

Effect of Background Influences on Use of English as a Course among First Year Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This work aims at examining the effect of background influences on Use of English as a Course among First Year Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. The purpose is to unearth its implications in curriculum planning, school administration, academic progress and socio-personal development of the students. To proffer solution to this problem, the students' scores in English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) conducted by West African Examination Council and National Examination Council (NECO) were used as index of their entry qualification performance in English language. A total of 320 copies of questionnaire was also administered on the respondents to give supportive information to whatever data obtained from the students' result in English language. Data related to the backgrounds subjected to analysis in the study were sorted and presented in a tabular form. A simple percentage and frequency count were the statistical tools employed for data analysis. Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the type of backgrounds students are exposed to during their primary and secondary school years have influenced their performance in The Use of English as a course with the exception of the lecturers' teaching effectiveness which has little or no influence on their performance in the course. Hence, it has been concluded that the performance of students in the Use of English course has inextricable affinity with the various backgrounds from which they come.

Key words: *Use of English, students' performance, background influences,*

INTRODUCTION

In some parts of the world, different Englishes are spoken by different people. In Britain for instance, there are many dialects of English language used in different areas. This is also the case when American and British English languages are compared and contrasted. According to Tomlinson and Ellis (1980):

In every part of the world where English Language is spoken, there is a distinction as a result of the influence of the linguistic and socio-cultural background of the inhabitants and the way of life prevalent in the area.

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In Nigeria, for instance, there is Nigerian English variety seriously influenced by over 513 languages from the various ethnic nationalities that have come together like jig-saw puzzle for the emergence of what is today referred to as Nigeria. Therefore, the Nigerian English is a nativized product of the socio-cultural milieu of the country (Onyemauwa, 1997). Again, English language in Nigeria is used as a second language (L2) because it is not one of the background languages of the people. Among other functional loads that English carries are means of communication between speakers of different ethno-linguistic backgrounds, business transactions, keeping of administrative and official records of government, medium of instruction in our educational activities and many more. Unlike native speakers, environment where children are often exposed to the language before they actually learn it and use it at school, children in Nigeria, irrespective of which state they come from will not only be taught English in the class room, but will also 'pick it up' as an optional compulsory course, a pass of which makes such a student a celebrity. Attah, (1990) justifies the explication above when he states that:

This may be an understatement when taken into consideration the fact that English language is an important repository of the skills and competences envisaged under the new policy. Moreover, since academic and vocational courses are expected to be transmitted by words of mouth with English language as the medium of instruction, proficiency in spoken English is necessary for both the teacher and the learner.

Jordan (1983) observes that the general nature of the secondary school syllabus that prepares a student for the university is such a detailed springboard that should make it easy than any structural syllabus to give more emphasis on the communicative properties of the language for the students not to have any challenge in his English language use, especially, at the university (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Moreover, secondary schools in Nigeria are seen as the stepping stones to tertiary institutions and to obtain jobs in the offices, therefore, students at this level of academic attainment should be competent in their use of English when given the right background. But the contrary is the case in Nigeria, as could be seen from the students' incompetence in the use of English course. That is why investigation has to be carried out into the various areas that could yield useful data about the nature of the background influences that constitute impediments to excellent performance in the use of English of these year students who are the subjects of this research undertaking.

The Problem of Poor Performance in Use of English

The fact that this research is carried out, using the first year students in the Department of General Studies of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra

State, Nigeria as a case study must not be viewed with some attachment of negative feelings with a conclusion that this phenomenon is characteristic of the targeted population for this work. Rather, it should be seen as a mere drop of a randomly sampled group selected for the study of a problem that is gradually gaining a global attention, so that generalization would be enhanced from the known to the unknown (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Over the years scholars have observed with dismay how appalling the abysmal poor performance of secondary school students in English language has been. An educated Nigerian, like any other educated foreign language learner, can be said to speak at least two languages: he/she acquires the first language (mother tongue) while at home and learns English language mostly at school. He/She applies both the mother tongue (L1) and the English language in various situations. He may use either of the two within the house, while outside and or at his place of work. But he chooses to use English at formal situations because other Nigerians or non-Nigerians who do not speak his mother tongue may be present. English, thus, becomes a vital tool to communication in Nigeria in view of the multi-lingual posture of the country (Enang, 2009).

This observation agrees with Bangbose's (1970) assertion that: "of the entire heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonialism probably, none is more important than the English language". English is taught and learned as a second language in Nigeria. The constant use of the English language in the day to day activities prompts the learner/users to strive to use it like the native speaker (Onyemauwa, 1997).

There is a consensus that there is no significant improvement in the competence and performance ability of some Nigerians educated in the language. Even with a credit pass in the English in the school certificate examination, students' performances in spoken and written English during their first year to finals as undergraduates are generally far below expectation. Given the fact that the SS3 students and the first year undergraduates are drawn from primary and post-primary institutions across the nation, their performance in the Use of English course could be seen as a national problem which requires a national solution.

The researchers have interacted with the educated Nigerians whose use of English falls below the class they claim to belong. Again, as examiner/markers of WAEC and NECO, the researchers have had access to students and have discovered that they have difficulties in the construction of sentences, clauses, group and word formation which could be analysed at the level of syntax. This and other problems have stirred up this study so as to highlight educated Nigerians' inadequacies in grammar and use same to proffer solutions as contribution towards equipping and helping teachers and students of English with facts for the analyses on English sentences. From the view point of theoretical framework, this work uses Maslow's (1954) Theory of Needs, Bloom's (1976) Theory of School Learning, Murray's (1938) and Hull's (1961) Theories of Motivation and Halliday's

(1961) Systemic Grammar Model which makes it possible to: select and analyse sentences and clauses of educated Nigerians from the corpus of data and discuss them, select and analyse the group and word structures and account for the possible differences and influences (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Maslow's theory of Needs

According to Maslow (1954), each child has to grow up and in its growing period has its needs. Maslow maintains that if these needs are not met, the child may not grow up to be a full fledged human being. He divides the needs into two categories: primary needs which include water, food, shelter and clothing while the secondary needs comprise love, justice, unity, self esteem quest for acquisition, exposition and self actualization. Maslow argues that when all these needs are satisfied, the individual will be able to grow up well and actualized (Onyemauwa, 1997).

It is Maslow's contention that social environment has much to do with the child's development. According to him, environment is rooted in two factors-observation (what you see) and the use of the brain. The brain records the experiences of a child in the environment. Learning, according to Maslow, results from the characteristics of the learner and the forces in the environment the learner finds himself. He goes on to say that readiness on the part of the child depends on the preparedness for learning, while preparedness in turn depends on the extent to which he has access to equipment meant for use in the task of learning. From the foregoing explications, it would be reasonable to say that a child may be disadvantaged learner because of reasons which include a child learning in a different language (English) in school and different language (vernacular) at home. Again, a child would be disadvantaged because if his readiness to learn is only in school while such readiness is markedly at home and vice versa. In such a situation, there is no continuity of learning or transfer of learning (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Bloom's Theory of School Learning

Another theory employed to explain the phenomena with which this work is concerned is Bloom's (1976) theory of school learning which holds that the variations in the cognitive entry behaviours and affective characteristics and the quality of instruction determine the level and kind of achievement, the rate of learning and the affective characteristics of the learner (Onyemauwa, 1997). Bloom asserts that the history of the learner is at the core of school learning and that the modifications are possible in the pre-requisite learning and motivation for learning in the quality of learning or both.

Murray and Hull's Motivation theories

In Murray's (1938) theory of motivation, his concept of need was postulated in order to be able to explain human behaviour. It is his opinion that need is a

construct which stands for the force in the brain region, a force which organizes perception, apperception, intellection, conation and action in such a way as to effect a change in a certain direction an existing, unsatisfying situation. It is Murray's contention that an unsatisfied need would ginger the individual into working hard in order to meet such a need. He further breaks down needs into Viscerogenic and Psychogenic which run in the platform with Maslow's as a drive reduction theory of reinforcement. Hull argues that drives and needs treated as a unit is a situation which requires action on the part of the organism as a prerequisite to optimum probability of survival of either the individual or the species.

Uzoeshi (1994) agrees with Hull asserting that the theory on hand provides the background to how a teacher can motivate learners (students). The source reasons that each learner needs motivation in order to achieve his best and to discover his true self or talent (Onyemauwa, 1997). Uzoeshi contends that "just as fuel energizes the car into action, or (increases or raises the flame of fire), so also should a teacher energize students into academic productivity". The source maintains that teachers have it as a duty to propel, energize, ginger, stimulate and sustain students' interest towards learning. The source further suggests that a teacher can realize the suggestions above by: (i) knowledge of subject matter (ii) presentation of subject matter (iii) use of reinforcement (iv) goal setting.

Systemic/Features of the Grammar Model

From the view point of the features of this model, systemic grammar has four theoretical categories of unit, structure, class and system which are used to account for the fundamental grammatical patterns of any human language. While unit and class apply to both surface and deep planes of grammar, structure operates only in the surface grammar, while system operates only in the deep grammar (Onyemauwa, 1997). It is a generative non-transformational grammar that operates at surface and deep planes. At the surface plane, the grammar deals with how any given system is ultimately realized in grammatical structure and their elements. At the deep plane, it accounts for semantic imports which are organized into networks, with the entry conditions into any given network explicitly. Classes are defined by their role in structure. For instance, 'nominal group' is defined in its role as subject and complement of a clause. There are differences in 'delicacy' of items of analysis. Some items or elements are more delicate than others (Osasinwo, 1999).

For the purpose of empiricism of this work, the following research hypotheses were formulated in null forms for the study.

H₀1: The mother tongue does not significantly affect students' performance in Use of English as a course.

H₀2: The family background does not have significant effect on students' performance in Use of English as a course.

H₀3: The school background does not have significant effect on students' performance in Use of English as a course.

METHOD

Descriptive survey was adopted as the research design for this study. The main purpose was to examine the effect of background influences on Use of English as a Course among First Year Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. To investigate and proffer solution to this problem, the students' scores in English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) conducted by West African Examination Council and National Examination Council (NECO) were obtained and used as index of their entry qualification performance in English language. A total of 320 copies of questionnaire was also administered on the respondents to give supportive information to whatever data obtained from the students' result in English language. Out of the 320 copies of questionnaire distributed to the respondents, only 300 copies were well filled and returned for analysis. Data related to the backgrounds subjected to analysis in the study were sorted and presented in a tabular form. The table contains information on the three backgrounds under study. A simple percentage and frequency count were the statistical tools employed for data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 indicates that language spoken as a background factor has a significant influence on the performance of the students. It shows further that the higher the students' use of the mother tongue and pidgin, the lower their performance in the Use of English tended to be. As can be seen, the students generally scored 88%, 55% in Vernacular and pidgin respectively which turn out to affect their performance in English language with an abysmal score of 43%. Again, a look at the family's socio-economic status of the child, it is obvious from the table above that students from low and middle socio-economic status score 59% and 66% respectively while those from families with high socio-economic status score 87% in their Use of English as a course. This finding indicates that the higher the socio-economic status, the higher students performance in the Use of English as a course.

Finally, School as background factor has a significant influence on the performance of students in their use of English. The table above shows that peer group influences the performance of the student as indicated in score line of 66% while the language spoken affects their performance with a score of 58% with teachers' effectiveness affecting their performances negatively with a score of 41%. The implication of this finding is that no matter how effectively adequate a

teacher and his teaching could be, the effect on the students' performance has always been on the negative. In other words, the teachers' teaching effectiveness does not influence the students' performance in Use of English.

Table 1: Results on Students Performances as affected by the various Backgrounds

Type of Background	Able to Perform well		Not Able to Perform well	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Language Spoken				
English Language	129	43	171	57
Pidgin	156	52	144	48
Mother Tongue	264	88	36	12
Family Status				
Low	177	59	123	41
Middle	198	66	102	34
High	261	87	39	13
School Background				
Teachers' Effectiveness	123	41	177	59
Language Spoken	174	58	126	42
Peer Influence	198	66	102	34

Source: Suvey, 2017

The Influence of the Mother Tongue

A speaker of English language as a native of the immediate environment acquires English naturally as a young native speaker. This, the child does because the language happens to be the language of the immediate community; its parents use it, its peer members use it and its elders use it as their normal means of communication even with him and with other members (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) in a different study, agrees with the above explication and further stresses that: 'where English is not the mother tongue, children (students) may have difficulties in trying to master English as a new language and as a subject in school', but the researchers of this work have seen that this views are too restricted in the sense that they merely point out the advantages a first language learner (L1) enjoys against a learner of the same language as a second language (L2) and conversely, an L1 speaker over a second language (L2) speaker. Hamp-Lyons and Heasley have ignored the existence of language among some students who can display mastery of the second language with less stress (Onyemauwa, 1997). Pyles (1964), Edwards (1981) and Rutherford (1987) cited in Onyemauwa (1997) explain that:

Children (students) may learn through their maternal language and later learn a second language through bilingualism. Children may learn the second language (L2) which in Nigeria is English through their parents at home. This, they can do the way and manner they learn the first language (L1).

This argument establishes a link between the first language (Mother Tongue) and the second language (English) in this context. The implication here is that hypothesis 1 which states that the mother tongue does not significantly affect students' performance in Use of English Language as a course is invalidated. Hence, there is the influence of the background language (MT) on the child's second language, English.

The Influence of the Family Background

Poor physical home conditions are associated with falling levels of performance or achievement. Sonerthurst (1975), Meers (1976) and Adedapo (1992) observe that poor housing, overcrowding and even lack of good bathroom facilities affect the behaviour of children (students). According to them, home has a great effect on the future of a child. Home is seen as the foundation of a child and that if such foundation (home) is bad; a child from such a home is bound to encounter some difficulties throughout his life (Onyemauwa, 1997). The type of family a child is born into and brought up from determines the future of that child. It is their contention that children that come from homes where there are little or no encouragement for their education or use of a language (for example, English language) usually perform poorly in reading and vocabulary. The availability of reading materials and an enriched home environment are vital for the development of the child. They also maintain that books at home and parents' encouragement of their children improve the children's academic performance (Onyemauwa, 1997).

Based on these views, it is observed that parents of low social status speak common language. In Nigeria as a whole, this may be vernacular or alternatively, pidgin English. Secondly, parents of high social status speak exclusively in refined language, like Standard English language in this context. This finding again knocks off hypothesis 2 of the study because the type of family a child comes from greatly affects its performance in virtually the Use of English as a course.

The Influence of the School Background

The international principle of nationality agrees that a child must always take his schooling in the language of the country of its admission, (Mayor and Pugh, 1987) with USA school system as a case study. This policy is also perennial in Nigeria because Nigeria's Educational Policy does not mind the multi-lingual posture of the country (Onyemauwa, 1997). A look at the three major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba explain this point. A research carried out by Anyanwu (1988) has shown that Hausa is spoken in three discrete States of the federation; Kano, Zamfara and Sokoto, and has a very high degree of usage in all

the other northern States. Igbo is spoken in five discrete States; Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Imo, and enjoys a degree of usage in Rivers, Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and Benue States. Yoruba is spoken in six discrete States; Ekiti, Lagos, Ondo, Ogun, Osun, and Oyo and has a degree of usage in Edo, Kwara, Kogi and Niger States. English language is the only single language that is used all over Nigeria from the Creek Town of Calabar to the Goronyo areas of Sokoto in the desert. It is pertinent to point out here that whether by error of omission or commission, Metchalf's notion is in effect in Nigeria today. This is because English language has pushed aside other Nigerian languages to become Nigeria's lingua franca and the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary institutions (Onyemauwa, 1997). The school is quite a new environment where the child remains for considerable length of time to design the state of its future. This finding rejects hypothesis 3 of this study, which states that the school background does not have significant effect on students' performance in Use of English Language as a course. Hence, the background of the school greatly affects the emerging child and its personality package.

CONCLUSION

This work examined the effect of background influences on Use of English as a Course among First Year Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. To proffer solution to this problem, the students' scores in English language in the Senior School Certificate Examination (SSCE) conducted by West African Examination Council and National Examination Examination Council (NECO) were obtained and used as index of their entry qualification performance in English language. The researchers who, themselves have direct relation with the participants and are lecturers, examiners and markers of the course, became disturbed by the students poor performance and agreed to join in finding out how the various backgrounds where these students come from have contributed to their performance in the said course. It was revealed that the various answers proffered by each of the positions of the research hypotheses that the child's mother tongue, the family and the school backgrounds contribute in no small measure to its performance in Use of English as a course among First Year Students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria. It has been concluded that the performance of students in the Use of English course has inextricable affinity with the various backgrounds from which they come.

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