

ANALYSIS OF DIFFICULT TOPICS IN SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM AS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated analysis of difficult topics in senior secondary school English language curriculum as perceived by students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State, Nigeria. The population for this study consisted of three thousand and twenty-six (3026) students' senior secondary school students' in Dutsin-Ma. The simple random sampling technique was used to select four public schools and four private schools in Dutsin-Ma of which a total of two hundred and seventy-five (275) respondents were selected randomly. The researchers designed instrument titled "English Language Difficult Topics Questionnaire (ELDTQ)" was used for data collection with Cronbach alpha reliability co-efficient of 0.89. Data collected were analyzed using frequency and percentage to answer research questions while hypotheses one and two were analyzed using t-test. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance. Findings of the study showed that senior secondary school students perceived five topics (tense, stress, intonation, essay & literature) difficult to learn while intonation (Mean =2.5, Standard Deviation =.96) is the most English language topic perceived difficult to learn by public and private senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma. Also, the study revealed no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State based on gender ($t = -1.197$; $df = 273$; $p > 0.05$) and school type ($t = -1.916$; $df = 273$; $p > 0.05$). Based on these findings, it was recommended that intonation, tense, stress, essay and literature should be taught by teachers with students centered instructional methods to enhance students' mastery in the topics.

Keywords: Difficult Topics, Senior Secondary School, Students, English Language Curriculum.

Introduction

English language remained the pivot of education in Nigeria. It is the language of instruction from upper primary education through secondary, to tertiary education in Nigeria. It is the language through which all other subjects in the curriculum are taught. It has been generally known that most students faced a lot of problems in learning English language as a second language in non-English speaking as a native language countries including Nigeria. Proficiency in English language refers to the ability of a student to have command over the spoken and written skills to carry out successful communication. The English language is one of the compulsory subjects in senior secondary schools in Nigeria. The English language is a providential colonial legacy bequeathed on Nigerians by the British. The language has assumed a central position in almost all spheres of the country's developmental attempts that almost every human pursuit beyond the self requires the use of English in a sense (Olutola, Iliyas & Abdusalam, 2017).

According to Blagojevich, Ruiz and Dunn (2004) English language proficiency refers to the learner's ability to use the English language accurately and fluently to enable him/her to communicate views, ideas and information without any difficulty in all the academic fields i.e., social studies, language and art. Students' who have proficiency in English language as opportunity to secure good job because employers always prefer those graduates who are fluent in English. In Nigeria, there is abundant evidence attesting to senior secondary school students' difficulty in attaining high academic performance in the English language.

Also, Chibuzor (2015) traced students' poor performances in English language national examinations to an inadequate number of qualified teachers of the subject, lack of instructional materials and unsupportive learning context; while Iliyas (2011) identified poor teacher training and uncooperative attitude of teachers of other subjects in the school. Moreover, general poor academic performance at the secondary school level in English language has been established. Tenibaje (2015) have blamed home background as one of the factors that are accountable for the poor performance of students, other researchers have identified problems in equivocation, elocution, transliteration and expression as reason for student's poor performance in English language. In addition, Udu (2017) carried out a research on difficult topics and achievement in English language: the perception of senior secondary schools and teachers in Markurdi Township, Benue State. He carried out the research on twelve English language teachers and one hundred and eighty seven students. The results of the analysis showed that out of the 35 topics selected from SSCE syllabus and prescribed textbooks for English at senior level, teachers perceived 14 as difficult topics while students perceived 22 as difficult topics. The reasons why they were experiencing difficulty with the topics were poor reading and study skills, absence of motivation, hatred for English language, poor experience with the subject and poor teaching method. He recommended remedial teaching of the difficult topics with the use of ICT; retraining of teachers, peer teaching and professionalization of teachers as steps to improve English language teaching and learning.

Moreover, a study by Peng (2014) investigated the perceived difficulty rank of five English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. The purpose was to establish the relationships among these skills. The study found that Chinese students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills to command, whereas reading is perceived

the least difficult one out of the five. Difficult topics could cause students to underachieve (Samba & Eriba, 2012) and to have negative attitude towards the subject. Difficult topics in a subject can make students to develop negative attitude towards that subject and the result will be poor achievement. Negative attitude towards English will effect of other subjects too, since English is used in learning other subjects. In addition, different studies (Ogunkola & Samuel, 2011; Cimer, 2012; Olubukola, 2015) have affirmed that difficult topics are one major cause of students' poor achievement in the various subject areas. Kaçani and Mangelli (2013) study was about Albanian teachers' and students' perceptions concerning the difficulties faced by teachers and learners in the teaching and learning of English grammar. Their study and other studies failed to point out specific topics in the component of grammar that students and teachers face. The study was more interested in approaches to teaching grammar; hence, it merely concluded that teachers and students face difficulties regarding English grammar instruction.

Also, Logan & Johnston, (2009) opines that overall, girls had better reading comprehension, read more frequently, and had a more positive attitude to reading. As to reading comprehension tests, significant differences favoring females were also found in earlier studies (Lynch, 2002). Also, Chiu and McBride-Chang (2006) conducted a large-scale cross-cultural study and concluded that there were significant gender differences in reading comprehension; girls' mean reading scores exceeded that of boys.

The researchers then feel that it is necessary to build on existing body of knowledge by investigating the English language topics that are actually difficult to students to learn. Therefore, this study investigated difficult topics in senior secondary school English language curriculum as perceived by the students in senior secondary school Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State.

Objectives of this Study

The general objective of this study is to analyze the difficult topics in senior secondary school English language curriculum as perceived by the senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State.

Specifically, the study was aimed at:

- i. Identifying the topics that are difficult in English language as a subject.
- ii. Determining the English language topics that senior secondary school students perceived as most difficult.
- iii. Finding the rank order of difficulty level of the topics in English language as perceived by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma Katsina State.
- iv. Finding out the difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State, based on gender, school type and age.

Research Questions

This study is to provide answers to the following questions:

1. How difficult are the identified English language topics?
2. What is the rank order of difficulty level of the topics in English language as perceived by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study.

1. There is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma.
2. There is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma based on school type.

Methodology

Descriptive research design of survey type was adopted for the study. The population for this study consists of three thousand and twenty-six (3026) SSS2 students in both public and private schools in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State. Simple random sampling technique was used to select the participants for the study. Four (4) public schools and four (4) private schools were randomly selected in Dutsin-Ma of which a total of (275) respondents were selected from the total population of three thousand and twenty-six (3026) students comprising both male and female across the eight schools. The researchers designed instrument titled "English Language Difficult Topics Questionnaire (ELDTQ)" was used for data collection. The instrument has twenty (20) items with four Likert-scale of Not Difficult, Difficult, Moderately Difficult and Very Difficult. Section A of the instrument consists of the demographic variables of the respondents such as school name, school type, gender and age of the respondents. Also, section B consists of twenty (20) items on English language topics students perceived difficult in senior secondary school syllabus.

To ensure the validity of the instrument, a copy of the drafted instrument was given to two experts in Educational Measurement and evaluation and two lecturers in the Faculty of Education, Federal University Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State to scrutinize. They determined the face and content validities of the instrument. Also, the reliability of the instrument was carried out using Cronbach alpha reliability with reliability co-efficient of 0.89. The questionnaires were administered to students in their classes by the researchers. This gave the researchers the opportunity to answer relevant questions that were raised by the respondents. Both the descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data collected. Frequency count and percentage were used to answer research questions. Hypotheses one (1) and two (2) were analyzed using t-test. The hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance.

Results

Answers to Research Questions

The two (2) research questions asked in the study were answered using frequencies, percentages, means and rank order as presented below.

Research Question One: How difficult are the identified English language topics?

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of respondents' perceptions on difficult level of the identified English language topics

Item	English Language Topic	ND	D	MD	VD	SD	M	Decision
1.	Word Class	100	107	41	27	.95	2.00	Not Difficult
2.	Sounds	73	95	75	32	.97	2.24	Not Difficult
3.	Vocabulary	63	111	69	32	.94	2.30	Not Difficult
4	Phrase	48	117	69	27	.94	2.40	Not Difficult
5	Listening	55	100	84	36	.94	2.40	Not Difficult
6	Tense	45	112	83	35	.91	2.50	Difficult
7	Speaking	45	108	88	34	.90	2.40	Not Difficult
8	Stress	47	101	76	51	.98	2.50	Difficult
9	Reading	52	98	94	31	.92	2.40	Not Difficult
10	Clause	40	100	95	40	.91	2.40	Not Difficult
11	Intonation	45	88	96	46	.96	2.50	Difficult
12	Essay	48	97	93	37	.93	2.50	Difficult
13	Spelling	49	103	76	47	.97	2.40	Not Difficult
14	Syllable	58	104	84	29	.92	2.40	Not Difficult
15	Writing	52	106	84	33	.92	2.30	Not Difficult
16	Word Structure	50	108	74	37	.96	2.40	Not Difficult
17	Comprehension	58	103	77	37	.96	2.40	Not Difficult
18	Cluster	47	111	80	37	.92	2.40	Not Difficult
19	Creative Writing	54	99	75	47	.99	2.40	Not Difficult
20	Literature	67	77	67	67	1.1	2.50	Difficult

Keys: ND=Not Difficult, D=Difficult, MD=Moderately Difficult, VD=Very Difficult, M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation

Table 1 reveals that respondents' perceptions on difficult level of the identified English language topics, students mean score on each item should be greater than or equal to the reference mean score of 2.5 in order to determine the topics that is difficult to the students to learn. Therefore, the students mean scores on item 6 (tense), item 8 (stress), item 11

(intonation), item 12 (essay) and item 20 (literature) is equal to 2.5 this means that students find tense, stress, intonation, essay and literature difficult to learn but perceived Item 1 (word Class), item 2 (sound), item 3 (vocabulary), item 4 (phrase), item 5 (listening), item 7 (speaking), item 10 (clause), item 13 (speaking), item 14(syllable), item 15 (writing), item 16 (word structure), item 17 (comprehension), item 18 (cluster) and item 19 (creative writing) not difficult to learn.

Research Question Two: What is the rank order of difficulty level of the topics in English language as perceived by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State?

Table 2: Mean, standard deviation, and ranked order of difficulty level of the topics in English language as perceived by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma

Item	English Language Topics	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank
11.	Intonation	275	2.5200	.95642	1 st
10.	Clause	275	2.4909	.91366	2 nd
8.	Stress	275	2.4764	.98269	3 rd
20.	Literature	275	2.4655	1.09814	4 th
13.	Spelling	275	2.4400	.97367	5 th
12.	Essay	275	2.4327	.93103	6 th
19.	Creative Writing	275	2.4182	.99067	7 th
7.	Speaking	275	2.4036	.90456	8 th
16.	Word Structure	275	2.4000	.95901	9 th
6.	Tense	275	2.3927	.90736	10 th
18.	Cluster	275	2.3891	.92288	11 th
9.	Reading	275	2.3782	.91753	12 th
4.	Phrase	275	2.3745	.94061	13 th
5.	Listening	275	2.3673	.94735	14 th
15.	Writing	275	2.3564	.92230	15 th
17.	Comprehension	275	2.3382	.95816	16 th
14.	Syllable	275	2.3055	.92085	17 th
3.	Vocabulary	275	2.2545	.94015	18 th
2.	Sounds	275	2.2400	.97442	19 th
1.	Word Class	275	1.9818	.95311	20 th

Table 2 reveals that out of twenty (20) English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State listed above; Intonation ranked first followed by Clause which is ranked second; Stressranked third, followed by Literature, thenSpelling; Essay; Creative Writing; Speaking; Word Structure; Tense; Cluster; Reading; Phrase; Listening; Writing; Comprehension; Syllable; Vocabulary; Sounds and Word Class.

Hypotheses Testing

In this study, two (two) null hypotheses were formulated and tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance. To test these hypotheses, t-test statistical tool was used to analyze the data collected as presented below.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma.

Table 4.4.1: t-test summary table showing the Difference in English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma.

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-Cal.	Sig. of t-value
English Language Topics	Male	137	46.672	11.034	273	-1.197	.232
	Female	138	48.174	9.749			

Table 4.4.1 reveals that there is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma ($t = -1.916$; $df = 273$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis three is accepted. This indicates that, English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma is not statistically different.

Research Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma based on school type.

Table 4.4.2: t-test summary table showing the difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma based on school type.

Variable	School Type	N	Mean	SD	Df	t-Cal.	Sig. of t-value
English Language Topics	Male	175	46.520	10.229	273	-1.916	.056
	Female	100	49.010	10.604			

Table 4.4.2 reveals that there is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma based on school type ($t = -1.916$; $df = 273$; $p > 0.05$). Therefore, the hypothesis two is accepted. This indicates that, English language topics perceived difficult by public and private senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma is not statistically different.

Discussion of Findings

The answer to research question one shows that out of the twenty (20) English language topics listed only five (5) topics (tense, stress, intonation, essay and literature) students perceived difficult to learn in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State. Answer to research question two indicates that intonation is the most English language topics perceived difficult by public and private senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State. This finding is supported by Udu (2017) who find that topics perceived as difficult by students are stress and intonation. Peng (2014) found that Chinese students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills to command, whereas reading is perceived the least difficult one out of the five. Peng (2014) is not in agreement with the result in this study. He found that Chinese students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills to command, whereas reading is perceived the least difficult one out of the five.

The results of hypothesis one reveals that there is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by male and female senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina State. This finding is not in agreement with (Logan & Johnston, 2009; Chiu & McBride-

Chang, 2006) research study on reading research on gender difference that females performed better reading comprehension. In addition, results of hypothesis two shows that there is no significant difference in English language topics perceived difficult by senior secondary school students in Dutsin-Ma, Katsina state based on school type.

Conclusion

The researchers concluded that intonation, tense, stress, essay and literature are the most difficult topics students find difficult to learn and it should be given attention in order to improve performance in internal and external examinations.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of this study, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Intonation, tense, stress, essay and literature should be taught by teachers with students centered instructional methods to enhance students' mastery in the topics.
2. The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should update the Nigerian English curriculum to match the new dynamism of the language. The new curriculum is expected to facilitate the teaching of effective everyday aspects in learning English language.
3. The Federal and State Ministries of Education should organize training to build and update teachers' skills.
4. Non-governmental organizations should support the Government in building and equipping the schools in teaching materials to facilitate practical oral English teaching and examination, and use of other modern learning resources.
5. Teachers should also adopt effective methods and add more efforts into the skills of teaching English language as a second language.
6. Parents should also motivate and encourage their children to use the language at homes and in their environments and also organize extra lesson for them to enhance their performance in mastering the target language.

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