

Causes of Problems in Learning English as a Second Language as Perceived by Senior Secondary Students in Makurdi Benue State

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Abstract

This study is an analysis of some causes of the problems in learning English as a second language. The objectives of the study were to find out the leading cause of the problems in learning English as second language, and to find out whether there was any significant difference in the causes of problems faced by students on the bases of different attribute variables such as sex, locality, habit of reading dailies and habit of listening to English news. The methodology employed in gathering information was a survey method. Sewi's Scale on Causes of Problems in Learning English as a second language, prepared by the researcher, consisting of 59 statements, was used as a tool. The sample comprised of 300 students covering 157 boys and 143 girls. The collected data were treated using mean, t - test and ANOVA. The results indicated that the environment was the leading cause for problems in learning English as a second language; that compared to girls, boys perceived more problems, and that rural student perceived more problems than urban students. It was also found that lack of reading habit and listening tends to result to several problems in learning English as a second language. The study recommended, among other things, that the government should often conduct in-service training to train the teachers in using English language in classrooms.

Keywords: Second language, Perception, Problems, Attitude, Teachers' competence, Environment.

Introduction

Language is a very important means of communication. It is very difficult to think of a society without language. It sharpens people's thoughts and guides and controls their entire activity. It is a carrier of civilization and culture (Bolinger, 1968). In the case of the mother tongue, the child learns it easily, due to the favourable environment and by the great amount of exposure to the tongue. But, learning a second language requires conscious efforts to learn it and the exposure to the second language in most cases is limited (Bose, 2007). Majority of students have favoured classroom instruction for the second language acquisition (James, 1996). There are so many factors affecting the process of learning a second language, including attitude, self-confidence, motivation, duration of exposure to the language, classroom conditions, environment, family background, and availability of competent teachers (Verghese, 2009). In this study, the

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researcher took up a study on analyzing the various reasons for the problems faced by the second language learner. The reasons identified were: environment, attitude and teacher's competence.

Environment and family background play vital role in success of learning process. For example, countries like Nigeria, where majority of the people are farmers, rural dwellers and have the poor background in education. Moreover, the income of majority of the families is not adequate. Hence, the parents are not interested in giving good education background to their children. In contrast, they are willing to engage the children in some jobs in order to earn money. This is the very basic reason and the affecting factor in teaching.

Attitude is yet another factor in learning a second language. Attitude is the way that you think and feel about something. The successful acquisition of a second language seems to some extent, contingent upon learners' views of the language learning environment, the learning situation, and how they view the target language and its speakers (Narayanan et al, 2008).

Like the environment and attitude, teachers' competence is also a variable factor that affects the second language learning. The teacher should be proficient in the language; his knowledge of and expertise in methods and techniques of language teaching should be of a reasonably high standard (Verghese, 2009).

According to Rumelhart (1980), when examining the reading process through the lens of the interactive model, he noted that both the reader and the text play critical roles in the reading process. Rumelhart and his colleagues expostulated that the processing of information is not expressly in one direction or the other. Instead, they believed that a reader grasps the meaning of the text by simultaneously synthesizing information from a number of sources in order to accurately interpret what he is reading. The reader draws on knowledge of *graphophonic cues*, recognizing the letters and the sounds they make; studies *syntax*, or the structure of the sentences; and searches for the appropriate word meanings using *semantics*. All the while, the reader is connecting what he reads to prior knowledge and experiences. In this approach, the reader is actively involved in making meaning (Rentzel and Cooter, 2000).

Farris, Fuhler and Walter (2004) postulated that teachers who choose to follow the integrative model when teaching literacy would be required to engage in such activities as teaching strategies for decoding words, working on vocabulary development, and modeling various comprehension strategies as they read aloud to the class. Students would practice these newly acquired skills and strategies as they read in small groups from a basal reader or real books, and then continue to practice new skills on their own. Thus, phonic instruction, word walls, sight words and reading, they emphasized, would make up activities in the classroom. Another integral part of the reading process would be to activate prior knowledge through thoughtful questioning and engaging hands - on activities. In addition, the teacher would encourage the

students' thoughtful responses to their reading, perhaps through writing or paired conversations to deepen understanding of what has been read.

Some other major findings of the reviewed studies were:

- i. Teachers experienced great difficulty in making students to understand English (Jayashree, 1989);
- ii. There was significant relationship between the problems faced by the students in pronunciation, learning grammar, knowledge of sentence pattern, habit of hearing news, rectification of homework, memorization without understanding, remedial teaching and different variables regarding sex, locality and type of management (Singaravelu, 2001); and
- iii. Structural differences between English and mother tongue have also been identified as another problem faced by the students in learning English, environment that is not conducive to language teaching further adds to the problem (Jalaluddin et al., 2009).

Afakereta (2011) also investigated the effect of two instructional strategies for main idea construction on secondary school students' achievement in reading comprehension. She examined the interaction effect of gender and treatments on achievement in reading comprehension. The study used a non-randomized control group, pre-test, post-test, quasi-experimental design. The data collected were analyzed using post-test mean scores and Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA). The research findings indicated significant effect of topic/comment strategy for main idea construction on students' achievement in reading comprehension. No significant effect on achievement in reading comprehension was found for initial hypothesis strategy for main idea construction and interaction effect of gender and treatments. Based on these findings, she recommended that strategies for main idea construction should be explicitly taught to students to improve their reading comprehension achievement (Afakereta, 2011).

English is being treated as a world language because of its vast presence all over the world. At this juncture, learning English gains currency. Majority of Nigerian students, particularly from rural place considers this seven-letter word as a magical and a mystical word. The moment they hear something in English, they start to feel discomfort. Twelve years of school study does not make students mastery over English. While they are in schools, English is not taught properly. As majority of the students are hailed from rural areas, bilingual method is adopted in language classes. This method helps only to slow learners to some extent. Moreover, this act reduces the real learning process as a whole. To learn English requires constant practice. The kind of feeling that prevails among students is that it is not possible to achieve fluency or mastery over English language. This kind of tendency prevents students from learning English. Most of the students study English from an examination point of view, so they are not able to produce even a single sentence without grammatical error. Furthermore, adequate practice is not given to students to learn a

language. Exposure too is far less to them. The researcher has tried to analyze several problems in learning English because for Nigerians, English has a special place. It is the official language of government. Knowledge of English is necessary if one wants to come up in life. Besides, being a link and library language in Nigeria, it is major window of the modern world. This is all the more true where the advanced countries have opened their doors for recruiting technically qualified persons. Only those who have a command over the English language is given a job.

In this context, cause of problems of senior secondary students in learning English is an important area for study as it would help the students identify the problems which will hinder their learning in English and also make them learn English with ease and comfort. To this end, this study aims to investigate the causes of problems in learning English as a second language as perceived by senior secondary students in Makurdi Benue state.

Materials and Method

Population and Sample

The population was the senior secondary students in schools in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State. From the population, 300 students comprised of 157 boys and 143 girls were selected as sample, following stratified random sampling technique. The selected sample was from rural and urban schools in Makurdi LGA.

Method

This aim of the research was to study various causes of the problems in learning English as perceived by senior secondary school students in Makurdi LGA of Benue State. Hence, this study involved data collection through the survey method.

Instruments of Data Collection

The researcher constructed a questionnaire on causes of problems in learning English as a second language. After constructing the questionnaire, it was consulted with experts in teacher education for establishing content validity. Based on their suggestions, few questions were modified to avoid ambiguity. Thus, content validity was established. The questionnaire was administered to 300 students, studying both in rural and urban areas in Makurdi Local Government Area. The responded questionnaires were collected and scored with the help of a scoring key. By using the whole item analysis, the total scores obtained by each student were correlated with the total score for each item. The correlation was calculated using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation formula. The items with validity indices of 0.20 and above were selected for the final draft. Finally, co-efficient of reliability was estimated using the Spearman-Prophecy formula. The co-efficient of reliability calculated for Sewi's scale on causes of problems in learning was 0.3.

The collected data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, Pearson Product Moment Correlation, t-test, ANOVA, and Post hoc ANOVA test.

Results and Discussion

It is inferred from Table 1 that "Environment " is the leading cause for the problems in learning English as perceived by senior secondary school students while comparing it with the other two dimension namely Attitude and Teacher's Competence.

The analysis of the difference in perception about cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to sex, locality of school, optional subject and habit of reading English Newspaper is evident in Tables 2,3,4 and 5.

Since for the dimensions 'Attitude', 'Environment' and 'Teacher's Competence' there is significant result, post hoc test is attempted and the results are tabulated in the Tables 5(a), (b) and (c).

Table 1. Leading Causes of Problems in Learning English

as a second language			
Dimension	Number	Total score	Rank
Environment	300	70.860	I
Attitude	300	75.055	II
Teacher's Competence	300	76.430	III

Table 2. Differences in Perception about Causes of Problems in learning English

as a second Language with regard to Sex

Dimension	Sex	Number	Mean Dev.	Standard Dev.	t value	P value
Environment	Boys	157	68.33	8.375	5.658	0.000
	'Girls	143	73.58	10.137		
Attitude	Boys	157	71.61	9.002	7.504	0.000
	Girls	143	78.75	10.006		
Teacher's Competence	Boys	157	75.68	10.221	1.367	0.173

Girls	143	77.22	12.298
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Table 3. Differences in perception about Causes of Problems in Learning English as a second language with regard to locality of school

Dimension	Locality of School	No.	Mean Dev.	Standard Dev.	t value	P value
Environment	Rural	191	70.15	9.023	1.824	0.067
	Urban	109	71.94	10.339		
Attitude	Rural	191	73.64	10.068	3.487	0.001
	Urban	109	77.20	9.890		
Teacher's Competence	Rural	191	75.17	10.888	2.769	0.006
	Urban	109	78.23	11.636		

Table 4. Differences in Perception about Causes of Problems in Learning English as a second Language with regards to Optional subject

Dimension	Optional Subject	No.	Mean Dev.	Standard Dev.	t value	P value
Environment	Science	177	72.01	9.739	2.621	0.009
	Arts	123	69.50	9.333		
Attitude	Science	177	76.35	8.919	2.787	0.005
	Arts	123	73.53	11.248		
Teacher's Competence	Science	177	77.14	11.372	1.378	0.165
	Arts	123	75.75	11.148		

Table 5. Differences in Perception about Causes of Problems in Learning English as a second language with regard to the Habit of Reading English Newspaper

Variable	Dimension	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean of Squares	F	P value	
Habit of Reading English Newspaper	Environment	Between	2733.789	3	911.263	10.553	0.000	
		Within	34196.371	396	86.354			
	Attitude	Between	2718.765	3	906.255	9.376	0.000	
			Within	38278.024	396			96.663
		Teacher's Competence	Between	3471.498	3	1157.166	9.683	0.000
			Within	47324.892	396	119.505		

Table 5a. Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Environment' with regard to Habit of Reading English Newspaper

Habit of Reading English newspaper	No.	Subset for Alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	24	65.63	70.21	
Daily	191			
Occasionally	47	71.83		

Frequently	38			77.96
Significant		1.000	0.419	1.000

Table 5b. Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Attitude' with regard to Habit of Reading English Newspaper

Habit of Reading English newspaper	No.	Subset for		
		Alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	—	69.43	74.66	
Daily	24			
	191			
Occasionally	47		74.63	
Frequently	38			82.13
Significant		1.000	0.999	1.000

Table 5c. Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Teacher's Competence' with regard to Habit of Reading English Newspaper

Habit of Reading English newspaper	No.	Subset for		
		Alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	24	69.33	73.66	
Daily	191			
Occasionally	47		76.53	

Frequently	38			83.51
Significant		0.067	0.223	1.000

Table 6. Differences in Perception about Causes of Problems in Learning English as a second language with regard to the Habit of Listening to English News

Variable	Dimension	Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean of Squares	F	P value
Habit of Listening to English News	Environment	Between	3323.552	3	1107.851	13.052	0.000
		Within	33606.608	396	84.865		
	Attitude	Between	2543.710	3	847.903	8.731	0.000
		Within	38458.080	396	97.104		
	Teacher's Competence	Between	2453.693	3	817.898	6.700	0.000
		Within	48341.747	396	122.065		

Table 6a: Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Environment' with regard to the Habit listening to English News

Habit of listening	No.	Subset for alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	14	61.36	70.32	
Occasionally	205			
Daily	61		72.62	

Frequently	20			80.30
Significant		1.000	.348	1.000

Table 6b. Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Attitude' with regard to the Habit of Listening to English News

Habit of listening	No.	Subset for		
English news		Alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	14	65.29	74.82	
Occasionally	205			
Daily	61		75.98	
Frequently	20			82.60
Significant		1.000	0.658	1.000

Table 6c. Post Hoc test for the Dimension 'Teacher's Competence' with regard to the Habit of Listening to English News

Habit of listening	No.	Subset for		
English news		Alpha = 0.05		
		1	2	3
Never	14	66.79	76.13	
Occasionally	205			
Daily	61		76.42	
Frequently	20			84.00
Significant		1.000	0.921	1.000

Discussion of Findings

Environment is the leading cause for the problems in learning English as perceived by senior secondary students while comparing it with the other two dimensions namely 'Attitude' and 'Teacher's Competence'. More boys perceived the 'Environment' and 'Attitude' as the causes of problems in learning English as a second language than girls. There is no significant difference in the perception of 'Teacher's Competence' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to sex.

Similarly, there is no significant difference in perceiving 'Environment' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to location of school. More students whose schools were in the rural area perceived the 'Attitude' and 'Teacher's Competence' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language than urban students.

A greater number of students who took Arts as their optional subject perceived the 'Environment' and 'Attitude' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language than Science students. There is no significant difference in the perception of 'Teacher's Competence' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to optional subject.

There is significant difference in the perception of 'Attitude', 'Environment' and 'Teacher's Competence' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to the habit of reading English newspapers.

For the dimensions of 'Attitude' and 'Environment,' the students who never read English newspapers perceived more problems in learning English as a second language than those who read occasionally, daily and frequently. Also, the students who read the newspaper occasionally and daily perceived more problems than the students who read the English newspaper frequently.

For the dimension of 'Teacher's Competence', the students who never read English newspapers perceived more problems in learning English as a second language than those who read occasionally and frequently. Also, the students who read the newspaper occasionally and daily perceived more problems than those who read the English newspaper frequently.

There is a significant difference in perceiving 'Attitude', 'Environment' and 'Teacher's Competence' as the cause of problems in learning English as a second language with regards to the habit of listening to English news (Tables 6, 6a, 6b and 6c). Additionally, for the dimensions 'Environment', 'Attitude' and 'Teacher's Competence', the students who never listen English news perceived more problems in learning English as a second language than those who listen news occasionally, daily and frequently. Also, the students who listen the news occasionally and daily perceived more problems than the students who listen to English news frequently.

Conclusion

The research concludes that environment, attitude and teacher's competence as perceived by rural and urban students, as well as male and female students, to various extents, are responsible for the problems they encountered in learning English as a second language. However, by listening to news in English and reading newspapers daily, these problems could be surmounted by the students significantly as seen in the difference in the responses of students that had a good reading habit and also listened to the news in English and those that did not. Also, the location of schools attended by students, which were either in Makurdi metropolis or rural areas had significant influence on their attitude; and teacher's competence as causes of problems in learning English.

Recommendations

The government should often conduct in-service training to train the teachers to use English language in classrooms. They should try to bring reforms in the pattern of examination. Separate marks could also be allotted to test spoken English language of the students. An attempt should be made to give rewards to the rural students for those that performed well in English examination. Government should facilitate all schools with language laboratory. The government may encourage the management to develop the aural and oral skills of the students.

The educational officers should arrange guidance and orientation programmes in English. They may encourage the management of the schools to conduct reading test in English. Often, they have to supervise the way of providing English education in schools. By the way of supervision, they can give suggestions for improvement in the curriculum. They have to motivate the teachers to imbibe the culture of referring dictionary among the students.

Management should often insist the teachers assess the development of students' proficiency in English. The information on students' development in English should be communicated to parents at regular intervals. They may arrange special coaching classes for slow learners and rural students. They may also encourage the students to read English news during prayer hours. The key role of the management is to insist the English teacher to converse in English with the students even in and outside the school campus. To impart the spoken aspects of the language, they should allot separate period for spoken English. If time permits, they could also extend the duration of the English class.

English teachers have to encourage the students to communicate in English. They may impart the spoken aspects of the language once/twice in a week. Teachers should create student-friendly and learner centered environment. They should motivate students for participative learning. They should also strengthen the communicative skills of the students by making them to raise their doubts in English. While

taking classes, the teacher should pay individual attention. They should stimulate the interest of the students to read English newspapers and magazines.

Children are more successful when their parents are involved in their education. Parents have to create conducive atmosphere to learn English. Their role is to encourage their children to communicate in English even at home. They should provide English newspapers, journals and magazines to enrich the reading skill of their children. They may also encourage them to listen to English news and to watch English programmes.

The mind of the students should always be ready to learn. They should read English newspapers, journals, novels, etc. as per the advice of their parents and teachers. They should also develop their habit of listening to English news and referring dictionary. They should not study English from an exam point of view. If they study English from an exam point of view, they may not be able to write on their own. The conversation with their parents, teachers and peers should always be in English. To learn English, opportunities have to be utilized by them effectively and efficiently.

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