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Classroom Interaction Patterns in Use of English Classes: A Survey of Some Tertiary Institutions in Imo State, Nigeria

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Abstract
The study investigated the interaction patterns in Use of English classes using an observation technique. Participants in the study were 15 Use of English lecturers drawn from randomly selected three tertiary institutions in Imo State. A self-developed observation coding sheet was used for data collection. Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics involving frequency counts and percentages. The result revealed that Use of English classes are teacher-centred. Furthermore, students are not actively engaged during classes probably due to the class size. Hence, it was recommended, among other things, that university authorities should employ more lecturers to handle the General Studies Courses generally and Use of English in particular so as to reduce the large classes.

Keywords: Classroom Interaction Patterns, General Studies Programme , Use of English.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-ethnic society with about 500 indigenous languages. These languages have been in existence before the arrival of the colonialists and the advent of English language in Nigeria. Even long after the end of colonialism, the language still enjoys an unchallenged supremacy over Nigeria's indigenous languages. The English language performs a wide range of functions in Nigeria. There is hardly any sector it does not play an important role. In Nigeria's educational system, the English language is so important that education is often equated among the educated and uneducated with the ability to speak the language fluently and in phonetic terms accurately (Nwaegbe, 1986). Expressions like "but he/she is a graduate" or "is he/she not in the university?" are common whenever a university graduate or undergraduate could not communicate in standard English be it in written or oral form. This is perhaps not out of place because proficiency in English language is the key to success in almost all other school subjects given that it is the language of instruction and examination.

The General Studies Programme which cuts across all tertiary institutions in Nigeria, is designed to provide an intellectual meeting point for all disciplines in that the courses are meant to expose students to greater awareness about other disciplines of study with a view to making them perform better in their chosen field of study and become better members of the society (Iloeje, 2016). Specifically, one aspect of the rationale for the inclusion of General Studies in the curriculum of tertiary institutions is for students to be able to improve their communication skills both oral and written (NBTE, 1993 as cited in Iloeje, 2016).

The Use of English course which is the focus of this study was introduced into Nigeria's university education curriculum as a remedial course to enhance the language skills of first year undergraduates for them to be able to cope with the more complex academic work in the higher institutions. Just as Wilson (1986) has noted, some students get to the universities with the false notion that the language skills they acquired at the Ordinary Level are enough to get them through academic work at the tertiary level. However, experience has shown that with the exception of a few of them, a great majority are grossly incapable of coping with their studies at this level. Thus, Nweke and Nwoye (2016) observed that the Use of English course was ushered into Nigerian universities and other tertiary institutions due to incessant complaints by lecturers and employers of labour that many undergraduates and even graduates lacked the ability to express themselves competently in the English language. Accordingly, the course is aimed at polishing the students' competence in English, equipping them with better reading, writing and speaking skills needed for their academic work in the university. It equally prepares them for effective use of these skills in their various endevours when they graduate (Udofot, 2016).

In recent times, scholars have drawn attention to the declining standard of English language among Nigerian students at all levels of education. Ihejirika (2012) observed that an average Nigerian student at all levels of education hardly communicates effectively in both spoken and written English. Odejide as cited in Onukaogu (2002) added that most graduates from Nigerian universities cannot communicate fluently and effectively in English. Sodipo (2014) asserted that most Nigerian graduates are unemployable because they lack employability skills. One of such skills is communication skill. Furthermore, Olubunmi (2015) remarked that students' deficiency and incompetence in English is evident in the high level of dissatisfaction of lecturers with the use of English language by students in Nigerian tertiary institutions for both written and spoken expressions which are plagued with slangs and pidgin forms. Nweke and Nwoye (2016) lent credence to the position of previous scholars on the poor competence in English language among Nigerian graduates and undergraduates alike by noting: "it was rather shameful and actually disheartening that Nigerian graduates could not even write application letters for employment in a language considered a national language." These observations suggest that the objective of introducing the Use of English course in our tertiary institutions is yet to be realized. This shortcoming has been blamed on several factors like large classes, lack of experts in the course (Ugwuanyi & Omeje, 2013), lack of drills and practice, poor teaching method, poor foundation in the English language (Anyadiegwu, 2012), students' apathy to the course and lack of electronic teaching (Aremu, 2015).

One of the fundamental concerns in the teaching and learning process is the study of activities that take place in the classroom. Thus, analysis of classroom interactions in the teaching and learning process has been the focus of a substantial number of empirical studies in recent times. Classroom interactions refer to verbal and non-verbal communication between teachers and students during the teaching and learning process. The communication could be teacher or student-initiated. Classroom interactions have been found to have significant influence on students' academic achievement (Kalu, 1997; Okoye & Onwuachu, 2018; Domike, 2002; Aboho, Dodo & Isa, 2014; Cheruiyot, 2015). Unfortunately, the teaching-learning process at the tertiary level is too weak because the classroom environment is totally based on rote memorization. There is no provision for the development of intellectual and thinking skills among students who are given little time for active participation and interaction. The teacher assumes a very dominant role in the class.

Consequently, the poorly structured classrooms quickly deteriorate into a vacuous waste of time (Inamullah, 2008).

The need for teacher-students interaction during classes cannot be over-emphasized. According to Ibrahim (2012), classroom interaction is very essential in today's educational system. Todays, educational institutions demand more interaction between a teacher and the students and among students rather than students just listening to the teacher. Hence, interaction between learners and their teacher is really fundamental both in spoken and written form. Commenting on the importance of classroom interaction, Hall (2003) posited that interaction between teachers and students in classrooms is one of the primary means by which learning is accomplished and in language classrooms, interaction plays a significant role in that it is both the medium through which learning is realized and an object of pedagogical attention. In support of the fore-going views, Ginting (2017) asserted that classroom interaction is the most important part in any teaching and learning process because the goal of the teaching and learning can be achieved through the interactions.

The recognition of the importance of interactions between teachers and learners perhaps led to studies in which researchers within and outside Nigeria (e.g. Onwuachu & Nwakonobi, 2009; Odinko & Williams, 2006; Ogunkola, 1999; Ginting, 2017; Cheruiyot, 2015; Meng & Wang, 2011) examined and analysed the direction of interactions and learners' attitudes to interaction patterns. In Nigeria however, the existing studies on classroom interaction seem to be limited to secondary and primary school levels of education. Studies on interaction pattern at the tertiary level of education generally and in the Use of English classroom in particular, published or unpublished, appear to be rare. Against this background, the purpose of this study therefore is to investigate the range and sequence of activities students perform during Use of English classes. The aim is to find out the level of students' participation in the classes and to examine the pattern of teachers' verbal interactions in Use of English classrooms with a view to determining how the course is taught.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

As noted earlier, research on classroom interaction patterns in relation to the teaching of Use of English in Nigerian universities is rare. Given this background, the concern of this study is to examine the range and sequence of activities students perform and the pattern of teachers' verbal interactions in Use of English classrooms.

1.2. Research Questions

In order to resolve the problem of the study, the following questions were raised.
1. What is the pattern of teachers' verbal interactions with their students?
2. What classroom activities do students engage in during Use of English classes?

2. Methodology
2.1. Research Design

This study belongs to the survey type. It employed the observation technique in order to identify the pattern of interactions during Use of English classes.

2.2. Sample and Sampling Technique

The study involved 15 teachers in the Use of English unit of three tertiary institutions (one college of education, one polytechnic and one university) in Imo State selected through the random sampling technique.

2.3.   Research Instrument

The instrument used to generate data for the study was Observation Coding Sheet (OCS) adapted from Flanders' Interaction Analysis Category System (FIACS) as cited in Putri (2011). The OCS which has a total of 16 items was divided into two sections – A and B. Section A (items 1 - 7) elicited information on students' activities during Use of English classes. Section B (items 8 – 16) contained teacher's verbal interactions in the classroom.

2.4.   Procedure for Data Collection

The researcher first of all visited the selected tertiary institutions to discuss the purpose of the study with teachers in the Use of English unit and to select participants. Five teachers from each of the three tertiary institutions were selected to participate in the study.   The criteria for selection were:

i.   The teacher must be willing to take part in the study.

ii.   The duration of his/her class must be one hour.

After selection, the researcher booked appointments with the participants. Then, on the agreed days, the classroom observations were done. Each teacher was observed twice which gave a total of 30 observations and 7,200 tallies on which the percentages of the frequencies were calculated. Coding was done after 15 seconds interval and it took about three weeks to carry out the observations.

2.5.   Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics involving frequency counts and percentages was used to analyse data generated.

3. Results

The results of the study are hereby presented in the order of the research questions.

Research Question 1

What is the pattern of teachers' verbal interaction with their students?

Table 1: Pattern of Teachers' Verbal Interactions

Verbal Behaviour	Frequency	Percentage
1. asking question	4,218	43.5
2. explaining concept	5,176	71.8
3. answering student's question	3,138	55.5
4. giving instruction/ directive	5,018	69.6
5. praising/encouraging students	946	13.1
6. criticizing student's idea/opinion	742	10.3
7. using student's idea/suggestion	2,216	30.7
8. justifying his/her authority	2,881	40
9.confusion/silence	4,002	58.5

Table 1 shows that explanation of concept (71.8%) dominated teachers' classroom verbal interactions with students. Closely following it, is giving instruction/directive (69.6%). Next

to this, is confusion/silence (58.5%). The implication of this result is that the Use of English classes are teacher-centred.

Research Question 2
What classroom activities do students engage in during Use of English classes?
To answer this research question, the students' activities section of the observation coding sheet was used.
Findings are presented in table 2.

Table 2: Students' Activities in Use of English classes

Students' Activities	Frequency	Percentage
1. asking question	3,916	54.3
2. listening to teacher's explanation	6,040	83.8
3. putting down points	4,756	66.0
4. answering teacher's question (orally)	3,480	48.3
5. answering teacher's question (in writing)	1,474	20.4
6. reading (aloud)	620	8.6
7. reading (silently)	840	11.6

Table 2 reveals that listening to teacher's explanations ranks first among the activities students engage in during Use of English classes with a total of 6,040 frequency distributions while the least occurring activity is reading aloud (620) occurrences. The other activities fall within the two extremes. It may therefore be concluded that students are not actively engaged during Use of English classes.

4. Discussion of Findings

The main focus of the study was to determine the general pattern of teachers' verbal interactions with the students. It also sought to identify the range and sequence of classroom activities students engage in during Use of English classes.

Available data from the study have revealed that much of the classroom time is taken by teachers talking to students either by explaining concepts or giving directives/instructions to students. This is an indication that the predominant method of teaching is lecture. This result supports Inamullah (2008) who noted that the teaching-learning process at the tertiary level of education is totally based on rote learning whereby the teacher seems to take a very dominant role in the class. The finding further supports the submission of Oviawe, Ezeji and Uwameiye (2015) that the current methods of teaching in Nigerian educational institutions especially the tertiary are based on the behavioural learning theories which are content driven, not learner-centred and do not give students the opportunities to participate in the classroom instruction. To them, instructional approach based on behavioural theory tends to overlook the human, social, cultural and psychological needs of the learner. Nevertheless, one possible explanation for the result obtained here is that Use of English classes are very large. In all the classes observed, the teacher-students ratio is one teacher to over two hundred students. Just like Ajelabi (2000) as cited in Achuonye (2015) has noted, in teaching a large number of students, the lecture method comes in handy for teachers.

Again, it was observed that students do not engage in participatory activities during Use of English classes. This result is not favourable because the traditional commonly held notion that the teacher is an embodiment of knowledge and that the learner is almost blank hence, it is the teacher's role to impart his knowledge merely by telling his students appears to hold sway still despite the call for constructivist approach to teaching. According to DeCaprariis, Barman and Magee (2005), constructivist teaching approach encourages students to be active in the learning process through participation in classroom activities. In the light of this, Olagunju and Ojo (2006) noted that effective teaching involves providing students with opportunities to listen and talk meaningfully, write, read and reflect on the content, ideas, issues and concerns of an academic subject. The constructivist view is also in line with the concept of active learning. Active learning entails students developing the ability to purposefully access information from a variety of sources, analyse and evaluate the information and then integrate it to construct a personal knowledge base from which to make intelligent decisions. This is to say that learning does not involve students' mere reception of information and ideas from the teacher.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has revealed that the dominant method of teaching the Use of English course is lecture. This therefore could account for the less students' participation during classes. To improve the teaching and learning of the course, the following recommendations are hereby made.

1. First, there is need to increase the contact periods allotted to the course. The one hour or at most two hours a week allotted to the course is certainly not sufficient for an effective teaching of Use of English via student-centred approaches.

2. The issue of teacher-students ratio should be addressed. The observed one teacher to over two hundred students' ratio is not appropriate in any teaching and learning context let alone in language teaching which should be characterized by drills and practice. To this end, university authorities should engage more lecturers to teach the course.

3. Use of English classrooms should be made technology compliant by equipping them with non-textual materials like interactive boards, over-head projectors, and public address systems.

4. A functional language laboratory should be built in every tertiary institution where none is available. This will aid in the teaching and learning of listening and speaking language skills.

5. Given the few contact periods allotted to the course, there is need for the course load to be reduced.

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