

Community of Inquiry Method and Language Skills Acquisition: Empirical Evidence

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Abstract

The study investigates the effectiveness of community of inquiry method in preparing students to develop listening and speaking skills in a sample of junior secondary school students in Borno state, Nigeria. A sample of 100 students in standard classes was drawn in one secondary school in Maiduguri metropolis through stratified random sampling technique. A self-developed questionnaire was used in generated the data from the respondents and data was analysed using descriptive consisting of mean and standard deviation as well as and inferential statistics one way ANOVA and multiple regression analysis (MRA). The findings show that speaking skill is stronger than that of listening; gender is significant predictor of speaking skill and no significant difference between students in different classes. The study revealed that community inquiry approach is a good method of teaching speaking skill and teachers should be encourage to master and employ the approach for developing English language skills to students.

Key words: community of inquiry, listening, speaking, skills, students, Borno

1. Introduction

English language is one of the key subjects taught at school level. It is one of the mandatory requirements for entry into university globally. English language among non- native speakers is widely being considered as a second language especially in places where it is not an indigenous language. English language has been given the status of core subject as enshrined in the national policy education. English is considered as an official language and it is being considered among one of the key subject at school level. English has also been made mandatory as a pre-requisite for entry into the university as well as a language for instruction in high education, tourism, business and civil services (Richards, 1985).

In recognition of the importance of English language, the National Education Policy clearly states that “In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling” (KPM, 1995, p. 1 as cited in Yamat, Fisher and Rich, 2014). Pillay (2005) perceives English language as a tool for gaining knowledge especially in the field of science and technology. Competency and fluency among students remains a subject of concern among educators, parents, and stakeholders despite the priority given to English language in Nigeria’s educational system. Competence in oral communication in speaking and listening is prerequisite to students’ academic, personal, and professional success in life. Indeed, teachers deliver most instruction for classroom procedures orally to students. Students with ineffective listening skills do not absorb much of the material to which they are exposed. Their problems are intensified when they respond incorrectly or inappropriately because of poor speaking skills. Students who cannot clearly articulate what they know may be wrongly judged as uneducated or poorly informed. Of equal concern, students who are unable to effectively ask for help from a teacher will not receive it, and typically reticent students’ progress more slowly despite what may be a normal level of aptitude.

Beyond the confines of school, oral communication competence can contribute to individuals' social adjustment and participation in satisfying interpersonal relationships. Youngsters with poor communication skills are sometimes viewed as less attractive by their peers and enjoy fewer friendships. Antisocial and violent behavior often company or occur with underdeveloped social and conflict management skills. On the positive side, the ability to communicate orally supports sound psychological development. One's self concept is acquired through interaction with others. In psychological terms, achieving self-actualization involves communication activities such as making contributions in groups, exerting influence over others, and using socially acceptable behavior.

As individuals mature and become working adults, communication competence continues to be essential. Communication skills are required in most occupations. Employers identify communication as one of the basic competencies every graduate should have, asserting that the ability to communicate is valuable for obtaining employment and maintaining successful job performance. The communication skills essential in the

workplace include basic oral and writing skills, and the ability to communicate in work groups and teams with persons of diverse background, and when engaged in problem solving and conflict management.

Humans are born with the ability to vocalize; but not with the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that define communication competence. The ability to communicate effectively and appropriately is learned and, therefore, must be taught (Morreale, Osborn and Pearson, 2000).

Inspite of relevance of English language in educational system in Nigeria, competency and fluency among students remain subject of concern among educators, parents and stakeholders. Study shows that Nigerian students' English language competency has always been the obstacle in securing success at university level as well as in job opportunities (Yamat, Fisher and Rich, 2014).

This problem calls for revisiting of the teaching method used in teaching English language in the schools with a view to changing the approach to an alternative method that engage students and makes teaching and learning interesting so that students could learn faster and easily. The methods being used today seem to be boring leading student to lose interest on the subject matter. In addition, the methodology also focuses more grammatical rules and represents old fashion way of teaching and learning the language. The purpose of the study therefore is to investigate the effectiveness of community of inquiry towards improving students' productive skills of speaking and listening.

2. Community of Inquiry

Graham & Harris (2007, p. 122) defines community of inquiry as engaging students in activities that helped them develop ideas for a particular writing task. The community of inquiry is a powerful pedagogical tool to foster student engagement, critical thinking, collaborative, and affective skills development. As such it can be useful in the bioethics classroom (Hunter, n. d). It is the teacher that structured Inquiry-based activities are with clearly defined objectives. The inquiry based activities allow for collaborative work between students. The method was developed by Professor Matthew Lipman and it is also popularly referred to as Philosophy for Children.

Community of inquiry aims to engage the participants, both teacher and students in collaborating with each other to grow in understanding of the world around them, forming a community of inquiry. The community of inquiry model has been shown to be very effective at engaging students in learning and exploring ideas, improving critical thinking skills, affective skills and collaborative skills (Pardales and Girod, 2006).

The process of the community of inquiry itself engenders affective and collaborative skills and attitudes as well. Since the participants are engaged in thinking together, and if they want their view to be respected, they will learn that they need to respect other viewpoints. Furthermore they will discover that respecting another view point doesn't just mean waiting their turn to express their view, but to engage with that view, and challenge it to discover just how robust it is (Gardner, 1999)

3. Variables in the Study

3.1 Speaking Skill

Academic English involves the effective use of listening and speaking skills in a school setting. Joos (1967) argues that every language in the world has five registers comprising of frozen, formal, consultative, casual, and intimate. Formal register are being used in teacher instruction, standardized tests, and job interviews. Payne (1996) argued that not all students are exposed to the formal register at home, but all students can benefit from direct instruction about its parameters. Using Academic English within the classroom setting allows students to more successfully process and retain classroom content.

3.2 Listening Skill

Community of inquiry deals with group or community aspect, therefore through vocalising the thinking together, and using the language of enquiry students learn how to think 'reasonably'. Lipman views reasoning is a discursive, group activity. Students are critically engage in important social and co-operative experiences that develop listening, empathy, respect, friendship and the ability to truly work and think co-operatively (<http://www.teachingtimes.com/kb/53/philosophy-for-children.htm>).

Clark (1999) students who are attentive listeners have the ability to influence the attitude of the speaker. Barr, Dittmar, Roberts, and Sheraden (1997) found that academic performance is strengthened when listening skills are actively taught.

4. Community of Inquiry and Language Skills

Studies involving community of inquiry and language skills were carried out in a number of places. In Malaysia for Preece (2013) employed CI method combined with thinking stories to engage intermediate level learners ESL classes at international Islamic University Malaysia. The findings revealed that CI method, combined with thinking stories, has great potential for improving listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in a holistic

way. In another study, Millett and Tapper (2011) discussed collaborative philosophical inquiry and conclude that collaborative philosophical inquiry has marked positive effects on schooling and thinking skills; and schooling, socialization and values of students. However, the paper suggests that available empirical evidence is strong enough to warrant implementing collaborative philosophical inquiry as part of a long-term policy.

5. Methodology

5.1 Population

Research population involves large collection of individuals or objects that form the centre of scientific inquiry. Population of a study is determine for the benefit of the population and due to the large sizes of populations, researchers cannot test every individual in the population because it is too difficult, expensive and time consuming. All individuals or objects within a certain study population usually have a common, binding characteristic. Thus, the description of the population and the common binding characteristic of its members are the same. For example ‘principals’ is a well-defined group of individuals which can be considered as a population and all the members of this population are school leaders.

The study covers secondary schools in Maiduguri metropolis, Borno state. The population involves junior secondary school students. The estimated number of students in the junior secondary school arm is above 10,000. The schools under the study cover were drawn from one educational zone of Borno state.

5.2 Samples

Sample being a portion of the population arises due to the fact that a researcher cannot carry along all the individuals in a given population for the study. The sample is a representative of the population from which it was drawn and it must have adequate size in order to carry out relevant statistical analysis. The main function of the sample in the study is to allow the researcher to conduct the study to individuals from the population so that the results of the study can be used to draw valid conclusions that will apply to the entire population. The study employed 109 samples drawn from one junior secondary school in Maiduguri metropolis across JSS1-3 but 100 were finally used due to errors in the filling of questionnaires and other problems.

5.3 Sampling Technique

Sampling technique is employed in order to get the representative of the population and considering the nature of population involved in the study, Stratified sampling involves identifying subgroups of the population representative of the portions of those same subgroups in the general population being studied, or to equal numbers of individuals within different subgroups for the purpose of comparing their responses to those of other subgroups. Having defined the population and sample size, the general population are classified within one of the identified subgroups of the population, thus, a random number is selected and each ninth individual. However, in stratified random sampling, the population is broken down into strata which contain the data elements. Within the strata, 33 students were selected as each has an equal chance of being selected.

5.4 Data collection and Analysis

Data was collected through a self-developed questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed to generate responses and then employ statistical analysis of its responses being the most frequently used instrument for data collection in educational and evaluation research as it helps to gather information on knowledge, attitudes, opinions, behaviors, facts, and other information required during empirical research.

The 12 item self-developed instrument has adequate psychometric properties with internal consistency of .82. However, validity of the instrument was obtained through expert assessment and other recommended procedures.

The data was collected and then analysed using descriptive statistics involving mean and standard deviation; one way ANOVA and multiple regression analysis (MRA).

6. Results

Table 1.1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables that comprises of listening and speaking skills. The finding revealed that both skills are adequate satisfactory ($m = 3.54$; $SD = 1.40$) and ($m = 3.71$; $SD = .89$ among students. However, speaking skill appears to be stronger than listening with the use of community of inquiry approach.

Table 1.1

	Mean	Std. Dev
Listening skill	3.5433	1.40
Speaking skill	3.7167	.89

The difference in listening and speaking skills has also been observed among three different levels of classes. No significant differences were found between students of JSS, 1, 2 and 3 in listening ($F(2, 97) = .138, p = .871$) and speaking ($F(2, 97) = 1.39, p = .253$) skills, indicating that students in the three classes do not differ in the skills.

Table 1.2: ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Listening skill	Between Groups	.555	2	.278	.138	.871
	Within Groups	195.146	97	2.012		
	Total	195.701	99			
Speaking skill	Between Groups	2.211	2	1.106	1.393	.253
	Within Groups	76.983	97	.794		
	Total	79.194	99			

However, predictors of listening and speaking skills were assessed through the use of multiple regression analysis with gender, age and class were used as predictors, listening and speaking skills as dependent variable in table 1.3 and 1.4. None of the predictor is significant in table 1.3 indicating that gender, age and class are not predicting listening skill.

Table 1.3: Multiple Regression for speaking skill

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	3.308	1.505		2.198	.030
	Gender	.171	.309	.059	.554	.581
	Age	.012	.081	.016	.153	.879
	Class	-.092	.276	-.034	-.332	.741

a. Dependent Variable: Listening skill, $R = .064, r^2 = .004, F = .132$

Conversely, in table 1.4 it is only gender that is significant predictor of speaking skills while age and class were not.

Table 1.4 Multiple Regression for speaking skill

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			
1	(Constant)	1.697	.927		1.832	.070
	Gender	.369	.190	.199	1.942	.055
	Age	.054	.050	.111	1.076	.285
	Class	.254	.170	.148	1.492	.139

a. Dependent Variable: Speaking skill

7. Discussion

The findings of the study show that speaking skill is stronger among students who in early adolescents than listening skill. This could be attributed to development stage of the learners who are may likely have short attention to listening. The finding demonstrates that the community inquiry approach is capable of helping learners to improve communication. Tickoo (1987) as cited in maintains: "...In order to learn a language it is important that learners ... become involved in real-life communication, that is to say, not simulation, role-playing or other games, but genuine communication in which the learner has to participate" (p. 54).

Community of inquiry enhances interaction as Lipman (2003) argues that Converting the classroom into a "community of inquiry" in which students listen to one another with respect, build on one another's ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seeking to identify one another's assumptions

However, the students do not differ significant based on the level of studies with respect to listening and speaking skills.

Finally, gender was found to be a significant predictor of speaking skill among students with female having strong skill over male counterpart.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

The results of the study show that community of inquiry approach possesses great potential to benefit learners' English language skills. It integrates listening and speaking skills, with learners getting the opportunity to practise their listening and speaking through sharing their views in a community of inquiry.

In addition, the approach has the capacity to enhance learners' confidence to listening effectively and speak more with the approach.

The paper recommends that

1. Teachers need training, to help them understand COI and to enable them to become skilful facilitators of COI.
2. Teachers should encourage the use of the approach so that second language learners would benefit, allow them to reflect on the issues within the stories and familiarise themselves with any new vocabulary thereby enhancing their speaking confidence.
3. Students should be helped to get familiar with the approach as it gives students valuable opportunity to practice the four language skills.

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