

Full Length Research Paper

The impact of English language proficiency testing on the pronunciation performance of undergraduates in South-West, Nigeria

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This study investigated the impact of English Language proficiency testing on the pronunciation performance of undergraduates in South-west, Nigeria. The study was a descriptive survey research design. The target population size was 1243 (200-level) undergraduates drawn from eight tertiary institutions. The instruments used for data collection were the English Language Proficiency Test and Pronunciation Test. The English Language proficiency test was used to measure the performance of students in English Language and was adopted from the Post-UTME past questions from Babcock University Admissions Office on Post Unified Tertiary Admissions and Matriculation Examinations screening exercise (Post-UTME) for undergraduates in English and Linguistics. The test contains 20 objective English questions with optional answers. The instruments were validated through experts' advice as the items in the instrument are considered appropriate in terms of subject content and instructional objectives while Cronbach alpha technique was used to estimate the reliability coefficient of the English Proficiency test, a value of 0.883 was obtained. The research questions were answered with mean and standard deviation while hypothesis was tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at 0.05 alpha level. The findings of the study revealed that the mean value of the students' English Proficiency and pronunciation scores were 66.36 and 74.21% respectively, which showed that the students' English proficiency and pronunciation performance were above average and high result respectively; there was a significant positive relationship between proficiency in English Language and pronunciation performance of the students who participated in the study ($r = 0.589$; $p < 0.05$).

Key words: English proficiency test, pronunciation, Language Testing, University, South-West.

INTRODUCTION

Language is the major tool of communication in our society and speech serves as a communication medium

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in which discussion of language is possible. In their submission, Obisike et al. (2019) regard language as the human existence trademark in which communication of humans and their relationship with one another is made possible. Nwala and Obisike (2014) opined that language is produced by speech for communication through a logical and consistence system. Santos (2019) explained that among the characteristics of man is the ability to send messages about events, situations and objects through language. The difference between man and animals is speech, man uses speech sounds for communication and English Language cannot be used very well without the effective manipulation of the speech sounds as far as for competence in linguistics is concerned. According to Kolawole and Oyinloye (2008), the most studied and generally desired language in the world is English Language, especially in the Nigerian society, starting from the nursery school to post-secondary school. It is a verbal behaviour governed by rules that have attained international scope (Omale, 2019). The importance of English Language in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised. Apart from the fact that it is the language used for instruction, it builds bridge across the barriers created by the existence of several ethnic groups and also serves as the official language with which communication is done in all facets of political, economic and social lives.

In their submission, Jackobson and Halle (2016) averred that for language users to achieve an effective communication, then the morphological, syntactical, semantic and phonological ideals of the language must be maintained, otherwise, the language will not be properly communicated which also affect the language proficiency of the user. Oral communication is an avenue whereby the sounds of language are being put in so as to yield precise lexical items which results to acceptable syntactic structures due to its important to create effective communication between the speaker and the hearer, more so as an average of 70% of a normal person's working day is engaged in oral communication, invariably, man speaks more than he writes (Oyinloye, 2013; Fasanmi, 2006). English pronunciation is an important subject since it provides the students with the required knowledge to fully comprehend and communicate in this language. By knowing the correct English pronunciation, the students are able to avoid misunderstanding in the language. Emphasizing the importance of pronunciation, Pourhosein (2016) explained that to pronounce is to make a meaningful sound. In the teaching and learning of pronunciation, its target is more than merely telling the learners to pronounce like the native speakers but emphasizes should be placed on pronouncing effectively. For effective pronunciation by the learners, learners should alter the way they think about the sounds of words and parts of speech such as stress pattern, rhythm and syllables.

Correct pronunciation aids learners to achieve their

goals in communication that is their vocal sounds can be perceived by the audience clearly and easily and they will also be able to understand native speakers' conversations. But achieving accuracy in pronunciation does not come stress-free for the learners neither do teaching pronunciation for the teachers. Egwuogu (2012) explained that to speak is to orally encode information before conveying the information to the listener and the listener must be knowledgeable enough in the sounds of the language so as to understand and decode the information which was passed across to him/ her. This shows that the encoder and the decoder must be knowledgeable in the pronunciation of sounds, formation of words, construction of sentences as well as the interpretation of meaning in that language. Therefore, teachers of ESL should primarily pay particular attention to teaching the core language features which are allowed by the national and international, and also be understood by even the native speakers of the Target Language (TL).

Testing is an approach to measure and ascertain the ability level of the testee or the student in a given domain. According to Kemilainen (2018), testing is the measure a testee's proficiency or knowledge through a test. A test is an instrument or procedure designed to find out the level of achievement from learners on a set out goals. There are four rationales for administering a test which are to show prospect ability; to find out what is already known; to locate what has been learnt; and to recognize what is still to be learnt. Language testing is a process whereby test is administered so as to assess and estimate a person's language competence and performance in language. In his view, Allen (2019), sees language testing as the drill to ascertain the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language effectively. Brown (2010) asserted that the skills that should be tested for language proficiency are listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. During the Language testing, the learners' difficulties and L2 proficiency must be diagnosed and assessed respectively.

Brown (2010) also stated the different test that are in common use in language curricula are: (a) Proficiency tests: Proficiency tests have traditionally consisted of standardised multiple choice items on grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, aural comprehension, and sometimes a sample of writing. (b) Diagnostic tests: Diagnostic test is used to diagnose a particular aspect of a language. It is used to determine the phonological features which are difficult for a learner. Diagnostic tests are used to find out the strengths and weaknesses of language learners; (c) Placement tests: A placement test is used to assign a student into a suitable level or position of a language curriculum or school; (d) Achievement tests: An achievement test is used to achieve the course objectives at the end of a particular instruction; (e) Aptitude tests: An aptitude test is a test that forecasts a person's future success. A language aptitude test is designed to measure a person's potential

to learn a foreign language. Researchers such as Parlindungan (2018), Cook (2008) and Thompson et al. (2001) asserted that the teachers can use 44 phonetic symbols as a guide to teach pronunciations to students; sounds can be used to differentiate between the target language and the learners' mother tongues; use of dialogues or mini-conversations; use of tutorial session and self-study technique, recording of the learners' speech and contrasting it with native model; use of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) (Jolayemi and Oyinloye, 2019); imitating teachers by the students; self-monitoring; and reading aloud.

Kang (2013) in his study, found that the effect of the pronunciation features on ratings of non-native speakers' (NNS) oral proficiency was arranged in order of rank. Navidinia et al. (2019) used experimental approach to find the effect of discerning on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' speaking accuracy and revealed a positive effect on EFL students' speaking accuracy. Khoshima et al. (2018) found that there is a positive effect of teaching test-taking strategies on Iranian IELTS candidates' performance on the reading section. They also took the perceptions of the experimental group participants regarding the teaching test-taking strategies and found the same positive attitudes. Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) found that English National Examination (ENE) had mentionable impacts on teachers and students. This study found that the ENE also affected the students' learning in the classroom in which teachers made the students practise the test and enhance their test-taking skills. Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) found that the washback effect occurred only when the students and teachers felt that the ENE preparation is an obligation.

One of the challenges faced by teachers is pronunciation assessment, and despite the fact that pronunciation is an important unit of proficiency in spoken English, there are few published works in the concerned area. Therefore, this paper seeks to find out the impact of language testing (example, English Language proficiency test) on the pronunciation performance of undergraduates' students of Linguistics in South-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

Research questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What is the level of English proficiency of Linguistics undergraduate students in the South-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria?
2. What is the performance level of the participants in pronunciation of English words?
3. Is there a relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation?

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance:

1. There is no significant relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation.

Theoretical frame work

Proficiency in language and communicative competence

Proficiency in language is fundamentally viewed as the ability to make utilize language in communicative situations. Mäkelä (2005) opined that communicative competence has been the target of foreign language teaching since the early 1970s. Chomsky (1965) gave an introduction to the term, competence. He differentiated between performance and competence, whereby performance is a situation where a speaker uses language in real life situations, and competence is where the speaker is conscious of the language and its structure. The Chomsky's ideas was further developed by Hymes (1972) further whereby he explained that communicative competence grammatical knowledge of language and the ability to use the language in social interactions. Chomsky's and Hyme's models which dealt in first language teaching later became a vital action that helped to make progress towards other frameworks. Canale and Swain later developed a model for second language teaching and testing purposes in 1980 in which the model influenced the comprehension of communicative competence. The model of Canale and Swain (1980) divided communicative competence into three diverse competences such as sociolinguistics competence, strategic grammatical competence and grammatical competence. Bachman and Palmer (1996) also enlarged the Canale and Swain's model of communicative competence for testing by including more detailed information about personal and test-related characteristics that affect an individual's test performance.

This study made use of the model presented in language proficiency and communicative competence. This study investigated the impact of English proficiency test scores of undergraduate students on their pronunciation performance. The English proficiency test was made up of items on grammatical knowledge of English Language, vocabulary, morphology, syntax and semantics etc. This is to find out the grammatical competence or skills which the participants possess. The pronunciation test comprised of an English reading comprehension passage so as to test the pronunciation performance of the participants. Moreover, the

Table 1. Level of English proficiency of Linguistics undergraduates in the South-West geopolitical zone of Nigeria.

S/N	Name of University	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Federal University, Oye-Ekiti	71.02	26.99
2	University of Ibadan, Ibadan	71.48	26.95
3	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife	73.23	24.40
4	Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti	51.81	9.48
5	Osun State University, Osogbo	70.48	27.21
6	Adekunle Ajasin University, AkungbaAkoko	66.26	24.87
7	Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye	74.40	24.01
8	Fountain University, Osogbo	52.18	9.57
	Grand Mean	66.36	21.69

pronunciation test (reading comprehension tests) was used to ascertain the students' ability to differentiate the difference between letters and identify relationships between sounds of letters. letters; ability to acknowledge words and group of words; ability to relate sounds with their matching graphic symbols and comprehend their various meanings; concede structural clues and understand the criterions of the structures; put a name to the meaning of a sentence and any complete sequence of words; discern the connections and series of ideas; apprehend paragraphs and longer units of novels and select the main idea and other characteristics; grasp and peruse for particular information; and scrutinize in a way that expresses or involves an analysis of the merits and faults of a work.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, descriptive survey research design was used. This study made use of the 200 level undergraduates in South-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria. Five states: Ekiti, Ondo, Osun, Oyo and Ogun States were randomly selected for the study. The sample population size was 1243 (200-level) undergraduates drawn from eight universities which are: Federal University, Oye-Ekiti; Ekiti State; University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State; Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife, Osun State; Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State; Osun State University, Osogbo, Osun State; Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State; Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State; and Fountain University, Osogbo, Osun State. The selected universities are made up of three federal universities, four state universities and one private university.

English Language Proficiency and Pronunciation tests were the instrument used in data collection. The English Language proficiency test was used to find out the performance of students in English Language and was adopted from the English and Linguistics Post-UTME past questions from Babcock University Admissions Office. The test contained 20 objective English questions which has options lettered A to D. The students were given 30 minutes to write the proficiency test. The pronunciation test involved a reading passage which the participants were made to read aloud while the researchers recorded their performances on how the students pronounced words in the passage. The English Language Proficiency and Pronunciation tests were graded on 100% each. The instruments were subjected to face validity as well as content validity through three (3) experts in Languages and

Literary Studies Department and, Education Department, Babcock University. The items are considered appropriate in terms of subject contents and instructional objectives. Cronbach alpha technique was employed to estimate the reliability coefficient of the English Proficiency test and a value of 0.883 was obtained. The data collected were analysed using mean and standard deviation while the hypothesis was tested with Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient at 0.05 alpha level.

RESULTS

Research question one

What is the level of English proficiency of Linguistics undergraduate students in the South-west geopolitical zone of Nigeria?

Table 1 presents the level of English proficiency of Linguistic undergraduate students in the South west geopolitical zones of Nigeria.

Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviation of the English proficiency possessed by the participants in terms of their respective universities. Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye has the highest mean score of 74.40 in English proficiency test, followed by Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife with mean of 74.23; followed by University of Ibadan, Ibadan with mean of 71.48; followed by Federal University, Oye-Ekiti with mean of 71.02; followed by Osun State University, Osogbo with mean of 70.48; followed by Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko with a mean of 66.26; followed by Fountain University, Osogbo, with mean of 52.18; followed by Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti with a mean of 51.81. Table 1 also shows a grand mean of 66.36 which is above the critical mean of 50. This means that the level of English proficiency which the undergraduate students in South-west geopolitical zone possess is above average.

Research question two

What is the performance level of the participants in pronunciation? Table 2 introduces us to the performance

Table 2. Performance level of participant in pronunciation.

S/N	Name of University	Mean	Standard deviation
1	Federal University, Oye-Ekiti	86.19	10.24
2	University of Ibadan, Ibadan	86.22	10.37
3	Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife	73.6	24.36
4	Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti	54.15	21.25
5	Osun State University, Osogbo	71.48	26.95
6	Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko,	73.04	24.51
7	Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye	82.7	20.24
8	Fountain University, Osogbo	66.26	24.87
	Grand Mean	74.21	20.35

Table 3. Relationship between the level of English language proficiency possessed and linguistics students' performance in pronunciation.

Variable	N	r	Sig. (2-tailed)
English Language Proficiency Test			
Pronunciation Test	1,243	0.589	0.001

$\alpha = 0.05$.

level of the participants in pronunciation.

Table 2 shows the participants' performance level of pronunciation in terms of their various universities. University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Oyo State has the highest mean score of 86.22 in pronunciation test, followed by Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Ekiti State with a mean of 86.19; followed by Olabisi Olabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State with a mean of 82.7; followed by Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Osun State with mean of 73.6; followed by Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State with mean of 73.04; followed by Osun State University, Osogbo, Osun State with a mean of 71.48; followed by Fountain University, Osogbo, Osun State with a mean of 66.26; followed by Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State with a mean of 54.15. Table 2 also shows a grand mean of 74.21 which is above the critical mean of 50. This means that the participants' performance level of pronunciation is high.

Hypothesis one

There is no significant relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation.

Table 3 shows the relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation. Table 3 shows a positive correlation coefficient of 0.589, and a p-value of 0.001. Testing the hypothesis at the 0.05, the p-value is less than the alpha value of 0.05. This means a

significant relationship and the hypothesis is, therefore, rejected. Therefore, there is a significant relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and the Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation. The positive relationship implied that the more proficient students are in English, the better their performance in pronunciation.

DISCUSSION

Research question one revealed that the level of English proficiency which the undergraduate students in South-west geopolitical zone possess is above average. The finding of this study is in disagreement with the finding of Alghazo (2015) who revealed that the mean for students' proficiency level of students used in the study was 2.39% which shows that they are just under the intermediate level of proficiency.

Research question two revealed that the participants' performance level of pronunciation is high. The finding of this study is not in agreement with the finding of Ubong et al. (2012) who found that 6.2% of the respondents appropriately pronounced and the performance in all other items are all below 50%.

Result from hypothesis one revealed that there is a significant relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation. The finding of this study is in line with the finding of Khoshshima et al. (2018) who found that the use of test-taking approaches had positive effects on Iranian IELTS candidates'

performance on the reading section. To the contrary, the study of Matemilola (2004) revealed that language teaching and testing in Nigeria may not bring about the growth of communicative competence in learners.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it is concluded that the English Language proficiency and pronunciation levels of the participants in this study is above average and high respectively; and there is a positive significant relationship between the level of English Language proficiency possessed and Linguistics students' performance in pronunciation. This means that the more the students are proficient in English Language, the more their performance in pronunciation will improve.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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