

STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN NECO- SSCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses some of the factors that hinder the performance of Secondary School Students on the National Examination Council- Senior School Certificate Examination in Nigeria in the area of English as a foreign language standard examination. After juxtaposing the NECO-SSCE performances over the years, the study utilized several empirical studies, with quantitative framework, to examine these factors that both have positive or negative significance and influence in underpinning the academic performances of the learners. Several factors such as the learners' attitudinal factor, teachers' input and teaching strategy including years of experience and teaching qualifications, socio-economic and cultural background of the learners, parenting attitude, age and gender factor, exposure to the target language, learning materials and host of others have been identified and discussed. The paper however, considers these factors as applicable to most of the standard tests on English as a target language not only peculiar to the Nigerian NECO-SSCE English examination. Finally, the paper suggests certain recommendations which chiefly centre on offering professional development to teachers as well as encourage the stakeholders to cater for the needs and comfort of the students.

Keywords: secondary school, National Examination Council of Nigeria (NECO), senior secondary school certificate examination (SSCE), language learning, academic performance.

Background of the Study

In preparing an individual child, the Nigeria's National Policy of Education (FME, 1982) specified the broad objectives of secondary school education in the country as for: (i) useful living in the society; and (ii) for higher education. Thus, these aims can only be achieved through effective assessment and evaluation strategy and as such the Nigeria created body that shoulders the responsibility of evaluating the learners annually. Nworgu (1992) asserts that the agencies are set for this assessment and evaluation task in order to promote secondary school education through coordination, controlling, monitoring as well as evaluation of the quality of educational institutions in the country. In the country moreover, these bodies include National Examination Council of Nigeria (NECO), West African Examination Council (WAEC), and the Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB). All these three bodies provide end of program examination for the graduates of secondary school education in the country. They offer range of examinations in different assemblage of secondary school subjects with English language as one of the core-subjects. The general purpose of the examinations, as according to Offor, (2001) is to determine the level of performance a child has achieved in a course as stipulated in the broad educational objectives.

English Language in Nigeria's Education System

In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (2004) structured the country's education system into (i) Early Childhood Care and Development which is aged 0 – 4 years (ii) Basic Education aged 5 – 15 years, which involves year one of pre-primary schooling, six years of primary school and three years of junior secondary school (iii) three years in senior secondary schools or technical colleges which is often referred to as "Post-Basic Education" and (iv) the tertiary education provided in colleges of education, polytechnics and universities.

English language is the official language of Nigeria (Danladi S. S., 2013; Hamisu A. M. et al, 2018; Oribabor O. A., 2014, Taiwo, 2009). People have to communicate in English in whatever they do that concerns government officiating and business, and even otherwise. This has made Nigeria one of the largest English-speaking populations in the world (Taiwo, 2009). The English language becomes an essential pre-requisite for gaining admission into the university to study any discipline of knowledge such as medicine, software programming, engineering, language sciences (Oribabor O. A., 2014). It is central to Nigeria's educational growth because of its important role as a medium of knowledge delivery in Nigeria's educational institutions.

English language remains the language of instruction in Nigerian schools mainly at the upper primary school level, secondary school and beyond (Danladi S. S., 2013). Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004), plainly spelled out the function of the English language as a school subject in Nigerian schools. It provides that the first three years of primary education of a Nigerian child the indigenous language (the language of the environment) can be used for class instruction while English is retained as a core subject. While from the fourth year in primary school English should be the language of instruction apart from its status as a core subject of study. The policy further specifies that every schoolchild should be made to learn English and any other Nigerian language apart from the native language of the immediate environment in the junior secondary school education. Whereas a child is expected to learn the English language and any other Nigerian language other than that of the natives of the immediate environment.

The report of International Organization for Migration (2014) observed that some educational reforms led to the restructuring of the national curriculum on education. At the senior secondary level students are required to study four core subjects compulsorily in addition to elective subjects in four offered areas. The core compulsory subjects include English language as the first followed by mathematics and others. The report further opines that the reforms in the curriculum are geared towards increasing employability rate of high school graduates in the country.

Who Teaches English in Nigeria?

According to Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004), it is highly expected that teaching in Nigeria shall accomplish the highest standards possible. It proclaimed that "Since no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers, teacher education shall continue to be given major emphasis in all educational planning and development" (p.10) and it further states that "...the minimum qualification for entry into the teaching profession shall be Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE)" (p.10). However, Daily Trust (2015) reported Malam Ibrahim Shakarau, the Minister of Education, saying the federal government reached a decision to make the possession of a Bachelor's degree to be the minimum teaching qualification in Nigeria. This was a sequel to the effort of improving the standard of education in the country. The policy also stipulates that all teachers should be professionally trained in accordance with the structured teacher education programmes for the effective performance of their duties.

The Method and Data Collection

This study largely employs a secondary data analysis of the phenomenon in a descriptive analysis. The significance of using existing survey data and originally published data, to find meaningful answers cannot be overemphasized (Creswell, 2014; Johnston, 2012; Smith, 2008) The results of the entire NECO-SSCE candidates in the country were accumulated using readily published results by NECO body. The valid results of the

candidate's performance were arranged into the year of the examination, a number of candidates that sat for the examination and number of candidates that passed the examination with credit pass in the years under investigation which was from 2009 to 2017. The obtained data were analyzed using frequencies and percentage scores. Thus, some variables were recorded while others were computed to make interpretation meaningful and facilitate further analysis. The study further examined some recent empirical studies on the student's performance on NECO-SSCE. The reviews of the empirical data from these studies additionally provided profound insights into the causes of disparities in the students' performance (Creswell, 2014).

The focus of this paper however, is to analyse the performance of secondary school examinees in the National Examination Council of Nigeria (NECO) with restriction to English language only. This analysis will compare the candidates' performance in English language tests over the years. Though, the other parameters by which the performance of the students could be assessed either through evaluation of the educational objective, course-content coverage, the reliability of the test, the perception of the test takers and so on and so forth. Apart from the comparability model, the paper, will also analyse some studies done on the performance of the students in the Examination in order to establish a positive relationship in the comparison with empirical evidence. This will enable us foster some recommendations that can upgrade the future performance in high stakes in NECO-SSCE examinations.

National Examination Council of Nigeria (NECO) is an examination body in Nigeria responsible for conducting the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE) in the Country. The NECO administer other examinations apart from SSCE which encapsulates; Basic Education Certificate Examination (otherwise referred to as BECE) and National Common Entrance Examination (Known as NCCE). NECO was created in 1999 by the then, Head of state, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, with a vision of preparing and conducting standard and acceptable examinations that are credible nationally and internationally across the world (NECO, 2017). The

NECO must also ensure that the examinations it administered are in accord with the provisions and cardinal expectations of the Nigerian Curriculum and National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 2017). NECO has significantly gained its popularity as the most widely national body in Nigeria used for conducting examinations that chiefly involve English proficiency tests, particularly in SSCE.

The SSCE however, is the examination taken by candidates in their last phase of Secondary School Education. The SSCE is of two types. One is for the candidates in the final year of their senior secondary education which is also their third. It is called the "Internal SSCE". The second is called "External SSCE" as it is for the candidates not in the School system that is 'Private Candidates' (NECO, 2017). In all the examinations, English proficiency test is amongst the Compulsory Cross-Cutting Subjects. In 2017 alone, a total number of 1,051, 472 candidates sat for the English examination in NECO/SSCE out of 1,055,988 who registered for the examination as spoken by the Registrar and Chief Executive Officer of the Institution, Prof. Charles Uwakwe. This is reported by the Vanguard newspaper:

"... 745,053 or 70.85% have 5 credits and above including English language and mathematics and represents 1.11% improvement in candidates' performance compared with 2016. 947,850 or 90.14% candidates have 5 credits and above irrespective of English and mathematics representing 1.63% improvement compared with last year's result. 903,690 candidates have credit and above in English while 849335 candidates have credit and above in mathematics." (September 14, 2017, 12:44 pm).

The main purpose of the SSCE English test in NECO examinations is claimed to assess the English proficiency of second language speakers of English who intend to study in institutions of higher learning and/ or be able to communicate in English language in the country as the English language is the lingua franca (official language of the government). The function of the test has

however, been expanded throughout its administration. The test is not only used as one of the basic entrance requirements for applying institutions of higher learning in the country but, also used as a job requirement in various sector in the country. As such, both the internal and external candidates, with the help of their teachers devote their time, energy and money to prepare for the test. They have to study in line with the syllabus developed by the NECO which is in tune with the National Curriculum. They also learn strategies to take the examination.

In view of the above sense, testing of English language proficiency in Nigeria has become a compulsory aspect in all secondary schools in Nigeria whether public or private. This experience therefore, has proven that the NECO (SSCE) English test is actually influential for the life of its test takers. In observing this phenomenon above, we can reflect on the assertion of Shohamy (2001), that:

“when a language is tested in a higher institution as criteria of acceptance, the symbolic power of the test and the language are enhanced significantly, presenting the society with an extremely powerful tool” (p.123).

Invariably, youths are the bedrock of any nation's educational as well as its economic system. In Nigeria, the engine room that provides the raw materials for the sustenance of the educational system has always been the students from secondary schools. These students are those that that annually sit for NECO examinations upon which the test of English language proficiency is compulsory. However, the lower rate of admissions experienced by the Nigerian tertiary institutions is directly linked with the problems associated with poor performance of students in English Language NECO examination. Whenever an English language NECO examination is released, there are outcries and complaints on the incessant failure which is often described as national discomfiture. Judith, (2014) argued that this menace has been in increase for the past two decades. Adepaju, (2011) supported that the persistent poor performance English language NECO examination has continuously made the development of secondary system of education in the

country a challenging task. Some educators in the country, such as Ajayi, (2012), described the situation as unhealthful to the educational growth of Nigeria and they wondered why this level of education has persistently fall short in meeting the educational aspiration and yearnings of the country. They further put a question mark on the country's secondary education quality.

Tracking Students' Performance in NECO/SSCE English Language Test:

Adesulu, (2012) reported that the year 2002 was the maiden edition of NECO/SSCE examination. It was a good story to many secondary school leavers as many candidates passed their registered subjects including English Language as against the previous years' performances in WAEC/SSCE. The positive performance of the test takers continued accelerating until after the year 2007. The preceding five years continuously saw the poor decline of the test takers' performances. The negative performances in NECO particularly in English language become a matter of urgent concern by the educators, policy planners and all stakeholders including the students who are the primary victims. The poor performances caused a 'blame game' within the country; accusation and counter accusation flooded the National Dailies. Who was to blame; the teachers or the students? Policy makers on educational reforms or the parents or it is the government or NECO body itself? In the year 2010 only 105,989 students, who constituted 9.36% out of 1,132,357 that sat for the NECO examination, were able to pass English language at credit level. By the following year (i.e 2011) there was continuous declining of students' performance in the general examination with heavy casualties in the subject of English language as only 94,369 (8.06%) passed with credit within 1,169,951 candidates who sat for the English language test.

There was however, a substantial improvement in the year 2012 as 355, 266 (32.22%) passed English test at credit level out of 1,102,608 students who sat for the English proficiency examination. Invariably, the candidates for the NECO/SSCE in English language subject increased their performances as against the previous year by substantially having 47.68% (493,154) passing

the test with credit out of the 1,034,263 that sat for the test. The performance also increased in the year 2014 as 718,267 (72.58%) passed at credit level out of the total number of candidates which was 989,622. However, there seemed to be a substantial reduction in the number of candidates who failed NECO examination in its 2012 edition. During the year under review (2012) 32.22% (355,266) candidates' clinched credit in English Language out of 1,102,608 candidates who sat for the exams. Consequently, in the year 2015 there was a rapid increment of credit passes in the English Language subject as there was 12% improvement in the results as against the previous year's results. Thus, 83.28% of the candidates that sat for the examination passed with credits. Again in the year 2016 the results announced portrayed that 905,011 (88.51%) of the total number (1,022,474) of candidates that sat for the exam had credit in the English subject test and that shows 1% increase in the previous year's results. Finally, in the year 2017 there was also 1.11% improvement against the previous year as 70.85% (745,053) of the candidates passed with credits. Let us now see the table below which shows students performances in English NECO/SSCE over the years which is source through the NECO official website and some National Dailies.

| Year | Number of Candidates | Number of Candidates with Credit Pass |
|-------------|-----------------------------|--|
| 2009 | 1,184,907 100% | 126,500 (10.67%) |
| 2010 | 1,132,357 100% | 105,989 (9.36%) |
| 2011 | 1,169,951 100% | 94,369 (8.06%) |
| 2012 | 1,102,608 100% | 355,266 (32.22%) |
| 2013 | 1,034,263 100% | 493,154 (47.68%) |
| 2014 | 989,622 100% | 718,267 (72.58%) |
| 2015 | 969,491 100% | 807,392 (83.28%) |
| 2016 | 1,022,474 100% | 905,011 (84.54%) |
| 2017 | 1,051,472 100% | 903,690 (86.1%) |

Table 1: Showing English NECO/SSCE Examination Analysis across Years.

Examining Some Recent Studies in Examining the Performance of Secondary school Students on English NECO-SSCE Examinations in Nigeria.

The study by Peter J.K. et al (2011) which investigated the performance of secondary school students on both NECO and WAEC from 2004-2006 quantitatively analysed the candidates' performance on individual subjects, English language inclusive, by the use of correlational sample in testing eleven hypotheses with the technique of Pearson correlation set at 0.05 alpha level. The results of the study designated a statistically significant relationship of English language performance as compared to other subjects. This study portrays that the performance of English language is comparable to all the other subjects not only in NECO but, WAEC as well. Inversely, Oluwakemi and Olukayode (2015) examined the relationship between teachers' teaching experience and academic performance in English language and mathematics at government secondary schools in Ogun state of Nigeria. A major part of the research was questioning the performance level of the selected schools in Ogun state and comparing these performances with the academic qualifications of their teachers. The results of the study revealed that the teachers' qualifications and years of experience are imperative in the positive academic achievement of learners in both English language and mathematics subject. A different study approach to studying the academic performance of secondary schools in English subject in Nigeria is by Dzever (2015). The study examined the academic performance of Garki Area District Secondary Students in Nigeria through comparing the impact of home environment factors. As the study employed both descriptive and inferential statistics; the techniques of ANOVA (Multiple regression analysis) and Pearson Product Moment Correlation were used in revealing both the positive and negative significant relationship between the variables. This showed that the variable of the "permissive parenting style" has a significant relationship

($p < 0.05$) with the academic performance. While the ($p > 0.05$) in the variables showed no existence of relationship between “authoritarian parenting” and “demanding parenting” with academic performance of the learners at the secondary school. The study further implies that both the socio-educational background of the learners and educational level (or rather identified income) of the learners' parents have impact in the academic attainments of the students.

In juxtaposing the three studies above, we can see three different approaches had been employed by the researchers in attempts to investigate student academic performance in their NECO-SSCE level. One more thing common amongst these studies is their usage of quantitative design in arriving at their result though different variables were used to ascertain the factor or rather comparability of the students' grades in their secondary school final examinations. Subjects and examination mode were compared in the first study to analyse if there is any significant relationship as they relate to the students' achievements. In this token, Peter J.K. et al (2011) asserts that:

If both WAEC and NECO are able to maintain high standards in the development and administration of Senior School Certificate Examinations, then performances in the examination should be good indicators of individuals' standings with respect to any of the tested subject areas (p. 106).

This shows that, according to the study, the performance of students in English language examination should be compared with performances of the same students in other subjects in the same examination standard or quality.

The study by Oluwakemi and Olukayode (2015), however, regards teachers experience and qualifications as the greatest yardstick upon which to determine the success of the learners in attaining good grades in the NECO-SSCE result. The teachers' factor here is seen as an index of academic performance. They opined that in guaranteeing excellent academic performances by any standard to measure students, teachers must play a significant role. Finally, the last cited study of

Dzever (2015) observed that the underperformance of secondary school students in NECO-SSCE is inhibited by factors amongst which environmental influence is an important one. The study posits that the home environment of a child has a 'powerful influence' in his/her developmental outcomes such as the reading readiness, cognitive/mental capability, and emotional achievement and of course the academic successes.

General Factors Affecting Students' Performance in English as a Second Language

Over the years the factors affecting secondary school students' language learning academic performances has been the major concern of many educationist and applied linguists. Since almost four decades ago, Ramirez, (1986) examined some language learners in a rural school. His study found out that the abilities of the learners in communicative skills in the rural school were lower than their counterpart in urban setting. This gave rise to the assertion of environmental factor influencing the learning outcome as discussed above. Contrary to the environmental factors, Genc and Aydin (2011) investigated on other factors that have to do with motivation mode of the language learners. They examined students of the preparatory school through the use of a web-based computer-assisted language-learning program (CALL). The study revealed that there were no significant differences statistically between the variables selected of demographic nature (including, learners' gender, age, grade, status, parental background, experience in the computer usage et cetera). But, the variable of 'learners' 'interest' was statistically found to be significant. The learners interest attaches to the importance of learning the English language was revealed high. A study by Suh et al (2010) employed the use of Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) to investigate the effectiveness of English language instruction in an elementary. The results of the study revealed that the learners that utilize the online program have higher performances in acquiring most language skills (listening, reading, and writing) than the learners who are taught through the face-to-face lessons. The investigation further

revealed that the speed of internet network, learning motivation and 'previous knowledge' are other prominent factors that affect the learning of English language.

In investigating the factors affecting learners' achievement in English language learning, Jurkovic (2010) studied two factors (i) pre-existing linguistic competence and (ii) frequency of use of language learner strategies in order to examine their effects on the performance scores in English as a 2nd language. The study revealed the effect of general linguistic competence on learners' grades with positive statistically significant results. Thus, meta-cognitive strategies are the only one found to be of relevant effect in this study. Another quantitative study which utilized Multilevel Analysis Procedure (MAP) in an attempt to investigate the factors affecting performance is by Hungi and Thuku (2010). The researchers examined the school-level factors to determine pupils' variation in reading performance. Factors found to be useful in the study included the pupils' socioeconomic background, pupils' age and gender and parenting factor (which implies the use of the target language at home).

Huang and Brown (2009) examined the Chinese students' academic performances at North American universities by studying how the cultural factors affect their learning outcomes. In their responses to the administered questionnaire the learners identified the following as factors that affect their performance: the classroom behaviours of their American student peers, lack of professional discussion method by the Lecturers, Lecturer's failure to follow the guided textbooks, too much emphasis on group-work, lack of lecture summaries and organization and differences in religion and other common interests counterparts. In an attempt to examine the multiple factors affecting the learners' performance in English language Woo (2009) investigated the poor performance of learners in reading category. He studied the standardized tests by utilizing both the complex classroom-level and school level factors in a hierarchical linear modelling manner (HLM).

The Woo's study recognized the impact of student- teacher and school characteristics on standardized reading performance through examining them differently. Factors found relevant, in

relation to the learners' performance in the target language were frequent use of the target language at home by the pupils through their home relations and provision of equal opportunity amongst learners. This was the yielded result after controlling the other variables as student-teacher and school factors. However, in Harb and El-Shaarawi (2007) study, the main factor which was found to affect the student's performance was speaking competency in English as the target language. This was analysed through the use of regression analysis. The study revealed that participation in a classroom discussion increases chances of high performance amongst the learners.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the interference theory, the language differences and language transfer also give rise to interlingual errors which may result to problems of comprehension. It is observed by several studies that Nigerian learners of English as a second language do transfer their first language patterns into those of the of English language, and this constitutes one of the bases for interlingual interference (Gas and Selinker, 2006). Thus, we may consider the interference as one of the major causes for having disparities in students' performances in NECO-SSCE across the years under investigation.

Underfunding of Nigeria's educational sector is one of the most persistent problems affecting the Nigeria's education system. It has been severally reported that over the past decade, despite exploding student numbers, the federal government has not made any significant increment in the share of the government budget devoted to education. WES (2017) reported that in between "2003 and 2013 education spending fluctuated from 8.21 percent of the total budget in 2003 to 6.42 percent in 2009, and to 8.7 percent in 2013". However, in the year 2014, "... the government significantly increased education spending to 10.7 percent" of the total budget of the federal government. This might explain the conspicuous disparity in students' performance of the years 2012 and 2014.

The analysis indicates that the secondary school students' academic performances, especially those that sit for NECO-SSCE are influenced by a number of factors. The factors could be learners' attitudinal factor, teachers' input and teaching strategy including years of experience and teaching qualifications, socio-economic and cultural background of the learners, parenting attitude, age and gender factor, exposure to the target language, learning materials and others. From the analysis however, this paper recommends that; English language teachers should be given more professional training on student-centred pedagogy, guided textbooks should be professionally adhered to and the material providers should give more logical presentation that tallies with the NECO-SSCE test guidelines. The Nigerian government should prioritise employing professional teachers with good qualifications so as to foster improved academic performance in the NECO-SSCE examinations. So, also the teachers' productivity should be improved through sponsorship programmes to attain higher qualifications or get special development training.

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