

## ***English Language Components Preference of Students in Calabar, Cross River State, Nigeria: Implications for Teaching English as a Second Language***

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### **Abstract**

*Students' performance in the English Language examinations in Nigeria has continued to be less than desirable. The examination syllabuses of the West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO) contains six main components. Since students' interest and performance in the different components vary, this study investigated the components of the English Language syllabus that secondary school students liked the most and the reasons for their preference. The research involved gathering mainly qualitative data by interviewing 45 final year senior secondary school students and secondary school graduands in Calabar, Nigeria, who attended a preparatory class for entrance into the university. The researcher formulated two research questions. Using simple percentages, the result revealed that whereas 42 percent of the participants liked essay writing, only 20 percent liked Oral English, and only 9 percent liked all the components. Thematic analysis revealed that the reasons for students' preferences were mainly instrumental and perceived ease of learning the preferred component. The implication of the study on the teaching of English as a second language is highlighted.*

**Keywords:** components, attitude, essay writing, oral English, Ease of Learning, instrumental

### **Introduction**

English has not only a historical, but also a utilitarian relevance to Nigerians. It is a vital artefact of our colonial experience and serves as the official language, which is used not only for public business but also for private communication. As Timothy (2016) noted, English serves not only educational, but also political, commercial and sociocultural purposes. Therefore, it gives those who have some competence in it a considerable advantage in inter-ethnic communication, sociopolitical interactions, educational advancement, and in international transactions.

In spite of the importance of English Language to the Nigerian students, and despite their near immersion in the English language, unfortunately, many of them, especially at the secondary school level, still exhibit appalling deficiencies in both the spoken and the written aspects of the language. This has resulted in a very disturbing mass failures (Olatunyi, 2012). Recently, for instance, Wahab (2018) in the Pulse of 17 July 2018 reported that 61.67 percent of the total number who sat for the West African Examination Council's Senior School Certificate English Language examination failed. This is serious because students need at least a score of 50 in English Language and four other subjects to study any course at a Nigerian university. Even those who seek admission overseas, especially in the United States of America, need to pass their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). Therefore, a poor performance in English could effectively exclude a student from further education and the pursuit of a career. So, it is important to investigate students' attitude to English Language.

The English Language curriculum for senior secondary schools has four main components. The components are

1. Vocabulary Development
2. Oracy Skills, (comprising Spoken English, and Listening for Comprehension)
3. Literacy Skills (Comprising Reading for Comprehension and Effective Study, and Writing for Effective Communication) and
4. English Grammatical Structures

The West African Examination Council (WAEC) and the National Examination Council (NECO) examine these components at the senior school certificate examinations. The same components, except Writing, form the Use of English syllabus of the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME), a compulsory examination for admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports consistently show that students' differ in how they perform in the different components of the English Language examinations. Therefore, this study sought to find out whether differences exist also in students attitude to the components.

One of the reasons suggested for the poor performance of students is lack of interest (Oyinloye & Ajayi, 2011). Thus, Olowoyeye and Oladunni (2014) blame students disinterest in English Language for their ill-preparedness for examination and consequent poor performance. Tsuda (2003) in a study to find out the attitude of Japanese university students towards English, found out that the majority of the participants said they did not like the study of English. Even though they understood

the importance of English and admired those who were proficient in it, specifically, they hated the study of grammar and the study of English for examination. Saddiqua (2016) agrees that even if attitude does not always account for behaviour, it is one of the variables that are implicated in failure or success. According to Saddiqua, "...belief and attitudes accelerate the outcomes." Also, Gardner and Lambert (1972) have identified key drivers to language learning. According to them, second language learning is usually driven by either instrumental or integrative motivation. Instrumentally driven learners learn the language because of overt benefits they hope to obtain from learning it. With integrative motivation, the learner, admires the culture of the target language and seeks to acculturate to it. Similarly, Chalak and Kassaian (2010) on the motivation orientations of Iranian students and their attitudes toward the English language and its community revealed the dominance of both 'instrumental' and 'integrative' reasons. The instrumental importance of language was also highlighted by the Minister of State, Education, Prof. Anthony Onwuka, when he said, concerning French, "This is good for the continent; it is good for us as a nation. It is good for our brothers at the borders because it will enable us to communicate with them effectively" (Akinterinwa, 2016).

Attitude often manifests in students' interest or disinterest. Studies have established a causal relationship between interest and achievement (Olatunji 2012, citing Ogunwuyi, 2000; Akabuike & Asika, 2012; Tunde-Awe, 2014). Specifically, students' attitude toward reading seems to affect reading performance (Seitz, 2010; Sundari, 2013). Attitude is also implicated in students' writing achievement (Bustamante & Eom, 2017; Bulut, 2017), research links attitude and writing skill development, attitude to grammar and achievement (Akay & Toraman, 2015). In view of the importance of students' attitudes to performance in English Language, this researcher decided to investigate students' attitudes toward the different components of English Language and the determinants of students' attitude. It is hoped that this study will help shape English Language teachers' pedagogy to cohere with students' interests and education-for-life rather than for examination only.

### **Research questions**

Two research questions were formulated to guide the study.

1. What part of the English language do students prefer the most?
2. What determines students' preference for any part of English language?

### **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative design. The design was adopted because it "...tends to enhance peripheral vision," and "...identify patterns and configurations

among variables (Sofaer, 1999, p.1102). It also helped the researcher to unveil “a target audience’s range of behavior and the perceptions that drive it” (Qualitative Research Consultants Association, n.d). The purposive sampling technique was used in selecting two sets of students. The first set consisted of twenty-eight (13 girls and 15 boys) final year students of a university demonstration secondary school in Calabar, Nigeria. Their ages ranged from 15 to 19 years. The second set of participants were seventeen (10 girls and 7 boys) secondary school graduands from private and public secondary schools attending a preparatory class for the Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (UTME). Participants consented to participate after they had been assured of their anonymity and right to withdraw from the study.

An interview protocol was developed and validated for clarity of expressions, relevance of contents to research questions and appropriateness of contents. Since the researcher interviewed the participants orally, follow-up questions were occasionally posed. Also, the participants had opportunities to ask questions and seek clarification. The researcher, then, interviewed and audiotaped each of the students for about 3 - 5 minutes. Only pseudonyms were used for the participants. The researcher kept a field note where reflections on the interviews and related observations were documented.

The transcripts of the interviews were typed into the Microsoft Word document and saved. They were read carefully severally. Reflexions on the data were recorded and typed into Word document. From the readings, the participants’ responses were summarised, tabulated in accordance with the research questions. Then keywords were identified and highlighted using the Microsoft word highlighting tool. Keywords were categorised into themes. Similar themes were then grouped together. The Excel spreadsheet was used for frequency counts of the number of participants who expressed a preference for any component of English Language. It was also used for the frequency counts of the participants who shared similar reasons as gleaned from their responses to the interview. The frequency were converted to percentages.

### **Presentation of findings**

The findings are presented according to the research questions.

**Research question 1:** What aspect of the English language do students prefer the most?

Based on the research question, the researcher summarised and tabulated the transcripts. The analysis of the students’ responses showed that the participants

varied widely in their preferences. Twenty-two percent of the participants liked no component of English; 38 percent liked essay writing, while 9 percent of the participants preferred Oral English. Six percent liked all components of English. The result is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Components of English most preferred by students

<b>Most preferred Components of English</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>% Preferred</b>
Essay	19	42
Oral English	9	20
All	4	9
Grammar	4	9
None	4	9
Vocabulary Development	4	9
Reading Comprehension	1	2
Total	45	100

Table 1 shows that the component of the English Language which participants liked most is Essay (Writing) as 42 percent of the participants declared a preference for writing. The next in preference was Oral English as 20 percent said they preferred Oral English. However, it should be explained that only two participants expressly mentioned oral English as the most preferred. Two others simply liked one component of oral English, which is emphatic stress. A careful examination of the result shows that even for the most liked component, the number of participants who liked it (writing) was less than 50 percent. In fact, only nine percent liked all aspects of the English Language.

**Research question 2:** What factor(s) determine students' preference for the component of English language they like the most?

The transcripts of participants' interview was read to identify themes. The themes emerged from keywords. Then, the number of participants with similar themes was counted to obtain the frequency of occurrence of the theme. This was used in constructing the pie chart in Fig.1.

#### 1. Utility

The reasons for students' preferences varied as their preferences. Keyword analysis showed that preferences tended to be governed by the use to which the students put the component of English or believed it could be put. This is illustrated by the following verbatim transcripts of participants' opinions:

“I love reading novels and writing stories. It’s a way of expressing myself.”(Sam)  
“I think because it helps me know the right pronunciation and spelling of words....”(Barit, talking about Oral English).

Also, such expressions like “How will you pass?” “important,” and “helps in using” used by participants point to the utilitarian and instrumental reasons for students’ preferences. Utilitarian themes occurred 16 times.

## 2. Ease of Learning

Another reason that emerged from the analysis was Ease-of-use. For instance, one of the participants said this of emphatic stress, “Emphatic stress is straightforward. You just look for the option that has a word opposite to the one in capital and that’s the answer....” (Marble).

Another explained, regarding the summary component of reading comprehension, “It’s very easy to understand. It’s just about getting the main idea in a paragraph....” (Adie)

keywords like “straightforward,” “easily understand,” “very easy” indicate that perceived ease of learning the component influenced participants’ preferences, also. However, ease of learning themes occurred only five times. One participant mentioned parental encouragement and love of a particular component:

“...my mother encourages me to write since from primary school. She gets me books, those small books and I read....” (Vicky)

Therefore, the major determinant of students’ preference for any part of English Language was utility.

**Table 2:** Frequency of reasons for students preference for components of English Language Curriculum

Themes	Frequency	%
Utility	27	60
Ease of Learning	16	36
Parental encouragement	1	2
Love of it	1	2
Total	45	100

Table 2 shows that utility was the dominant reason for students’ preference for any component of English Language, as 60 percent gave utilitarian reasons for their preferences. Next was Ease with which the component could be learned. Thirty-six

percent of the participants gave ease of learning as their reason for preference of a component of English. This is visualised in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1: Major reasons for students preference for components of English Language Curriculum

### **Discussion**

Data analysis revealed that students varied in the component of English that they preferred. But, the majority preferred writing for utilitarian or instrumental reasons, despite the fact that “writing is often considered an especially difficult second language skill to attain” (Bustamante & Eom, 2017, p.46). Of course, according to Bustamante & Eom, (2017), research links attitude and writing skill development. The reasons for the preferences differed widely. The reasons for preferring Essay writing centred on their perceived utility and ease of learning. Writing was preferred for its utility, parental encouragement and love. Therefore, in terms of the component of English students liked the most, writing was most preferred because of its utility. Participants believed that writing was inevitable in their academic and social lives. The instrumental and utilitarian reasons for preferring components of English Language support Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) as well as Chalak and Kassaian (2010) views that instrumental and integrative motivation are strong drivers of language learning.

### **Conclusion**

The researcher sought to find out the attitudes of students towards different components of the English Language. The findings indicate that the component students love most is the Essay, and this is instrumentally motivated. However, many students did not like English Language at all. This is deduced from their responses which showed many liked no component of the English Language. This is

disturbing because poor attitude to English Language could result in poor performance, which is already threatening the educational sector in Nigeria.

### **Implications for English Language teaching**

In view of the importance of English Language nationally and globally, students who have a negative attitude to the subject, actually jeopardize their future. For a language that is critical to national and international survival, a negative attitude to any component of it or the whole of the language is not only dangerous but also tragic. Therefore, the teacher has a critical role to play to stimulate and sustain students' interest in all components of English Language by leveraging on what motivates the students to love the components.

Most of the participants were driven to prefer a particular component often because of its usefulness in real life or the perceived ease with which they master that component. Therefore, the teacher needs to establish a link between classroom language learning and real-life situations. The teacher needs to make all components bear relevance to authentic experiences in and outside the classroom. Students' should be made to apply the knowledge they acquire in real life situations. For instance, students should be made to engage in debates on issues in their immediate and global community. Teachers should take their time to highlight the practical outcome of learning any component of the English Language.

Furthermore, the infusion of appropriate technology into English Language learning has become imperative with the boom in mobile devices and the increasing access to mobile technology and the internet by youths. Language learning apps such as the mobile dictionaries, pronunciation software, and language learning games abound. Teachers should, therefore, guide students to exploit them for academic purposes.

Teachers' instructional strategies should be modified to make every component of English interesting. Merely teaching for examination can affect the teachers' instructional strategies. Teachers have to change their instructional strategies and make them less exam-focused.

Consequently, teachers need further training in teaching the various components of English. Zhang, Lai, Pang, Yi, and Rozelle (2012) comment that in-service teacher training can be used to improve teacher quality and student educational performance in developing countries. Deliberately designed and targeted need-focused in-service training may help in remedying identified teacher deficiencies. Such training will keep teachers abreast of modern teaching resources and practices.

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