CORRELATION BETWEEN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVE CLASSROOM COMMUNICATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Effective classroom communication is an essential component of teaching and learning in Nigeria's educational ecosystem. Indeed, there is growing concern about declining classroom communication in the school context. This present study aimed to determine the correlation between English proficiency and effective classroom communication using a sample of secondary school students from the post-primary education system in Enugu State, Nigeria. Two hundred and forty-eight respondents (n=248) completed a self-report measure of English proficiency and classroom communication. A Pearson's product-moment correlation was performed to ascertain the correlation between English proficiency and classroom communication among secondary school students. The analyses revealed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between English proficiency and classroom communication, $r(246) = .39, p < .001$. Most importantly, the R^2 indicated that English proficiency explained about 21.2% of the variation in classroom communication. The study concludes that English proficiency is a determinant of student-teacher classroom interaction. The practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: *English proficiency, classroom communication, secondary school, students*

BACKGROUND

English reflects the official language in Nigeria (Mercy, 2019). Indeed, it has assumed essential in classroom learning across the educational system and beyond. Reports indicate that adopting English as a medium of intra-national and inter-national communication in Nigeria was due to the absence of a national unifying indigenous (Fakeye 2006). Notably, English describes the engine of Nigeria's education. Remarkably, it functions as the language of education, instruction, educational assessment, the media, politics, government, and legal documents (Adebileje & Akinola, 2020). English governs interaction in Nigeria and acts as an instrument of communication (Abubakar Muhammad, 2018). It is indispensable to all levels of education in Nigeria and serves as a veritable tool for human development in contemporary society. Notably, English is a critical determinant of educational transition in Nigeria. Accordingly, learning English remains crucial for many students (Mercy, 2019), especially for its role in social interaction in every domain.

Communication effectiveness is a central and ubiquitous component of the classroom learning process (Fashiku, 2017; Ismail & Idris, 2009). Indeed, instructors are expected to communicate effectively and convey accurately to achieve an effective learning outcome. Hence, teachers' effectiveness is determined by how they communicate with the learners (Brown, 2005). However, feedback from the learners is essential in demonstrating effective learning and probable clarifications. Therefore, classroom communication can be explained as student-teacher interaction in a learning environment in the simplest term. Consequently, if there is a breakdown in communication in the classroom, teaching and learning will be affected negatively. Indeed, teachers are experiencing difficulty achieving effective communication in the school to attain an efficient teaching-learning process (Cegarra & María, 2020).

In the classroom, effective communication remains the highest challenge to teachers at the undergraduate level in this 21st century (Subha & Nagarani, 2009). Meanwhile, it is the absolute instrument and bedrock upon which the teachers' indispensable and significant roles are made. It enhances complete and expressive interaction between the teachers and the learners. For instance, studies have found a high and positive relationship between teachers' effective communication in the classroom and students' motivation in learning (Akudo, 2020). It is also crucial for presenting a lesson or lecture in class (Das, 2014). However, effective communication has an essential function in teaching because failure in communication will result in an unsuccessful process (Mahmud, 2017). Possibly, problems and failures associated with classroom performance could be attributed to ineffective communication in the classroom. Positive teaching and learning can only take place when there is effective communication in the school (Chung et al., 2016; Duta et al., 2015; Trihastuti & Zamzani, 2018)

Proficiency is operationalized in this study as a student's ability to effectively use English to communicate meaningfully in spoken and written contexts while adhering to the basic principles of grammar. English proficiency is an essential indicator of success in academics. Research suggests that teachers' general proficiency significantly affects how they use language in the classroom to promote learning (van Canh & Renandya, 2017). At the same time, proficiency in English is used to measure student competency in Nigerian schools (Ghani et al., 2012). Therefore, students are expected to read, write, listen and speak effectively for proper teaching and learning.

Previous studies have established a link between English proficiency and academic performance in Nigerian samples (Dogo, 2016; Fakeye & Ogunsiji, 2009; Jimoh & Kenneth, 2016; Oyinloye et al., 2020; Taiwo, 2018; Ozowuba, 2018). For instance, Fakeye and Ogunsiji (2009) studied English language proficiency as a predictor of academic achievement among students in Nigeria. Their findings showed that English proficiency has a significant positive relationship with students' overall academic achievement. English language proficiency considerably impacts a student's overall academic achievement. The result is congruent with several findings in different parts of the world (e.g., Maleki & Zangani, 2007; Feast, 2002; Bayliss & Raymond, 2004), indicating that students can be disadvantaged in their academic performance due to low proficiency in English. Indeed, most students and graduates in Nigeria cannot speak standard English in their formal and informal discourse (Ghani et al., 2012).

The present study

The importance of student-teacher communication in the classroom has been established (Jafarri & Asgari, 2020; Rawat, 2016; Tan et al., 2019; Asrar et al., 2018). Effective classroom communication describes the student's ability to effectively interact with the teacher and express one's position in the learning process. Thus, communication relating to questions, reporting incomprehension, and demanding clarity. Observation of classroom interaction between teachers and students suggests that most students are left out in the teaching process due basically to the inability to use English effectively. The fear of uttering a blunder, the embarrassment accompanying wrong grammar, the psychological mechanisms of stage fright, and the influence of the mother tongue primarily restrict some students from participating in classroom activities. In particular, there are indications that the trend is prevalent in the post-primary school system. Thus, the present paper explored English proficiency as a scarcely explored variable contributing to effective classroom communication among secondary school students in Enugu state.

Hypothesis: *English proficiency will positively correlate with classroom communication among secondary school students in Enugu state.*

Method

Participants

The post-primary school system in Enugu state encompasses all state government-owned secondary schools across the 17 local government areas of the state. Thus, the participants of this study comprised secondary school students conveniently pooled from fifteen (15) secondary schools in the Enugu metropolis, Eha Amufu, Nsukka, and Nkanu west zones. The students included males and females enrolled in the senior secondary class.

Measures

English language proficiency

English language proficiency was measured with a scale designed to assess one's English-speaking proficiency level. The scale was adapted from the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT), the standardized TOEFL Paper Test and Interview designed to test the individual's speaking skills. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is intended to evaluate English language proficiency more generally in everyday situations. A higher score signifies a higher proficiency level. The instrument was validated following a pilot study .87 Cronbach's alpha was obtained.

Classroom communication

Classroom communication was measured using an instrument designed to measure students' ability to communicate, ask questions and express satisfaction in the classroom. The scale consists of 10 items in a 5-points Linkert-type. The instrument contains questions such as "My English is very poor" and "I don't like asking questions in class." A lower score indicates high classroom communication skills. Cronbach's alpha .88 was recorded for the instrument following a pilot study in this study.

Procedure

Authorization was given by the heads of the selected secondary schools following a request to conduct the survey. Indeed, with the help of the teachers, 271 students were approached and asked to participate in a study to gain a better understanding of their English proficiency and how it affects them in the class. In all, 262 students out of the 271 approached agreed to participate in the study. Hence, the instruments were administered to them. Two hundred and fifty-one (251) copies of the scale administered were completed and retrieved on the spot. Nevertheless, only the satisfactorily filled questionnaires (i.e., 248) were used for analysis. Other copies were discarded due to inappropriate fillings.

Ethical considerations

A concept note was completed by the participants before the commencement of the study. Indeed, the respondents were made to understand the study's objectives fully, and they were also reminded that participation is voluntary. Thus, they were advised to withdraw from the study at their wish. Indeed, their privacy was respected.

Result

A correlation research design was employed in the present paper. The data collected with the instrument were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, Version 23). A Pearson's product-moment correlation was performed to ascertain the correlation between English proficiency and classroom communication among secondary school students. Two hundred and forty-eight respondents completed the study's instrument. The analyses revealed that the relationship is linear. Indeed, both variables were normally distributed, as observed in the Shapiro-Wilk's test (p > .05). Also, there were no observed outliers. However, the analysis showed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between English proficiency and classroom communication, r (246) = .39, p < .001. Most importantly, the R^2 indicated that English proficiency explained about 21.2% of the variation in classroom communication.

Table 1:

Table showing correlation between the main variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2
1. English proficiency	3.29	0.34	.12**	
2. Classroom communication	4.71	0.42	-.33	.39**
R^2	.212			

Note. $N = 248$, ** = $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Discussion

The current study focused on the correlation between English proficiency and effective classroom communication among students in secondary schools. The Pearson-moment correlation analysis conducted on the data showed a statistically significant, moderate positive correlation between English proficiency and classroom communication, r (246) = .39, p < .001. The finding indicates that students' proficiency levels in English determine their participation in the school and have broader implications for academic performance. The result can be explained in line with the notion that intermittent use of English negatively impacts English proficiency. Similarly, (Ozowuba 2018; Susanti, 2016) noted that English speaking

in Nigeria is mainly restricted to the classrooms. Consequently, the students find no reason to use the language outside the school except when in contact with non-indigenes. The finding is consistent with previous studies (Asif et al., 2018). For instance, Otto (2018) found that English proficiency prevented Pakistani students from speaking in the classrooms. Furthermore, the finding implicates English proficiency in the observed low student classroom participation among students in Nigeria. Poor vocabulary inhibits learners' maximum participation in-class activities (Agbatogun, 2012). Similarly, (Agbatogun 2012) opined that students' communicative competence positively and significantly correlated with listening and speaking skills. For learning to occur among the students in the classroom, the students must have a clear interpretation of the teacher's teaching. However, understanding what the teacher teaches entails listening, asking questions, and giving helpful feedback. This study suggests that teachers should create an inclusive opportunity to accommodate the low proficient students

Limitations, strengths, and future directions

Caution is advised in generalizing this study's finding due to the observed limitation it encountered that needed to be reported. For example, the sample size, comprising only students from the post-primary school system of Enugu state, posed a limitation to the generalization of the finding. The data used for the study was exclusively based on self-report, which could raise the issue of common method variance. However, the current study contributes to the English literature by revealing English proficiency as an essential variable in classroom communication, expanding our knowledge of the causes of low student-teacher classroom interaction among secondary school students in the Nigerian educational ecosystem. Moreover, research attempting to investigate the relationship between English proficiency and classroom communication using Nigerian samples seems scarce. Hence, justifying the present study. Future studies should consider using data from more inclusive sources and endeavor to utilize data triangulation.

Practical implication

The present finding has implications for effective teacher-student communication in the classroom setting. The finding supported the predictive effect of English proficiency on students' disposition to communicate and interact in the classroom. Indeed, the result of the study might help provide relevant data to the education administrators and pertinent stakeholders in promoting teachers-students classroom communication, as well as researchers, as a result, provide insight into the reason for poor academic outcomes among students in the secondary schools.

Conclusion

The current study is concerned with the relationship between English proficiency and classroom communication. Two hundred and forty-eight students were recruited for the study. Indeed, the finding corroborated the assumption of the present paper. Thus, the study concluded that English proficiency is an essential determinant of student-teacher, student-student classroom interaction. However, it is unclear if the teacher's factor contributed to the current knowledge. It is recommended that teachers establish a robust, inclusive classroom that accommodates students with English proficiency concerns. Future research should also expand the representative sample to include the teachers and determine other intervening variables in the English proficiency-classroom communication relations.

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