

**ASSESSMENT OF LEARNERS' PREFERENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING
AMONG JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SELECTED EDUCATIONAL
ZONES OF SOKOTO STATE, NIGERIA**

Abstract

In spite of the benefits that are attached to effective reading, speaking, listening, and writing skills; recent reports from the West African Examination Council on students' performance in English Language Studies in Sokoto State revealed an unimpressive performance by students at public examination. This study carried out an assessment of learners' preferences in English language learning among junior secondary school students in selected educational zones of Sokoto State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was used in the study. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select a total of 300 respondents from three educational zones in Sokoto State. A self-developed questionnaire with a reliability value of 0.73 was used as the instrument for data collection. The data was analyzed using simple percentages. The finding revealed that there were preferences for English language learning among JSS students in Sokoto State. It was established that learners' preference for English language skills in JSS was due to memorization of lines, memorization of lines and difficulty of grammar. It was recommended, among others, that learners need to be given clear and constant guidance on why they need to prefer all the language skills.

Keywords: *Learners' Preference, English Language Learning, Reading Skill, Listening Skill, Writing Skill, Speaking Skill, and Educational Zones.*

Introduction

English Language studies appear to enjoy a prominent position in Nigeria's educational system at all levels. More specifically, it is accorded the highest priority in the National Policy of Education [1]. In fact, the intention to impose the English language as a recurring language from the beginning of the first year in primary school to the end of secondary school is clearly manifested in the NPE. This viewpoint is bolstered further by the policy's auspicious provisions in sections 4: a (l), 5:24 (a), and 4.19 (f), which define English as not only a school subject but also a medium of instruction for learners (fourth year in primary school).

Accordingly, the Federal Ministry of Education designed a curriculum for the English Language in which listening, speaking, reading, writing, and literature in English form the major skills [2]. The rationale behind this was to provide a solid platform for effective and broad-based English language learning. Language learning is, in principle, regarded as a deliberate act which entails committing to memory language skills. Mechanics and norms are presented to the learner by the teacher [3]. This indicates that language learning involves getting immersed in a language system and working towards using the language system appropriately.

Given the different peculiarities of individuals in learning language skills, where learners have a preference for some English skills, little for some, and non-preference for some English skills, the nature of preference in English language learning becomes an imperative issue to be investigated. Preference as a variable could be simply described as the process of making a choice or decision on some substance or idea based on one's needs; however,

freedom could be defined [4]. There is no doubt that some choices made can either make or mar a person. More often than not, teachers' methodology remains a catalyst that propels students' interest.

[5] revealed that learners' abilities differ as far as their respective linguistic competence and knowledge are concerned. Thus, the idea of this paper was conceived in order to explore the effects of preference on English language education. The paper has explored factors responsible for learners' preference in English Language learning. In addition, such effort is made to proffer certain practical steps towards promoting an all-round preference necessary for comprehensive English language skills development among learners of English in Sokoto State.

Review of Literature

[6] found a significant relationship between overall academic achievement and learning styles. [7] assessed the learning styles of 517 adult ESL learners in Australia. Based on their responses to a 30-item questionnaire, willing aimed at identifying how differences in cognitive learning styles affect learners' preferences in six different areas:

1. preferences for specific kinds of classroom activities;
2. preferences for special types of teacher behavior;
3. preferences for particular grouping arrangements;
4. preferences for some aspects of language which need a kind of emphasis;
5. preferences for some sensory modes, such as visual, auditory, or tactile learning;
6. Preferences for particular modes of learning on one's own outside class.

It was found that differences in cognitive styles do affect learners' preferences for some learning styles. For example, concrete learners tended to choose the following:

a) In class, I like to learn by games.

b) I like to learn English by working in pairs.

Analytical learning styles, however, preferred the following:

a) I like to study grammar.

b) I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes.

In another assessment, learners' preferences have been much emphasized in some research papers. [8], for example, based on survey data, distinguished four learning styles:

1. visual learning (for example, reading and studying charts);
2. auditory learning (for example, listening to lectures or audio tapes);
3. kinesthetic learning (involving physical responses); and
4. Tactile learning (hands-on learning, as in building models).

[8] developed a questionnaire for students coming from varying language backgrounds to assess their preferences. This study clarified that the learners' preferences often differ from those of native speakers of American English. It showed a general preference for kinesthetic

and tactile learning styles. [9] categorized perceptual learning styles in relation to vocabulary learning as auditory, visual-verbal (with text), visual-nonverbal (with pictures), and mixed preferences.

Despite the above mentioned as captured by [10], [11] argued that such information in relation to students' preferences for learning English can prove to be significant, but the idea of putting "learners into boxes labeled according to cognitive styles" is unacceptable (p. 62-63). [12] points out that considering learners' preferences is crucial in establishing a learner-centered curriculum. Such importance given to students' preferences has also been emphasized in [13] study, in which he reported an assessment of high school ESL learners' perceptions of the language teaching-learning activities presented in their classes. The outcome of such an investigation surprised the teachers in that perceptions of teachers and students differed greatly from each other. Block (1994, 1996) stated that synergy between students' and teachers' aims regarding task assignment and performance must be stressed. The same idea was stated by [14] while discussing styles of thinking that are the foundation from which styles of learning do emerge.

[15], as cited by Mohammad (2016), conducted a study to elicit Turkish students' language learning preferences. Depending on the results of their study, they highly emphasized the willing co-operation of the participants (students and teachers) in the interaction and the agreement between them upon the goals of their interaction, as co-operation cannot be imposed but must be negotiated.

[16] categorized learners in their article "learning styles and strategies" as, active versus reflective learners; sensing versus intuitive learners, visual versus verbal learners; and sequential versus global learners, giving each classification its own qualities, distinctive features, and preferences. This study was carried out in response to these studies, with the hope of making a valuable contribution in the same field.

Statement of Problem

Recent reports by the chief examiner, West African Examination Council (WAEC) on students' performance in English Language Studies in Sokoto State revealed an unimpressive performance by students at public examinations as well as students that are still in school [17]. Personal contact with the Junior Secondary Schools in Sokoto State as well as an exploratory survey by the researcher revealed that there was an unimpressive performance by students at public examinations. Given the fact that learners are key variables in the school system, they undoubtedly have choices to make in their areas of preference [18]. It is thus, envisaged by this paper that preference in English language learning could be a contributory factor to the problem of unsatisfactory performance in English language examinations in Sokoto State.

Moreover, such an attitude by the learners is potent enough to affect their performance in English studies tests, thereby thwarting their productivity in the use of the English language. The existence of this preference in the learning of English and the need to appraise how such could influence English language programme development serve as a springboard for this investigation into learner's preference in English language learning in Sokoto State. Previous studies focused largely on the development of English language studies, with little concentration on learners' preferences in English language learning. This study, therefore, examined learners' preferences in English language learning among junior secondary school students in selected educational zones of Sokoto State.

The objectives of this study;

The following objectives were set to find out:

1. The nature of learners' preferences for the learning of English Language in Junior Secondary Schools in Sokoto State.
2. If there are causes of preferences in the learning of English Language skills in Junior Secondary Schools in Sokoto State.
3. If preferences in the learning of English skills could performance of students in the acquisition of English study skills in Junior Secondary Schools in Sokoto State
4. If preferences in the learning of English language skills can be harmonized to favour all aspects of English language education in Junior Secondary Schools in Sokoto

Research Questions

In line with above objectives, this study answered the following research questions:

1. Are there preferences for learning of English Language among learners in JSS in Sokoto State?
2. Are there causes for learners' preferences in the learning of English Language skills in JSS in Sokoto state?
3. Do preferences in the learning of English language skills affect students' performance in English language in JSS in Sokoto State?
4. Can preferences in learning of English language skills be harmonized to favour all aspect of English language in JSS in Sokoto State?

Research Limitation

The focus of the study was limited to covering the assessment of learners' preferences in English language learning among junior secondary school students in selected educational zones of Sokoto state, Nigeria. Other states of the nation were not included because of limited resources and time. The scope of the study covered junior secondary school students from some selected secondary schools in Sokoto State, Nigeria. The senior secondary schools, which are the advanced institutions of the basic, are not part of the selection. The focus was on the junior secondary schools because they form the foundation of language learning. Once the junior students get it right from the foundation, it will be easier not only for them but also for the teachers handling the students at the senior secondary school level. The study covered three (3) educational zones, which are Yabo, Sokoto, and Gwadabawa. These were selected out of the six educational zones in Sokoto on the basis of educational needs analyses. The scope was limited to dealing with the nature of preferences, the causes of preferences, and preferences in English skills.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design used in the study was a descriptive method of the survey type. According to [19], survey studies are effective when a researcher intends to establish the status quo of events or situations in order to proffer solutions.

Population

The population comprised junior secondary school students from three educational zones in Sokoto State. The zones include Yabo Educational, Sokoto Educational, and Gwadabawa Educational Zones, respectively.

Samples and Sampling Techniques

Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to select a total of 300 respondents from three educational zones in Sokoto State. A purposive sampling technique was used to consider junior secondary school students as the population for the study. A

purposive sampling technique was used to select 100 respondents from each of the educational zones selected in Sokoto State. A simple random sampling technique was used to select 100 respondents from each of the educational zones; making a total of 300 respondents.

Table 1: Showing the samples size of the students

S/n	Educational Zones	Sample of Students
1	Yabo Educational Zone	100
2	Sokoto Educational Zone	100
3	Gwadabawa Educational Zone	100
Total		300

Source: MoE, Sokoto (2016).

Instrumentation

A twenty items self-constructed questionnaire was used for collecting data from the respondents. The preference in English Language Learning questionnaire (PELL) used the four points like scale that has: **strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree**. The items sought to find out learners preference in learning English. Furthermore, the questionnaire sought to investigate the nature, causes and effects of learners' preferences and how their preference could be modified in favour of the skills of the English studies curriculum. The questionnaire was validated and subjected to reliability analysis which yielded a reliability value of 0.73.

Method of Data Analysis

The researcher used simple percentage as statistical tool for data analysis. This helped to reveal the degree to which learners of English perceive the nature, causes and effects of preference in English Language learning as well as how they felt preference could be harmonised to favour entire English Language education.

Results and Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1: Are there preference for English Language learning among JSS students in Sokoto State?

Table 2: Summary of result on preference for English Language learning

S/n	Description	SA	A	D	SD
1.	Students prefer to learn English instead of any other subject	209 (70.0%)	26 (9.0%)	26 (9.0%)	39 (13.0%)
2.	Students prefer to learn more than one English language skill (listening, speaking, reading and writing and Lit-in-English)	166 (55.0%)	49 (16.3%)	45 (15.0%)	40 (13.3%)
3.	Students prefer to learn English Language skills from their English teachers only.	210 (70.0%)	90 (30.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
		(750)		(150)	
		83.0%		17.0%	

As indicated in table 2, 200 (69.6%) strongly agreed that students prefer to learn English instead of any other subject; 26 (8.7%) agreed; 26 (8.7%) disagreed; while 39 (13.0%) strongly disagreed. In addition, 166 (55.0%) strongly agreed that students prefer to learn more than one English language skill; 49 (16.3%) agreed; 45 (15.0%) disagreed; and 40 (13.3%) strongly disagreed. Also, 210 (70.0%) students preferred to learn English language skills from their English teachers only, while 90 (30.0%).

The table further showed that most of the respondents (83.0%) agreed that there were preferences for English language learning among JSS students in Sokoto State. It implied that there were preferences for English language learning among JSS students in Sokoto State. This outcome of this study concurs with the finding of [20], who posited that English is closely related to the leading edge of global scientific, technological, economic, or cultural development. The outcome of this study was in contrast with the assertion of [20] that Nigeria does not present a good example of content and language integrated learning (CLIL), even though other subjects are taught in English.

Research Question 2: What are the causes of learners' preference for English language skills in JSS in Sokoto State?

Table 3: Summary of result on causes of learners' preference for English Language skills

S/n	Description	SA	A	D	SD
1.	Students do not prefer spoken English lessons because of fear of teachers overbearing corrections to students pronunciations	211 (70.0%)	89 (30)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
2.	Memorization of lines may make students not to prefer poetry and Drama	260 (87.0%)	40 (13.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
3.	Difficulty of grammar may make students not to prefer grammatical accuracy skill	276 (92.0%)	24 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Total		900 (100.0%)		0 (0.0%)	

As shown in table 3, 211 (70.0%) students strongly agreed that they do not prefer spoken English lessons because of fear of teachers' overbearing corrections to students' pronunciations, while 89 (30.0%) agreed. In addition, 260 (87.0%) respondents strongly agreed that memorization of lines may make students not prefer poetry and drama; 40 (13.0%) agreed. Also, 276 (92.0%) respondents strongly agreed that the difficulty of grammar may make students not prefer grammatical accuracy skills, while 24 (8.0%) respondents agreed.

The table further showed that all the respondents (100.0%) agreed that English lessons, memorization of lines, memorization of lines and difficulty of grammar were the causes of learners' preference for English language skills. It implied that spoken English lessons, memorization of lines, memorization of lines and difficulty of grammar were the causes of learners' preference for English language skills in JSS in Sokoto State. This concurs with [21] in her caution that if a learner is never successful in the lessons, he or she will soon give up. The outcome of the present study was in agreement with the finding of [22] that the difficulty of a topic could make learners not have a preference for it.

Research Question 3: Can preferences in learning English language skills by students be harmonized to favour all aspect of English language Skills in JSS in Sokoto State?

Table 4: Summary of result on preferences in learning English Language skills

S/n	Description	SA	A	D	SD
1.	Preference for few English language skills may limit the students' knowledge of English	265 (88.0%)	27 (9.0%)	6 (2.0%)	2 (1.0%)
2.	Preference for few English language skills generate anxiety when a learner is asked to perform tasks in areas not preferred	292 (97.0%)	5 (2.0%)	2 (1.0%)	1 (0.3)
3.	Lack of preference for a particular English language skill may make a learner have low grade in it	290 (96.0%)	6 (2.0%)	2 (1.0%)	2 (1.0%)
Total		885 (98.0%)		15 (2.0%)	

Table 4 showed that 265 (88.0%) respondents strongly agreed that preference for few English language skills may limit the students' knowledge of English, 27 (9.0%) agreed, 6 (2.0%) disagreed, while 2 (1.0%) strongly disagreed. In addition, 292 (97.0%) respondents strongly agreed that preference for a few English language skills generates anxiety when a learner is asked to perform tasks in areas not preferred, 5 (2.0%) agreed, 2 (1.0%) disagreed, while 1 (0.3%) strongly disagreed. Also, 290 (96.0%) respondents strongly agreed that a lack of preference for a particular English language skill may make a learner have a low grade in it. 6 (2.0%) agreed, 2 (1.0%) disagreed, while 2 (1.0%) strongly disagreed.

The table further showed that most of the respondents (98.0%) agreed that preferences in learning English language skills by students were harmonized to favour all aspects of English language skills. It implied that preferences in learning English language skills by students were harmonized to favour all aspects of English language skills in JSS in Sokoto State. The outcome of this study was in contrast to the assertion of [23] that students have little interest in the contents to be learned and hence adopt a surface approach to learning which is aimed at passing an examination. In addition, the outcome of the present study was in line with the study of [23], which stated that lack of preference for a particular English language skill can make learners have low grades.

Research Question 4: Do preference in the learning of English affect learners' performances?

Table 5: Summary of result on effect of preference in the learning of English on learners' performances

S/n	Description	SA	A	D	SD
1.	Constant and clear guidance may make students develop preference for all the language skills	212 (71.0%)	80 (27.0%)	5 (2.0%)	3 (1.0%)
2.	Good teaching methods may make teachers develop students interest in spoken English language skill	256 (85.0%)	40 (13.0%)	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.3%)

3.	Teachers' interest in grammatical skills may make learners to prefer such skills.	252 (84.0%)	43 (14.0%)	3 (1.0%)	2 (1.0%)
Total		(883) 98.0%		(17) 2.0%	

Table 5 revealed that 212 (71.0%) respondents strongly agreed that constant and clear guidance may make students develop a preference for all the language skills, 80 (27.0%) agreed, 5 (2.0%) disagreed, and 3 (1.0%) strongly disagreed. In addition, 256 (85.0%) respondents strongly agreed that good teaching methods may make teachers develop students' interest in spoken English language skills. 40 (13.0%) agreed, 3 (1.0%) disagreed, while 1 (0.3%) strongly disagreed. Also, 252 (84.0%) respondents strongly agreed that teachers' interest in grammatical skills may make learners prefer such skills. 43 (14.0%) agreed, 3 (1.0%) disagreed, while 2 (1.0%) strongly disagreed.

Table 5 further revealed that most of the respondents (98.0%) agreed with the fact. This implies that preference in the learning of English affects learners' performances. The outcome of this study was in line with the assertion of [24] which stated that preference in the learning of English can be achieved through guidance or effective counselling. The outcome of the present study was also in line with the finding of [25] that the use of good or appropriate methods in the teaching/learning process ensures easy comprehension or a positive impact on the students.

Research Question 5: What is the learners' scale of preference of English Language skills?

Table 6: Summary of result on learners' scale of preference of English language skills

S/n	Description	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Rating
1.	Reading Skill	58	19.0	3 rd
2.	Speaking Skill	86	29.0	2 nd
3.	Listening Skill	92	31.0	1 st
4.	Writing Skill	38	13.0	4 th
5.	Literature in English	26	9.0	5 th
Total		300	100	

The table above showed that the students prefer listening, with 92 respondents representing 31.0% of the respondents, followed by speaking, with a score of 86 representing 29.0% of the respondents. The students scored reading third with 58, representing 19.0% of the respondents, while writing came in fourth with 38, representing 13.0% of the respondents. Literature in English was the least preferred by the students, with 26 respondents, representing 9.0% of the respondents. The ranking of the English language skills is not surprising. This is because the learners had earlier indicated their wish to study the whole skills set in their responses to the questions that asked the nature of their preference for the learning of English language skills. It means that listening skills were the most preferred skills.

Practical Implication

A study of learners' preferences in English language learning would be of valuable significance to finding a solution to the incessant academic failures recorded in the English language. Having discussed reasons for students' preferences in the English language, the

various skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking where students have preferences against others will be sorted out. The skills discovered to be Herculean and posing a threat to learning would be ironed out by fostering and mastering the usage of all skills without preferring one to the other. Teachers can then come up with techniques and counseling strategies to prompt the learners to have positive preferences for those language study skills or items hitherto not preferred by them. The study will provide foresight into the teaching of the English language among teachers. It will enable the learners to see English as being learner-friendly rather than a difficult subject. The findings of this study will also enable teachers of the English language to realize that learners of English have preferences and a lack of interest in some particular components of the English studies curriculum. This knowledge will enable the teachers of the English language to take advantage of such preferences to arrest a lack of interest that could hamper learners' concentration on learning English study skills and competence building. The data obtained uncovered significant results, suggesting a need for closer cooperation and collaboration among students and their teachers concerning how English language learning activities should be re-arranged and implemented in the classroom. It should be made clear that an inability to abide by the findings of this study will result in the problems inherent in the English language preferences persisting.

Social Implication

The study carried out on the assessment of learners' preferences in English language learning among junior secondary school students in selected educational zones of Sokoto State, Nigeria will not only correct the abnormality of learning English among the students but also provide an alternative to inspectors in the English Language Inspectorate Unit of the State Universal Basic Education Board as well as Federal and State Ministries of Education on the status of the effects of preferences in English language learning in JSS in Sokoto State. This will enable the inspectors to carry out their inspection with the aim of making sure that learners' interests are stimulated towards the five skills of the English Language. It will also enable the inspectors to recommend remedial strategies for teachers where preferences for not learning some components of the English studies curriculum are due to the teachers' lack of proficiency in delivery techniques or other genuine reasons. The study will enable parents as well to find it easy to check the level of their children's academic prowess in English and make appropriate recommendations where necessary. The study would be of immense value to other researchers, who might be interested in one or the other issues arising from this study. Scholars with an interest in research in education, English, or linguistics would be happy to choose a topic from the list of research questions for future studies, while the methodology used for the study could serve as a guide to prospective researchers on a topic related to the current study.

Originality Value

Previous studies focused largely on the development of English language studies, with little concentration on learners' preferences in English language learning. This study, therefore, examined learners' preferences in English language learning among junior secondary school students in selected educational zones of Sokoto State. [10] carried out research on students' preferences in the English language using university students at the English language department in a Jordanian private university. This present study focuses on junior secondary students in Sokoto State, Nigeria. [7] assessed the learning styles of 517 adult ESL learners in Australia. Based on their responses to a 30-item questionnaire, with the aim of identifying how differences in cognitive learning styles affected learners' preferences in six

different areas, however, this present used purposive and simple random sampling techniques to select a total of 300 respondents from three educational zones in Sokoto State.

Conclusion

It was concluded in the study that there were preferences for English language learning among JSS students in Sokoto State. It was established that learners' preference for English language skills in JSS in the study area was caused by learners' memorization of lines and difficulty of grammar. It was also concluded that preferences in learning English language skills by students were harmonized to favour all aspects of English language skills in JSS in Sokoto State. Also, it was established that preference in the learning of English affects learners' performances. The conclusion was also made that listening skills were the most preferred skills.

Consent

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made:

1. Learners should be motivated extrinsically to increase their preferences for all the English Language skills.
2. In the aspect of speaking skills, teachers should be polite and systematic when making corrections. Thus, fluency should be encouraged first, then followed by accuracy since it is discovered that too much Correction reduces students' usage of English language.
3. In order to boost students' preference for literature in English, emphasis should be placed on paraphrasing and not verbatim production when students are asked to recollect what they absorbed in the literature lessons.
4. Learners need to be given clear and constant guidance on why they need to prefer all the language skills.

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