

INVESTIGATING PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHERS' SUBJECT MATTER KNOWLEDGE OF NOUNS

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Abstract

Experience and research demonstrate that teacher quality is vital in ensuring successful learning outcomes. This is crucial, not only because primary school education is the foundation for the secondary and university levels of education but because the English language itself continues to occupy a central place on the global stage. One way teachers teach English is to talk about the language using word classes. Word classes belong to metalanguage, the language we use to talk about language. One major word class is nouns. The aim of this study was to find out whether selected primary school teachers in Igbo Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State could correctly identify nouns in sentences. The result indicated that only 16.2 % of the teachers scored 50% and above in the test. The implications of this result in the teaching of English in our primary schools were discussed and some suggestions for the way forward made.

Keywords: Education, Primary school teachers, subject matter knowledge, word classes.

Introduction

Education is vital for human capital development. It makes it possible for people to acquire skills and knowledge, which invariably improve the quality of their lives. The contribution of education towards national development has been well documented. Ocho (2005: 21) cited in Ozochi (2007: 191) has indicated that:

The ability of a nation to grow and develop depends on the quality and emphasis in its educational system and not on the amount of natural wealth such as minerals, arable land forestry and sea products available in the country.

This is the Nigerian experience. Nigeria is blessed with diverse natural resources yet a majority of her population lives below one dollar a day. In Northern Nigeria, about 65 million to 70 million Nigerians are illiterates.

Orji and Job (2013:316) have pointed out that "if the Boko Haram sect had received quality education, they would not have embraced violence." The dire consequences of this menace on national development are very high.

The Role of the Teacher in the Educational Sector

At the centre of any educational programme is the teacher. The National Policy on Education (2004) brings to the front burner the vital role teachers play in any educational institution when it declares "no education system can rise above the quality of its teacher" In order words, the quality of education in any country can be measured by the quality of the

countries' teachers. To underscore the vital role teachers play, Ukeje (1991:6) cited in Nworgu & Esobhawan (2014:200) has observed:

If the child is the center of the educational system, the teacher is the pivot of the educational process. This is because in any educational Process, there always stands the teacher, in front or at the back, at the centre or at the side, what he knows and does not know, cannot do or fail to do can be an irreparable loss to the child.

If teachers occupy such a key position, their quality can make or mar the pupils they teach.

Knowledge of Subject Matter

The knowledge of subject is an important competence teachers require to make a positive difference among learners. The Knowledge of subject matter is a conceptual mastery of subject matter and the capacity to be critical of knowledge itself. Commenting on the significance of teachers' knowledge of subject matter, Loewenberg and McDiarmid (2013) posit:

If teaching involves helping people to learn, then understanding what is to be taught is a central requirement of teaching. The various tasks involved in teaching such as selecting worthwhile activities, giving helpful explanations, asking productive questions and evaluating students learning all depend on the teachers' understanding of what it is that students are to learn

A teacher in a College of Education defined a clause as a sentence. When the researcher asked the difference between a clause and a sentence, the teacher hurriedly glossed over her explanations and went on to another topic. When teachers possess inaccurate knowledge or see knowledge in narrow ways, they are likely to pass the wrong ideas down to learners.

Problem

Word classes are the language we use to talk about language itself. Himmelmann (2010: 1) highlights the significance of word classes when he states:

" their critical position is due to the fact that they provide central building blocks for the architecture of grammars and of lexical entries in dictionaries'. Grammatical rules are stated in terms of word classes and there is a mutual dependency between the grammatical rule system and the word class system.

Without word classes it will be difficult to talk about how sentences are constructed, or to tell pupils why their sentences are incorrect and how to correct the sentence. Nouns are a major part of word classes. According to Okoye (2017:20)

Nouns are important in building sentences. We use them to say which people, things, ideas, events we are talking about in our sentences.....

It is therefore difficult for us to write an effective sentence without implying a noun.

Nouns contribute to the difficulty of a sentence. The number of difficult nouns we use in a sentence, according to research, determines the level of difficulty of the sentence. The more different nouns we use in a sentence, the more

information our reader will have to process. In other words, the more nouns our sentences contain, the more difficult the sentences will be to understand.

Since the English language contains an infinite number of nouns, Primary School teachers ought to be able to identify them in sentences in order to teach English effectively at the foundation level of education. We are also interested in nouns because Okoye (2017: 20) and Obika(2016: 135) have indicated that nouns are very many and can be problematic to second language learners.

The crucial question this study tried to answer then was: 'To what extent can primary school teachers in Igbo Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State correctly identify nouns in sentences?'

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical support for this study is the classical theory of categorization which is often traced to Aristotle's two works *Categories* and *Metaphysics* (Taylor: 2003:20). The theory of categorization posits that:

When a person at first sees only the unity or common quality of many things, he must not give up until he sees the differences in them, so far as they exist in classes; and conversely, when all sorts of dissimilarities are seen in a large number of objects he must find it impossible to be discouraged or to stop until has gather into one circle of similarity all the things which are related to each other and has included them in some sort of class on the basis of their essential nature (285a-285b)

The basic tenets of the classical theory of categorization are that categories exist objectively. Based on the category theory, each word in English must be associated with a category label in order to be used in constructing phrases, clauses and sentences.

While some experts agree that knowledge of word classes is essential in learning the English Language, others do not. For example, in supporting the teaching of word classes, the DfEE/Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) (1999: 38) states that "Pupils should be taught the principles of sentence grammar." However, as to be expected, not every teacher of English believes that word classes, especially nouns, should be taught in the English Language classroom. Critics of the teaching of English word classes are mostly native speakers of the language.

These teachers argue that teaching word classes consumes a lot of classroom time and they believe that ability to analyze how language works does not necessarily make people fluent users of the language. Okoye & Nnamani (2018) have however argued that teachers of native speakers of the English language can afford to take this stance for two main reasons. First, as native speakers, their students have implicit knowledge of word classes because they read and think in English. Second, these students are introduced to reading in English at a very early age. A primary 3 British pupil is, therefore, most likely to recognize a noun without necessarily knowing why the word is a noun. This innate knowledge of word classes gives them an edge over Nigerian primary 3 pupils for whom English is a second language.

It is important to point out that most of the studies of word classes were carried out by native speakers of English and by lecturers of English as a foreign language. Tsang (2011:1-18) for example, investigated the English metalanguage awareness among Primary School teachers in Hong Kong. The teachers were asked to produce, recognize, correct, and explain grammatical forms and their functions. Twang discovered that the school teachers' best performance was in recognizing the word classes while their worst performance was in explaining word classes perhaps because explaining required the teachers to use met language.

It seems from the results of our searches that no research has been carried out on knowledge of nouns among Primary School teachers in Igbo Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State. This neglect has a far-reaching effect on the subject matter knowledge of teachers. Such a study is absolutely necessary in Nigeria as it will show our English Language teachers some of the ways of helping primary school learners, undergraduates and teachers in training how to identify nouns, a knowledge that is mandatory for academic and professional success.

Methods

South Saharan Development Organization, a non –governmental organization, in Enugu engaged the researcher and other lecturers to train thirty primary school teachers randomly selected from Igbo Etiti local Government of Enugu State. The aim of the workshop, which took place between 19 – 21 June 2018 at Nsukka, was to improve learning outcomes through capacity building in modern teaching techniques.. After the training, the questionnaire was administered.

An authentic text from UNESCO SOURCES, N0 9, April 1997, was used for the study. The text contains 75 words, 18 of which are nouns. (See the appendix for sample of the text.). The teachers were asked to underline nouns wherever they appeared in the text. No time limit was given for the exercise and respondents were not allowed to discuss the answers while carrying out the test.

One limitation of this study is that some of the respondents may have been too tired to respond appropriately to the questionnaire as the questionnaire was administered after a workshop. However, it can be argued that no matter how tired N.C.E holders are, they should be able to identify nouns correctly.

Results

The teachers' choices indicated that they had very little knowledge of nouns. Some answers were discarded because some teachers underlined a noun and a word before it which is not a noun. Such answers indicated guess work and so were marked as wrong. The highest score was 17 while the lowest was 1. Three teachers scored 1 out of 18; three teachers scored 3 out of 18 and 4 teachers scored 5 out of 18. Many teachers avoided underlining any word for lack of knowledge. Here are some examples of their ridiculous choices for nouns.

Nouns

Non- Sterile No one, they

Test of Hypothesis:

H₀₁: Primary School teachers in Igbo Etitì Local Government Area of Enugu State do not have knowledge of nouns.

H₁₁: Primary School teachers in Igbo Etitì Local Government Area of Enugu State have knowledge of nouns.

Table 1: t-test Statistic on mean scores for knowledge of nouns by primary school teachers in Igbo Etitì Local Government Area of Enugu State

One-Sample Test

Scores	N	\bar{x}	SD	Df	t-cal	t-crit	Decision
Teachers	30	4.6700	2.65549	99	17.586	1.658	Reject H ₀

Source: SPSS version 22 analysis.

Decision

From the spss output, the calculated t value (17.586) > t critical (1.658), we reject the null hypothesis at 5% level of significance and conclude that Primary School teachers in Igbo Etitì Local Government Area of Enugu State have a knowledge of nouns but to a low extent.

Findings & Discussion

As the results indicate, a majority of the teachers in Igbo Etitì Local government Area of Enugu State performed poorly in identifying nouns. If teachers lack adequate knowledge of nouns, how will such teachers describe language as they teach? Teachers’ inadequate knowledge of word classes is not limited to second language teachers in Nigeria. Schoonmaker (2015) discovered that in -service teachers studying an undergraduate English course at a university in Florida had limited ability to express grammar errors and use proper metalanguage , language connected with word classes.

In spite of these findings from Igbo Etitì Local Government Area, it is unfortunate that some use of English teachers in Colleges of Education and in Nigerian Universities believe that communicative competence is more important than grammatical competence and so often gloss over the teaching of nouns. Others assume that the students should have acquired adequate knowledge of nouns while in the primary and secondary schools since it is in the English Curriculum. But if in- service teachers in America, whose first language is English, struggle with knowledge of word classes, teachers of English in higher institutions should take the teaching of nouns seriously.

Teachers of English in Colleges of Education and Faculties of Education in Nigerian universities need to teach students, as Okoye (2017: 20-30) has pointed out not only how to use meaning to identify nouns but how to use the way they look and their position in sentences.

The finding from this study appears to suggest that teachers in Igbo Etitì Local Government Area of Enugu State are poor in English. This finding is similar to the findings of made of Primary School teachers in Benin-City and Kaduna State respectively which has attracted the attention of their State governors. Ihejirika (2014) recalls the encounter between the ex-

governor of Edo State, Adams Oshiomhole, and a primary school teacher, who in spite of her many years of teaching experience was unable to read the contents of an affidavit. In similar circumstances, the governor of Kaduna State, Gov El Rufai, sacked 22,000 teachers in 2017 when they remained irredeemable in spite of several trainings and re-trainings. (Daily Posts)

The consequences of low quality teachers on this all important education sector are far reaching yet government has not helped matters. Whereas UNESCO recommends that 26% of government expenditure should be spent on education, in 2019, Enugu State government spent a paltry 5 % on education. While we call on government to invest more on teacher education, we concede that government alone cannot effectively bear the burden of improving the quality of teachers. Hence, we suggest private sector collaboration with government, whereby managers of Private School whose learners have success stories to tell arrange for teacher training in public schools. Unless Nigerians begin to give freely to our communities, the Uhuru we seek in educational sector will be far-fetched.

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Appendix 1: Diagnostic Test

IDENTIFYING NOUNS IN SENTENCES

Sentences are made of words known as word classes or part of speech. The major word classes are noun, verb, adjective and adverb.

The main aim of this test is to find out if you can identify the nouns in sentences.

1. Read Test 1 below and underline all the nouns in the sentences.

TEST 1

By tradition, Rwanda is extremely unfair to women. They work in the fields with no knowledge of techniques for improving production. They have their babies at home, unaware of the risk in using non-sterile instrument: and they watch, worried but silent, as their society disintegrates before eyes. No one seeks their advice, unless it is to ask for details about the way they are raped during war or how to care for orphans.

UNESCO SOURCES No 9, April 1997

Appendix 2 Results of Igbo- Etiti Local Government Area - Tests

S/No	Nouns (18)
1.	4
2	1
3	1
4	3
5	7
6	8
7	3
8	14
9	6
10	1
11	2
12	14
13	3
14	7
15	7
16	8
17	5
18	7
19	8
20	6
21	8
22	6
23	17
24	9
25	5
26	10
27	5
28	6
29	5
30	8