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AN INVESTIGATION ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GES 100 (COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS IN ENGLISH) IN THE UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT

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ABSTRACT

This study is an investigation on the effectiveness of GES100 (communication Skills in English) in terms of its delivery from the students' perspective in the University of Port Harcourt. GES100 is taken in one semester by all students in the first year on admission to strengthen gains from the secondary level in the core language areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, library studies and study skills to enhance their professional careers in the University. In this study, the researchers sort to examine students' perception on the effectiveness of the course on their academic life. At the end of our investigations, all the six areas of the course were found to meet students' needs except one – the speaking skills. Solutions were therefore proffered for remedial purposes with a view to achieving set goals.

Key words: Curriculum, communication, effectiveness and language skills

I. INTRODUCTION

Nations that use English as their Second Language, including Nigeria place high premium on communication skills in English in their tertiary institutions' curriculum. The rationale behind this curriculum inclusion, especially in the early stages of education is to expose students to communication skills needed for their entire professional training as well as social interaction within the fourwalls of the institutions and beyond. In the University of Port Harcourt, the course is offered by all students irrespective of their faculties in the first year of study and the curriculum include: listening skills, speaking skills, writing skills, and reading skill, in addition to study skills and library skills. But over the years, there is polemics regarding the effectiveness of the GES 100 course in terms of meeting its aims and objectives in the institution.

While some argue that the programme meets its objectives, others see great deficiencies in terms of the duration of the programme and gross paucity in infrastructural development in the general studies unit. In view of the foregoing, this study sets out to investigate students' perspective on the effectiveness of this University programme, with a view to consolidating the gains already recorded or to proffer needed solutions where necessary.

II. LITERATUREREVIEW

Perception is a multidisciplinary term which traverses literatures of such disciplines as psychology, philosophy, epistemology, language and literature, education and so on. Similarly, its research has been in recent publications of Schacter, D.(2011), Banerjee, J.C. (1994), Gray, P.O.(2006), and Noe, A. and Thompson, E.J.(2002)among others. These approaches are no doubt bias towards the respective disciplines, but Richards and Schmidt

(2012) made a notable entry into the definition of perception.

The above authors postulate that perception is the recognition and understanding of events, objects, and stimuli through the use of senses (sight, hearing, touch, etc.), (p.391). They distinguish three basic types of perceptions which include: visual perception, auditory perception and speech perception. Visual perception relates to all visual information and stimuli an individual receives. Auditory perceptions are those received through the ear and require the listener to detect the different kinds of acoustic signals. Speech perception however, is the comprehension or understanding in their variegated manifestations as produced by a speaker.

Sharma (2016) notes that perception is interpreting stimulus and with attention followed by sensation and finally interpretation by brain. He further says that perception involves an integrated approach of synthesis of different physiological processes in human beings. It is a process involving seeing, receiving, selecting, organizing and interpreting meaning in the environment. Agarwal (2009) notes that perception is a complex cognitive phenomenon, which differs from one person to another. He clearly differentiates sensation from perception in that the former means receiving stimulus through the sensory organs while the latter involves receiving raw data from the senses and then subjecting same to filtering, modification and transferring such data to the process of cognition.

Based on the insights from the views expressed, a learning process can be assessed or perceived as effective or not. Learning takes place only when the behaviour of the learner changes from what he was to what he is, then it can be seen and therefore said that he has learned. The course in communication skills in English in the University of Port Harcourt is designed to alter the expressive behaviours of student in listening, speaking, reading and writing, in addition to improving the study skills in the courses of their professional interests. These skills are examined one after the other.

Listening Skills

Listening skills, also known as listening comprehension involves the ability to understand

the meaning of words one hears and relating them to situations in one's life. In a second language situation, Richards and Schmidt (2012) note that the learning focus is on individual linguistic unit, namely phonemes, words and the various grammatical structures. According to them, also emphasized in language learning are the roles of learner's expectation, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic "(p 313). It is widely acknowledged that the possession of good listening skill enhances comprehensibility of linguistic materials, remembrance, and discussion of materials in their own words.

A good listener naturally becomes a versatile communicator in life because the skill enhances the learner to overcome the subtleties of reading complex language material as well as affording him the rich resources upon which he can draw all that is required of him to express his thoughts in life. In this way, listening skills form a pivot, in its right, for the evaluation of specific language programmes, (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) imbibed by the learner (Anyauwu, 2002).

Speaking Skills

Speaking skills refer to the ability of communicating effectively, using the vocal sound in conveying and expressing ideas and thoughts. Adequate knowledge of speaking ensures that one is not misunderstood by those listening. It is regarded as the act of generating linguistic structures that can be understood by listeners in clear and informative terms. Amir (2013) identifies three kinds of speaking situations. These are interactive, partial interactive and non-interactive situations. In each of these cases, speaking effectively, especially in L2 situation is a problem to many and developing the skills enhances communication.

Since speaking involves oral communication, knowledge of the components of oral communication in English is important. The components include 44 sound units, 20 vowels and 24 consonant sounds. Nutsukpo (2011) writes that accurate pronunciation of these sounds is the initial prerequisite for intelligent, intelligible and effective English speech. Apart from these sounds, knowledge of English syllable structure, stress, rhythm and intonation are essential for English speech sounds.

Research has shown a number of means which can enhance speaking skills in students and some of them include practice, fluency training, interaction with real audience, consideration of the audience and so on.

Reading Skills

In reading skills, we are referring to the skills which enable one to acquire meaning from print. The act of reading is a cognitive process of decoding symbols to elicit meaning from texts (Lopez, 2012). Lopez further notes that there are three components of reading which include, decoding, comprehension and retention. Decoding involves the process of translating a printed word into a sound; comprehension, the level of understanding of the message; and retention, the keeping of the message either in the short or long term memory. However, in the university, reading abilities go beyond the simple understanding and retention of reading materials but to critique, evaluate, compare and contrast, including their application to real life situations.

The University of Sydney, under the permission of the University of Melbourne (2010) has reproduced a HELPSHEET IA which basic strategies are outlined for developing reading skills. These include: purposeful reading, scanning, skimming, information words, phrase reading, analytical reading, marking text, note-taking, managing vocabulary, and reading with others. The above strategies are universally accepted and with other individual or personal strategies, efficient reading skills can be developed. Above all, time and individual efforts are common denominators for a successful and enjoyable reading space for any career.

Writing Skills

Writing skills constitute one of the significant skills a student needs in order to meet the intricacies of his career in the University. As an integration of processes and activities involving a variety of complex skills, a writer thinks out his thoughts, organizes them and manipulates his resources of language in grammar, vocabulary and meaning. But the problem of writing skills, especially among ESL students in the University is enormous.

Blackwell (2013) talks of ten ways to improve your writing skills quickly, just as Alo (1995) postulates that to acquire writing abilities a learner must gear efforts towards the mastering of skills.

Alo argues that the skills are practical and must be part of the conventions underlying the writing of composition in English. They include:

- a. Language skills- embracing vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure, and stylistic skills.
- b. Organizational skills- involving paragraph structures and cohesion.
- c. Mechanical Skills- involving punctuation, spelling, and so on.
- d. Collection and treatment of ideas.

Other Skills

Despite the four language skills necessary for students to acquire irrespective of their faculties, library skills and study skills form what are needed as an organic part of their academic life. The significance of the library entails that students learn and form the conventions of using the library. Such skills include: how to locate books, classification schemes and other library resources such as reference and information desk, and access to individual materials.

On the other hand, study skills, according to Nutsukpo (2011) is habit formed and developed into practical ability through conscious, deliberate and persistent effort. Those abilities in the learner consequently translate to become what is known as tools and methods, a way of doing things in an orderly manner. Study skills enable the student to manage the resource of time and its systematic organization against study loads in school. Throughout academic life, students who have acquired the skills of time management are successful in their academic pursuits, but those who lack such knowledge or deliberately refused to inculcate the habit, perform poorly in their academic pursuits.

III. METHODOLOGY

In this study, we adopted an empirical survey method where respondents were used to elicit answers to questions posed to them. The respondents to the question were the second year

students of the institution, all of whom had taken the course in their respective faculties. In all, nine (9) faculties were identified and fifty (50) students from each faculty were randomly selected, giving a total sampling population of four hundred and fifty (450). Structured question type was used and the

respondents chose from the following: (1) strongly agreed (SA),(2) Agreed (A), (3) neutral (N),(4) disagreed (D) and (5) strongly disagreed. A total number of 18 questions were administered from the core areas of the course.

IV. PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Question

S/N	DESCRIPTION	SA	A	N	D	SD	TOTAL
1	I am trained effectively in listening and comprehension skills.	84	230	42	82	12	450
2	Attentive listening enhances comprehension.	380	40	13	5	2	450
3	The ear is the most important organ in listening.	450	-	-	-	-	450
4	I can differentiate between cheap/sheep sounds.	52	50	20	302	16	450
5	Mary saw the man is/ae/sound.	38	111	172	92	27	450
6	Church is pronounced as /tʃ:ʃt/	55	90	230	50	25	450
7	The captain as well as the boy is here. Correct.	54	222	63	102	9	450
8	Maze, grease, haze, rage. All rhyme except one.	40	101	215	90	4	450
9	His granny has kicked the bucket. Dead	363	32	5	21	29	450
10	A letter has an introduction, the body and a conclusion.	402	29	3	8	8	450
11	The poor do not like their circumstance is noun phrase.	121	232	28	49	14	450
12	Vegetarians are few in the world. Meaning vegetable eaters.	310	63	33	20	38	450
13	Uniport uses the library of Congress Classification System.	406	11	21	9	3	450
14	The catalogue card helps me locate books in the library.	362	38	28	5	18	450
15	I cannot borrow a book at the reference collection area in the library.	215	202	10	14	8	450
16	Effective management of time and study loads is crucial for me as a student.	104	312	15	2	17	450
17	Human and material resources constitute study facilities in the university.	56	108	70	198	18	450
18	A good outline should capture the main ideas of a book or lecture.	98	210	23	105	14	450

SUMMARY

TOTAL R EACH GROUP – 1350	POSITIVE	NEUTRAL	NEGATIVE
1-3 Listening Skills	88%	4%	8%
4-6 Speaking Skills	29%	33%	38%
7-9 Reading Skills	60%	21%	19%
10-12 Writing Skills	86%	5%	9%
13-15 Library Skills	91%	5%	4%
16-18 Study Skills	66%	8%	26%

Based on the data above, it is easy to discern that students benefited from studies in library skills, listening skills and writing skills out of the six core areas. Top on the scale is the library skills resulting from students' awareness of the fact that the library is universally inevitable as a tool for a successful academic career. It exposes students to all forms of textual materials, such as text books, journals, periodicals, reference collections such as encyclopedia, government publications as well as audiovisual materials. Listening and writing skills also rank high as students strive for excellence in their career.

Next on the rung are study skills, reading skills and speaking skills respectively. Study skills subsume the necessary tools and methods by which studies are carried out successfully. It is the anchor point of a studious student. However, reading and speaking skills pose more challenges to the respondents apparently due to the traditional history of the Nation. Nigeria as an English second language nation, has a mirage of inherited problems in attaining proficiency in the use of English, especially spoken English. Some of the speaking problems include interference in the use of L₁ in L₂ which manifest at all levels of linguistics description. Also, some students are reticent and require professional teachers to improve their communicative and linguistic competence.

Reading skills rank second lowest and is the skill that engages the mind in critical thinking as it goes beyond the information on the pages of texts but to evaluation and application of same in practical terms. Some of the identified problems in effective reading at this level include: eye movement, vocalization and sub-vocalization, finger pointing and use of the dictionary. These however affect the effective mastering of reading skills in the early years.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study has revealed the fact that the curriculum of GES 100 (Communication Skills in English) as designed in the University of Port Harcourt is quite effective in achieving the set goals. The varying positive impact of the course which ranges from 91% result of the library skills to the 60% result of the reading skills attest to the

effectiveness, success and achievement of the objective of the curriculum.

The gap noted in one of the primary language skills, speaking skills, is understandable. This is abundantly because the language in question, English, is non-native to the learners; also the influence of their first languages at this level is still pervasive.

In the light of the gap, we therefore recommend that specific attention should be paid by the teachers in order to remedy the situation. To achieve this, language drills that are specifically orally-programmed should be improved upon. Again, more time should be allotted to exercises involving speaking skills, this will give both the teachers and the students enough time to practice and rehearse the oral or speaking skills exercise optimally.

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