

**INVESTIGATION INTO THE COMPETENCE AND
PERFORMANCE OF SPOKEN ENGLISH OF SELECTED
NIGERIAN SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH**

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an investigation into the spoken English in Nigeria, focusing on the distinctions between competence and performance among Nigerian speakers of English. Research findings of several studies have it that there are individual non-native English speakers with impeccable ability to communicate in written English and are admired internationally without a matching ability in spoken English. This paper sets out to examine the spoken English of fifty (50) randomly selected educated Nigerian speakers of English through a structured questionnaire (SQ). Mixed methods comprising a quantitative method for data collection and a descriptive method for data analysis were adopted to form a decision on the data collected. The principal findings, among others, reveal that Nigerians' spoken English can be analysed through the lenses of both competence and performance. The paper considers the implications of these findings for language policy, education, and intelligibility in communication. It advocates for a more nuanced understanding of spoken English in Nigeria, emphasizing the need for pedagogical approaches that will balance the skills of literacy and those of oracy. This will, by so doing, address the interplay between competence and performance in spoken English among Nigerian users of English

KEYWORDS: Spoken English, Competence, Performance, and Perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The English language in Nigeria is acquired or learned as a second language, whether in childhood or adulthood. Proficiency is the main target of every learner of

a second language. Language proficiency in second language learning has received attention among linguists over the years. The two concepts language scholars have explored in assessing language proficiency are competence and performance. From the body of literature, right from Chomsky's theory of Language competence and performance to recent publications, it is obvious that one cannot discuss a learner's level of mastery of a second language without diving into these earlier-mentioned concepts. These two terms, though closely related, can be delineated as will soon be done in the work to show where a second language learner has chosen to major in the process of learning a language, whether formally or informally.

This paper focuses on the oral aspect of English in second language acquisition in Nigeria. This is necessary because there are several Nigerians who are academically sound when it comes to writing, but cannot match such competence with their speaking ability in the same English. This is true because the spoken aspect of English is the most neglected in second language learning in Nigeria. It is therefore not surprising for some average, educated Nigerian users of English to attain a high standard of grammatical accuracy in the language and master all the technicalities of composition writing, but he or she cannot often appropriately speak the same language with a reasonable degree of confidence.

In his view, Banjo explains why we have "individuals with an impeccable ability to communicate in written English and be understood, even admired internationally, without a matching ability in spoken English" (71). Udofot points out that what gave birth to this is the fact that emphasis is on "the skills of literacy more than those of oracy" (35). Babalola adds: A language one cannot speak with good understanding cannot be read or written with good understanding as well. Listening becomes useless when the spoken words are misunderstood. Life becomes frustrating when you have an idea that cannot be correctly articulated (9). He also says that "Error in speech is transferred into writing" (9). Udofot equally notes that "A remarkable feature of spoken English in Nigeria is that it often falls short of the user's ability in written English" (*The Intonation* 35). It is in view of the above that this paper investigates the factors influencing spoken English skills, exploring the relationship between competence (knowledge of the language) and performance (actual use of the language) in various social and educational settings.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

The proficiency of Nigerians in spoken English could be assessed through several factors, which are not actually the primary concern of this paper. To an

extent, the global rating of Nigerians' spoken English has received a pass mark. This is because many Nigerians have demonstrated good proficiency in spoken English, particularly in formal and informal contexts. In other words, many Nigerians are fluent in spoken English, a strong command of the language due to its status as an official language and medium of instruction in schools. But there are still several educated Nigerians who the above cannot attest to because, with their level of education, their spoken English is rated as below average.

The thrust of this study, however, is to investigate whether the spoken English of Nigerians is based on competence or performance. This is necessary because researchers have raised concerns over the challenges associated with the spoken English of Nigerians. But adequate work is yet to be done to investigate whether Nigerians' spoken English is based on competence or performance. Therefore, this paper takes a different approach in investigating the subject matter. It is hoped that the concept of competence and performance in relation to the spoken aspect of English by Nigerians will receive better attention in this study against this background.

THE AIM, RESEARCH QUESTIONS, AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The broad aim of this study is to examine the competence and performance of the spoken English of Nigerians. This will be achieved through the following objectives:

- i. Ascertain whether the spoken English of Nigerians is based on competence or performance
- ii. To examine whether competence in written English matches that of spoken English
- iii. To identify possible difficulties faced by Nigerians in their spoken English.

The following are the questions this research intends to answer in relation to the objectives:

- i. What is the spoken English of Nigerians based on competence or performance?
- ii. What is the level of competence of the spoken English of Nigerians compared to their written form?
- iii. What are the possible difficulties faced by Nigerians in their spoken English?

This study is limited to the spoken aspect of English of Nigerians. The source of data is principally from the structured questionnaire. Efforts were not made to conduct an oral test using the respondents due to a lack of time and other challenges faced by the researchers.

CONCEPTUAL LITERATURE REVIEW

The Spoken English

Spoken language is arguably the most important activity that distinguishes humans from non-human species. One important characteristic of the linguistic approach towards the study of language generally is that it is not connected merely with the written language but also (and usually with greater emphasis) with the spoken. People usually place greater prominence on written communication than the spoken form of the language, especially English. But contrary to this popular opinion, Gimson arguably observes that “We are apt to forget that the written form is originally an attempt at reflecting the spoken language and that the latter precedes the former” (4). It is in view of this that he further states that “...written English is often an inadequate and misleading representation of the spoken language today” (4). Indeed, in many languages today, so parallel are the two forms, spoken and written, that the written may be responsible for a change in pronunciation or may at least tend to impose restraints on the spoken form.

This is quite true of many non-native users of English, where their spoken English often falls short of their ability in written English. Udofot attributes the problem to the kind of educational system in Nigeria that has emphasized, in her words, “the skills of literacy more than those of oracy” (35). Most often, the result of this kind of educational system has produced, as noted by Banjo, “in many cases individuals with an impeccable ability to communicate in written English and be understood, even admired internationally without a matching ability in spoken English” (71).

Palmer, in his intensive study on semantics, argues that the spoken form of language must be given priority over the written form (154). He states four reasons why the spoken language should be given more basic attention than the written, thus:

- i. The human race had speech long before it had writing, and there are still many languages that have no written forms.
- ii. The child learns to speak long before he learns to write.

- iii. Speech plays a far greater role in our lives than writing. We spend far more time speaking than writing or reading.
- iv. Written language can be largely converted into speech without loss. But the converse is not true. If we write down what is said, we lose a great deal.

From the above points, one will agree with Palmer that the spoken language has far more striking characteristics that cannot be easily shown in the written form. In particular, the spoken language has prosodic and paralinguistic features which are primarily handled under intonation and stress. Palmer further argues that “concentration on the written language has misled grammarians; they have often failed to see that the spoken language is different from the written and have, misleadingly, attempted to describe the spoken language in terms appropriate to the written” (155).

Also stressing the need for the speaking skills to be learnt seriously and adequately perfected, Babalola states that “Error in speech is transferred into writing” (9). He further asserts that “A language one cannot speak with good understanding cannot be read nor written with good understanding as well. Listening becomes useless when the spoken words are not understood. Life becomes frustrating when you have an idea that cannot be correctly articulated” (9).

English as a Second Language in Nigeria

Second language refers to a language that is learned or acquired after the individual has already acquired their first or native language. The term “second language” is often used in contrast to “first language” or “native language”. While the first language is acquired naturally as a child’s primary means of communication and forms of identity, a second language is learned later in life, typically during adolescence or adulthood. This implies that the term “second language” is used to mean a language that is learned after the first or native language is relatively established. In their view, the second language may refer to a second, third, fourth, or even twentieth language. On the other hand, the NTI manual, *Introduction to English as a Second Language* states that the term ‘second language’ is used to refer to a language that is learned extensively in addition to the first language (3). In other words, we use the term second language to describe the language a bilingual or a multilingual person acquires and uses extensively after their first language.

Today, in many parts of the world, the English language is used as a second language. This is exactly the situation in Nigeria, India, Kenya, Ghana, Singapore, Sierra-Leone, among others. Where English is used as a second language, it develops

its own peculiar characteristics different from those of English as a first language. Such characteristics manifest in the areas of pronunciation, lexis, and semantics, and to some extent grammar (syntax). Researchers have established that learning or acquiring English as a second language in Nigeria has always been laden with challenges. One of such is fluency in speaking the language. It is in view of this that mastering the language as native speakers has been an uphill task for many Nigerians. This view is strongly stressed by Fasanmi that native speakers of English believe that a second language can never attain the native speakers' proficiency (4).

Competence and Performance

Competence

Chomsky, in his elaborate study on the competence and performance of a language user, states that competence consists of the knowledge of language that the language user, in principle, has. He further explains that competence is a factor that refers to a speaker's knowledge of their language and is an attribute of the individual. This implies that the general concept of internalization of the rules that govern a language fit into the language user's competence, while the usage of these rules can be referred to as performance. The question is, where do we then place the spoken English of the educated Nigerians based on the above distinction or delineation of the two concepts made?

Performance

Chomsky delineates performance from competence by stating that performance is the result of the psychological process that employs this knowledge (in producing or interpreting language utterances). He further sees performance as the actual use and realization of language or application of language, the actual process of speaking. However, Chomsky dismissed performance as an imperfect manifestation of competence and is not worthy of being incorporated into a 'serious discipline'. If what Chomsky said is something to go by, what then will be the implications of this for this study?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Population

The design adopted for use is a mixed method comprising a quantitative method for data collection and a descriptive method for data analysis. Data for the study were collected from fifty (50) respondents through a structured questionnaire

using random sampling techniques. The respondents are made up of educated Nigerians with an ND/NCE as the least qualification. They are also of different academic and professional disciplines. Their demographic spread covers about ten (10) states in Nigeria. This is necessary because the problem of spoken English among Nigerians is not limited to a particular profession, discipline, academic cadre, or even state. It is a national issue. The responses of the respondents in the questionnaire were reduced to figures and tables and scored accordingly using simple percentages for easy statistical interpretation and analysis. The said scoring formula employed is mathematically expressed as:

$$\text{Scoring formula} = \frac{\text{No of Respondents}}{\text{Total of Respondents} \times 100}$$

DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Personal Data of Respondents

Variable	Sub-Group	Frequency (over 50)	Percentage (%)
Academic Qualification	NCE/ND	15	30
	Degree	22	44
	Masters	12	24
	PhD	1	2
	Total 50	Total 100	
Academic Discipline	Arts/Humanities	15	30
	Science	17	34
	Bus. & Mgt.	10	20
	Others	8	16
	Total 50	Total 100	
Profession	Teaching	19	38
	Civil Servants	15	30
	Students	6	12
	Others	10	20
	Total 50	Total 100	

State	Nasarawa	25	50
	Benue	5	10
	Plateau	4	8
	Bauchi	3	6
	Kogi	5	10
	Others	8	16
		Total 50	Total 100

The above data in Table 1 are very significant to this study because they enable us to know whether the respondents have the necessary qualifications, exposure, and training required to provide the needed information in this research. The demography of the respondents is equally needed to show the level of the geographical spread of the respondents. Under academic qualification, most of the respondents 44% are first degree holders. With this, many of them would have encountered the teaching or training on spoken English during their education. On the other hand, the respondents with NCE/ND are of a significant number too, 30%. Still on the qualification of the respondents, 12 persons, 24% have Master's degrees in various disciplines, and only one person has a PhD, giving a fairly balanced stratified population for this research.

From the table above, two other considerations for the selection of the respondents are academic and professional disciplines. The data surprisingly shows that most of the respondents are teachers of various levels of formal learning. 30% of the respondents are civil servants, the rest are either students or are involved in other forms of work. On the other hand, under academic specialization, the statistics reveal that 34% are from the sciences, 30% are of the arts/humanities, business & management 20% while the rest belong to other disciplines outside the mentioned ones. The demographic distribution from the table indicates that the respondents are from over ten (10) states in Nigeria. It is important to note that this background information of the respondents is relevant to the overall findings of this study because it will help in establishing that the identified research problem is restricted.

Table 2: Respondents' Response on Level of Exposure and Practice of Spoken English

Questions	Options	Frequency (over 50)	Percentage	Total
4a. Have you at any point taken a course in spoken/oral English	Yes No	26 24	52 48	100
4b. Which of these have you formally studied	Eng. Sounds Alphabets Both	7 13 30	14 26 60	100
5. What is your level of proficiency in spoken English	Beginner Intermediate Advance	5 30 15	10 60 30	100
6. What specific challenge do you face when speaking English	Pronunciation Grammar Vocabulary Confidence Intonation Understanding Native speakers	16 8 9 5 5 7	32 16 18 10 10 14	100
7. How often do you find yourself mistaking grammatical errors even when you know the correct forms.	Frequently Occasionally Rarely Never	4 30 14 2	8 60 28 4	100
8. What factor(s) is responsible for poor performance in spoken English	Anxiety Lack of practice Influence of NL Limited voc./phrases Others	7 8 15 16 4	14 16 30 32 8	100
9. Which of these uses of English will you rate yourself as being more competent	Spoken Written	15 35	30 70	100

10. Would you say your spoken English sounds the same as the native speakers	Yes	14	28	100
	No	36	72	
11. Do you believe that many Nigerians often make errors in spoken English rather than the written form?	Yes	44	88	100
	No	6	12	
12. In the course of speaking English, do you experience mother tongue/accents?	Yes	32	64	100
	No	18	36	

Table 2 shows that all the options in each of the questions had a certain number of respondents, no matter how insignificant the number may be. This confirms the fact that all the questions generated and options attached to them are relevant to the subject matter of this research. For instance, in question 4, most of the respondents (52%) admitted that they had formal teaching/training in spoken English. Some right from primary school level, some at secondary school, while others at the tertiary level of their education. It is important to note that because of the significance of spoken English, it is being taught at all levels of our educational system. These data attest to our research question 1, which seeks to know whether the spoken English of Nigerians is based on competence or performance. This therefore establishes that many Nigerians have acquired the knowledge of oral English and are well exposed to the underlying rules of phonology. Hence, their spoken English is based on competence and not mere performance.

On the other hand, 48% of the respondents claim they have never been exposed to the teaching/training of spoken English. The researchers believe that either the respondents did not understand this question well enough, or failed to maximize the opportunities they had when in school to be taught. However, their responses here imply that, though they may lack adequate knowledge, their spoken English may likely be based on performance.

In the same vein, the data in the table for question 5 further reveal that 60% of the respondents admitted that they are at the intermediate level of proficiency in spoken English. This agrees with the work of Jowitt and Silas on *Common Errors in English*, that many educated Nigerian users of English cannot be rated beyond

average in their use of English due to 'inadequate grasp of the rules of English grammar being their general cause, but no doubt the interference of African languages also accounts for many of them (vii).

It is observable from Table 2, question 5, that 60% of the respondents admitted that they fall into the immediate level of proficiency. The implication of this simply infers that most of the respondents are not above average (perfect, fluent) or below average (poor) in their self-rating of spoken English. Deeper insight into the data has shocking revelations contained in questions 10, 11, and 12 as presented in Table 2 above. 70% of the respondents in question 10 agree that they are more competent in the written form of English than in the oral form. Surprisingly, in question 11, 72% claimed to speak the same as native speakers of English. Whereas the same respondents, 88% concur that they do commit errors more in spoken English than in the written form. One will notice inconsistencies and disparities in their responses to these three questions. But one thing that is obvious here is that it confirms that many Nigerians who speak English are based on performance. The spoken English is the same or near native speakers', yet embedded with errors, and a lack of in-depth knowledge of the language. The last question on Table 2 affirms that mother tongue interference is part of the reasons why many Nigerians who speak English lack proficiency, with 64% accepting this fact.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This study investigates the spoken English of Nigerians vis-à-vis competence and performance. As earlier noted, this study elicited data from fifty (50) respondents of different academic disciplines and professions, varying academic qualifications, and different geopolitical areas. From the data presentation and discussion above, the following constitute the principal findings of this research:

1. Nigerian spoken English can be analysed through the lenses of both competence and performance.
2. There are indications from the study that their spoken English is characterized by competence because of their underlying knowledge of the language rules. Also, in the context of spoken English, many Nigerian English speakers often demonstrate a strong understanding of English grammar, vocabulary, and evidence of phonetics and phonological rudiments in the course of their speaking.

3. Another principal finding shows that the spoken English of many Nigerians is based on performance. This is justified by the responses of the respondents that many in real-life situations do not speak out of in-depth knowledge of the technicalities that govern the use of language.
4. Another notable finding in the research reveals that many Nigerians are better and more accurate in the written form of English compared to the spoken form. Some attributed this to being exposed to the rudiments of writing (literacy) more than to speaking (oracy). This is due to our educational system in Nigeria, which places a premium on literacy above oracy.
5. Some of the challenges that several Nigerians are facing with spoken English are partly due to the kind of educational system in place in the country and the lack of practice of speaking.

CONCLUSION

The spoken aspect of English could be based on competence, performance, or both, especially among nonnative speakers of the language. It is in view of this that the primary goal of this study was to investigate whether the spoken English of some educated Nigerians is based on competence or performance. The investigation focused on some educated Nigerians who have a minimum of NCE/ND qualification in different disciplines. Considering their levels of education, the study has confirmed the findings of related earlier reviews that the spoken English of some educated Nigerians is usually characterized by performance because they lack the basic underlying knowledge of the technicalities of spoken English. The paper has also shown that many educated Nigerians are very good and exhibit mastery of English at the written level of using the language but lack such mastery at the spoken level of the same language. This study concludes that the spoken English of many educated Nigerians can be analysed through the lenses of both competence and performance. This implies that for some, their spoken English could be identified with competence, while for others is based on performance skills.

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