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Effects of Extrinsic Factors on the Acquisition of English in Selected Primary/Secondary Schools in Gombe Metropolis, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines the extrinsic factors that affect English language acquisition in Gombe metropolis, Nigeria. It touches on an important aspect of applied linguistics which involves problem solving in language learning. A preliminary review of existing literature shows that most studies on acquisition of English focus attention on the learner and the challenges of success and failure in the second language, especially English. This study looks at the teacher and the education authorities as pertinent in the acquisition of English language by learners of English in Primary and Secondary schools in Gombe metropolis. The study draws from the behaviourist theory as it is demonstrated in the second language classroom learning. Two primary and two secondary schools were sampled for this study, with twenty teachers of English language. For the data collection, the instruments used were: a questionnaire and a classroom observation. As noted, that the English language in Nigeria is mostly learnt through classroom instruction, the teachers' role in effective acquisition of the target language (English) is significant because the teacher is recognized as the sole provider of the target language. This is the situation found in Gombe because the responses on the language use and preferred language of communication are indications that the teachers play significant roles in acquisition of English in the schools. In considering the role of the teachers and education authorities in this study, we consider teaching methodology, teacher qualification, teaching experience, and authorities as important factors. The study concludes that teachers and education authorities are strategic in the successful acquisition of English in the study environment.

Keywords: Acquisition, Stimulus, Applied Linguistics, Teacher, Authority.

Introduction

The study of second language (L2) and its success are important aspects of the field of applied linguistics, the purpose of which is to solve or at least ameliorate the language learning problems (Davies, 1). This implies that incorporating applied linguistics methods or approaches in class room instruction is an important aspect of teaching. Many applied linguists with an interest in second language acquisition have been studying about learners' problems related to various grammar components and parameter settings. One of such areas which get more attention is the study of the factors responsible for learners' success in the use of a second language. A key factor that affects second language acquisition is the teacher or teaching factor which is often overlooked and focus is always driven on the second language learner. The current study however looks at the role of the teacher and education authorities and presents some interesting outcomes on the acquisition of the English language by learners (mostly Hausa speakers) of English in Primary and Secondary schools in Gombe metropolis. Previous studies like Steinberg (1996), Krashen (1997), Sun (2001), Akinmade (2003), Gass (2008), Li and Yasuhiro (2009), Adesida, Aina

and Adekunle (2011), Ibbi (2018), and Wong (2020), either focus on learner errors or language teaching in foreign L2 environment, or focusing on the learner. This study reveals that English language teachers have a greater role to play in the context of English acquisition in Gombe metropolis. This study further reveals that the problems of English as second language have not been properly addressed in the previous studies because, most of the studies were based on the role of the learner, learner errors, learning environment, age of the learner, etc. Acquiring and learning a second language is very important in a bilingual and multi-lingual society. It is also a necessity in today's global world where the medium of communication in the use of technology is mostly restricted to specific languages of the world. One of the challenges confronting second language learners (L2) arises from the complexities of methods or approaches available to the learner once the learning takes off. Hausa language is the lingua franca and first language of most of the people in Gombe; thus, English is often learnt as a second language with the educational institutions as the sole provider of the second language (English). Consequently, a very active participation of the teacher is essential in the process of acquiring proficiency in English.

It is clear that second language acquisition (SLA) is a complex issue. There is no single comprehensive account of SLA, but only a number of theoretical accounts. It would indeed be difficult for one theory to account for the entire range of second-language phenomena, especially if one also considers teachers' personality factors and environmental factors. However, the behaviourist theory as adopted in this study can, to a large extent, improve second language acquisition. Different theories exist in attempting to provide a near to perfect empirical explanation as to how second language is acquired. These theories include among others, Innatism, Behaviourism, Biologism, Mentalism, and Cognitivism (Ibbi 10). However, the focus of this paper is to discuss, to a great extent, the role of the teacher and education authorities in the acquisition of English language, thus, the study draws from the behaviourist theory. This would be done by taking into account the behaviourist theory as it is demonstrated in the L2 classroom learning. Davies and Elder argue in support of the behaviourist thus:

The behaviourist perspective that dominated in the 1950s, imitation (leading through repetition to memorization) was a cornerstone of the learning process. In the reaction against behaviourism, its importance was widely rejected but it is now again generally recognized as a significant process. (508)

To the behaviourist, the human being is an organism capable of manifesting a wide range of behaviours. The occurrence of these behaviours is dependent upon three

crucial elements in learning: a stimulus, which serves to elicit behaviour; a response triggered by a stimulus and the repetition (or suppression) of the response in the future (Skinner 276). Reinforcement is a vital element in the learning process because it increases the likelihood that the behaviour will occur again and eventually becomes a habit. To apply this theory to language learning is to identify the organism as the foreign language learner, the behaviour as verbal behavior, the stimulus as what is taught or presented of the foreign language, the response as the learner's reaction to the stimulus, and the reinforcement as the extrinsic approval and the praise of the teacher or fellow students or the intrinsic self-satisfaction of target language learner. Language mastery is represented as acquiring a set of appropriate language stimulus – response chain. This indicates that the behaviourist approach can indeed be used for instruction and teaching language in the classroom.

Literature Review

The term 'acquisition' usually refers to acquisition of the first language but research interests have included second language acquisition (especially in recent years). Lightbown and Spada explain that second language acquisition deals with the acquisition (in both children and adults) of additional language/languages (115). According to Krashen also, second language acquisition “requires meaningful interaction in the target language” and this should include “natural communications in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding” (8). The capacity to successfully use any language requires an acquisition of a set of tools which include Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Semantics, and an extension of vocabulary.

Richards and Schmidt refer to the term 'second language' as any language learned after one has acquired one's native language (472). This approach to second language is central to the description of the L2 in this study. Steinberg describes the acquisition of an L2 as either psychological or social factors. He explains that the psychological factors involve either explication (the process whereby the rules and structures of a second language are explained to the learner in his or her native language), or induction (which involves learning of the rules by self-discovery). The learning by explication fits into the method of the learning and teaching of the English language by the subjects of this study.

Chan (2012) used a language processing perspective to study the second language acquisition of tense and aspect. He focused strictly on universal grammar vis-a-vis the language-specific dimensions of temporal and aspectual semantics involved. According to this hypothesis, the initial acquisition and subsequent emergence of tense and aspect follow a semantic-driven universal sequence. Chan's research follows a strictly psycholinguistic investigation of second language learners (L2) processing of English past and progressive morphology.

Mungungu (2010) conducted a research titled “Error Analysis: Investigating the Writing of English as a Second Language of Namibian Learners”. Her study examines the various categories of errors committed by the participants of her

research. The errors she analysed include tenses, prepositions, articles and spellings. Her study offers useful explanation to the failures of the participants as she states that the errors “could be that they are taught in a second language” (Mungungu, 80). Her study is equally limited to the analysis of errors made by L2 as the important factors that educators should be aware of.

Short and Fitzsimmons carried out their investigation on the “Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Academic English Language Learning” in 2007. Their study explores an action-oriented agenda that include reform in teacher education and the introduction of new instructional approaches likely to increase students' achievement. The study population was a group of adolescent English learners in the United States and their aim was to identify major challenges to improving literacy in adolescents. This study focused on the improvement of teaching methods for teachers of adolescents and not how they acquired the English language or the method through which they acquired it. This study also dwells on adolescent learners who lived and acquired English in the domain of the target language which is the United States. Thus, acquisition of English within the domain of the native language is quite different from the acquisition of English in Nigeria or Gombe in particular.

Another study which utilized a second language environment for acquisition is that of Opitz (2011). Opitz studied the parallel processes of first language maintenance and second language acquisition in adult bilinguals resident in a second language environment. The L2 attainment study explored by Opitz shows that on measures of emphasizing breadth of linguistic knowledge and accuracy, bilinguals perform differently even though some of them indicate some levels of native-like competence. Willie (2011) investigated lexical aspect and lexical saliency in “Acquisition of Past Tense-Aspect Morphology among Ibibio English speakers as Second Language Learners”. This is one of the few studies that relates in some way to the current study but it differs in target, purpose and findings as the current study targets the teacher and education authorities. Willie aimed at investigating the extent to which the expression of temporality through inflectional morphology by second language learners is determined or influenced by lexical semantics of the verbs (130).

Chukwu (2012) is another related research in second language acquisition that explored the “Challenges of Effective English Language Learning in Nigerian Secondary Schools”. This study concentrates on the problem of effective learning and the availability of teaching aids in Nigerian secondary schools, with emphasis on mother tongue interference as the problem in learning and using the English language. He drew conclusions using different patterns of interference such as speech patterns, transliteration and code-mixing (99). This is a typical example of the studies on second language acquisition in Nigeria. Attention is often built around the learner, existence of the errors or features of the errors.

In a more recent study, Wong (20) explored the issues of motivation of students in the third year of teacher training. Wong reports that in some Chinese

English learning environment, the origins of teachers' worries were originated from different aspects, of which some later became sources of motivation. As Wong's study presents one of the roles of the teacher in L2, her study subjects and environment are different from the current study and motivation is just one aspect of the teacher's role. This study is significant in exploring different teacher factors in relation to Nigeria, and Gombe in particular. However, these related studies have provided the impetus for this current research which seeks to fill the research gaps that the other studies could not fill.

Research Methodology

Four schools were chosen as samples for this study. They are: a public primary school own by the government, a public secondary school, a private primary school own by individual or group, and a private secondary school. It was necessary to sample both the public and private schools because they represent the available types of primary and secondary schools in Gombe and a comparison of how English is acquired in both education sectors was necessary and relevant to the study. The subjects of the study comprised twenty (20) teachers of English from the selected schools. There were five (5) teachers from each school. The sampling procedure for this study was built upon Maree's explanation of sampling in a research which he refers to as the process used to select a portion of the population for study (18). Prior to the beginning of data collection, the researcher had visited the schools selected. The purpose was to develop rapport with potential participants especially the English teachers.

For the data collection, the instruments used were: a questionnaire and a classroom observation. The units of analysis were the teachers and the researcher had to explain to the teachers what each item on the questionnaire and the observation would be. The SPSS software was also used as an instrument of analysis. It contains different kinds of tests such as the Chi-square (X^2) test. The results that indicate significant p-value were captured in the relevant table especially in factors associated with preference of teaching method where school type and method of teaching English showed significant p-value (0.004). The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine acquisition and teaching of English language in the schools. The subjects' consents were already sought and each item on the questionnaire was explained to them before they responded. The questionnaire was distributed and responded to on two different days with two schools for each day. The observation provided the researcher with a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study. It helped the researcher to collect the sample being studied in its natural context. Cohen, Marion, and Morrison (315) point out that "observation methods are powerful instruments for gaining insights into situations." The researcher was allowed to observe the teachers while they taught, and was also allowed to make notes based on the following points: teachers' knowledge, skills and behaviours, method of teaching, and language of instruction. The researcher was personally involved in the observation herself over a period of five days. Twenty selected

teachers that earlier responded to the questionnaire were observed at different times in their various classes.

Result and Analysis

The findings from the questionnaire reveal the following:

Educational Qualification of Teachers

The responses from the questionnaire show the qualifications of the teachers. Nine of the respondents hold the highest qualification (a first degree in English) making 45% of the respondents. The next qualification is NCE which is 25% of the teachers (5 out of 20). Diploma holders (OND) are 15% of the teachers while SSCE, HND and Masters have the least representation which is 5% of the teachers respectively.

Employment Status

The status of participants' employment was found to be different. Most of the teachers have permanent employment status representing 60% against 40% that have temporary employment status.

Years of Teaching Experience

The years of teaching experience as indicated by the teachers show that most of the teachers have less than six years of teaching experience (1-5 years) constituting 55% of the respondents. The teachers with the highest number of years of teaching constitute 10% of the respondents (2 out of 20). The least number of teachers based on years of teaching experience is within the year group 16-20 representing 5% of the teachers.

Teaching Method

The teaching methods used by the teachers as indicated in their responses show that most of the teachers indicated using modern method with a representation of 70%, while some indicated using traditional method (25%) and others indicated using both traditional and modern methods of teaching (5%).

Result of Classroom Observation

The observation result for this study was obtained from qualitative data with practical assessment of the teaching sessions of the teachers using a checklist for the evaluation of the methods commonly used:

Knowledge of the Topic

From the observations, most of the teachers (65%) showed unsatisfactory knowledge of the topic while 35 % showed satisfactory knowledge of the topic.

Ability to Motivate Students' Participation

The ability of teachers to motivate participation while teaching indicated 65% of the teachers demonstrate satisfactory ability while 35% of the teachers demonstrate unsatisfactory ability.

Teachers' Communication

The observations of teachers' communication with respect to the use of teaching aids and tone of voice during teaching sessions show that most of the teachers (80%) did not use teaching aids while teaching and only four of them used teaching aids in their teaching sessions. A few proportions of the teachers used tone of voice (20%) while in 80%, voice tone was not used. The use of tone shows the particular voice nuance used by some of the teachers in the course of teaching.

Use of English by Teachers

The use of English as language of teaching/communication was observed in the teaching sessions. 60% of the teachers combined their teaching with Hausa and Pidgin English, with tense errors exhibited once in a while. 40% of the teachers use Standard English.

Method of Teaching Observed

From the observations made in the teaching sessions, the traditional method of teaching was used more than the modern method representing 50%. About 30% of the teachers employed the modern method which represents the teaching methods found in our theoretical framework. A few of them employed a combination of both traditional and modern methods with a 20% representation as observed.

Discussion

The adopted theoretical model for this study posits that L1 and L2 speakers can acquire the language by imitation, practice and interaction through which vocabulary and grammar are acquired and developed (Skinner 193). Thus, the teachers' mode and approach to English will certainly influence the students' acquisition. From the classroom observation, some of the teachers exhibited few deficiencies in some of the topics. They also did not encourage the students in most instances and some had poor communication ability. Most of them used the traditional method of teaching English and more than fifty percent (50%) of them used either Hausa or both English and Hausa as language of instruction in the classroom. These findings are different from their responses on the self-administered questionnaire where the teachers indicated that the modern method of teaching is used in their teaching of English language. The classroom observation clearly indicates that some of the schools performed better in the teaching and method of teaching than other schools. It appears that the private school teachers are more dedicated to their teaching than the public school teachers. It also appears that teachers in the private schools communicate more using English than Hausa.

Teaching experience in this study is also found to be a strong determinant of the students' performance in English. From the classroom observation and responses of the teaching experience, the students seem to learn more from the experienced teachers. On the other hand, the qualifications of the teachers did indicate different degrees including Mass Communication, English Language, and English Literature and a few of them had backgrounds in Education (NCE or PGDE). With regard to how the teachers or education authority can improve acquisition of English, the study also reveals that some of the teachers are graduates in fields that are not related to language teaching and are thus under-qualified to improve learners' competence in the acquisition of English as a second language. This draws attention to factors associated with teacher and education authorities.

The educational qualification, employment status and the years of teaching experience were not sufficient to address the target of English acquisition. This is an indication that both the teachers and the school authorities have a role to play in helping the students to acquire appropriate English. The language of instruction and the language used for communication at school are both under the control of the teachers and education authorities. Teachers with background in education were only 25% (5 out of 20). 40% of the teachers were on temporary employment which implies inconsistency in teaching; as such teachers could leave for better job offers at any time.

Most of the teachers who were investigated had less than six years of experience in English teaching. This means that teachers learn a lot about teaching from their experience over time. Through work experience teachers build up their beliefs, and apply different approaches and methods with different learners. By the time they discover or form beliefs of these approaches and methods (as good as to be followed or bad to be avoided), language teaching would have greatly improved. Bowles and Montrul (28) also reveal that a teacher's pedagogical system is shaped by his/her educational and professional experiences. Their study shows that the teacher's experience introduces him/her to communicative methodology and enhances his/her beliefs in student-centered instruction which has an immediate and lasting impact on his/her practice in teaching.

The classroom observation also shows that teachers can make acquisition more effective if they also serve as information providers and listeners. Some of the teachers observed were found to encourage participation, which is encouraging. Therefore, this study posits that explicit classroom teaching will greatly influence the acquisition of tense in a second language. One of the similar findings on how face-to-face teaching can positively influence second language acquisition is that of Bowles and Montrul. In their study on form-focus instruction, they explain that regardless of the theoretical position, all second language acquisition (SLA) researchers agree that input is essential for SLA (19). However, many studies find that input in the form of positive evidence is not sufficient for successful SLA and that some focus on language form is necessary. That is, learners may benefit from some type of form-focused instruction, defined by Spada as consisting of "events which occur within

meaning-based approaches to L2 instruction in which a focus on language is provided in either spontaneous or predetermined ways” (73).

Form-focused instruction has proved effective in many face-to-face classroom settings and the advent of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) has enticed many language programs to offer hybrid, or technology-enhanced language courses, in which grammar instruction is offered via self instructional units online. However, Bowles and Montrul conclude that second language acquisition requires particular kinds of input for success to be recorded. Their study typically supports the stance of the current study on the use of particular language teaching methodology (modern teaching).

Conversely, the analysis of acquisition also reveals that the process of learning English as a second language is actually a process of making errors, correcting the errors, and promoting the acquisition level. Hence, a very active participation of the teacher and the learner is essential in the process of acquiring proficiency in English. The findings on acquisition also reveal that the behaviourist conceptions of the stimulus response with practice and reinforcement are good theoretical frameworks and backgrounds to explain effective acquisition of a second language. From the analysis of the teachers' responses and the classroom observation, this study reveals that the teachers play more central roles in helping the students to achieve competence and performance in English language.

Conclusion

As already noted, the English language in Nigeria is mostly learnt through classroom instruction, the teachers' role in effective acquisition of the target language (English) is significant because the teacher may be the sole provider of the target language. This is the situation found in Gombe because the responses on the language use and preferred language of communication (71.5%) is a clear indication that the teachers are responsible for teaching English to the research subjects. In considering the role of the teachers in this study we consider teaching methodology as an important factor. Particular teaching approaches are likely to prove more effective but the teacher is responsible for identifying the effective ones. It is the teacher who acts as facilitator, resource person and language model for the second language classroom (Rivers 13). This clearly indicates that the education authority has the responsibility of orientation and training of language teaching and teaching methodology.

This study aimed at an investigation of the extrinsic factors that affect acquisition of English as second language in a Nigerian city, Gombe. The teachers and education authorities are believed to be the extrinsic factors and are strategic in the successful acquisition of English. Therefore, in view of the findings derived from this study and the conclusions arrived at, the following recommendations are suggested for policy and practices in teaching of English as a second language in Gombe:

- i. Qualitative English teaching should come from trained teachers, and the education authorities can ensure the training of all employed English language teachers.
- ii. Budget for educational facilities should be enough to cater for the foundations of language learning in Primary and Secondary schools.
- iii. Teachers should adopt approaches based on available and suitable methodologies for their various levels of education using modern teaching methodologies.

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