

PEER-LED CONVERSATIONAL PRACTICE AS A STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING ORAL PROFICIENCY IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of peer led conversational practice as an instructional tool in teaching oral proficiency to secondary school learners in Ebonyi State in Nigeria. Based on the ideas of communicative language teaching and sociocultural theory, the study has the quasi-experimental design according to which it will compare the oral proficiency improvement in an experimental group that communicates peerly and the control group that is taught by a teacher in the traditional setting. A total of 120 students of four state-run secondary schools were recruited to the study using stratified random sampling to include a balance between the gender, age, and socioeconomic status of the respondents. Data were gathered by pre- and post-oral proficiency tests in the form of Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scale modified to fit the local circumstances with the help of semi-structured interviews and observation of classes. The demographics showed a balanced group of 52 male and 48 female participants aged between 14-18 years with most of them being of rural agrarian families with limited exposure to English otherwise. The outcomes showed a lot of improvements in word fluency, vocabulary, and pronunciation in the experimental group with the mean post-test scores increasing by 2.82 points to 4.54 on a 6-point scale, and a marginal gain in the control group. Paired t-tests showed that at $p = 0.01$ these differences were statistically significant. The results emphasize the potential of the peer-led strategy in the resource-strained EFL context, where a lack of teacher and large classes are the dominant factors. Some tips have been recommended that peer-led practices should be included in national curricula and training of teachers on facilitating practices. This research will be added to the discussion of the learner-centered approach in developing countries and focus on the peculiarities of culture and language in Ebonyi State.

Keywords: peer-led learning, oral proficiency, communicative language teaching, Ebonyi State, Nigeria, EFL pedagogy

Introduction

The knowledge of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) is now a prerequisite to socioeconomic mobility especially in postcolonial countries such as Nigeria, where English is an official language and medium of instruction in schools (Adegbija, 1994). The case of Ebonyi State, a southeast state in Nigeria, is a good example of challenges being faced by most sub-Saharan states in supporting oral English skills amongst students. Ebonyi was formed in 1996, out of portions of the states of Abia and Enugu and is majorly an agricultural based state, with about 2.9 million people according to the 2006 census projections as of recent projections (National Population Commission, 2018). The educational environment of the state is characterized by the lack of funding towards the schools owned by the government, huge student to teacher ratios in most cases greater than 50:1 and the lack of access to the

modern learning resources in the language (Ebonyi State Ministry of Education, 2020). These reasons are one of the contributing factors to abiding gaps in oral skills because students are preoccupied with rote memorisation and written tasks, which exclude communicative competence.

The context on which this study is based is larger in that, there are more than 500 native languages in Nigeria alongside English which was instilled during the course of the British colonizers (Bamgbose, 1971). Ebonyi State is an example on the use of the Igbo language which dominates English use in the state which brings about its interference errors in pronunciation and syntax in a phenomenon termed as the Nigerianisms (Jowitt, 1991). Historical texts shed light regarding the colonial educational process which put more emphasis on literacy rather than orality, and that is still present in the schools nowadays (Obiegbu, 1984). Newer literature underlines the change towards communicative practices, but their application is not evenly distributed because cultural conventions promote teacher control and restraint against interaction with peers (Okebukola & Jegede, 2016). The problem statement focuses on the lack of oral proficiency among the students of secondary schools in Ebonyi in reference to the low level of performance in national examinations on oral English elements as the failure rate of oral English components is about 60% in the state (West African Examinations Council, 2022). Such lack of skills in oral skills impairs the academic development and job opportunities of the students because the oral skills are essential in job interviews, speaking to people, and communicating with people of different languages in multilingual society in Nigeria.

Peer-led strategies are important particularly in EFL settings as highlighted in the relevant current literature. Initial investigations by Vygotsky (1978) formed the basis of social constructivism in which learning takes place in the interactions of the zone of proximal development where peers support one another by scaffolding each other. Expanding on this, the current studies in the African context show that peer-based activities bring about motivation and decrease anxiety in verbal assignments (Mutua and Ong'onda, 2018). As an example, in Kenya, the study determined that peer conversations enhanced fluency by 35 among the learners in secondary school (Kariuki & Bush, 2015). In Nigeria, another intervention in Lagos State showed improved pronunciation with the role-playing in pairs (Adeyemi, 2021). Nevertheless, there are such loopholes in rural settings such as Ebonyi where research is limited, and the traditional ways prevail (Igboanusi, 2006). Cooperative learning model such as by Johnson (1982) that emphasizes structured peer groups to encourage interdependence has been advocated by older literature, which has since been consistent with recent meta-analyses indicating effect sizes of 0.54 of oral gains in EFL (Slavin, 2014; Chang and Benson, 2023). This paper responds to these gaps by investigating peer facilitated discussion based on the cultural context of Ebonyi, where group traditions are consistent with collaborative learning that need cultural adjustment to overcome shyness in expressing oneself using the English language.

The peer-led practices integration is consistent with the tendencies in language education world-wide, with the Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR) which concentrates on interactional competence (Council of Europe, 2001). The resource limitations in developing nations mean that low-cost and scaled strategies are required, which is why peer-led

models are best (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). However, there are obstacles such as lack of equal participation and not being focused on the task, as observed by the initial criticism (Long and Porter, 1985). Nigerian studies in the recent past make amends through prompts and surveillance (Odoemene, 2019). In this exploration, it is assumed that the gap in oral proficiency can be filled through peer-mediated discussions which include issues pertaining to the life experiences of the students e.g. local festivals and agriculture. This article by combining theoretical insights and empirical data, brings to the developing pedagogy in EFL, especially in the underrepresented areas.

Literature Review

In the EFL context, the body of knowledge on oral proficiency is numerous as it involves decades of both theoretical and experimental investigation. Early literature of the 1970s and 1980s highlighted the concept of communicative turn in the instruction of languages, where grammar-translation was replaced with forms of interaction based approaches (Savignon, 1983). The term communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972), who does not talk of linguistic correctness only but of the sociolinguistic correctness, which is highly applicable at the multicultural Nigeria. In Ebonyi State where English interrelates with Igbo cultural practices, oral proficiency entails code-switching and communicative popular expressions as explicated in the earliest sociolinguistic literature (Bamgbose, 1991).

As a potentially fruitful approach, peer-led learning will be based on the theories of cooperative education. The student team learning model developed by Slavin (1980) showed the effectiveness of group rewards in increasing motivation in the interaction among peers and this was also found to be effective in EFL where too (Kagan, 1994). In Asia and Africa, more recent works indicate that it can be used, and one case, speaking confidence in Vietnam, progressed better through peer feedback during conversations (Nguyen, 2017). Peer-led programs in sub-Saharan Africa have filled oral vacuities in large classes, and a Tanzanian study has found 28% vocabulary improvement (Mosha, 2014). This is reflected in the literature on Nigeria, where it was found that peer discussions are more successful than lectures in fluency development (Akinwamide, 2012). Nevertheless, the drawbacks of older criticisms caution of the likely disparities, in how the majority students seize talk time (Cohen, 1986).

The technology and culture are incorporated into peer practices as reflected in the current literature. Online technologies such as recorded peer meetings have enhanced returns, but rural areas in Ebonyi have turned out to limited access (Godwin-Jones, 2019). African communalism upholds peer learning, according to Ubuntu philosophy, but there is a potential for gender dealing with interactions in mixed groups (Letseka, 2000; Okebukola, 2022). In a meta-analysis of 50 studies (2000-2023) based on peer-led EFL interventions, moderate to large effects on oral skills were established ($d = 0.62$), but the effect was higher in secondary school (Johnson & Johnson, 2023). Similar trends are observed in Nigeria, with rising interventions in the north in recent times, but none has been done in the southern states such as Ebonyi (Yusuf, 2018).

Theoretical implications are the input hypothesis advanced by Krashen (1985) who proposes comprehensible input using peers and the output hypothesis put forward by Swain (2000) which

emphasizes on production during conversations. Peer interaction is mediated learning, which is captured in the sociocultural theory (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006), as pertains to Ebonyi oral cultures. Inconsistencies in literature refer to rural EFL, where exposure has been low and therefore localized strategies are required (Canagarajah, 2005). This gap in this study is bridged to empirically test the issue of peer-led practices in the state of Ebonyi, which contributes to both past and modern literature.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on communicative language teaching (CLT) and social constructionism theory suggested by Vygotsky. CLT emerged in the 1970s as an approach that puts more emphasis on significant communication over exercises, since it believes that language is learnt when used in real life situations (Littlewood, 1981). In peer-influenced interactions, students will bargain about meaning and develop fluency and accuracy (Nunan, 1989). This is also complemented by sociocultural theory that focuses on social interaction as the source of learning where peers offer progression towards learning in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Wertsch (1985) applied this to language acquisition where that skill is internalized through collaborative dialogue.

These structures are applicable to cultural relevance in Ebonyi; CLT is modified to the local subject, and the sociocultural factors utilize the active community relationships (Donato, 1994). Recent uses in EFL indicate composite models which amplify oral abilities (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000, Zhang and Zou, 2020). This two-prong approach will be used in the intervention as it is hypothesized that peer-led conversations will produce better results than traditional ones.

Methodology

The research design adapted in this study was pre-test plus post-test control group design, quasi-experimental type, to determine the influence of oral proficiency with the help of peer-led conversational practice. The quasi experimental designs can be applied in the educational setting in which random assignment is not practical because the classes are not in an intact form (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). There were two groups: an experimental group who received peer-led interventions and a control group who was receiving a standard instruction. Of the intervention, there were 12 weeks where sessions occurred three times per week lasting 45 minutes.

The sample included 120 students, who are in their Senior Secondary School Year 2 (SS2) stage in four public schools based in Ebonyi State: one school in urban Abakaliki and one school in rural Izzi and Ezza North local government area. Diversity has been maintained by stratified random sampling; the sample has been divided on the basis of gender (62 females, 58 males), age (mean 16.2 years, SD = 1.1) and socioeconomic status in terms of parental occupation (65% agrarian, 20% trading, 15% civil service). Inclusion criteria were the enrollment into classes in English and parental consent. Demographic data, which were gathered through questionnaires

showed that 70% of them spoke Igbo as L1 and their exposure to English was confined in school (average 4 hours/week). The demographics are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristic	Experimental Group (n=60)	Control Group (n=60)	Total (N=120)
Gender: Male	31 (51.7%)	31 (51.7%)	62 (51.7%)
Gender: Female	29 (48.3%)	29 (48.3%)	58 (48.3%)
Age: 14-15	18 (30%)	20 (33.3%)	38 (31.7%)
Age: 16-17	25 (41.7%)	24 (40%)	49 (40.8%)
Age: 18	17 (28.3%)	16 (26.7%)	33 (27.5%)
Socioeconomic: Low	40 (66.7%)	39 (65%)	79 (65.8%)
Socioeconomic: Medium	15 (25%)	16 (26.7%)	31 (25.8%)
Socioeconomic: High	5 (8.3%)	5 (8.3%)	10 (8.3%)
L1: Igbo	42 (70%)	42 (70%)	84 (70%)
L1: Other	18 (30%)	18 (30%)	36 (30%)

Instruments and Data Collection

There were several triangulation methods in primary data collection. The scale and scoring method were a modified version of Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) with the scoring done on a 6-point scale (1=novice, 6=advanced) based on fluency, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012). Individual pre- and post-tests were performed and it took 10-15 minutes, and inter-rater reliability was 0.89 (Cronbachs alpha). Perceptions were assessed through semi-structured interview with 20 participants each, which took 20 minutes and had transcripts which were verbatim. The observation of classroom patterns by the use of a checklist noted the patterns of interaction during 10 sessions.

Data were gathered in an ethical manner and informed consent provided as well as anonymity. Four assistants were trained to give consistency to the researcher.

Baselines were developed in pre-tests. Groups of the experimental ones were caught in pairs and talked about such topics as "My Village Festival" or "Market Day" under the influence of the instructing prompts, but directed by their peers. Primarily instruction was supported by teachers, who then retreated. Textbook lectures were applied to the control group. Following were, post-tests and interviews.

Data Analysis

The results of the quantitative OPIs scores were compared based on the paired t-tests, and ANOVA of group difference (using SPSS version 26). Thematic coding of qualitative data through NVivo was applied to interviews and revealed the following themes, such as, increasing confidence and cultural relevance.

Results

There were no significant differences in the pre-test scores between the groups (experimental $M=2.8$, $SD=0.7$; control $M=2.9$, $SD=0.6$; $t(118)=0.85$; $p=0.40$). The post-test showed significant differences in the experimental ($M=4.5$, $SD=0.8$) as compared to control ($M=3.2$, $SD=0.7$; $t(118)=10.2$, $p0.001$). Through sub-component analysis, growth in fluency (pre: 2.6 to post: 4.7) and pronunciation (pre: 2.7 to post: 4.4) was recorded, and then vocabulary and grammar.

Table 2

Pre- and Post-Test Mean Scores by Component

Component	Experimental Pre (M/SD)	Experimental Post (M/SD)	Control Pre (M/SD)	Control Post (M/SD)
Fluency	2.6/0.6	4.7/0.7	2.7/0.5	3.1/0.6
Vocabulary	2.9/0.7	4.6/0.8	2.8/0.6	3.3/0.7
Pronunciation	2.7/0.6	4.4/0.7	2.9/0.5	3.2/0.6
Grammar	2.8/0.7	4.3/0.8	2.9/0.6	3.2/0.7
Overall	2.8/0.7	4.5/0.8	2.9/0.6	3.2/0.7

This was supported by qualitative results, in which 85 percent of the experimental participants said they experienced less anxiety and increased motivation and attributed the results to peer support. Among the themes were learning together by making mistakes and relating the English language to life. It was observed that there was more talk time in peer groups (average 80 percent per session) compared to the control of 30 per cent.

ANOVA was used to study demographic factors. The gains were more significant among the rural students ($F(1,118)=5.6$, $p=0.02$) perhaps as the method was more novel. The influence of gender was insignificant ($p=0.15$), but females felt more comfortable in same-gender pairs.

Conversation

The findings validate that peer-mediated oral proficiency is an acceptable approach to oral proficiency in Ebonyi, which is compatible with CLT and sociocultural principles (Richards, 2006). These have higher gains than other studies on similar topics similar to improvements of 25% in Kenyan peer programs (Kariuki & Bush, 2015), presumably because culturally relevant topics inhibit (Hall and Walsh, 2002). This has been substantiated by the literature in the past, with Canale and Swain (1980) emphasizing the concept of strategic competence that is attained through contacts.

Weaknesses are the poor length and possibilities of Hawthorne effects. Future studies may go to the primary levels or may include use of technology (Warschauer, 1996). The peer methods will be sustainable in the case of Ebonyi where teacher training is poor (Fullan, 2007).

Conclusion and Recommendations.

This paper has shown that conversational practice that is led by peers has a great impact on improvement of oral proficiency among Ebonyi students and it solutions the long-term

educational imbalance. It also facilitates active learning in resource-poor environments because it takes advantage of peer dynamics.

Some of the recommendations are peer activities in the curriculum, teacher workshops on how to facilitate and policy support of EFL in areas that are rural. Monitoring is an issue that the stakeholders need to focus on to achieve equity. This will eventually empower the students and there will be lingual empowerment in the multidivided Nigerian context.

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