

SCHOOL LOCATION AND STUDENTS' PROFICIENCY IN ORAL ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The influence of nurture on achievement has been an age long controversy that has remained unsettled. This informs the need for research on the possible effects of nurture, as dictated by school location, on the oral English of students. A total of one hundred and twenty students were randomly selected from some schools in the central part of Ekiti state to find out if school location plays a role in proficiency in oral English. Results of a t-test at 0.5 level of significance showed that there was an influence of location (rural and urban) on secondary school students' proficiency in oral English.

INTRODUCTION

English is not an indigenous language in Nigeria and not a mother tongue (MT) to most Nigerians. It is, however, listed as one of the many languages in Nigeria (Hansford et al, 1976). It is, no doubt, the most important language in education as it is the language of instruction in schools from senior primary to the tertiary level (FGN, 1998). It is the Nigerian lingua franca and the official language in government offices. Among the languages in Nigeria, it is the most preferred by parents and teachers for teaching in the primary schools in the six geo-political regions of Nigeria (Bodunde, 2004). The age-long controversy in the field of psycholinguistics over whether or not first language (L1) interference contributes negatively to proficiency in the second language (L2) acquisition, remains unsettled. Smith (1969) and Burling (1973) assert that an individual tends to transfer forms and meanings of his native language to the tar-

get language (TL), hence the occurrence of language interference. Lado (1957, 1964) argues that a learner constructs the TL in the source language (SL) which he has been exposed to. Thus, he treats the TL as the SL thereby transferring the peculiarities of the former to the later.

Spencer (1971) asserts that the phonology of a second language (L2) will almost always receive some imprint from the phonology of the MT. He emphasizes that West African languages conform to a basic pattern of syllable isochronicity whereas English conforms to an opposite kind of rhythm termed stress isochronicity. This indicates that there will be phonological interference upon the English of West African learners. Bamgbose (1971), Roy (1975) and Tiffen (1976) say that the greatest influence on the pronunciation of English by Nigerian is the sound systems of the indigenous languages. Stevenson (1969), on the other hand, identifies students' atti-

tude of not wishing to speak the way they are taught as one of the causes of deviation from the correct pronunciation. It is obvious from these views that there is L1 interference but much has not been done on the effect of school location on the spoken English of L2 learners.

This study was therefore undertaken to investigate rural-urban influence on proficiency in oral English in the former Ekiti Central and Irepodun/Ifelodun Local Government Areas of Ekiti State.

METHODOLOGY

The population for his study includes eighteen secondary schools in Ekiti Central and Irepodun/Ifelodun Local Government Areas of Ekiti State. Out of these, six schools were sampled. The choice of the location for this study is based on the historical linguistic homogeneity of the towns which were previously in the same local government but now in two different local councils. Out of the three schools, three were from urban area (Ado, Iyin, and Igede) while the other three were from the rural area (Are, Iworoko and Afao). Twenty students were randomly selected from the Senior Secondary three (SSIII) class of each school giving a total of one hundred and twenty subjects. All the students selected were born in Ekiti and had lived the last seven years in the area in which they were residing at the time of the study. The selection of 120 subjects from the population is in line with Ferguson's (1981) suggestion that to facilitate the use of Central Limit Theory, a size of thirty or more, is adequate.

The null hypothesis formulated for this study is: There is no significant difference

between the spoken English of learners of English in urban secondary schools and that of learners in rural secondary schools.

Instrument

A production test designed for students was used. The test was based on English phonemes that are absent in Ekiti phonology. Words that contained such phonemes were required to pronounce such words. The error-detecting test used was as follows:

Dental Fricatives

/θ/ path, bath, anthem, arithmetic, thank, think

/ð/ this, that, mother, father, smooth

/h/ heat, hour, honour, behind

Bilabial Plosives

/p/ print, piece, stop, steep, spin, speed

Alveolar Affricatives

/tʃ/ chair, church, catch, chief, literature, chop

Labio-Dental Fricatives

/v/ van, vice, evade, evoke, invite, interview

/z/ zoo, zeal, zed, seize, zip

/ʒ/ vision, seizure, measure, treasure

Vowels

Monophthongs

/i:/ seat, beat, bead, seed

/a:/ cart, heart, hard, clan

/ʌ:/ caught, off, cross, often

/ʌ/ cut, hut, such, uncle

/ə/ doctor, above, better, measure, word, heard, firm, skirt

/u:/ hood, fool, boot, food

Diphthongs

/iə/ tear, fear, ear, appear

/eə/ air, hair, care, bare

/uə/ poor, tour, pure, fuel

/ɔi/ oil, choice, joy, soil

Syllable

/f/ leaf, chief, wolf, wife

/str/ strange, straight, strive

/kst/ next, text, vext.

Data Collection

An isolated classroom was used for the test since none of the schools visited had a language laboratory. The production test required subjects to read aloud, independently, the words containing the non-existing phonemes in Ekiti phonology. The subjects were called individually for

the test. Wrongly pronounced words were noted for each subject per school, and were summed up for each location. Teachers of the sampled students (subjects) were not allowed to interfere with the conduct of the test.

Data Analysis

The mean responses of urban-rural subjects were calculated. The statistical analysis was done using the independent t-test of significance and the result was considered at 5% level of significance.

RESULTS

There is a significant difference between the spoken English of learners in urban secondary and rural secondary schools as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean and t-test Results for Urban and Rural Subjects

Subject	Score	%	\bar{X}	df	t cal	critical	Decision
Rural	3790	45.42	63.17	118	5.73	1.98	significant
Urban	4555	54.58	75.98				

Table 1 shows a significant difference in the scores of rural and urban subjects both in mean and the t-test results. The value of t calculated is greater than the critical value of t. The null hypothesis is therefore rejected.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that learners in urban area correctly pronounced 58.58% of the words given while those in rural could only correctly pronounced 45.42% of the words. This further confirms the t-test result that shows a significant difference in favour of the urban schools. A significant difference is shown between urban and rural locations which is evidenced in the difference

between the scores of students in the two locations. This implies that location has an influence on proficiency in English Language. Ehiozuwa et al (2000) in a test of Standard Progressive Matrices (SPM) earlier found out that urban children outperformed their rural counterparts. This further confirms the importance of location in learning. There may be reasons for this. For instance, the opportunity to use English Language in the urban setting is higher than in the rural setting.

There is likely to be a mixture of people from various ethnic groups and different nationals in the urban area. This phenomenon, therefore, gives credence to the multi-

lingual nature of the urban environment. Students from such diverse linguistic communities in an attempt to interact, use a common and mutually intelligible language since they do not understand each others language. English, a foreign and second language; and a lingua franca, seems to be a quick option. The opportunity to use English Language outside the classroom setting serves as a motivating factor to learners in the urban area in enhancing proficiency in oral English. This is what Di Pietro (1976) describes as an extra grammatical factor motivating learners in language learning.

Another likely reason for the poor performance of pupils in the rural area may be inadequate teachers and the use of unqualified teachers in the location. Most teachers do not want to work in the rural areas which makes many schools operate without specialist teachers of English Language. The few available ones are saddled with the responsibility of handling too many classes which does not give room for effective teaching of all the aspects of the language and speech work is the easiest prey. It is also assumed that any degree holder can teach English Language, particularly in the lower secondary class. Such 'emergency English teachers' avoid the speech work section of recommended English text-books since they are not trained to teach the subject. The cumulative effect of all the reasons may have contributed to the poor performance of students in oral English.

Some of the wrongly pronounced sounds by learners in the rural area are:

Dental Fricative

/θ/ as in path pronounced / pat/

/ð/ as in this pronounced /dis/

Labio dental fricative

/f/ as in suffer pronounced /s[^]və/

/v/ as in vision but pronounced fission

/fiʒn/

Consonant clusters

/str/ as in strange but pronounced srange / sreind/

/kst/ as in text but pronounced test /test/

Monophthongs

/i:/ as in seat but pronounced sit /sit/

/ʌ/ as in hut/ but pronounced hot/bot/

hɔt/ /bɔt/

/ɔ:/ as in word but pronounced ward /wɔ:d/

/u:/ as in fool but pronounced full /ful/

In Ekiti dialect, there are no dental fricative sounds. The closet sounds to dental fricatives in the language are used, hence the use of /t/ and /d/ in place of /θ/ and /ð/ respectively. In the case of labio dental fricatives, there is confusion in the use of the two sounds, /f/ and /v/ which are often used interchangeably as shown in this study. There is no consonant cluster in Ekiti dialect. Words with consonant clusters are looked at in terms of alphabets, thus they are produced as single sounds. For instance, /gb/ which comprises two letters is a single sound in Ekiti. An Ekiti learner of English language tends to treat consonant clusters as single sounds.

RECOMMENDATION

The effect of school environment on proficiency in pronunciation was determined. It

was discovered that location of a school affects students' proficiency in English pronunciation. English Language is often used as medium of expression in urban location while a mixture of Mother Tongue or Language of Immediate Community is used in the rural area. Since secondary school students in both rural and urban locations are exposed to the same assessment (Senior Secondary Certificate Examination) at the end of the secondary school, the finding of this study therefore has implications for the teaching and learning of speech work in the secondary schools, particularly in the rural area. The school administrators, policy makers and teachers are challenged. The following recommendations are made to enhance a better performance in oral English in rural locations:

- i. Adequately qualified English teachers should be sent to both rural and urban areas.
- ii. The oral English lesson should be given a place on the time-table.
- iii. The teaching of speech work should be monitored by the Head of Department of English of each school.
- iv. Conscious effort should be made to correct wrongly pronounced words as the need arises both in formal and non-formal situations.
- v. Since most students in rural areas are day students, they should be made to stay in school till 6pm daily to increase their interaction period with others using the target language.
- vi. Language laboratories should be made available in secondary schools in rural and urban areas.
- vii. The Ministry of Education in collaboration with Institutes of Education

should organize workshops for teachers of English in oral English during vacation as a means of preparing them for a new academic session.

CONCLUSION

The effect of school location on students' proficiency in oral English was established in the study. The remote causes include interference error, inadequate and unqualified teachers, incompetent certificated English teachers, lack of language laboratory and inadequate exposure to language situations that can facilitate the mastery of the Target Language. When all these causes are adequately addressed, a tremendous improvement will be recorded. All the stakeholders need to come together to facilitate the process of improving the teaching of English, in general, and oral English, in particular, in the rural area, considering the fact that students in rural and urban areas will be exposed to the same Senior Secondary Certificate Examination and operate in the same country-Nigeria-where English is medium of instruction from primary six examination to the university level and the official language. A relationship between spoken English and writing has been established in literature. This justifies why the teaching and learning of oral English should be taken more seriously and addressed urgently before it hinders students' proficiency in speech work, overall performance in school and the teaching and learning processes.

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