

ORAL COMMUNICATION PRACTICE: A MEANS OF MEETING THE ACADEMIC LITERACY NEEDS OF NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS.

IBE, Chioma Nkechika.

Directorate of General Studies,
Federal University of Technology,
Owerri, Imo State.

Email: chyex2000@gmail.com

&

OCHIAGHA, Ijeoma Sandra

Directorate of General Studies,
Federal University of Technology, Owerri,
Imo State.

Email: Ijeomaochiagha4u@gmail.com

&

NJOKU, Odionyenfe

School of General Studies
Akanu Ibiam Federal Polytechnic, Uwana,
Ebonyi State

Email: Odionyenfeakuma@gmail.com

&

AJEMBA, Oziomachukwu Akunna

Department of English Language
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: oa.ajemba@unizik.edu.org

Abstract

The main purpose of every student in tertiary level of education is to attain academic literacy. This includes students' proficiency in the use of language for academic purpose. In Nigeria, there are numerous researches on the issue of decline in the educational standard. This has been traced to students' deficiency in the use of English language for academic purpose. Also, there have been observations from previous researches on language acquisition that constant practice in the use of target language enhances learning. Thus, achieving English for academic purposes require students' use of the language often in oral and written communication even after English lesson.

Based on this background, this study is a contribution to already existing works on literacy. In this case, the research is set to explore students' oral communication practices outside classroom. Framed with the theory of literacy as a socio-cultural practice, the purpose was to establish the extent students have adapted to the use of English on campus outside English classroom, identify the challenges they have encountered in those interaction and the implication of the challenges on the students' pursuit for academic literacy. With the instrument of questionnaire, data were collected from the 300 students of Federal University of Technology, Owerri. The data were analyzed by using the simple percentage. Based on the findings we recommended that students should be encouraged to use English for oral communication outside classroom interaction to improve proficiency.

Keywords: Literacy, Language Acquisition, Oral Communication, interaction.

Introduction

Previous empirical studies on the use of English in Nigeria have a consensus that the language though used as a second language, plays vital roles in the education system and in official matters. The central role of English language in obtaining education, particularly at the tertiary level, demands students' proficiency in the use of the language for academic achievement. This involves learning (Literacy) and doing something with what is learnt (literacy practices). Doing something with what is learnt is not restricted to classroom situation. The learner is expected to apply what s/he learnt in real world situation (cf Barton and Hamilton, 2000).

Hoadley-Maidment and Mercer (1996) observes in their research, the widespread of English as a medium of communication in higher education. Nigerian higher institutions are not excluded from this observation thus the introduction of Use of English for Academic purposes designed for tertiary education with the aim of building students competence in English Language for academic pursuit.

Meanwhile, Osakwe (2002: 9) citing Pica (1987:4) posits that efficient learning of English as a second language requires students' engagement in social interaction with other users outside the classroom setting. On campus, whether in the classroom or not, students have to learn a set rules for using English and many of which are unwritten. Hence, students are expected to take on a new identity being conscious of the culture (style) of higher education and the language use is part of the culture. The problem is that students have not understood their expectations not only to develop academic writing but to develop academic English. The only way however, is for the students to develop sensitivity to academic environment.

Therefore, this study is an addition to already existing submissions on literacy with the aim of establishing the extent students have adapted to the use of English on campus outside English lessons as well as identifying the challenges they may have encountered in those interactions.

At the end of the research the researcher hopes to find answers to the following research questions:

- What are the native languages of students involved?
- What language(s) do students use for communication?
- What instigated the choice of language?
- What challenges do students encounter while using English language for oral communication outside classroom?
- How will oral communication practices help the students in attaining literacy?

Statement of the problem

There is decline in the standard of education in Nigeria and Students have not understood their expectations are not only to develop academic writing but to develop academic English. Although numerous attempts have been made by scholars to revive literacy in Nigeria's educational system, more has to be done.

Aims and Objectives

1. Establish the extent students have adapted to the use of English on campus outside English lessons
2. Identify the challenges they may have encountered in those interaction.
3. Identify the implication of the challenges on the students pursuit for academic literacy

Background to the study

According to Elizabeth B. Keefe and Susan R. Copeland (2011: 92), the word literacy may appear to be simple, but in actual sense opens up the world of complexity. Initial documentations on literacy believe literacy involves only reading and writing. This conventional definition is still maintained in most English language dictionary. But the world today change, so is the definition of such terms as literacy. Keefe and Copeland cited Lumsford, Moglen, and Slevins (1990:2) assumption that literacy is a right that has been denied an extraordinary number of citizens. What this suggests is that going by the definition of literacy as just acquisition of reading and writing skills excludes a certain group of humanity. Hence the definition of literacy goes beyond reading and writing. According to Article 13 of the UNCRC Convention on the Rights of the Child,

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice

(UNCRC, UNICEF p 4).

This suggests the definition of Literacy as the holistic development of a person's linguistic capacity to enable him participate proficiently in a social group. To support this claim, The National Literacy Trust as cited in Cambridge assessment 2013, mentions speaking and listening. In their submission, literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, speak and listen well. Hence, literate person has the ability to communicate proficiently with others as well as to understand written information. (Cambridge Assessment 2013:8)

To wrap it up, Barton and Hamilton (2000: 7) cited in (Perry 2012: 54) simply define actual literacy practices as what people do with literacy.

However, there is no universal standard of literacy even though the traits of literacy identified as the vital reason for educational pursuit. (Lawton and Gordon, 1996:138, Cambridge Assessment, 2013: 9).

Literacy as a social practice

The concept of literacy has gained the interest of scholars across discipline. In language for instance, literacy has been viewed from different perspective. Judging from the sociolinguistic perspective, Literacy is a social practice (Perry, 2012:50). In this case, the interest of the sociolinguists is to device ways in which language instantiate culture. (cf Halliday 1973, Hymes 1984, Bakhtin 1986, Gee, 1996, Perry 2012). This explains the relationship between language and culture. Sociolinguists have described the many ways in which language and literacy are patterned according to context — what Bakhtin (1986) referred to as speech genres. Gees (1996) “identity kit” explains the ways in which language is connected with social roles. According to Perry (2012: 53), the theory of literacy as a social practice has been heavily influenced by Streets (1985:433) early work in Iran. Streets theory juxtaposed the autonomous and ideological models of literacy. Autonomous model under which most formal literacy instruction operates involves literacy in strictly technical terms. That is, literacy is assumed to be a set of neutral, decontextualized skills that can be applied in any situation (Perry, 2012: 53). The autonomous model attributes important consequences both to individual cognition and to society through the intrinsic characteristics that literacy is assumed to have. In contrast, the ideological model conceptualizes literacy as a set of practices (as opposed to skills) that are grounded in specific

contexts and “inextricably linked to cultural and power structures in society” (p. 433). Street in 2003 called it New Literacy Studies (NLS) as it involves recognition of multiple literacies...

Citing Barton and Hamilton (2000), Perry (2012), explains the concepts of literacy events and literacy practices. Literacy events are observable; that is, we can see what people are doing with texts. Practices, in contrast, must be inferred because they connect to unobservable beliefs, values, attitudes, and power structures. Due to the emphasis on literacy events, those who work within this framework of literacy as social practice tend to focus on print and written texts. This study is going to experiment the use of this theory in social practices that involve oral communication in social interaction among students on campus.

Research Methodology

Sampled population

The sampled population for the study was 250 students of Federal University of Technology, Owerri. The students were randomly selected from various departments and various levels (except the student in level 100). The determining factor for selection was that the students were taught the Use of English (GST 101 and 102) in their first academic year in school.

Instrumentation and technique

The instrument for the research was a four item questionnaire. The first item was concerned with finding out the respondent's ethnic group and native language. The second item asked which language the respondent use most often for oral communication on campus. The third item was designed to investigate how often the respondent used English language for oral communication outside English language class and the last item was designed to identify most challenges the respondents encountered while using English for oral communication on campus outside English classroom situation. The data collected from the respondents of the questionnaire were classified and the responses were converted to simple percentages for analysis and discussion.

Validity and reliability of the instrument

The questionnaire was designed and validated by the researcher using experts advice. The questions in the questionnaire were designed to provide answers to the research questions raised. In all, two hundred and fifty (250) questionnaire items were distributed to students who are randomly selected from various departments on campus. All the respondents returned the questionnaire items that were given to them.

Result Analysis and discussion.**Table 1a: representing the ethnic group of the respondents**

Language	Number of respondent	Percentage (%)
Igbo	217	86.8%
Hausa	1	0.4%
Yoruba	11	4.4%
Others	21	8.4%
Total	250	100%

Table 1b: representing the native language of the respondents.

Language	Number of respondent	Percentage (%)
Igbo	217	86.8%
Hausa	1	0.4%
Yoruba	11	4.4%
Others	21	8.4%
Total	250	100%

Table 1a showed that most of the respondents (86.8%) were originally from Igbo ethnic extraction while just 13.2% of the respondents were from Hausa, Yoruba and the other ethnic groups. Meanwhile the data presented in table 1b showed that majority of the respondents speak Igbo as their native language. While majority of the respondents predominantly speak Igbo may be linked to the geographical location of the institution where the inhabitants are predominantly Igbo. Even though there are a few respondents speaking other languages, their presence illustrated the multilingual nature of a typical campus in Nigeria.

Table 2: Language used often for Oral Communication outside the English class on campus.

Language	Number of respondent	Percentage(%)
English	125	50
Pidgin	102	42.58
Igbo	12	4.8%
Hausa	0	0.0%
Yoruba	6	2.4%
Others	0	0.0%
Total	250	100%

The data presented in table 2 showed that 50% of the respondents indicated using English for oral communication outside the classroom on campus. An equally high percentage of respondents (42.58%) indicated using Pidgin for Oral communication outside English class. While 4.8% and 4.4% of the respondents use Igbo and Yoruba respectively for oral communication. Some of the respondents who used Yoruba for oral communication explained that they resorted to speak English language when they communicated with people who are not speakers of Yoruba. However, they predominantly use Yoruba for communication. This result does not come as a surprise knowing that only very few linguistic groups were represented in the study. The surprising aspect of the result is that a relatively high percentage of the respondents use pidgin for oral communication on campus outside English class even when all lectures are taught in English, and all academic and administrative works on campus are done using English. The result showed that though more respondents indicated using English, many still preferred to use pidgin. When asked why they prefer pidgin to English, most of the respondents believe it to be trendy while the others responded that pidgin is easy for communication and it is easily understood by others. This indicates that students prefer to use language which easily gives them access to others.

Table 3: how often the respondent used English language for oral communication out English language class

	Very Often	Often	someti mes	never	Tota l
Ask questions in departmental course class	25	44	89	92	250
Make contributions to departmental course class discussion	49	70	93	38	250
discuss assignment with classmates outside of class	21	92	101	36	250
Discuss ideas with lecturers in your department	46	49	102	53	250
Discuss grades/ assignment with department in your department	67	79	82	22	250
Teach other students	62	47	85	56	250
In a community-based group meetings on campus	10 (4)	5 (2)	100 (40)	135 (54)	250
In the hostel	63	70	113	4	
For official purposes	178	31	39	2	
At leisure and other places on campus	125	107	17	1	

Table 3 showed that the respondents who use English for oral communication on campus outside English classroom situation did so for identifiable reasons. As the table indicated, respondents mostly use English for official matters. However, for oral interaction in community-based group meetings on campus, majority of the respondents indicated that they rarely use English. Various reasons given by respondents in this table have significant implications for language teaching and learning of English as a second language. The reasons reveal the nature of motivation which the respondents have for using English outside the classroom. Even though the indicative that students mostly use the language for official purposes, it is necessary to encourage students to

use the language in unofficial situation since many of them rarely use it at leisure. The students should know the need to be using the language while they are on campus.

Challenges faced by the respondents while using English for oral communication on campus

The students responded freely to this question which was not in any way controlled. Majority of the respondents gathered indicated that they are afraid of making errors while others related the challenges to their inability to understand certain information. There are still many students who are afraid of using wrong accent. Other challenges are related to grammar, subject verb agreement and not speaking fluently.

Since the respondents were free, many listed not less than three challenges. However, the response that they give indicates generally that they are afraid of making errors. In all, only 1 respondent indicated he did not have problems using English for oral communication.

Conclusion and recommendation

This research investigated students' oral communication practices and problems in using English. The investigation was conducted through a four item questionnaire administered on two hundred and fifty students of Federal University of Technology, Owerri. The students were randomly selected from various departments and various levels.

Findings from this study indicate the multilingual nature of classes in high institutions in Nigeria. They also show that while students used English for oral communication outside classroom, a close to average percentage also uses pidgin for the same purpose. This particular finding calls for worry since it has been established that proficiency in second language learning is determined by a high frequency of use and exposure to the second language. If many students limit the use of English to only English classroom time, the result would ultimately mean low performance in both English and other courses which rely on English language as their medium of instruction. The findings of this study also show that the respondents are differently motivated in their use of English on campus. Many were concerned about others understanding them since people have different native languages. However, most of the students were instrumentally motivated since they are compelled to use the language for official purposes.

Following this findings, the following recommendations are made

1. Students should be encouraged to use English for outside classroom interaction to improve proficiency.

2. Teachers should spend sometimes to explain the need for students to use the language outside the classroom.
3. The list of the challenges identified by the respondents could serve as a base or needs analysis for designing a course to remedy the oral communication problems of students.

References

- Barton, David, and Mary Hamilton. (2000) "Literacy Practices." *Situated Literacies*. Routledge, pp 6-13.
- Hoadley-Maidment and Mercer (1996) "English in the Academic world." In Mercer, Neil and Joan Swann (eds) *Learning English development and Diversity*. New York: Routeledge, pp 284-319
- Halliday (1973) *Explorations in the Functions of Language*. London: Edward Arnold
- Hymes, D.H. (1985). 'Toward linguistic competence.' *AILA Review/Revue de l'AILA (Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquée)*, 2, 9-23.
- Keefe E. B. and S.R. Copeland (2011) "What is Literacy? The Power of a Definition" *Sage Journals*. 36, 3-4 : 92-99
- Osakwe (2002) "An investigation of students oral communication practice and problems in English." *Awka Journals of English Language and Literary Studies(AJELLS)* Enugu: Fulladu *vol1 No1*: 6-16.
- Perry,K (2012) What is Literacy? — A Critical Overview of Sociocultural Perspectives. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education* retrieved on August 24, 2019 from <http://jolle.coe.uga.edu>. "What is literacy? An investigation into definitions of English as a subject and the relationship between English, literacy and being literate" retrieved on August 24, 2019 from <http://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk>