

English Language Proficiency, Attitude towards Literature-in-English and Academic Achievement of Students in Literature-in-English

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Abstract

The study explores the relationship between English language skills and academic achievement of students in literature courses, comprehension and engagement with literary texts emphasizing the significant role language proficiency plays in students. Descriptive survey method was adopted. The participants were 400 senior secondary school students purposively selected from 10 secondary schools. The instruments used for data collection were Literature-in-English Achievement Test, English Language Proficiency Test, and Students' Attitude to Literature-in-English Questionnaire. Data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Analysis. The results revealed that students' English language proficiency and their attitude have very strong positive and significant relationship with students' achievement in literature-in-English. English language proficiency and students' achievement in literature-in-English correlates at $r=.721$, students' proficiency in English language and students' attitude towards literature-in-English at $r=.843$. Also, attitude towards literature-in-English has a positive and significant relationship with students' achievement in literature-in-English ($r=.814$). Based on the findings of this study, it was recommended, among others, that secondary school authorities should provide adequate resources for teaching English Language so that the students will have a good background in English Language to enhance their proficiency in English which in turn will enable them to perform in Literature-in-English.

Keywords: English language proficiency, academic achievement, literary studies, language acquisition, vocabulary development.

Introduction

Language is regarded as the most unique distinguishing feature between human being and other creatures. It is a systematic arrangement of sounds for meaning-centred production.

Its paramount goal is communication. According to Olasebikan's (2019) postulation, language is not just a means of communication, it is a huge resource, a reservoir of knowledge and folk wisdom, an encyclopedia of sort, a window to reality and a vehicle of culture. This shows that the importance of language in human experience is undeniable. Viewing language from the global perspective, Olasebikan (2019) quoting Sapir (1929) states that the real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on language itself and this represents an objective reality by means of which man structures and organizes their thought in a certain characteristic way. A language may be used as a medium of instruction, as English is a medium of instruction in institutions of learning in Nigeria right from primary, secondary to the tertiary. It is a subject on the curriculum of junior secondary and senior secondary schools. Students' poor performance in English has been a thing of concern to educators (Adesosun, 2014; Gatugel, 2020; Omoike et al., 2020). Gatugel (2020) said that student must have mastery of English not only to pass it but also use it to perform very well in other subjects. This means that students should be proficient in English language as it will aid them in academic performance; as the reverse will be the case if they are deficient in English language.

English proficiency increases students' ability to communicate, comprehend and engage with other subject areas (Jocson & Genton, 2024). They pointed out that proficiency in English makes learners to read text, have better understanding of instructions, and also effectively express their thoughts and ideas. These facilitates their learning participation in classroom activities. Kadwa and Alshenqeeti (2020) assert that proficiency in English helps students to build large vocabulary, increase their thinking ability and open door to accessing educational resources. According to Fakeye (2014), the importance of English language proficiency in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized, as students are taught the contents of school subjects at all levels via the English Language. English Language proficiency makes a positive impact in easy social interaction among students and makes them to perform better in their work places after graduation from school (Arkoudis et al., 2009). They point out that those who are proficient in English Language have better chances of doing well at work. English Language proficiency gives an individual an edge over those who are poor in the language in nearly all aspects of life in Nigeria.

Students should be able to read the target language before undertaking to study literature (Wallace, 2003). Literature texts given in foreign language have the effect of favouring those students who have the most fluency in the language. According to him, students' foundation in language learning ought to be boosted in all four language skills - listening,

speaking, reading and writing - so that language will not be a barrier either in understanding or in expression to those who study literature and communications. Smita and Mujundar (2010) discussed about the mutual complementary nature of language and literature, and called for analysis of their common characteristics. In the case of English language and literature-in-English, the English language is common to both because literature depends on language for its full manifestation. Therefore, a good mastery of language may better facilitate students' performance and attitude towards literature, hence the need for this study.

Smita and Mujundar (2010) observed the low language proficiency of students and said that a good foundation in literature will positively affect students' performance in English language and other subjects. Hence, some language teachers recommend literature books to students who are weak in English to help polish their English. This study centred on how students' English Language proficiency correlates their achievement and attitude towards literature. Kolawole (2009) mentioned that students' problems in composition, comprehension and summary writing which are important receptive and expressive skills are due to lack of mastery of literature. The ability to do well will boost students' confidence that will in turn generate positive attitude towards literature learning.

Since literature is a form of applied English, it affords the students the opportunity of seeing English Language used by different authors in varying styles. Literature is therefore seen as further English or practical English. Language and literature can be said to be inseparable allies by reason of their nature, characteristics and function. Onukaogu (2002), commenting on literature as an important complement of language, states that language competence is bound to hasten what is explicitly or implicitly stated. It will enhance the recognition of metaphors, analogies, figures of speech, connotation and denotation. It will facilitate how to distinguish between humour, satire, straightforward author, strategies and tone. This assertion points to the positive effect of language proficiency on students' achievement in literature.

Ohia (2002), making references to the relationship between language and literature, said that literature enables students to find words used in peculiar ways and in the widest range. Literature reflects the valuable literary standards of the country or period it discusses. It portrays culture, values and civilizations of the group of people it talks about. It involves the imaginative participation in experience created by a writer because of its ability to appeal to the senses. Its openness to various interpretations makes it a subject that enables students to think critically and argue logically based on the experiences and events in the work. This is why it is one of the compulsory subjects for Law, Theatre arts, English Language and

Mass communication students. The place of language proficiency in the study of literature or any subject is vital as language is a natural gift with which humans express their thought (Olopoenia, 2006).

Many research works have been carried out to investigate how language proficiency affects students' achievement in and attitude towards academics. Williams et al. (2012) investigated the use of English Language proficiency to predict the future academic success of English learner (EL) students. Their study revealed that English Language proficiency is a factor of prediction for future academic success. In a related study, Wilson and Komba (2012) investigated whether there is a relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance in Tanzanian secondary schools. The study revealed that there is a weak positive relationship between English language proficiency and students' academic achievement. Sadia et al. (2021) found that proficiency in English language significantly influence academic achievement of medical students. Sivaraman et al. (2014) reported that lack of proficiency in English affects students' performance in engineering courses at a college in Oman. Other research findings at two tertiary institutions in Oman also showed a strong and positive relationship between English Language proficiency and academic achievement (Roche & Harrington, 2013).

The problem of teaching and learning Literature-in-English may be responsible for students' attitude towards the subject. Students' attitude towards a subject has to do with emotional reactions, behavioural tendencies and beliefs about the subject.

Statement of the problem

Students' unwillingness to read, poor command of the English language coupled with poor teacher quality and unfavourable learning environment inhibit good performance of students in Literature-in-English. The persistent poor performance of students in Literature-in-English is yet to be addressed adequately; this poor academic performance may be due to students' low English Language proficiency. This has been a source of concern to parents, teachers, government and other stakeholders in the education of the child. The need to improve students' achievement and sustain students' positive attitude towards the subject has long been a topic of popular and academic interest in Nigeria. Several efforts by researchers to provide solutions to this problem have concentrated on providing effective instructional strategies. All these have not brought about significant skills that could affect academic performance of students in a country like Nigeria where English Language is a second and official language. This may result in poor academic achievement of students in

Literature-in-English. Students who have low English Language use skills might find it difficult to comprehend text and may also be unable to express themselves properly in written tests and examinations. This study therefore, investigated whether the level of students' proficiency in English language have any significant relationship with their achievement and attitude towards Literature-in-English.

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated to guide this study

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between students' proficiency in English language and their achievement in literature-in-English.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between students' proficiency in English language and their attitude towards literature-in-English.

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between students' attitude towards literature-in-English and their achievement in literature-in-English.

Methodology

The descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population of this study consists of 400 senior secondary school students purposively selected from 10 secondary schools in Akinyele Local Government Area. The instruments used for the study were Literature-in-English Achievement test, English Language Proficiency Test and Students' Attitude towards Literature-in-English Questionnaire.

Students' Attitude Towards Literature-in-English Questionnaire (SATLQ) was developed by the researchers to collect data on students' attitude towards literature-in-English. It comprises 30 items requesting for students' responses on their attitude towards literature-in-English. The questionnaire consists of two sections: A and B. Section A was designed to elicit personal information about the respondents while section B used four-point response format (Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D), and Strongly Disagreed (SA)). The SATLQ was trial-tested on 50 Literature-in-English students in the schools outside the selected schools for the study. The scales were subjected to reliability analysis using Cronbach alpha method and a reliability index of 0.80 was derived.

The Literature-in-English Achievement Test (LEAT) was adapted from West African Examination Council Literature-in-English Paper 2 and 3, based on the fact that it met the criteria of standardization and acceptability. The questions in Literature-in-English were selected to cover only the aspects that were already studied by SSII students. On the other hand, the English Language Proficiency Test contained a total of 50 items which sought to

measure the overall language competence of the students. It comprised of spelling, reading, writing and grammar skills. Its reliability was determined using test re-test method of reliability and a coefficient of 0.87 was obtained. The test was administered to the participants and their scores in the test was used to determine their English Language Proficiency. Descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlational (PPMC) were used to analyse the data and test the research hypotheses.

Presentation of results

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between students' proficiency in English language and their achievement in literature-in-English.

Table 1: PPMC showing relationship between English language proficiency and students' achievement in literature-in-English

| Variables | Mean | Standard deviation | N | R | Df | Sig. | Remarks |
|--------------------------------------|-------|--------------------|-----|------|-----|------|-------------|
| English language proficiency | 61.86 | 16.61 | 400 | | | | |
| Achievement in literature-in-English | 58.54 | 24.31 | 400 | .721 | 399 | .042 | Significant |

Significant at $p < .05$ alpha level

Table 1 shows that the relationship between English language proficiency of the students and students' achievement in literature-in-English is very strong and positive ($r = .721$; $p < .05$). The table also indicates that the relationship is significant.

Ho2: There is no significant relationship between students' proficiency in English language and their attitude to literature-in-English.

Table 2: PPMC showing relationship between English language proficiency and students' attitude towards literature-in-English

| Variables | Mean | SD | N | R | Df | Sig. | Remarks |
|--|-------|-------|-----|------|-----|------|-------------|
| English language proficiency | 65.12 | 13.45 | 400 | | | | |
| | | | | .843 | 399 | .002 | Significant |
| Attitude towards literature-in-English | 40.74 | 11.04 | 400 | | | | |
| Significant at $p < .05$ alpha level | | | | | | | |

Table 2 shows that students' English language proficiency has a positive relationship with students' attitude towards literature-in-English ($r = .843$). The table also shows that as students become proficient in English language, their attitude towards literature-in-English improves significantly ($p < .05$).

Ho3: There is no significant relationship between students' attitude towards literature-in-English and their achievement in literature-in-English.

Table 3: PPMC showing relationship between students' attitude towards literature-in-English and their achievement in literature-in-English

| Variables | Mean | SD | N | R | Df | Sig. | Remarks |
|--|-------|-------|-----|------|-----|------|-------------|
| Attitude towards literature-in-English | 55.43 | 20.10 | 400 | | | | |
| | | | | .814 | 399 | .036 | Significant |
| Achievement in literature-in-English | 51.54 | 18.53 | 400 | | | | |
| Significant at $p < .05$ alpha level | | | | | | | |

Table 3 shows a strong positive relationship between students' attitude towards literature-in-English and students' achievement in literature-in-English ($r = .814$). This means that positive attitude could lead to a great improvement in students' achievement in literature-in-English. The table also shows that the relationship is significant ($p < .05$).

Discussion of the findings

The study investigated English language proficiency as correlates of students' achievement in and attitude towards literature-in-English in senior secondary school in Akinyele Local Government Area of Oyo state. Findings revealed that students' English language proficiency and their attitude have very strong, positive and significant relationship with students' achievement in literature-in-English. Students' proficiency in English language correlates with students' achievement in literature-in-English at $r=.721$. Students' proficiency in English language correlates with students' attitude towards literature-in-English at $r=.843$. Also, students' attitude towards literature-in-English has a positive and significant relationship with their achievement in literature-in-English ($r=.814$). This implies that improvement in English language proficiency and a more positive attitude will significantly improve achievement in literature-in-English. These findings corroborate those of Fakeye (2014), Sivaramana et al. (2014) who affirm that there is a strong correlation between proficiency in language of instruction and academic achievement of learners. When students are proficient in English and have positive attitude, they develop confidence and are better disposed towards participation in the study of literature-in-English. A positive attitude towards literature-in-English could boost students' achievement in the subject.

Conclusion

The study concluded that English Language proficiency is a good indicator and predictor of relationship with academic achievement of students in literature-in-English. In essence, students' level of proficiency in English language can lead to a better performance in literary work. Efforts of educational stakeholders should be geared towards helping learners to develop proficiency in the use of English, through provision of necessary instructional materials and facilities that will enhance both the learning and use of English.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

- 1) Government and schools should conduct workshops and seminars to equip English language teachers to teach the four language skills effectively.
- 2) The government, schools, teachers and parents should pursue the goal of educating learners to be proficient in English language.
- 3) Literature teachers should adopt good instructional strategy to enhance teaching and learning of literature-in-English.

4) Secondary school authorities should provide adequate resources for teaching English Language so that the students will have a good background in English Language to enhance their performance in literature-in-English.

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