skill (i.e. 34%) while their performance in the aural skill was above average (i.e. 62%). These results showed that the pupils have not acquired substantial degree of competence in aural-oral skills to receive instruction in English, because a language that cannot be spoken cannot be read and written. The study, therefore, concluded that aural-oral skills should be given priority attention in the primary school curriculum by curriculum designers and teachers.

1. Introduction

In recent years, parents, teachers, educational administrators and curriculum planners are worried stiff over high percentage of failure in English language papers at the basic education level and even at the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination level. This case has degenerated to such a level that students and parents cut corners in order to excel in this crucial subject. Consequently, the issue of teaching and learning English language should be of a great interest to everybody. Indeed, the general public should be concerned about the quality of English language education in schools. The basic reason for this is that English language is central to learning and to life itself in Nigeria (Boyer, 1996). In this sense, the success of education generally is hinged on the success and the functionality of English language education. Conversely, educational failure is basically a linguistic failure (Offomata, 1990; Afolayan, 1995; Simmons and Baines, 1998). The thoughts of these educationists are cast along line the popular belief that language is the essential vehicle for learning all other subjects. It is imperative to note here, the close relationship between linguistic competence and performance and, educational achievement. At the basic education level, students' educational failure is always blamed on the teachers and especially, English language teacher who has denied such students an instrument of self-expression through ineffective teaching. Here, the main concern is to draw attention of the teachers on the needs to improve their methods of teaching and learning of English language in Nigerian schools, According to the National Policy on Education (1981) and revised in (2004), the objective of English language teaching is to give children permanent literacy and the ability to communicate effectively (pg 13). Banjo (1989) intone the guideline above in his observation of what instructional effort should aim for the child; ...the Nigerian school boy has to learn how to behave appropriately in English which is the second language, over a wide area which we define as the National life of the country and he has to behave appropriately both in written and spoken English. The above assertion is to make the child "coordinate bilingual", efficient partaker in national life and also, to enhance the child's professional career. Having highlighted the goals of English language teaching, it becomes pertinent to inquire into the extent to which the teachers acquaint themselves with different methods of language teaching especially, the aural-oral method, as well as using these to achieve desired goals in their instructional efforts.

Aural-oral method involves the process of imparting grammar and pronunciation skills in students with the aim at enhancing functional communication skills, desired performances in school subjects and excellent acquisition of international intelligibility during conversational interactions. It should be noted from the above that aural-oral skills are directly linked to bilingual education programme. On this note, it is pertinent to note the ability of aural-oral language method to help students in identifying the differences and the similarities between their native languages and the English language as well as guiding them to achieve the status of coordinate bilinguals. This is the basis for this paper which seeks to "investigate the level of acquisition of aural-oral skills in English by upper basic school pupils in Nigeria.

2. Review of Related Studies

Listening and speaking skills (aural-oral skills) are very much related and must be simultaneously developed for the learner to communicate effectively in the second language (L2). These skills are reciprocal since the speaker and the listener exchange views without which there will be no communication. Lynch (1988) cited by Azikiwe (1998) opines that lessons for developing listening skills must incorporate speaking tasks. Thus, effective speaking depends on successful listening for foreign language learning. Studies on foreign language skills have revealed that listening and reading should also be simultaneously taught sine it has been established that there is a strong relationship between listening and reading skills. Scholars such as Neville (1985), Garrod (1986), and Muodumogu (1999) have proved that good listeners make good readers while poor listeners are most often poor readers. There have been many problems inhibiting learners from developing aural-oral skills in a foreign language. This could be partly due the fact that learners have already formed wrong habits on how to pronounce sounds at the early stages. Hence, they find it difficult to differentiate between the sounds that exist in L1 and L2 which subsequently results to the problem of interference (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005). Oyetunde et al. (1999) note that various researches and experiences have revealed that spoken English is not receiving any systematic teaching or learning; thus, it is often done haphazardly as reported by Akere (1989), Odejide (1979), Malgwi (1991). Odejide (1979) reports that listening and speaking are by-products of instruction in reading and writing and do not need to be emphasised as essential skills in themselves. Akere (1989) however, submits that there is need to consciously teach spoken English with a view to developing in the learners oral communication skills which will enable them to communicate in English in different domains of interactions.

Odejide (1979) notes that priority should be given to aural-oral skills based on the fact that a good grounding in listening and speech work is seen as naturally constituting a good basis for learning to read and write in a well-planned language course. In other words, children are potentially able to read and write what they are made to understand and say. McGregor (1971) in Azikiwe (1998:128) thus submits that if we neglect the teaching of speech, we are neglecting one of the fundamental purposes for which we are teaching English. In classroom practice, speech therefore has come to be regarded as the foundation of language work. Also, the ultimate goal for which listening is taught is for the learners to be able to understand without difficulty both the native and non-native speakers of English in any language use situation, particularly classroom situations where – instructions are given in the second language (L2), hence the need for effective teaching and learning of aural-oral skills at the basic level.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

Simple percentage was used to analyse the level of acquisition of aural-oral skills among upper basic level school pupils with a view to determining their preparedness towards receiving instructions in English language in order to facilitate or enhance their learning of other subjects across the curriculum. The data were drawn from twenty pupils Michael Otedola International Nursery and Primary School in Epe Division of Lagos State, Nigeria, using purposive random sampling procedure. In order to examine the level of acquisition in aural and oral skills, the researchers conducted three different exercises drawn from the primary four English language textbook, Macmillan English Course Book. Ten items on each of the following skills; dictation, listening, comprehension and oral composition were administered on the pupils separately. The findings revealed that pupils were grossly deficient in oral skills with an average score of 34%, while the score in aural skills was above average with 64%. The result implied that the pupils had not acquired substantial degree of competence in aural-oral skills which would enable them to receive instruction in English since language that cannot be spoken cannot be read and written.

4. Summary

The poor performance in the acquisition of aural-oral skills among these pupils is as a result of the following factors:

- i. Poor methodology
- ii. Incompetence on the part of teachers handling English language.
- iii. Negligence in the teaching of these aspects by the teacher.
- iv. Attitude of teachers handling the subject. An English teacher must be friendly and free with the children. No child can learn effectively well under a harsh teacher.
- v. In addition, poor performance could also be a result of mode of the tests given. The pupils were unprepared. Some of them could develop stage fright while speaking or could be as a result of shyness.

5. Recommendations

In view of the findings highlighted above, the school needs to:

- Engage in proper monitoring of teachers while teaching and make sure that all aspects of English language are being taught.
- Engage teachers in training and retraining exercises with emphasis on new pedagogy of teaching different aspects of English language.
- Teachers of English language must be friendly with the pupils considering the fact that these children are young and besides, English language is not their mother tongue: it is a second language. The teacher must also bear it in mind that acquisition of aural-oral skills are needed not only in English language, but also in other subjects since the medium of instruction and learning is in English language.
- The pupils must be engaged in classroom debate, oral composition dictation as often as possible.
- Our colleges and institutes of education should have standard language laboratories with specialists to train these teachers to be so that they can impart the right rudiments/skills into the life of these children. It is what they have that they can give.
- Schools should also engage in specialization of subject teaching at this level so as to enhance efficiency and acquisition of all these skills.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, aural-oral skills should be given much attention in the primary school curriculum by curriculum designers and teachers since primary education is bedrock to all other levels of education

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