
EXAMINATION OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH ENGLISH AURAL – ORAL SKILLS ARE EVALUATED IN COMPLIANCE WITH THE PROVISION OF THE 9 – YEAR ENGLISH STUDIES CURRICULUM AT JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KATSINA STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The study examines compliance with the 9 – year English studies curriculum proposition that after each topic students’ performance in oral English be evaluated. The design adopted for the study was the descriptive survey. Two objectives and their corresponding research questions were used to guide the research. 210 teachers of English and 384 students from public, community and private secondary schools across the seven zones of Education formed the respondents for the research questionnaires. Two sets of questionnaires developed by the researcher, were used for data collection. Forty eight teachers were also observed in real class teaching – learning situation. The findings as check – mated by classroom observation revealed neglect of evaluation of the aural – oral skills contrary to the provision of the 9 – year English Studies Curriculum. Where the tests were carried out. They were lop – sided in favour of productive skills. Among the recommendations given based on the findings is that In consonance with the 9 – year Basic Education English Studies Curriculum, after each lesson and each topic, schools management, inspectors and supervisors, should ensure that students’ oral performance is adequately evaluated.*

KEYWORDS: curriculum, evaluation, aural – oral skills, examination, compliance, language testing

INTRODUCTION

The JSS English language curriculum under 6-3-3-4 system of education was published in 1985, by the Federal Ministry of Education. However, following the decision of the Federal Government to introduce the 9 – year Basic Education programme, it became imperative to review that curriculum, especially to attain the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS). Consequently, the National Council on Education (NCE) at its meeting in Ibadan in 2005, directed the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) to carry out this assignment.

In view of this development, NERDC organised and coordinated various activities including series of workshops, writing and critique in which professionals in Education from all parts of the country participated. Following all these, finally, a new ESL Curriculum emerged. The curriculum tagged ‘English Studies is based on the 9 – year Basic Education programme. The concern of this study is the upper Basic (JSS) Curriculum for English Studies, and particularly the spoken English component.

The curriculum is fashioned along the integrated design. It embodies the following essential elements: Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing; Grammatical Accuracy; Language appreciation through literary works. The focal point of the curriculum revolves round communicative competence by means of extensive practice sessions. The curriculum further emphasises the need for integration of all skills irrespective of breaking down the activities into themes for pedagogical convenience. In addition, the curriculum recognises that English is both the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools and medium of interpersonal, inter-ethnic, government and business communication. The new English Studies Curriculum therefore provides that the student at the upper – Basic (JSS) should be equipped with an adequate range of words and sentences that could enable him to communicate effectively in everyday situations. These could be at home, in schools or the wider society.

Objectives

The objectives of the new upper Basic Education (JSS) curriculum are both remedial and developmental. It sets out to:

- I. Tackle the language deficiencies brought in from the lower basic (primary).
- II. Develop language proficiency for both lower and upper Basic (JSS and SSS).
- III. Develop the language proficiency necessary for performing well in other school subjects.

To achieve the above objectives, the curriculum is modeled along (CLT method) which provides activities that ultimately lead to proficiency in English Language. These activities include student – student, student – teacher, verbal interactions, group activities, discussion, retelling stories, role playing, acting, telling stories, debates etc.

As earlier stated, the concern of the study is the skills of listening and speaking. The new curriculum recognises that these skills are closely interrelated as one reinforces the acquisition of the other. Further, the designers of the curriculum borrow from the principles of audio – linguistics as they maintain that listening and speaking skills are instrumental to the learning of the written skills (reading and writing). In view of this, the curriculum firmly believes that the skills of listening and speaking form the ‘bedrock of the language’. To promote efficiency in listening and speaking, the curriculum made ample provision for aural – oral exercises. These are through the use of particularly recorded materials, storytelling, conversation etc. Listening which in the old curriculum was not emphasised (Aina, 2001) is given a special place in this curriculum. This has enriched the oral English component. Aliyu (1995) believes that listening skills form part of the interrelated set of skills required by the language learner to be effective. In view of this, all purposes for listening including the entire sub – skills are fully exploited in the curriculum. The speaking sub – skill component on the other hand is maintained and improved upon. Both segmental and supra – segmental features are fully emphasised.

The basic features of the two skills which the curriculum sets to exploit include:

- a) What is said
- b) What is heard

- c) Extracting meaning
- d) Possible interpretation

The curriculum however encourages the teacher to be flexible in his methods and approach. This is to prevent his becoming a slave to the curriculum. In addition, the curriculum has not only broken down the activities into themes, it has also in tabular form, provided guide to the teacher in form of

- i) Topic
- ii) performance objective
- iii) content
- iv) teacher/students activities
- v) teaching materials
- vi) evaluation.

This is a commendable effort. It has by this made the work of both the trained and untrained teacher easier. Furthermore, one outstanding feature of the new curriculum is the integrative approach to language teaching and learning. The main thrust of the effort is communicative competence through intensive and extensive practice session.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 9 – Year Basic English Studies Curriculum (2007) as discussed earlier recommends that after each topic has been treated in class, students’ learning should be evaluated. However, contrary to this in most Nigerian schools, little attention is paid to testing oral English. Majority of teachers do not volunteer to give test in oral English for reasons such as those highlighted in Ogunrombi (1986), which include the fact that:

- a) many teachers are not aware of the various techniques of testing oracy;
- b) some teachers feel that a subjective evaluation of pupils’ performance in class is sufficient;
- c) others feel testing oracy in the absence of a language laboratory is impossible;
- d) most text books do not have sections that give testing ideas in oracy and, not the least though,
- e) testing oracy takes too long a time to prepare, administer and grade. (p205)

But cogent as these reasons are, the language teacher’s job is only half done if his effort does not promote adequate oral communication. There are pertinent problems that must be tackled in testing oracy in Nigeria. Some of these include:

- a) Knowing what to test;
- b) Knowing how to administer and score the tests;
- c) Meeting the criteria of a good test and
- d) Making use of test results.

English teachers could employ various types of oral English tests depending on Learner needs. Kado (2013) divides language tests into four categories. These include language aptitude tests, language achievement tests, diagnostic tests and language proficiency test. Language proficiency test which tells us whether or not an individual is proficient enough in a language to perform certain tasks or undertake a certain training programme in the target language, is itself sub-divided into two types namely: discrete point and integrative tests.

Discrete point tests are based on the assumption that there is a given number of specific structure points, the mastery of which constitute knowing language. Integrative tests on the other hand are based on the premise that knowing a language must be expressed in some type of functional statement. "He knows enough English to read the newspaper but not enough to follow the news on television", (Spolksky, 1969). Discrete-point testing according to Williams (1990) may be a unit of pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. Items of language are normally dealt with in isolation.

Discrete-point testing has been criticised by many linguists. They claim that the discrete-point test is disjointed, difficult to construct and administer within the class room. But Oller cited in Kado (2013) recommends as an alternative to discrete-point, test of integrative skills, especially cloze tests and dictations both of which require control of the natural redundancy of language. The 9 – Year Basic (JSS) Curriculum seems to favour integrative approach. However in the opinion of this researcher it could be discrete-point tests or integrative tests or both depending on the situation or learner need. Unfortunately, however, many teachers still lack the awareness of the various techniques of testing oral English and some textbooks lack sections on it. Most times, the language teachers do not know what to test and how to administer and score such tests.

In testing oral English, it is important to test the standard of spoken English, that the learners are exposed to, e.g RP. This test should cover the learning problems of the second language learner. Kado (2013) suggests that both receptive and productive tests should be given when the situation demands. Receptive tests include sounds discrimination, comprehension of continuous passages etc. Productive tests on the other hand, include pronunciation of sounds in isolation and context, oral composition, reading aloud, etc. Unfortunately, as observed earlier, the mode of the oral English examination conducted by the examination bodies, deviates seriously from this proposition. English teachers should be careful when administering and scoring oral English tests. This alone, will encourage uniformity in the assessment especially as there are no language laboratories in most schools

Statement of the Problem

The National Junior Secondary School (JSS) English Studies Curriculum recognises speaking and listening skills as the bed-rock of the English language programme. This is in consonance with Obanya's, Dada's, Iheanaco's and Olowe's (2005) claim that it is the spoken language which should come first and receive greater attention in teaching and learning of English. This is because listening is the first language skill that a child acquires which provides a foundation for all other aspects of language (reading, writing, grammar etc) and cognitive development (Azikiwe, 2007).

Speech, on the other hand, is the universal means of communication. It is considered by linguists, as the primary material for study. Knowsley (2009) for instance points out that language users spend 30% of their communicating time, speaking. Iyere (2008) opines that speech is human universal. He argues that people learn to speak and process language more easily and much earlier than the skills of reading and writing.

The 9 – Year Basic English Studies Curriculum (2007) recommends that after each topic has been treated in class, students’ learning should be evaluated. It is in view of this that this study was carried out to ascertain the level of compliance by teachers at the targeted schools.

Objectives

1. To find out the extent to which productive skills are evaluated by teachers of English in junior secondary schools in Katsina State.
2. To find out the extent to which receptive skills are evaluated by teachers of English in junior secondary schools in Katsina State.

Research Questions

1. To which extent are productive skills evaluated by teachers of English in junior secondary schools in Katsina State?
2. To which extent are receptive skills evaluated by teachers of English in junior secondary schools in Katsina State?

METHODOLOGY

The design adopted in this study is the descriptive survey. Sixty eight, including public, private and community junior secondary schools were used in the study. The respondents included 210 teachers and 384 students. A self – designed two sets of questionnaires were used to collect the relevant data. To check mate the information from the two respondents class room observation was carried out. Frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the data.

Research Question 1: To what extent do teachers of English at JSS level in Katsina State evaluate the teaching of English aural-oral skills?

The aural-oral teachers’ job is only half done if his students’ performance is not tested. It was in view of this that responses of both teachers and students were used to find out the extent to which teachers of aural-oral skills were testing students’ performance. Table 1 below is a summary of teachers’ responses on this.

Table 1 -Responses of Teachers on the extent to which they evaluate Students English Aural-Oral performance.

Item	Statement	Public		Community		Private		All Schools	
		Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
1.	listening comprehension	60 (46%)	70 (54%)	17 (47%)	19 (53%)	16 (53%)	14 (47%)	93 (47%)	103 (53%)
2.	sound discrimination	64 (49%)	66 (51%)	16 (44%)	20 (56%)	15 (50%)	15 (50%)	95 (48%)	101 (52%)
3.	pronunciation in isolation/context	103 (79%)	27 (21%)	28 (78%)	08 (22%)	2 (3(77%)	07 (23%)	154 (79%)	42 (21%)
4.	reading passage aloud	95 (73%)	35 (27%)	28 (78%)	08 (22%)	24 (80%)	06 (20%)	147 (75%)	49 (25%)
5.	oral composition	64 (49%)	66 (51%)	16 (44%)	20 (56%)	15 (50%)	15 (50%)	95 (48%)	101 (52%)

From the analysis in Table 1, although it is generally visible that the aural-oral skills are tested, often it is evident that majority of respondents discriminate against the receptive skills. Items 1 and 2 in the table which are concerned with the receptive skills are indicative of this. One hundred and three respondents (53%) and 101(52%) across the schools, disagree that they often test listening and sound discrimination respectively. On the other hand, items 3, 4 and 5 which are concerned with productive skills, indicate that only 42(21%) and 36(18%) across the schools, disagree that the skills are often tested. The private schools however seem to be even, in their treatment of the receptive skills. For teachers that disagree with items 1 and 2 in the table are 47% and 50% respectively.

To verify the above assertion by teachers, responses of students was used. Table 2 represents the summary of their responses to similar questions raised in the T.Q on frequency of aural-oral test given to learners.

Table 2 Responses of Students on the extent to which their performance in Aural-Oral Skills is evaluated.

Item	Statement	Public		Community		Private		All Schools	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
1.	oral English	178 (81%)	42 (19%)	53 (80%)	13 (20%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	271 (82%)	58 (18%)
	listening	28 (13%)	192 (87%)	13 (20%)	53 (80%)	15 (35%)	28 (65%)	56 (17%)	273 (83%)
2.	comprehension;	95 (43%)	125 (57%)	21 (32%)	45 (60%)	21 (49%)	22 (51%)	137 (42%)	192 (58%)
	Sound	180 (82%)	40 (18%)	56 (85%)	10 (15%)	41 (95%)	02 (5%)	277 (84%)	52 (16%)
3.	discrimination;	178 (81%)	42 (19%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	37 (86%)	06 (14%)	272 (83%)	57 (17%)
	Pronunciation in	186 (85%)	34 (15%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	282 (86%)	47 (14%)
4.	isolation/context	178 (81%)	42 (19%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	37 (86%)	06 (14%)	272 (83%)	57 (17%)
	Reading passage	186 (85%)	34 (15%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	282 (86%)	47 (14%)
5.	aloud;	186 (85%)	34 (15%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	282 (86%)	47 (14%)
	Oral	186 (85%)	34 (15%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	282 (86%)	47 (14%)
6.	composition	186 (85%)	34 (15%)	57 (86%)	09 (14%)	39 (91%)	04 (9%)	282 (86%)	47 (14%)

The opinion expressed in Table 2 above by students conforms with teachers' opinion in Table 1 that oral English is tested often. However more emphasis is given to the productive skills in testing the students' aural-oral English. Item 1 in the table, indicates that 271(82%) students across the schools accept that teachers test their oral-English. However, only 56(17%) and 137(42%) across the schools, accept that teachers test listening comprehension and sound discrimination respectively. Items 4, 5 and 6 on the other hand which take care of productive skills show that 277(84%), 272(83%) and 282(86%) students respectively across the schools are in agreement that they are often tested the skills. The opinion expressed by both teachers and students cut across all the three categories of schools.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicated that although both teachers and students claimed that tests, both receptive and productive, were usually given, observation by the researcher put this to question. No record and class observed revealed any test being given. This supports Ogunrombi's (1986) and Aina's (2001) assertions that little attention is paid to testing oral English. This may not be unconnected with the poor qualification of the teachers handling these skills. Many of the teachers in the targetted schools are National Certificate of Education (NCE) holders, which is the minimum qualification for teaching at these level of education. According to Alaku (2001) NCE as a teaching qualification has deteriorated beyond imagination. The 9-year Basic Education English Studies Curriculum provides that after each lesson, each topic, there should be an evaluation vis-à-vis the objective set for teaching the two skills. From the findings of this research, teachers of these two skills in Katsina state did not pay enough attention to testing, especially the receptive and supra-segmental skills. In consequence therefore, attaining the set objectives for the teaching of the aural-oral skills, may not be possible.

Recommendations

- (i) Test of orals as currently obtained should be replaced with tests of both oral production and listening as the practice was before.
- (ii) In consonance with the 9-year Basic Education English Studies Curriculum, after each lesson and each topic, schools management, inspectors and supervisors, should ensure that students' oral performance is adequately evaluated.
- (iii) Teachers of English should be encouraged to be resourceful by way of exhibitions of improvised materials.
- (iv) Government and proprietors should provide enough materials for testing oral English.

CONCLUSION

From the literature review it was revealed that within the current JSS examination, Oral English is tested alongside other skills. It is, however, given the least number of questions. Two, the examination is theoretical, taking care of the productive skills only. The implication of this is that enough is not tested. And this is a deviation from the normal practice. Since the skill is oral, it follows that it must be tested orally, for the desired effect. In this respect therefore, both National Examination Council (NECO) and State Education Research Centre (ERC), the two bodies that examine and certify students at the end of JSS education, must ensure reverting to the old practice whereby oral English is tested in two parts-oral production and listening comprehension. Similarly, they should ensure that as the regulations stipulate, no student is allowed to move to the next level of education (senior secondary school) unless he/she meets the requirements. One of these is passing English at credit level. This, if done, will make students at JSS face their learning of the aural-oral skills in particular and English language in general, more seriously.

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