Improving the Learning of English Language Skills among Secondary School Students: The Role of the School Counsellor

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Abstract
English language is an important language of instruction and its teaching and learning involve the acquisition of appropriate skills to facilitate its understanding. As the performance of students in English language during internal examinations is dropping by the day, acquiring the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of English seems to be a challenging task for them. This is becoming a concern to English Language experts and Counsellors. Counselling is very instrumental in bringing out remarkable changes in the personal, academic, career, and social life of students. It has been integrated and incorporated into the school system by different education stakeholders through their policies. This paper discussed how counselling is indispensable to the learning of English Language skills as it relates to finding solutions to poor performance in English language. It explored the specific roles of the school counsellors and enumerated various counselling psychotherapies for Improving Students' English language skills and recommendations.

Keywords: English, Language skills, Counselling, Learning, Psychotherapy.

Introduction

English language is a common instrument of instruction and communication in most post-primary and higher institutions. Consequently, it has attained the status of global-language as it is a 'must-learn' (Tom-Lawyer, 2016) and the official language of most countries of the world. It is a compulsory subject which must be passed at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, as well as internal and external examinations like Joint Matriculation Examination (JME), National Examination Council (NECO) and West African Examination Council (WAEC), among others. Considering its capacity to foretell a better educational attainment, secondary school students need English language skills to function maximally in their studies. But, students with limited proficiency in those skills may find it difficult to learn not only English language but also other subjects

and fields of study, since it is a mode of communication. This brought the issue of performance in English language to the fore.

English Language as a language of instruction and being Nigeria's lingua franca has necessitated its compulsory teaching and learning at different levels of formal education in the country. Good performance in educational activity can be linked to proficiency in the skills of English language. Malekela (2003) in Komba, Kafanabo, Njabili & Kira (2012) documented that the poor performance of secondary school students in their national examinations in Tanzania has always been attributed to their low proficiency in the language of instruction, which is English. In other words, a major factor determining students' academic performance is proficiency in the skills of language of instruction. If the language of instruction facilitates communication between teachers and students and students do not have adequate communication skills, therefore, effective teaching, learning and performance may not be achievable. This is justified by Patrick, Sui, Didam and Ojo (2014) who opined that the poor performance of Nigerian students in external English language examinations has become a source of concern to educational stakeholders.

Sa'ad and Usman (2014) equally corroborated the assertion of Patrick et al (2014) by documenting that it is disheartening to note that the poor performance of students in English language at public examinations in recent times has been explained as a major cause of the decline in the general academic performance in Nigeria. This trend, therefore, draws attention to the skills of English as a language of instruction. The importance of English language skills cannot be overemphasized, because internalizing, understanding and mastering of teaching and learning process is dependent on the full development of language skills. In Tanzania, Rajani and Sumra (2010) conducted a study in which they found out that many children reached Standard 7 without any English skills at all. In the same vein, they also reported that by the time the students completed primary school, half of all children (49.1%) still could not read a Standard 2 level English story, and far fewer were likely to be able to read at Standard 7 level. In view of this, it is not realistic to expect that students with such issues would not face challenges in communication as they progress to tertiary institutions where in most cases the language of instruction is English.

The Concept of English Language

Language is a collection of letters, words and phrases systematically brought together in sentences to achieve meaningful interaction and communication. It is not random behaviour but is systematic where certain orderings are accepted as having prescribed meanings (Husain, 2015). Language is used to give expression to thoughts and feelings of a social group. In most secondary schools in Nigeria, English language is and still the medium of instruction. More so, the available instructional media and pedagogical materials at this level are equally written in English. English language as a medium of instruction majorly occupies a space in many sectors such as technology, medicine, education, advanced studies, computing, business, engineering, banking, tourism among others. Furthermore, English helps people to manage their communication with strangers or foreigners from different cultures and tribes. However, the learning of English language starts with the skills of listening, speaking, reading and

writing. Students are prime seekers and learners of the knowledge of English language because it facilitates their ability to understand the various learning resources. This, therefore, necessitates the need to acquire good English language skills to boost their confidence to face the crowd during social interactions. Without the acquisition and appropriate use of English language skills, it may be very difficult to manoeuvre interaction in this modern world.

Theoretical Background

Learning is considered to be an active and conscious process that involves acting upon events relevant to the information to be acquired. Murray and Christison (2019) opined that learning is a process that brings together cognitive, emotional, and environmental influences for making changes in one's knowledge, skills, values, and worldviews. Learning also refers to acquiring or getting information and skill through practice or experience to bring about behaviour change.

The language teachers usually rely on the research outcomes/results provided by researchers, psycho-linguists and socio-linguists. Teachers in most cases adopt the techniques and methods advanced by these theories to teach different languages such as English language. Consequently, they are guided by the approaches and techniques postulated by the theorists. According to Rokani (2018), in the modern psychological approach, two basic schools of thought attempt to explain language learning. They are behaviorist and cognitive theories of language. The Behaviorists consider language learning as a process of conditioning, and the expected goal in learning is achieved by a series of stimulus and responses. According to behaviorists, learning takes place due to the relationship between stimulus and learners' responses to it. Learner, as a result of this conditioning, will be able to give the expected response and then it can be said that he has learned. Therefore, practicing the lesson activities is an important aspect that demands the attention of the language learner. Meanwhile, the cognitive theorists say that each learner has a cognitive structure into which any new learning is absorbed and language learning is a meaningful process. Cognitive theory is also called "mentalist" because all cognitive interpretation of language learning rests upon the neuropsychological base of thought. Cognitive theory validates Experiential Language Learning because the learner is expected to understand the new input and connects it with previous inputs or experiences.

The Skills of English Language

The common aim of most second-language speakers is to achieve competency in English language by mastering its basic skills. English language just like most languages has four basic skills, they are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The first two skills are receptive, while the others are productive. Ordinarily, learning our native language follows the pattern of learning to listen first, then to speak, then to read and finally to write. Similarly, competency in the use of English Language assumes having satisfactory listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. These are called the four English language skills. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Listening, according to Rodriguez, Hernández and Guerrero (2017), is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in a communication process. It involves identifying the sounds of speech and processing them into words and sentences. When we listen, we use our ears to receive individual sounds (letters, stress, rhythm and pauses) and we use our brain to convert these into messages that mean something to us. It plays a very important role in learning any language. When listening is effective, it ensures understanding and improves accuracy in other language skills. Listening skills play indispensable roles in the teaching-learning situation. The students learn better when they listen better. According to Ekiti State Government (EKSG) (2021), listening can assume different forms such as:

Creative listening: - This has to do with the ability of the learners to associate meanings with all kinds of listening experiences from imaginative thinking to bring about outcomes in writing, painting, and dramatizing.

Aesthetic listening: - This is characterized by situations whereby the students or pupils listen to choral, music, poetry, and drama among others with the aim of enjoying the cultural values and morals of different tribes and languages.

Critical listening: - This involves paying keen attention to communications to make meaning of the speech, habits and word usage to make value judgment and inference from the speech.

Social listening: - This occurs when the students or pupils listen to understand social interactions and exchange of ideas.

Concentrative listening: - This assumes the form of a study that allows students to listen and follow instructions from a book or an instructor as well as elicit specific collections of information.

Speaking is generally perceived as the most fundamental, second, and productive skill of language to acquire. It is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information (Rodriguez, Hernández & Guerrero, 2017). It is often spontaneous, open-ended, and evolving. It is one of the skills which have to be mastered by students in learning English (Mustafa, 2015). Speaking is a medium for the students to understand materials taught by teachers and it becomes the top source of learning a language for the students (Al-Hosni, 2014). As a complex and most utilized of all the four skills, speaking involves and requires the use of different abilities, such as grammar, comprehension, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar abilities to express oneself in a language that is conventionally acceptable.

When students have read words, written ideas and heard thoughts, all they need is to express- their speaking skills. Speaking shows or proves their assertiveness and expressiveness. Speaking in English for some students is not an easy task and needs much effort to produce acceptable words in English. The achievement measurement for English mastery is seen through speaking competence. Statistics reveal that when you talk, you use about five syllables per second and there are more than forty different speech sounds (Sadiku, 2015). Therefore, every time you speak, your listener is expected

to recognize the sounds, catch and translate the syllables into words and then translate the words into thoughts and it is only your excellent speaking skills that can help them to achieve such. As a result, the priority list of every student should ultimately include appropriate pronunciation, good diction, and vocabulary.

Reading is an active process that involves the identification and recognition of letters or groups of letters or printed words so as to interpret them. It entails pre-reading, decoding, reading for "learning the new", multiple viewpoints, construction and reconstruction (Ekiti State Government, 2021). Reading is a complex interaction between the text, the reader and the purposes for reading, which are shaped by the reader's prior knowledge and experiences, the reader's knowledge about reading and writing language and the reader's language community which is culturally and socially situated (Hughes, 2016). Reading is a process that involves the mind which takes a lot of time to develop and improve. The mind has the task of attaching meaning to letters, words and phrases to understand the structure and meaning of every sentence.

Writing is a process of organizing idea, opinions, and feelings into written form (Rodriguez, Hernández & Guerrero, 2017). It involves the ability and knowledge to systematically and clearly express ideas through written words. It is a complex activity with the control of language both at the sentence level (grammatical, structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and later information) and beyond the sentence rank (organizing and integrating information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs or text). What we want to write should have something meaningful to convey. Writing is made up of basic elements such as subject, verb, object, and adverbs among others.

Every communication or interaction involves the process of input and output; the four skills of English language can be classified into input and output. During the input process, the students are passive and receive information either via listening or reading. Therefore, listening and reading are receptive and passive skills. In other words, they are the medium of acquiring the fundamentals of every language, while speaking and writing as output process are productive and active skills which involve producing language as a part of learning. During speaking and writing, the students are active by producing letters, sounds and symbols. These skills in the language classroom serve many valuable purposes such as giving the students support and creating opportunities and contexts to showcase the skills for exchanges of real information, proof of their ability, their confidence and assertiveness.

The Role of the School Counsellor

Counselling is a helping relationship that involves a professional counsellor and a client. The counsellor is saddled with the responsibility of executing the functions of counselling in both school and non-school settings. The school system is faced with a lot of students' problems such as poor performance in various subjects which calls for the attention of the counsellor. For example, Oluwole (2008) was of the view that "having difficulty in grasping fully the contents and concepts (which are English sounds and words put together) of the various subjects of the curriculum taught in target language seems to be one of the most serious problems which students face in their particular course of study. This might be due to their weaknesses in English language (the medium of

instruction) which may have negative consequences on their overall performance. These consequential negative performance in English language and the inability of students to learn its skills may be attributed to factors such as the students' lack of vocabulary, limitation of English speaking strategies, learner's limitation of oral skill, lack of speaking time, and crowded classes, learner's psychological barriers, their hesitance or reluctant feeling of making mistakes and being afraid, less-confidence, lack of motivation, speech anxiety and low self-esteem (Arifin, 2017; Manurung & Izar, 2019). These factors can be classified into psychological, social, academic and environmental factors. Since, a large percentage of the factors that affect English language skills are within the ambit of counselling approaches and the school counsellor is a professional with specific expertise in applying psychological techniques to solve problems ranging from personal, emotional, social to psychological, then some psychotherapies can be applied in reducing the effects of these factors.

Counselling Psychotherapies for Improving Students' English language skills

Counselling involves the acquisition of skills and knowledge to cope and adjust appropriately to issues that may be hampering personal development. There are therapies in counselling that equip individuals with such skills based on their respective techniques and modalities. This paper highlights eight approaches that are easily applicable to improving English language skills among students:

Rational-Emotive Therapy: - The rational-emotive approach asserts that events only do not disturb people but their belief systems about the events/issues (English language skills). This therapy has been found effective in helping clients to change and replace their self-defeating thoughts/beliefs with positive ones for healthy decisions to develop language skills. The counsellor can suggest various ways of challenging any negative thoughts that may be impeding the students' ability to learn language skills. However, this should be done with respect to the needs and abilities of the students. The counsellor can help the students to use this therapy to dissociate themselves from teachers, peer groups, guardians that have negative perceptions and attitude towards skills of English language. Some parents and teachers and even students' peers and relatives may discourage some students from learning English language skills. Some of these significant orders brainwash the students that the skills of English language are difficult to learn especially the topics that have to do with phonetics and sounds. So there is the need for therapy of this sort to counter such unproductive mindset and instruction. Students should train themselves with this therapy to guide their thoughts and stay away from people that may want to discourage them from learning English language skills.

Transactional analysis: - This therapy helps clients to examine early decisions in their lives and to make new decisions (Britto, 2014). The counsellor can adopt this approach to help the students examine their early choices and decisions with respect to the learning of English language skills to make new and productive choices. After having helped the students to get rid of their nervousness and negative thoughts of learning English language skills, the counsellor should help them form new habits, make new choices, take new decisions such as improving on the number of hours spent on learning English language skills; speaking English language often; learning new English words; reading English language books, bulletins, publications and newspapers among others.

Behaviour Therapy: - This therapy helps clients to examine and unlearn their possible unhealthy behaviour and learn more effective behaviour. Through behaviour approach, the clients are helped by the counsellor to identify, learn and acquire more effective behaviour. The counsellor should help the students identify and recognize their existing learning styles and behaviour, ascertain their effectiveness then drop such if not effective or improve upon them so as to improve their skills in learning English language. Through this therapy, students can also be helped to review their reading and study behaviour. They can be helped to change those behaviour, which may serve as obstacles to their learning of English language skills. This therapy can help the students to adopt new behaviours such as keeping abreast with past English topics and questions. Reinforcement is a technique of behaviour therapy and can be used to emphasize rewards such as school award of prizes to the best English students. This will allow for healthy competition among students and indirectly enhance the learning of English language skills.

Person-centered Therapy: - This therapy focusing on providing a climate for clients to engage in self-exploration through acceptance and positive regard. The students should be accepted and respected irrespective of their weaknesses and vulnerabilities so as to give room for identification and freedom of expression of their barriers, challenges and interests. This can be possible when the counsellors create an atmosphere for the students to engage in self-exploration and self-examination, so that their actual needs and barriers in learning the English language skills can be identified and resolved by them.

Gestalt Therapy: - This therapy helps clients to gain awareness of self, their present situation, and experiences as well as others. The therapy emphasizes being attuned to one's language (Sharf, 2012). The counsellor can help the students to gain awareness of acquiring language skills by facilitating awareness through language. For example, pronouns such as "it" or "you" can be replaced with "I". This will usher in responsibility for the acquisition and improvement of language skills. This approach can be applied to improve the learning of English Language skills through the effort of the counsellors, who should help the students to be aware of the available resources and facilities to learn English skills. The counsellors can also help them to be aware of and review their current situations in terms of their current performances by being inquisitive. Through this therapy, the counsellor can inspire the students to be very inquisitive during English lessons by asking questions to understand the principles guiding pronunciations and phonology. These probing questions will consequently enhance students understanding of concepts.

Reality Therapy: - This therapy helps clients to evaluate their present behaviours and how effective they are in ensuring that their set goals are met. This approach enables clients to evaluate their present behaviour such as behavioural and attitudinal dispositions towards English lessons, English teachers and assignments so as to find out the extent to which these behaviour are promoting/impeding their effectiveness in meeting their set academic goals. One of the goals of students is to develop their communication skills in English. In this sense, counsellors should help students evaluate their present behaviour to find out to what extent they are effective in meeting their goals of learning English

language. They should also make them be aware of the extent to which they should develop their language skills in English.

Adlerian Therapy: - This advocates that every individual is creative and goal-directed to take responsibility by adopting the healthy style of life to adapt to obstacles of their life and ways in which they create solutions and means of achieving their set goals. The focus of this therapy is to provide encouragement to develop socially acceptable goals. These approaches can be applied to English language teaching and learning. Many students are hesitant to speak English because they are not encouraged or do not set goals. The counsellors should take up the responsibility of encouraging the students particularly the slow learners and help them set the goal of learning English language skills. The counsellors should also encourage teachers and school principals to motivate the students towards learning English and remind them that the school is a major source of extrinsic motivation to students.

General Ways for effective Counselling of Students in English

The counsellor can also counsel students on how to improve their skills in listening, reading, writing and reading of English Language, by:

- Collaborating with teachers to arrange and design some daily activities that will create opportunities for the students to develop each language skill. Activities that will enable them to listen to their teachers, to a song, to one another in a group activity; speak during debates, group discussions, pronunciation practice, role play, songs, recitation, oral speed reading; read during comprehension passage exercise, spelling and pronunciation drills and write a dialogue script, fill-in-the-blank sheets, write journals and articles.
- Guiding the students on the need to know the importance of studying English language skills, considering the fact that it serves as the most used medium of communication among most counterparts. Students should be made to understand that English language forms part of the foundations of expression and communication of ideas and embraces other fields of study such as law, engineering, social sciences, science, arts, management, and technology among others. Therefore, English at the secondary school level is very crucial and has immense effects on students' development. Once this awareness is ascertained, students will take the subject more seriously and that will improve their learning of English language skills.
- Emphasizing the global and worldwide use of English as a language of instruction and communication. When students are deciding to engage themselves after graduation, the counsellors should help them to keep in mind that every involvement and interaction with the outer world involves communicating in English. Therefore, demands a wide range of abilities to use English, level of self-confidence and proficiency in the language. They should be reminded that using English language during interviews and social interactions is indispensable and instrumental to their on-going personal and professional development.
- Encouraging the students to practice more exercises in the topics they were taught in English. Students should be advised not to rely only on what they have been

taught in the classroom alone. They should form the habit of practicing more questions relevant to the topics they have been taught and if they are unable to get the solution, the teachers or other students who are better in the subject should be consulted. They should endeavour to map out free periods for studying English language skills and not compulsorily during the main class or lesson.

- Encouraging the students to see movies in English. In some scenarios, students are often discouraged from spending too much time watching movies and television. However, they can be advised to productively see movies in English. In the course of seeing the movies, the students can try to pick out words and look up their meaning to improve their language skills, get used to colloquial and conversational forms of English. Listening to and reading English language news on television and in magazines will help to expand their vocabulary and pronunciation skills as well as their understanding of how words are used, spelt and the context in which they can be used.

- Encouraging students to join English group/club in schools like other subject clubs and societies. The group plays a significant role in the total development of pupil's ability. Through this club, the students get opportunities of interacting with others, practice speaking skills, express themselves, and identify their mistakes so as to make amends. Expectedly, the group activity should involve the English teacher, therefore, the students will have the opportunities to mention what was and was not helpful in their efforts to become better speakers, readers and writers of English language. In addition, the counsellor should ensure that cooperative learning is encouraged among the students.

- Stressing the importance of group study for the students. They should be made to understand that group study in English gives room for the exchange of English ideas among themselves. Students that are unable to ask their teacher questions in the classroom may have or possibly express themselves during the group study. The group study should comprise all levels of learners so as to elicit from and integrate ideas of the good, average and below-average students in English language skills.

- Designing seminars and talks to enlighten and discuss with the students how their grades are computed in the internal and external examinations. It is important that students are exposed to how their scores are being graded. The counsellors should source Information on the computation of scores from WAEC and NECO and make them available to the students for better understanding and clarity. They can also duplicate, provide and discuss marking schemes/guides for WAEC and NECO examinations with the students. This will guide them on how to answer questions during examinations.

- Emphasizing patience while learning English language skills. The counsellor should help the students to understand that the learning and developing of English language skills is a progressive, ongoing, dynamic process and will require time and effort. He/she should help them to realize that when problems are met, they (the students) should keep striving until the challenge is resolved. They should understand that every challenge could be overcome by studying, seeking solutions, and consulting books, other students and teachers for help and guidance, and most importantly they need to be patient.

- Lastly, practicing. The best way of knowing anything is by doing. The counsellor should emphasize regular practice of the skills and strategies highlighted above. The students should try as much as possible to expose themselves to the skills of English language by practicing. Practice makes perfect! This indicates that if the students want to improve on their language skills, they will have to practice.

Recommendations

For effective teaching and learning of as well as good performance in English Language examinations, teachers and counsellors need to collaborate in applying the counselling therapies. Children learn to speak by imitating what they have learned, therefore counsellors and teachers should imbibe and exemplify the practice of good and effective language skills such as refraining from speaking vernaculars which impede improvement in learning English language skills.

Parents and guidance should endeavour and encourage their children/wards to indulge in at least half an hour of listening, reading and writing a day to keep abreast of the various styles of writing and new vocabulary, and progress to making small efforts of daily reading and writing so as to improve reading habit and writing skills.

School counselors can also promote literacy skills by gathering and analyzing data of students with literacy needs and subsequently refer students for appropriate interventions; monitoring student's progress and engaging in discussions and; integrating strategies to incorporate the literacy instruction standards into a comprehensive school counselling program.

The school support services which include virtually all the personnel (The counsellor, nurse, librarian, mental health personnel, and the teacher even parents among others) in the school system should give attention to the personal, academic, career and social needs of students and help them to make English language part of their life at home, school, prep-time, and other social activities.

Conclusion

The psychotherapies and strategies highlighted in this paper are practical measures, which would help students to responsibly and independently improve their ability to learn English language skills. The students should not hesitate to seek help from the school counsellor when the need arises because with the help of the counsellor, the application of these strategies and therapies will be with ease. This, therefore, calls for the counsellor to build the confidence in the students to trust him/her to be able to provide appropriate and handy information.

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