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A Synopsis of the Factors Affecting the Quality of Spoken English Among Tertiary Institution Students in Nigeria

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Abstract

In the present global development, the English language has become one of the most significant languages in the world. It is widely used for many communication purposes such as business transactions, educational development, political engagements and technological development. English language learning for non-native speakers is usually a very difficult task to acquire mastery of the language because it incorporates regular active practice in speaking, listening, reading, and writing as opposed to just passive grammar study. This article examines some of the critical challenging factors affecting the quality of spoken English among tertiary institution students in Nigeria. The article pinpoints some key factors affecting the fluent speaking ability of the students and also discusses some of the relevance of the English language in the Nigerian educational system. In addition, recommendations through confidence-building strategies to improve the quality of spoken English among students were stated.

Keywords: English, Language Skills, Education, Learning, Proficiency, Teaching

1. Introduction

Mounting evidence from practice shows that many tertiary education students in Nigeria have inadequate verbal ability to communicate fluently in English (Sotiloye *et al*., 2016) [22]. Also, many graduates from tertiary institutions in Nigeria are becoming less proficient in Standard English, yet little research has investigated the causes of this deterioration in English language fluency among young people. There is much evidence of weak English language communication proficiency in tertiary institutions in Nigeria (Udeh, 2025) [27]. This includes numerous grammatical and lexical mistakes among student speakers, along with inappropriate contextual word usage. In some cases, undergraduates in Nigeria consistently use a variety of English with a non-standard tone and poor grammatical coherence. The resultant effect in many situations is that the negative impact of such incorrect grammar in writing and communication has been seen in their poor academic performance and lack of clarity in communication in actual conversational contexts. Inadequate communication ability has been a rampant problem among many students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

It is no doubt a fact that Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with serious cultural and language diversity, with more than 300 native languages. The country was colonized by the British in the 19th century and bestowed upon it English as a language of unity for the people. The adoption of the English language put an end to the sociolinguistic problem of adopting a single language out of the hundreds of native languages (Ogunmodimu, 2025). Although Nigeria is a non-native English-speaking country, for the purpose of educational demand and official communication, the learning of the English language has become an important endeavor for the people of the country. With the emergence and subsequent development of the Nigerian educational system, the English language consequently became the primary language of instruction in schools and the language of everyday business transactions (Owojecho, 2020) [18]. The prioritization of the English language in the country, due to its use for many formal and informal activities, explained its overwhelming supremacy over all other languages in the country. Despite the importance of the language, there are significant deficiencies in communicative capability among students in Nigeria.

Communication in English is a very crucial component of any academic endeavor for students, especially in Nigeria and other English-speaking countries, irrespective of their educational level (Sunday, 2013; Trudell, 2018) [24, 26]. English language and

mathematics are two important subjects that must be completed in their approved modules and passed at any level of education in Nigeria. From primary education through secondary to the tertiary level, English Language is a basic subject with a high level of priority because it influences communication and writing. As a result, English language proficiency in speaking and writing English is regarded as a noteworthy component of the academic environment. In workplaces in Nigeria and in other official transactions outside the formal workplace and government offices, the English language serves as a national language for all communications and businesses. Therefore, the ability to write excellently in English and the desired communication proficiency appear to be diminishing in Nigeria due to some multifaceted factors (Ogbue, 2025) [16]. In consequence, language communication researchers are required to figure out the problems and recommend ways to enhance students' communication skills.

2. Relevance of English Language in the Educational System of Nigeria

In Nigeria, the English language is one of the greatest assets in the educational system of the country. It makes communication easier in the country, considering the multilingual nature of the country. Language in general is a tool that enables easy communication among human beings in their society, with characteristic distinctions from animals, which do not have the strong ability to communicate like humans, with the ability to express feelings of anger and satisfaction (Jiboku, 2005) [9]. Languages are used to manipulate situations and create ideas, establish perceptions and transmit knowledge.

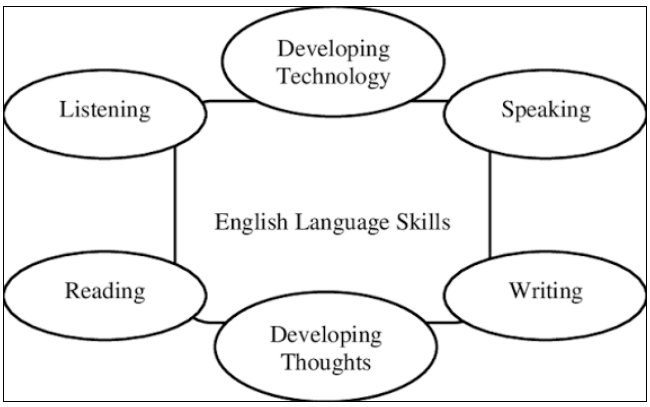


Fig 1: Essentials of English language skills (Srivani & Hariharasudan, 2023) [23]

2.1 Language of Instruction

In the country's education system, English is the key language of instruction in schools and colleges. The educational policy of the country strongly and unambiguously adopted English as the sole language of instruction in schools (Trudell, 2018) [26]. For many years of the country's educational system's existence, English has served as the central medium of instruction from the beginning of the educational system. It has replaced hundreds of native languages in the country and has been made compulsory, especially in secondary schools, with a strong emphasis on it under National Universities Commission rules, requiring students to pass it at a credit level before admission to a tertiary institution (Muhammad *et al*., 2018) [13]. Effective learning of standard English by students at all levels of the educational system in Nigeria to foster proficiency for academic progression is a mandatory endeavor. In tertiary institutions in Nigeria, English has served as a language for academic research activities and on-campus communication. In addition, students' evaluations are conducted based on the use of standard English (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006) [2]. However, a common problem associated with the use of the language in schools in Nigeria is related to the use of local variants of the language by students who are non-fluent speakers.

2.2 Unifying Language

With the existing linguistic pluralism of the country, there are a series of challenges that can be encountered when trying to select a single indigenous language for official communication. The adoption of the English language as a unifying language in the country has been viewed as one of the vital colonial unifying legacies for Nigeria (Mishina & Iskandar, 2019) [11]. Nigeria is a nation with ethnic rivalry and a marginalization mentality may make it difficult to agree on the selection of one language from hundreds of available languages for official and educational communication. In this regard, the agreement of the national stakeholders and the colonial masters on the use of the English language for official and educational purposes has indeed resolved the unifying language constraint in the country. The adoption of the English language helped to unite the diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria in terms of politics, governance and education (Obiegbu, 2015) [14]. In this post-colonial era, the English language has continued to serve as an indispensable achievement in the quest for unity for the multicultural society of the country (Yusuf, 2012) [28].

2.3 National Development

In the context of modern development, the English language has played many different roles in the development of Nigeria as a sovereign nation (Sunday, 2013) [24]. Apart from its usage as a tool of national unification for inclusivity and equity dialogue, the English language has also played a vital role in international integration. Since national is highly embedded in multiple indigenous language and diverse cultural system, no single native language would have been suitable neutral national unification and development. Ethnic rivalry is a real threat to the unity of the country, especially as it concerns language diversity, but with the emergence and subsequent adoption of English as a sole national language, the anticipated national cohesion was easier to sustain (Elugbe, 1990) [7]. Apart from its importance in the unification of the different ethnic tribes in Nigeria, the English language has greatly benefited public policy documentation, research activities, corporate business dealings, technology transfer of global knowledge and the operation of democratic governance in Nigeria (Chinaguh, 2025) [6].

3. Challenges Affecting the Quality of Spoken English

The important skills in learning the English language are reading, speaking, writing and listening. A learner of the English language is expected to acquire all the skills to be proficient in the learning experience. In many situations, some English language learners may find it difficult to speak the language fluently due to some learning challenges. Some of the identified causal factors affecting the quality of

spoken English among tertiary students in Nigerian tertiary institutions are highlighted as follows:

3.1 Linguistic Interference of Indigenous Mother Tongue and Nigerian Pidgin English

The quality of spoken English among most students in Nigeria has been impacted by indigenous mother tongues and the Nigerian versions of pidgin English (Akande, 2010; Faraclas, 2008) [3, 8]. In many parts of the country, indigenous languages and pidgin English are usually the first versions of the language to be learnt by school children in their immediate environment from their childhood. The acquisition of indigenous languages in daily communication before enrolling children in school has a great impact on learning the English language in schools. When the students encounter the English language in schools, there could be a serious grammatical clash based on grammatical stress patterns, pronunciations and syntactic structures, instigating non-standard pronunciation with consequential phonological distortion.

3.2 Quality of Teachers and Teaching Materials

The quality of teachers employed to teach the English language in a school determines the learning capability and subject understanding of the students (Trudell, 2018) [26]. A well-educated English teacher with up-to-date instructional materials could secure active learning with better conversational practice for students. English teachers with poor educational backgrounds are prone to weak oral fluency and poor pronunciation, with a tendency to switch between English and their local indigenous languages. English language teachers are sometimes heavily overloaded with teaching due to the shortage of an adequate number of teachers in public schools (Obiegbu, 2016) [15]. There are also problems of shortage of specialist English teachers, limited professional development and modern language teaching method training for teachers in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, thereby affecting the learning of English by the students.

3.3 Poor Learning Facilities

In Nigeria, there is a shortage of learning facilities compared to what is required for standard teaching and learning in tertiary institutions (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2006) [2]. In some cases, the classroom spaces are usually characterized by space congestion, and the language laboratories are either totally absent or inadequate. The absence of important learning facilities can severely affect the students' attention to learning in the classrooms. Poor learning conditions due to infrastructural hurdles harm the students' effective speaking ability. Poor learning facilities such as epileptic power supply, inadequate ventilation, broken furniture, poorly equipped language laboratories, limited computer-based audio-visual facilities, and insufficient seating arrangements in the classrooms are some of the common challenges in public tertiary institutions affecting the state of learning. In addition, frequent outdated English learning textbooks and teaching methods have sometimes contributed enormously to the challenges affecting the learning of English as a second language in tertiary institutions in the country.

3.4 Lack of Dedicated English Language Drill

A dedicated English language speaking club can help with the art of performing language speaking practice drills. The absence of constant and focused practice drills in the English language among students, especially among those who are not studying English language as a course in Nigerian tertiary institutions, has really affected their capability to develop better speaking fluency in the English language (Patrick *et al*., 2013) [20]. To understand any language, regular practice is very important because it has a significant influence in guiding students to understand the rules associated with the writing and speaking patterns of the language. Irregular practice has some consequential problems, such as limited understanding of the conceptual rules in speaking or writing. The prevalence of poor English drill among tertiary institution students in Nigeria has strongly created non-standard English dialects in their social interactions in English. It has not only affected their construction of spoken sentences but also their written sentences.

3.5 Psychological Factors

Psychological factors are major problems affecting tertiary institution students' ability to communicate effectively in English in Nigeria. Some students lack the self-confidence to speak standard English due to the fear of ridicule among their peers (Gobena, 2025; Caisa Ugsha & Chucho Chucho, 2024 [4]). Increasing self-confidence and the habit of thinking in English are very important aspects of language development. Throughout the learning process, students should stay motivated and develop a positive mindset towards improving their fluency in English (Sari, 2022) [21]. Shyness among students may also affect their self-esteem, which may consequently lead to low motivation to practice and speak in public. This influences the rampant use of pidgin English among the students and its consequential impact on their standard English-speaking ability. For many years, since English became an official and educational language in the country, pidgin English has served as a socially accepted dominant version of the English language on campuses of tertiary institutions in the country. Due to this problem, many students have lost the inherent motivation to practice standard English outside their classrooms, thus affecting their speaking capabilities.

3.6 Interference of Mother Tongues

Students' learning ideas are required to be translated from their native languages into English. However, there is a tendency that an attempt to do so may bring about structural and phonetic mistakes (Oyebolu & Olaoye, 2022) [19]. Despite the English-only Federal Government directive in schools, learners are not totally banned from using their native languages in unofficial communication outside the schools. In Nigeria, English is encountered more in schools, business places and offices. Some student learning situations require the use of the native language to understand the concepts involved and then use English to write and communicate the ideas to others. In the communication processes, there is a tendency toward mother-tongue interference. In some parts of the country, especially in rural areas, there is a common belief that the easiest approach to literacy is to teach children in their mother tongue (Chekwube *et al*., 2023) [5]. This has conditioned some of the local teachers to sometimes mix up English with native languages in the teaching activities, especially at primary and secondary school level. However, this approach

sometimes creates another set of problems when the students advance to tertiary institutions, such that the mistake of mother tongue interference in their speaking English becomes inevitable. The heavy dominance of English language use in school and the interference of the mother tongue during conversation in schools greatly contributed to a decline in the fluency of the English language among some students in tertiary institutions (Abubakre *et al*., 2024) [1].

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

English is widely used and highly accepted for international communication, spoken by over a billion people in the world (Kule *et al*., 2024) [10]. It is projected that more than 2 billion people will speak the language by 2050 (Motteram & Dawson, 2025; Talbot, 2023) [12, 25]. English is studied as a second or foreign language by millions of individuals worldwide, especially in countries colonized by the British Empire. Speaking is still one of the most difficult aspects of the language to master, even if students normally do well in reading, writing, and listening. Many tertiary institution students in Nigeria have an adequate vocabulary and a good knowledge of grammatical principles, but they find it difficult to articulate their ideas in spoken English. This strain is often encountered due to a lack of experience coupled with the fear of making mistakes, and little exposure to real-world oral communication practice. Constant practice improves language processing and speaking skills. When learning to speak fluent English, learners often encounter several difficulties poor grammatical connections, trouble pronouncing words correctly, and a lack of confidence. However, with persistent work and the right learning techniques, these challenges can be conquered.

Apart from being a major spoken language in the world, English is also widely taught in schools and colleges in many parts of the world such that Nigeria is not an exception. Considering its global relevance in the communication space, many countries are rapidly adopting the teaching of the English language for the purpose of teaching and learning in their academic institutions. In Nigeria, the use of the English language dates back to the British pre-colonial era in the country and it has been favoured as a national language by the preceding language policies of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Therefore, it is indispensable to look at the challenges influencing tertiary institution students' proficiency in the English language. This is because the results could enhance to the body of knowledge and initiatives aimed at improving students' weak English language proficiency. This might as well provide the students with a clear pathway to resolve the problems affecting their level of fluency in communication in English language. Many multifaceted factors contributing to poor English speaking among tertiary education students in Nigeria have been identified and discussed in this study's framework. However, some important recommendations on how to improve the quality of spoken English among students are stated as follows:

1. Encouragement of students to develop a high skill level in English language speaking proficiency through in-depth speaking training courses and testing techniques.
2. Prioritization of vocabulary development through the establishment of language practice laboratories in tertiary institutions to incorporate newly learnt words into active conversations.
3. Deployment of knowledgeable English language instructors and a stimulating learning environment for supportive speaking guidance through student motivation.
4. Continuous curriculum improvement with integrated practice of speaking and writing competency in the English language.
5. Continuous training and empowerment of teachers through rigorous professional development.
6. Integration of parental efforts to encourage and support the learning mechanisms of English language speaking skills.
7. Encouragement of students to regularly listen to standard English conversations for the improvement of their listening skills.
8. Building standard vocabulary through the use of standard dictionaries daily to look up new words and the meanings of complex words for practicing speaking English towards perfection.
9. Improvement of English language teaching methods with increasing time for learning English in the tertiary institutions.

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