

**SPELLINGS AND PRONUNCIATION AS MAJOR CAUSES OF FAILURE IN
EXAMINATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE: A CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC
SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN OBOT AKARA LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA,
AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA**

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DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL STUDIES

AKWA IBOM STATE POLYTECHNIC

IKOT OSURUA, P.M.B. 1200, IKOT EKPENE

AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA.

GSM: +234 803 777 4501

e-mail: idcletusudoh@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the influence of spelling and pronunciation on academic performance of students in English Language in secondary school in Obot Akara Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. Two schools located in rural areas in Obot Akara were purposively selected for the study. The study employed a descriptive survey research design. Four variables, which include: dictation, pronunciation, reading and spelling were used to assess the students. The students were tested individually; and scores on 100 percent basis were noted. results obtained show that out of the 20 SSII students tested in English Language in the first school, Students tested in English dictation and spelling, 25 percent got pass while 75 percent failed in the test in each tests respectively. Also, in the pronunciation test, 65 percent of the students fail while 35 percent got pass. Reading test recorded 70 percent failure against 30 percent pass. At the second school, 75 percent of sampled students failed the test on pronunciation, while 25 percent got pass; 70 percent failed in the reading test, and 30 percent got pass; 60 percent failed in spelling test and 40 percent passed; and 55 percent failed in the dictation test while 45 percent passed. It was therefore established that students' performance in English Language in these schools was not encouraging. A number of suggestions were proffered.

Keywords: Spellings, Pronunciation, English Language, Causes of Failure, Secondary School.

INTRODUCTION:

The English Language plays an essential role as an international language of commerce, industry, politics and education to the extent that it has become an agreed-upon fact in the academic world today. So it is important to be able to express oneself properly and to communicate with other people in English, not only orally, but in writing as well. Writing is a crucial act in the process of learning any foreign language, but more so in English since it is today the language of global communication. The ability to write clearly is essential to effective communication and critical to employment and production in the contemporary world. One important factor to take into account when discussing writing is spelling. In the worst case, one single misspelled letter can change a word and alter the whole meaning of a text. In the popular view, correct spelling is a sign of good education. Conversely, bad spelling simply looks ill (Fagerberg, 2006). Cook (1997) also says that effective spelling is important for users of a second language because of its it in research is minimal.

Presently, Nigeria Secondary School Students have problem in the learning of English Language as revealed in their performance in the subject at public examinations (Kolawole 1998; Anoma 2005). Most of the students are being delayed from advancing in their studies to higher schools of learning because of their inability to obtain a credit pass in the subject, which is a pre-requisite for admission into any course in the tertiary institutions (Fakeye 2002). Students normally pass every other subject but English Language and an excellent performance in other subjects without a credit passes in English in non-effectual. Evidence abound (Oyeyebi 1998; Adeosun 2004) to show that students have not been doing well in the Language. Anyone who is familiar with English Language examination scripts in the secondary school today will not disagree with the view that the standard of English in secondary school has fallen to a low level. This low standard failure rate each year is certainly greater than the pass rate (except in 2003). This is certainly disturbing and something urgent has to be done to get students out of this nagging problem. This no doubt, is an ugly scene. Scholars have advanced reasons for this woeful performance in English Language over the years. Some other studies have identified learner variables, which may enhance or retard students learning of English Language such variables are motivation, interest, age, intelligence, aptitude cognitive style and learner personality (Fakeye 2002; Anoma 2005). The fact remains that the standard of spoken and written English of today's secondary school students cannot be compared with that of their predecessors during or

shortly after the colonial periods. (Fakeye 2002). According to him, the reasons are obvious. One major reason advanced by him is the poor attitude of some English Language teachers to work and students' lack of enthusiasm and interest in the subject.

From the above it could be seen that a number of students' variables may determine student's performance in the Senior Secondary English Language. Students' attitude to the language is one of the personal variables that affect the learning of English language. Researchers have stressed the importance of developing favourable attitudes as a means of enhancing performance in the learning of second language like English. Ige (1996), in relating attitude to achievement under some teaching strategies, concluded among other things on the relationship between academic ability and students' achievement in English language, the attitude will guide teachers to plan their lesson for different ability groups in the class. He concluded by saying that factors in turn produce poor achievement and in turn produce negative attitude to the subject.

Several researchers and scholars have reported a link between academic ability and achievement in the learning of English language. Using a variety of Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests and different methods of assessing language learning, Ige (1996) and Fakeye (2002) concluded that intellectual ability (academic ability) was a good means of predicting how successful a learner would be at language learning in general and English as a second language (ESL) learning in particular.

The Role of English in National Development

A traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers in countries where English is generally not a local medium of communication makes it to be termed as a second language. That environment may be a country in which English is not the mother tongue or in which English has an established role (e.g., India, Nigeria). English as a Foreign Language (EFL) corresponds roughly to the Expanding Circle described by linguist Braj Kachru in "Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle" (1985). Nordquist defined English as a Second Language as 'a traditional term for the use or study of the English language by non-native speakers'. (Nordquist, 2010). The colonial masters introduced the English language to Nigerians as they did not value the native languages. The English language was considered as the only official means of instruction in training people to serve in the government and the only official means of communication. The school's curricula were structured after the culture, education and

history of the colonialists transmitted through the use of the English language. Thus the English language became Nigeria's *lingua franca*. That is the language of 'convenience' for communicating with diverse ethnic groups being tutored and related in a common language. The quality, efficiency and effectiveness of Nigeria's education and educational curriculum relied on the English language as the *lingua franca* cum official language. This was as a result of prejudicial disposition of the colonialists to Nigerian languages. According to Omelewa (1975), "Rev. Metacalf Sunter, an inspector of schools, once dismissed the vernacular as "only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become a second language in Nigeria due to the multi-lingual nature of the nation and it helped in the unification of the nation. In Nigerian homes, children were taught from the cradle to speak the English language as a language of communication. People speaking any of the Nigerian languages in environments where the English language would have been spoken are derogatorily considered as not to have arrived.

The English language became an indispensable tool for national unity, integration and global communication. Baldeh referred to it as "a window on the world" (Baldeh, 1990). Learning the English language equips Nigerians to confidently meet other people from other English-speaking nations of the world for all transactions. Above all, students need to acquire a competence in the English language in order to be fluent in it. However, despite the use of the English language, the standard of the English language in Nigeria is gradually waning. This decrease in standard is a worry to many scholars in Nigeria.

Poor results in the English language in West School Certificate are an enduring problem. Among the factors that affect effective study of the English language are interference, inadequate use or non-use of teaching aids and qualifications and experience of English language teachers. These factors go hand in hand in hampering the effective study of the English language in our schools. However, despite all these problems, learning English in Nigeria is imperative as English is a global language without which communication with the outside world will be impossible. Students must be assisted, encouraged and aided to learn the English language for their ultimate success in Nigeria and outside.

Consonants

The table below shows the system of consonant phonemes that functions in most major varieties of English, including the British version used in Nigeria. The symbols are

from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), and are also used in the pronunciation keys of many dictionaries.

Table 2.1: English Phonology: Consonants

	Bilabial	Labio dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labial velar	Glottal
Nasal	m			n			ŋ		
Plosive	p b			t d			k g		
Affricative					tʃ dʒ				
Fricative		f v	θ ð	s z	ʃ ʒ		(x)		h
Approximant				r		j		w	
Lateral				l					

Source: Wikipedia, 2014

Where consonants are given in pairs (as with “p b”), the first is voiceless, the second is voiced. Most of the symbols represent the same sounds as they normally do when used as letters, but /j/ represents the initial sound of *yacht*. The symbol /ʃ/ represents the *sh* sound, /ʒ/ the middle sound of *vision*, /tʃ/ the *ch* sound, /dʒ/ the sound of *j* in *jump*, /θ/ and /ð/ the *th* sounds in *thing* and *this* respectively, and /ŋ/ the *ng* sound in *sing*.

As regards the consonants, the correspondence between spelling and pronunciation is fairly regular. The letters *b, d, f, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, z* represent, respectively, the phonemes /b/, /d/, /f/, /h/, /dʒ/, /k/, /l/, /m/, /n/, /p/, /r/, /s/, /t/, /v/, /w/, /z/ (as tabulated in the Consonants section above). The letters *c* and *g* normally represent /k/ and /g/, but there is also a soft *c* pronounced /s/, and a soft *g* pronounced /dʒ/. Some sounds are represented by digraphs: *ch* for /tʃ/, *sh* for /ʃ/, *th* for /θ/ or /ð/, *ng* for /ŋ/ (also *ph* is pronounced /f/ in Greek-derived words). Doubled consonant letters (and the combination *ck*) are generally pronounced as single consonants, and *qu* and *x* are pronounced as the sequences /kw/ and /ks/. The letter *y*, when used as a consonant, represents /j/. However this set of rules is not application

without exception; many words have silent consonants or other cases of irregular pronunciation.

Vowels:

The system of vowel phonemes and their pronunciation is subject to significant variation between dialects. The table below lists the vowels found in Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American, with examples of words in which they occur. The vowels are represented with symbols from the International Phonetic Alphabet; those given for RP are in relatively standard use in British dictionaries and other publications (Gimson and Cruttenden, 2008).

Many of the English spelling and pronunciation are without a doubt a complicated matter in which many interrelated skills are involved and learners around the world have trouble getting the letters right. It is a fact that English spelling is more complex than Ibibio / Efik languages, Annang and Oron dialects. This is expected to pose several spelling and pronunciations difficulties and errors for Nigerian students of Akwa Ibom extraction, particularly in the early stages of their spelling development. Due to the limited body of research in the acquisition of the pronunciation and spelling skills, errors are produced by Nigerian learners of English who are learning English as a foreign and second language and this is reflected in the large number of candidates who fail the school certificate English examinations every year as shown in WAEC and NECO results. This study tries to determine patterns of spelling and phonology (pronunciation) errors as major causes of failure in examination in English language in Secondary Schools in Obot Akara Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

In realization of the persistent students' mass failure in SSCE English Language examinations despite governments' commitment to educational development. This situation created the need to strategize effective ways of ensuring the high academic performance in English Language, which plays an essential role as an international language of commerce, industry, politics and education to the extent that it has become the Country's official language. The overall objective of this work is to determine the patterns of spelling and phonology (pronunciation) errors as major causes of failure in examination in English language in Secondary Schools in Obot Akara Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. This research work aims to:

- (i) identify and classify some morphological errors in the English of some Nigerian secondary school students;
- (ii) examine the causes of English morphology errors;
- (iii) assess the level of competence of Nigerian SSS students in the use of English morphology;
- (iv) assess the level of competence of Nigerian SSS teachers in teaching the subject;
- (v) assess the level of competence in English syllabi as well as in the English textbooks used in Nigerian Secondary Schools; and
- (vi) suggest measures as a way of minimizing failures in English morphology in Nigerian Secondary Schools.

Reports from researchers have revealed that the current state of students' performance in English language at public examination leaves much to be desired. Studies have shown that students' Personal variables could be held accountable for this ugly trend. Therefore, this study identifies and classifies some morphological errors in the English language, the cause of English morphology errors, level of competence of student, level of competence of teachers, level of competence in English syllabi as well as in the English textbooks used in teaching English language in Nigerian Secondary Schools, thus providing insights into those variables that interfere with instruction to provide better results in Students' academic performance in English Language being a core and instructional subject. The findings will help government, teachers, school administrators, psychologists, parents and students to understand the seriousness of the problem with a view to taking steps to improve students' learning of English language. Also, it would be useful to the guidance counselors who, as behaviour modifiers will seize the advantage of the study to counsel students and teacher alike for a better attitude towards the study of English language.

Methodology:

The research centered on spelling and pronunciation as major causes of failure in English language in secondary schools in Obot Akara Local Government Area, Akwa Ibom State. The research design is a quasi-experimental study, which involves, pre-test, post-test and control group design. Intact classes were randomly assigned to different treatment conditions. The primary method of interest is reading-writing method combined with a package of linguistic inputs, of spelling and pronunciation, which also combined with lecture and discussion methods respectively. The population of the study is the senior secondary

schools students in two public secondary schools in the study area. There were about, 150 SSII students in the two schools used for the study.

Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample for the study was purposively selected using the school record for second term of 2014/2015 school session. 35 SSII students were drawn from the two public secondary schools in the area, which 20 came from Methodist Secondary schools Nto Ndang and 15 from Community Comprehensive Secondary School, Abia Okpo Ikot Ukana, respectively.

Instrumentation

Four different parameters were used to test the students' academic ability in English Language. The parameters included:

- (i) Spelling
- (ii) Dictation
- (iii) Pronunciation; and
- (iv) Reading

The lesson and test guide was drawn from the students English Reader to enhance their effective participation and trust in the test exercise.

Administration of the Instruments

The researcher visited the two schools and administered the tests on the students. Students who failed in English language were selected for the study. The experimental groups were exposed to lesson and test guide drawn from their English Reader after the formal introduction by their Vice Principal, Academic. During the experimental session, the students in the experimental groups were exposed to reading, dictation, pronunciation and spelling exercises, using different methods planned for the study in addition to packages of linguistic inputs, which will enhance the students' ability to write and read good sentences.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data collected in this study was analyzed using the simple percentage methods.

The data generated during the study were used in the analysis.

Table 1: Performance of SSI Students in English Language Test at Community Comprehensive Secondary School, Abia Okpo Ikot Ukana, Obot Akara Local Government Area

Variables	Pass	Fail	Total
Dictation	5 (25)	15 (75)	20 (100)
Pronunciation	7 (35)	13 (65)	20 (100)
Reading	6 (30)	14 (70)	20 (100)
Spelling	5 (25)	15 (75)	20 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2019

Result in Table 1 shows that out of the 20 SSI Students tested in English dictation and spelling, 25 percent got pass while 75 percent failed in the test in each tests respectively. Also, in the pronunciation test, 65 percent of the students fail while 35 percent got pass. Reading test recorded 70 percent failure against 30 percent pass.

Table 2: Performance of SSI Students in English language test at Methodist secondary schools Nto Ndang, Obot Akara Local Government Area

Variables	Pass	Fail	Total
Dictation	9 (45)	11 (55)	20 (100)
Pronunciation	5 (25)	15 (75)	20 (100)
Reading	6 (30)	14 (70)	20 (100)
Spelling	8 (40)	12 (60)	20 (100)

Source: Field Survey, 2019

According to Table 2, 75 percent of the sampled students failed the test on pronunciation, while 25 percent got pass; 70 percent failed in the reading test, while 30 percent got pass; 60 percent failed in spelling test and 40 percent passed; and 55 percent failed in the dictation test while 45 percent passed.

Discussion of Findings

From the analysis of data gathered and presented above, no student in the two schools sampled in the study area passed the test involving dictation, pronunciation, reading and spelling. This could be for reasons that there are no qualified English teachers in the schools. It could also be as a result of poor students' family background with its corresponding negative effects on students' academic achievement. Also, poor school environment could have been the responsible factor. This may have caused qualified teachers to decline postings to such schools, which now yield this negative result.

Summary

The study has revealed the trends of students' performance in English Language at the SSII level for two public secondary schools in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. These secondary schools were purposively selected for the study because of their rurality. From the result obtained, it was established that students' performance in English language in these schools were not encouraging as a greater number of them recorded failure though that of Methodist Secondary School, Nto Ndang was a little higher than what was obtained in Community Comprehensive Secondary School, Abia Okpo Ikot Ukana (percentage of passes and failure was used in this context). Government policies / positions in terms of mass promotion of students from one grade to another without using a benchmark, free education programme, mass transfer of teachers, location / distribution of secondary schools, expenditure on education to a very large extent were found to be significantly related to students' performance in public examinations (Adepoju and Oluchukwu, 2011).

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have implications for educational planning and policy in Nigeria. For instance, the students' academic performance in public examinations and the one investigated in this study are very significant and worthy of note by educational planners, policy makers, curriculum developers, teachers, government, students, researchers, guidance counselors and even, the parents. Adepoju (2002) posits that parents are very conscious of the type of schools they would prefer to send their children to schools that hardly record distinction and credit in English language and Mathematics. Educational planners, policy makers, curriculum planners and researchers are also challenged to carry out an investigation (action research) into the possible causes and effects of students' poor academic performance

in examinations with a view to identifying and proffering solutions to the emerging problems at the classroom level.

Conclusion

The result among other things revealed that, there was a poor performance of students in the two schools at the English language test administered scores obtained in Methodist secondary school Nta Ndang and that obtained in Community Comprehensive Secondary School, Abiakpo Ikot Ukana showed a very sorry sight. The findings corroborates the World Bank Report (1990) that the policies of government to a very large extent influence the academic situation in schools as well as the performance of students in public examinations. Of importance to note again in respect of the present study is that its finding supports the findings of Adepoju (2002) and Owoeye (2002) that distribution and location of secondary schools in both urban and rural areas (urban-rural dichotomy) was significantly related with academic performance of students use vernacular more often to communicate during off school hours and at home, thus making them prone to communicate during off school hours and at home, thus making them prone to mistakes and incompetence in the use of English language.

Recommendations

1. A remedial mechanism should be developed and built into the school system by the government, teachers, educational planners, policy makers, curriculum planners, parents and other stakeholders in education industry. Government should always be conscious of the implication of its policies and positions on schooling and the multiplier effect on academic performance of students and teachers productivity.
2. Promotion of students into higher grade or level or class should be based on prescribed benchmark. Any students that fail to meet such prescribed benchmark should not be promoted. This would go a long way in improving the quality, standard and the performance of students in public examinations.
3. Teachers, particularly, those teaching English language in senior secondary schools should be adequately motivated and encouraged to attend training workshops, seminars and in-services-training to improve their pedagogy. Free education programme of the various governments in Nigeria should be thoroughly examined since the programme to some extent affects quality education quality education. Parents should be adequately involved if quality education is to be achieved.

4. Parents should also be well educated to take up the challenges and responsible of financing the education of their children. Some parents for instance, believe that free education programme in Nigeria implies providing their children with all instructional materials such as biro, pencil, ruler, textbook, uniform, sandal, belt, food, allowances etc. free of charge by the government. Parents should encourage their children to speak English language at home to promote and cultivate the culture of good pronunciation, spelling, dictation and reading skills.
5. Also, functional supervision mechanism should be developed and built into the schooling system to ensure quality assurance of the system. For instance, Adepoju and Raji's (2004) study revealed among other things that functional supervision was found to be significantly related to quality assurance of secondary education in Oyo State.

It is hoped that if the above recommendations are thoroughly and effectively considered, students' performance in English language as well as in other subjects in both internal and external examinations would improve. Also, the problems of quality of the secondary school product and standard of education would also be addressed.

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