LANGUAGE SKILLS AS PREDICTORS OF ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: **The study investigated the extent to which language skills predicts academic performance of female and male students in public secondary schools in Rivers State, Nigeria. The predictive correlational research design was used for the study with a sample of 230 secondary school students drawn using stratified random sampling techniques. An instrument titled English Language Skills Scales was used for data collection, while students' school-based performance in English Language and Mathematics were used for assessing their academic performance. The ELSS had an alpha coefficient of 0.82. For answering the research questions, simple linear regression was used, while the hypotheses were tested using ANOVA associated with linear regression. Result from the study showed that while written language and reading comprehension skills had significant predictions on the academic performance of both female and male students, spoken language skills only had significant prediction for female, but not for male students. Based on the results, appropriate recommendations were made.**

Keywords: **Language Skills, English Language, Academic Performance.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Several factors have contributed in shaping the current Nigerian environment. However, one which has remained a reoccurring decimal is the standard of education in the country. Education is one of the propelling forces which the government embraces for driving national development relevant to the aspirations of the individual and those of the society, which is also in line with the realities of our environment and the modern world (Onifade, 2006). In this direction, Abid (2006) averred that the quality of a nation is judged by the quality of its citizens and the quality of the citizens largely relies on the quality of their education.

While education has been shown to be vital to the level of a country's progress, one factor that has remained vital for students and teachers to communicate effectively is language skills. Language skills are considered as a factor that shares a relationship with academic performance, which is the yardstick in measuring quality of education. Language skills are defined as cognitive skills combining knowledge and understanding with practice in language use, generally consisting of listening, speaking, reading and writing. This implies that for any student to perform well in academics, such student should have good combination of the knowledge and understanding of the instructional and learning language of the school in the areas of speaking, reading, listening and writing.

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The above point seems like a disadvantage for countries without a common unifying language. According to Fakaye (2006), the lack of a common language in Nigeria has not only raised the fear of mutual suspicion, it has also limited students' ability in understanding educational concepts. Thus, the multi-lingual and heterogeneous nature of Nigeria and the absence of a national unifying indigenous language gave room for the adoption of English Language as a medium of intra-national and inter-national communication and more so as the language of instruction from the primary to the tertiary level. This therefore follows that the mastery of English Language skills is a requisite for sound academic performance in Nigerian schools. Conversely, poor language skills among students have made many deficient in understanding classroom instruction and examination preparation.

Nowhere has this become more apparent than in students' performance in English Language with the attendant consequences. Fakeye and Yemi (2009) argue strongly that poor performance of students in English language at Public examinations in recent times is a contributing factor in the fall of academic achievement and standard of education in Nigeria. In the same vein, Maleki and Zangani (2007) observe that having difficulties in the full understanding of the contents and concepts of the various subjects of the curriculum taught in the target language (English Language) appears to be one of the most serious problems that English as Second Language (ESL) students contend with in their particular course of study. Corroborating the above argument, Feast (2002) posits that when students are not well grounded in the language of instruction, they would hardly perform well in the various school subjects taught in the target language. Hence, it is believed that the overall performance of Nigerians in English as Second Language (ESL) depends, to a considerable extent, on their mastery of English language skills (Fakeye & Yemi, 2009).

Therefore, taking into consideration the importance of academic performance to education and to the development of the nation at large, it becomes necessary to investigate how English language skills with academic performance of secondary school students to determine their independent and joint prediction of academic performance of students.

Observation by these researchers and empirical evidence from examination bodies have shown that academic performance, especially among secondary school students in Nigeria, has been at a very low ebb, and this has been generating serious concerns to various stakeholders including parents, educational administration, students themselves and the government. These findings is corroborated by the high level of school dropout in Nigeria generally and Rivers State specifically.

For instance, every year, the West African Examination Council laments over massive failure of candidates that sit the final examination. A recent finding revealed that only 32.32% of Nigerian WAEC candidates made 5 credits including English and Mathematics from 2010 to 2014 while 67.7% were not able to make it; thus, only 32.32% met the minimum 5 credits requirement for admission into any Nigerian University within these years. It follows therefore that 67.7% of Nigerian candidates who sat for only WASSCE during these years would be at home for at least another one year, struggling to make up their required subjects that will qualify them for admission into the higher educational institutions. It is usually at this time that discouragement, frustration and loss of interest in education set in.

More worrisome is the fact that English language, which is the language of teaching and communication in schools, churches, textbooks, public offices, etc. and which has almost completely replaced most of our native languages in our homes, is the subject that records the worst performance in external examinations like WASSCE, SSCE, UTME, etc. To stem this worrisome trend, it is pertinent that the effective interventions are made. However, such interventions are only possible with an empirical understanding of English Language Skills among secondary school students. It was therefore on this basis that the current study is being undertaken.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. To what extent do English Language skills of the female students predict their academic performance in Rivers State secondary schools?

2. To what extent do English Language skills of the male students predict their academic performance in Rivers State secondary schools?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance to further guide the study:

1. English language skills of the female students do not significantly predict their academic performance.

2. English language skills of the male students do not significantly predict their academic performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English Language Skills

Language has been described as a divine gift to man which has been accepted the world over as a means through which man expresses his views, ideas, feelings and emotions using voluntarily produced symbols (Ogunsiji 2001). In an effort to highlight the importance of language, Oladunjoye (2003) posits that language is indispensable for human survival and development, especially, when it is linked with communication. However, Suek (2017) pointed out the importance of using the right codes of the language if the interlocutors would benefit meaningfully from the process of communication.

Similarly, Flege (1988) understands language as being more than sounds produced and heard. According to him, language is a means of arousing and creating an association which deepens personal thinking so that one's individual mental life becomes a part of the mental life of a group. All human experience has achieved in terms of classification of ideas and ways of dealing with situations can be communicated through language. Language is not mere sounds produced and heard; it is a means of influencing personality. Hence, the value of adequate language skills development to education in general and academic performance specifically cannot be over-emphasized.

Hughes (2007) states that language is organized using four cueing systems; which together make oral and written communication possible. According to her, these four language systems are: the phonological or sound system of language, the syntactical or structural system of language, the semantic or meaning system of language, and the pragmatic or special and cultural use system of language. However, Crow and Crow (1996) prefer to organize language in terms of speaking, reading, writing, spelling, handwriting and listening. The latter is more suitable for the purpose of this study and therefore is adopted for this investigation. On this basis, the conceptual schema of the study is presented below. As shown in the schema, English Language skills study is concentrated on the following aspects of English language: reading comprehension, writing and speaking skills.
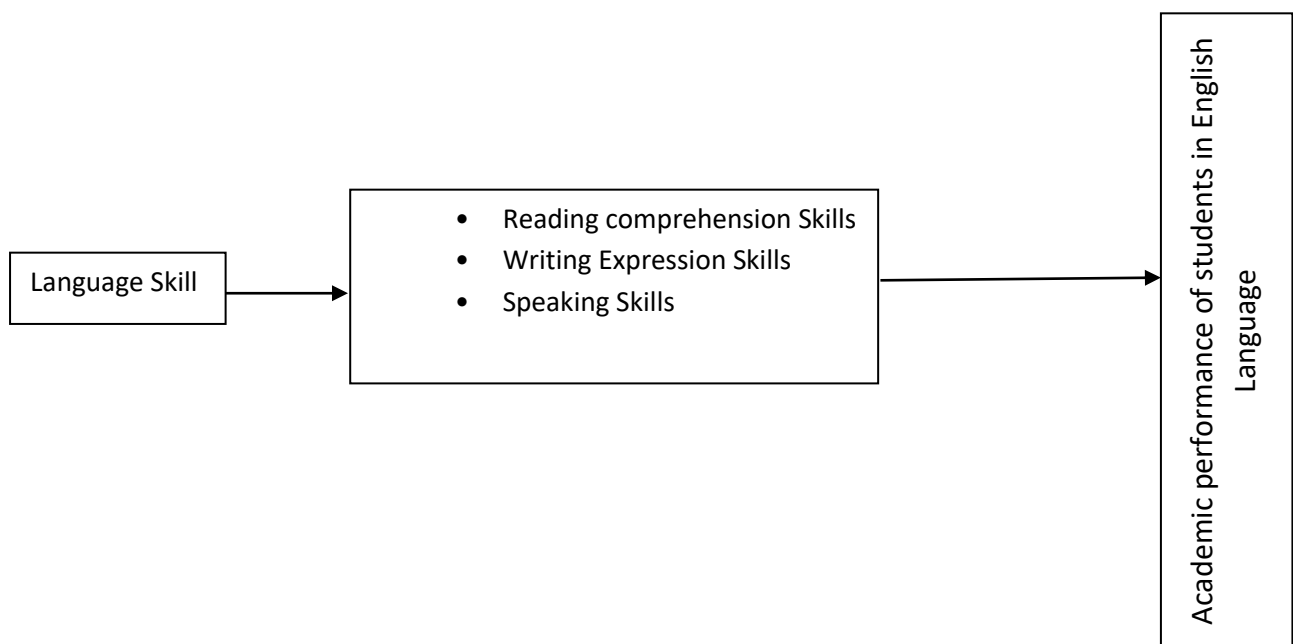

Figure 1: Conceptual Schema of the Study

3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is the most popularly used yardstick in measuring how far international students have developed the English language skills necessary for successful college-level study in the United States and Canada. Some studies have investigated the relationship between TOEFL score and academic success. In a study carried out by Light, Xu & Mossop (2003) in New York, the records of 376 international graduate students at the state University of New York, Albany were subjected to analysis for the ascertainment of the relationship among TOEFL score, grade point average, graduate credits earned and academic major. At the end of the study, TOEFL was not found to be an effective predictor of academic achievement as indicated by grade point average for this group of graduate students. However, there was a significant correlation between TOEFL score and graduate credits earned, and there were vast differences among academic majors in the correlation between TOEFL score and grade point average. This conclusion is in agreement with the findings of a number of earlier studies similar to this. To ascertain more effective predictors of international students' academic success therefore, they suggested that further research should be done.

In Nigeria, Kola, Ogundele and Olanipekun (2013) carried out a study on students' skills in English language relationship with academic performance in science and technical education in the College of Education, Lafiagi, Kwara State, Nigeria. A descriptive research of a correlation type was adopted for the research. A sample of 120 students was drawn from the College of Education to investigate the relationship between mastery of skills in English language and academic performance among students of science and technical education. The records of science students' performance in English and technical students' performance in English were taken and correlated with their performances in science courses and technical education courses. Students who passed English language performed better than those who failed both in science and technical education. It was therefore concluded from the findings that English language mastery is required for all students in Science and Technical education. This finding is in consonance with the position of Feast (2002), who argues that when students do not have the mastery of English language skills, they would hardly do well in other subjects.

Further, Fakeye (2014) in a study on English language proficiency as a predictor of academic achievement among English as foreign language students in Nigeria investigated the extent to which Nigerian secondary school students' proficiency in English predicted their overall academic achievement in Oyo and Osun States of Nigeria. The findings from the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between English language proficiency and the academic achievement of the subjects investigated (r 0.499). This therefore opines that as English proficiency increases, there are chances that academic success will increase.

The review of the empirical literature showed that ample researchers have been conducted to investigate how English Language Skills are related to the academic performance of students using different indicators. However, the above empirical studies have been conducted in other places using samples different from the secondary school students in Rivers State. It was to fill this gap in the literature that informed the conduct of this study which aimed to ascertain the extent to which English Language Skills predicts the academic performance of senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

4. METHODOLOGY

The correlational research design was adopted for the study because the study seeks to ascertain the extent to which students' English Language Skills can be used to predict their academic performance in Rivers State. A sample of 230 senior secondary school students drawn through stratified random sampling techniques were used for the study. The instrument used for the study, was the English Language Skills Scale adapted from the Language Proficiency Descriptor Scale by Brian North (1997).

The English Language Skills Scale (ELSS) is made up of part A which contains an item designed to elicit information on the student's sex and part B which contains 15 questions for Spoken English Language Ability, each with 5 possible responses designed to assess spoken English skills, 10 questions for Written English Language Ability to assess written English skills and 5 questions for Reading Comprehension Ability to assess reading skills. In all, the questionnaire contains 30 items designed to assess English language skills which is one of the variables of this research. The schools' academic records of the participants' performance in Mathematics and English were used by the researchers to determine their achievements. Their achievements in Mathematics and English were correlated with the result of the English

Language Skills Scale. Cronbach alpha reliability showed that the ELSS had a coefficient OF 0.82, thus affirming that the instrument were reliable for the study.

For answering the research questions guiding the study, simple linear regression were used, while the corresponding null hypotheses were tested using analysis of variance associated with simple linear regression. The obtained results are presented below.

5. RESULT PRESENTATION

Research Question One: To what extent do English Language skills of the female students predict their academic performance in Rivers State secondary schools?

This research question was answered using simple linear regression where the female students' scores in ELSS and academic achievement served as the independent and dependent variables respectively. The result of the analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Simple linear regression on the prediction of female students' academic achievement on their English language skills.

Model	Variable		R	R-square	Adjusted R-square	Std Error of the estimate	Unstandardized coefficient
1	Constant ELSS	female	0.234	0.055	0.051	10.792	28.45 0.895

Model 1 of Table 1 shows that the correlation coefficient (R) obtained from the prediction of female academic achievement from their spoken language skills is 0.734. Then the coefficient of determination (R^2) is 0.055 while the adjusted coefficient of determination is 0.051. This is clear that the female students ELSS can only explain 5.10% of the differences in the academic achievement levels, while the remaining 94.9% are unexplained by their English language skills. Furthermore, it is also shown in Table 1 that the unstandardized coefficient (B) obtained are 28.446 and 0.895 respectively for constant and female ELSS. This in predicting female academic achievement the model or the equation to be used is: $Y^1 = 28.446 + 0.895x$ where y^1 is the predicted score in academic achievement of the female while x is any score of the female in ELSS.

Hypothesis One: English language skills of the female students do not significantly predict their academic achievement.

This null hypothesis was tested using analysis of variance related with simple linear regression. This was done in three separate dimensions considering the three English language skills via spoken English language ability considered in this study. These three English language skills abilities served separately as the independent variable in each dimension while the female students' academic achievement score was the dependent variable. The results from the analyses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of variance related with simple linear regression analysis on the prediction of the female academic achievement on their English language skills.

Model	Skills	Source of variance	Sum of square	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	SELA	Regression	1536.63	1	1536.63	13.20	0.000
		Residual	26552.34	228	116.46		
		Total	28088.97	229			
2	WELA	Regression	2479.75	1	2479.75	22.08	0.000
		Residual	25609.22	228	112.32		
		Total	28088.97	229			
3	RCA	Regression	449.586	1	449.596	3.709	0.055
		Residual	27639.38	228	121.23		
		Total	28088.97	229			

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Results in Model 1 of Table 2 shows that the calculated F-value of 13.20 was obtained at the degree of freedom 1 and 228 at 0.000 level (p<0.05). Hence, the spoken English language ability of the female students significantly predict their academic achievement. In Model 2, Table 2 showed that the calculated F-value for the prediction of the female academic achievement from their written language skills was obtained at 1 and 228 degrees of freedom at 0.000 level of significance (p<0.05). Thus the written English language ability of the female students significantly predict their academic achievement.   Furthermore in Model 3 of Table 2, where reading comprehension of female students was used to predict their academic achievement, it is shown that the calculated F-value of 3.71 was obtained at 1 and 228 degrees of freedom at 0.055 level of significance p>0.05. Thus the reading comprehension of the female students do not significantly predict their academic achievements.

Research Question Two: To what extent do English Language skills of the male students predict their academic performance in Rivers State secondary schools?

Research Question Two was answered using simple linear regression whereby the male students' score in ELSS and their academic achievement scores were taken as the independent and dependent variables respectively. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Simple linear regression showing the prediction of male students' academic achievement on their English language skills.

Model	English language skills	Variable	R	R^2	Adj R^2	Std Error	Unstandardized coefficient B
1	ELSS	Constant female ELSS	0.098	0.10	0.005	8.47	45.408 0.276

Predictors: (constant), male ELSS

The results in Model 1 of Table 3 show that the correlation coefficient (R) obtained for the prediction of male students academic achievement on their ELSS is 0.098. It is also shown that the coefficient of determination (R^2) obtained is 0.10 while the adjusted coefficient of determination (Adj R^2) is 0.005. The adjusted coefficient obtained indicated that 0.5% of the differences in the level of the male students' academic achievement is explained by the knowledge of their score in ELSS while 99.5% of the difference in their academic achievement are unexplained by their ELSS.

Table 3 also shows that the unstandardized coefficient (B) obtained are 45.408 and 0.276 for constant and male ELSS respectively. That means in predicting male students' academic achievement on their ELSS, the equation to be used is Y^1 = 45.405 + 0.276x where Y^1 is the predicted score on academic achievement while x is any score in ELSS of the male students.

Hypothesis Two: English language skills of the male students do not significantly predict their academic performance.

This null hypothesis was tested using analysis of variance related to simple linear regression. This was done in three separate dimensions of English Language Skills considered in the study. The results obtained are presented in table 4.

Table 4: Analysis of variance related to simple linear regression analysis showing the prediction of male academic achievement on their English language skills.

Model	ELS	Source of variance	Sum of square	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
1	Spoken LS	Regression	157.36	1	157.36	2.20	0.140
		Residual	1634.09	228	71.68		
		Total	16499.45	229			
2	Written LS	Regression	319.07	1	319.07	73.73	0.000
		Residual	16180.39	228	70.97		
		Total	16499.45	229			
3	Reading Comprehension Language Skills	Regression	4031.93	1	4031.93	73.73	0.000
		Residual	12467.52	228	54.68		
		Total	16499.45	229			

In Table 4, it is shown in Model 1 where spoken language skills is used to predict male academic achievement that the calculated F-value of 2.20 was obtained at df of 1 and 228 at 0.140 level of significance $p>0.05$. Thus the spoken English language skills of the male students do not significantly predict their academic achievement. In Model 2 of Table 4, it is shown that the calculated F-value of 4.50 was obtained at df of 1 and 228 at 0.0350 level of significance $p<0.05$. Thus, the written English language ability of the male students significantly predicts their academic achievement. Furthermore in Model 3 of Table 4, where males language comprehension skills was used to predict their academic achievement, the calculated f-value of 73.73 was obtained at the df of 1 and 228 at 0.000 level of significance ($p<0.05$). Hence, male language comprehension significantly predicts their academic achievement.

6. DISCUSSION

From the result presented in this study, it can be seen that for female students' English Language Skills had a significant independent prediction on their academic achievement. Furthermore, the same result was obtained for male students. However, while spoken language skills did not have any significant influence on the academic achievement of male students, written and reading comprehension had significant prediction on the academic achievement of both male and female students respectively.

This result is expected because the researchers of the view that an individual who is high in spoken English language ability written English language ability, reading comprehension ability in combination with good study habit will achieve higher and vice versa. This result of the study may be attributed to the fact that English language is the official language and it is the major language of instruction in Rivers State. Hence, it is the second language for almost all the individuals in the state. That is, if an individual cannot read, understand and write well in English language, it will be difficult for such a person to achieve higher in other subjects. Again, if an individual can read, understand and write well in English language but does not study well, achieving higher scores may not be difficult. This finding is in line with that of Feast (2002), who found that English language proficiency positively relate significantly with students' academic achievement.

7. RECOMMENDATION

Based on the result obtained, the following recommendations were made.

1. The English teachers should endeavour to map out modalities to enhance acquisition of English language skills as this will not only promote achievement in English language but will also extend to other subjects.

2. Students with poor study habits should be encourage to visit counselors who will assist them to have good study habit.

3. The emphasis on making English language a compulsory subject to pass before one gets promote should be on the overall performance in the subject but on the specific areas such writing skills, speaking skills, and reading comprehension skills.

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