

**EFFECT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING ON
GENDER-BASED PERFORMANCE OF SECONDARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ENGLISH VOWELS IN CROSS-
RIVER, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Communicative language teaching method entails a need-based communication by learners in the target language for attainment of communicative competence. With eighteen distinctive local languages in the study area, prevailing students' inability to articulate and discriminate among the English vowel sounds continue to distract them from making intelligible expression in English language. The study, a pre-test/post-test quasi-experimental design with an intact class of thirty-nine male and female secondary school students in Cross-River Northern Senatorial district, was carried out to ascertain the effect of the CLT procedure on students' performance in English vowels based on gender. The study adopted the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) items on English vowels as instrument to gather data. The collated data were analysed using mean score, standard deviation and t-test. The study found that communicative language teaching method improved both male and female students' performance in vowel sounds and that male recorded slightly higher performance at the post-test, which could not reach a significance level. The study, therefore, recommends amongst other things that teachers of English should be made to undergo continuous re-training to be conversant with CLT skills for improved students' understanding of vowel sounds; and that teachers and parents should encourage students to communicate in English beyond just the school environment to gain confidence in and familiarise with the vowel sounds.

Keywords: Articulation; Interference; Intelligibility; Practice; Mastery

Introduction

English language enjoys a pre-eminent position in Nigeria's educational, political, administrative, inter-personal, social and economic life; and it is a widely used global language. The language bridges the gap in inter-ethnic communication and a credit pass in English language is a prerequisite for admission into the country's tertiary institutions of learning. As the official language in Nigeria with wider international patronage, it is getting increasingly necessary for training towards enhancing global intelligibility in spoken English.

Egwuogu (2012) points to some shared similarities in the sounds of English language with a few indigenous languages in Nigeria, but Omoniyi (2009) avers that the phonological features of the different Nigerian languages contrast with those of English language. So, what most speakers of English do is the adaptation of the English phonological features to their local languages, which makes transition to the fluent use of the Received Pronunciation (RP) difficult. Therefore, a student who aspires to speak English proficiently at a globally intelligible level would have to be taught how to identify and pronounce the sounds accurately in verbal communication.

This study centres basically on effect of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) on secondary school students' performance in English vowels. Sánchez et al. (2019) attribute age, exposure, the amount of prior knowledge and instruction; aptitude, attitude and motivation as factors that affect the learning of English language pronunciation. Bolunde (2005) opines that the choice of appropriate method to teach English sounds can impact learners' achievement positively or otherwise. Likewise, Richards (2001) observes that if teaching is successfully carried out, learning will occur and that successful teaching axiomatically implies good method application. The general performance of students in English language sounds in secondary school is lamentable. Ajani (2007) submits that students' performance is worse when considering only the spoken English. It is common understanding that there is a great deviation amongst the Nigerian users of English especially in the spoken form from the Standard Spoken English to the extent that there is a creative manipulation of sounds of English to suit traditional expressions. This is quite worrisome as this could obfuscate communication.

Cross River State Northern Senatorial district consist of five local government areas of Obudu, Obanliku, Bekwarra, Ogoja and Yala. The district is inhabited by speakers of eighteen ethnic groups and other dialects. The district is located around latitude 6° 30N of the equator (Odey, 2019). As prevalent in a multilingual environment which is a replica of the larger Nigeria, students exhibit divergent levels of English language mastery and spoken ability in secondary school, which is usually unimpressive. The extent to which instructional strategy contributes to these different levels of mastery along gender lines has attracted little or no attention in the study area and that is the focus of this study.

Statement of the Problem

Secondary school students in Cross River North district found some vowel sounds of English quite difficult to master and articulate owing to the variations in those sounds and that in their various L1. Teachers of English language across the senatorial district have been dealing unsuccessfully with the students to remediate this inadequacy and make them users of intelligible English vowel sounds in verbal expression. Consequently, students' performance in oral English resulted consistently poorly; and their ability to speak English language intelligible beyond their immediate locality difficult owing to deep mother tongue rendering of, especially, the vowel sounds. This, invariably, has serious consequences on the students' overall knowledge, performance and usage of English language for communication and as the medium of instruction across the school subjects. This disturbing situation tends to lend credence to Al Abdely and Thai (2021), who find that English vowels are believed to be one of the difficult sounds to pronounce thereby leading to errors mostly inspired by interlingual and intralingual interference. As a practical move to make the English sounds mastery attainable for students in the study area, this study deployed the students-centred CLT method to facilitate the pure vowel sounds. This was done to determine the effect of the method on secondary students' performance in knowledge and usage of vowel sounds.

The outcomes of this research would be of immense benefits by opening up new vistas of vowel sounds knowledge for students, who find it difficult to genuinely understand and use the sounds. The study would provide rewarding awareness to teachers on how well the vowels of English can be taught to enhance students' performance and proficiency. Parents and school administrators would heave a sigh of relief with the outcome of the study as they stand to find improvement in the spoken English and general performance of students.

Review of Literature

English phonology is divided into segmental and suprasegmental phonemes which include vowels and consonant sounds; stress, rhythm and intonation. Uwadiogwu (2019) defines segmental phonemes as separable sounds which render one sound as different from the other.

This study deals specifically with English pure vowels, which are an aspect of segmental phonemes.

Lubis et al. (2023) acknowledge that English vowels play a significant role in communication, language and learning. There is extensive research on the acoustic, articulatory and phonemic properties of English vowel sounds (Ladefoged & Johnson, 2020).

However, not much research is visible on the extent to which these properties are realized on gender grounds. Scholars (Bansal & Harrison, 2009; Senam & Senam, 2017) separately state that vowel sounds are articulated without a complete mouth closure with speech sounds produced without audible obstruction of the airstream from the lungs unlike consonant sounds which are produced with total or partial obstruction of the air. Vowels are the frictionless sounds of the vocal cavity.

Sharma (2019) states that English vowel sounds can be classified broadly into two types: monophthongs and diphthongs. There are 12 pure vowels (monophthongs) and 8 glides (diphthongs). According to Ramlan (2001), pure vowels are produced with the organs of speech remaining in a given position for an appreciable period of time. Kelly (2000) states that the word “pure” is used to differentiate single vowel sounds from diphthongs. They are produced with a single sound quality without glide. Pure English vowel sounds can be delineated by the length during articulation as: long (/ɪ:/, /a:/, /ɔ:/, /u:/, /ɜ:/) and short (/i/, /e/, /æ/, /ɔ/, /u/, /ʌ/, /ə/) (Jones, 2006).

It is instructive to note that students learning English as a second language often transfer the phonemic features of their first language (L1) into English language. The practice is warranted by the lack of a one-to-one correspondence between English sounds and its graphemes (Jones, 2012). So, sound distortion occurs as learners make effort to pronounce sounds that are non-existent in their L1 or similar to it. Several studies have highlighted the dynamic nature of English vowels and the impact of socio-cultural factors on the perception and production of vowels (Lubis et al., 2023). Sánchez et al (2019) assert that the acquisition of the sounds of a second language is a complex process that requires learners not only to integrate the new linguistic features of the second language to their mother tongue, but also to prove that knowledge through the correct perception and articulation of the sounds.

Undoubtedly, sound articulation is a fundamental aspect of communication as any improper sound articulation leads to meaning distortion. Senam and Ukut (2010) submit that language is conceived primarily as spoken because writing and reading skills are secondary skills. That submission underscores the importance of effective oracy skill as language proficiency starts from oral correctness. Every speaker of a language requires good pronunciation skill. Akeredalu-Ale (2005) observes the appalling situation of spoken English in Nigeria, while Ofulue (2007) posits that correct pronunciation skill is an essential tool for intelligibility in a second language context. They add the need for a renewed practice on effective oral communication skill as a major requirement in the workplace, regardless of discipline, good speaking requires good pronunciation.

Communicative competence was coined by Hymes (1972) who was convinced that Chomsky's (1965) notion of competence was limited. Hymes (1972) proposes a broader notion of language competences such as discourse competence, strategic competence and sociolinguistic competence. Thus, the goal of CLT is to make learners communicatively competent by focusing on the teaching of language through activities and strategies that would promote communication by the learners. It is a set of core principles about language learning and assumptions, which can be applied in varying ways to address structures of language teaching and learning (Richard, 2006; Ushie & Basake, 2021).

CLT shifts emphasis from linguistic competence to communicative competence. Otagburuagu (1997) describes competence as the mastery a speaker needs to communicate effectively in a culturally significant setting. Communicative competence includes knowing how to use a language for various purposes and functions and knowing how to vary the use of language according to setting and participants.

In CLT, attempt is made to give learners of English as a Second Language the natural setting to master communicative activities so as to try to understand the message produced by other speakers and to produce their own ideas and meaning (Amusegham, 2018). Hymes (1972) argues earlier that the goal of language learning is communicative competence. CLT emphasizes that language learning should be based on practical language needs, context, and not in sounds, words and innovative instructional strategies. hypothetical language use in the classroom arrangement.

Richards (2006) states that while grammatical competence was needed to produce grammatically correct sentences, attention shifted to the knowledge and skills needed to use grammar and other aspects of language appropriately for different communicative needs in CLT without leaving out grammar. Mida et. al (2025) posit that mastery of the appropriate sounds of English is fundamental for ESL mastery and users should be assisted to be good models in this regard through constant practice in sounds, words and innovative instructional strategies.

Iliyas (2019) points to the principles of CLT as including the use of the target language for general communication, the teacher stimulates situation that promotes communication, use of authentic language that promotes all the language skills and students working with language at discourse level. Others are encouraging cooperative use of the target language amongst learners and tolerating errors as manifestation of development of communication competence. Richard (2006) identifies strategies in CLT as including fluency/accuracy tasks, information-gap activities, jig-saw activities, task-completion activities, information-gathering activities, opinion-sharing activities, information-transfer activities, reasoning-gap activities and role plays.

The theoretical foundation of this study was the social learning theory (Bandura, 1994), which views learning as from knowledge of schema (previous experience), vicarious learning (influenced by what others are better at that do influence learning), social inspiration (like advice), and inferences informed by emotions (Iliyas et al, 2017). Bandura (1986) posits that the difficulties students tend to have in learning are derived from their pessimism about learning, which are erroneous. That the impression of 'I cannot learn it' is an untested hindrance to learning and in this case, the vowel sounds of English language. Bandura's (1994) Social learning theory is anchored on modeling including both physical and online amongst compatriots.

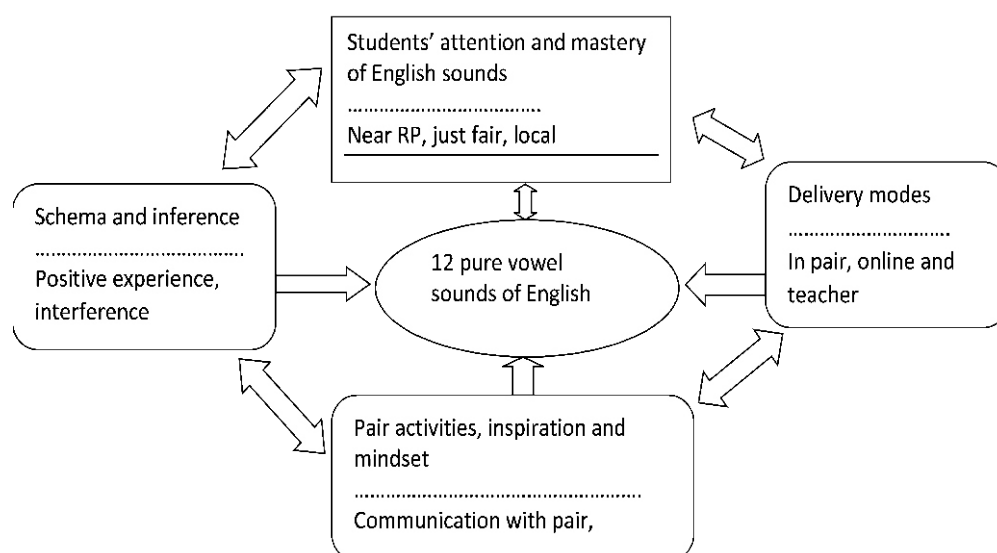


Figure 1- Source: Researcher's (2026) Design

Figure 1 focuses on how the mastery of English sounds was the objective of the class with learners' different entry points. The students carried into the class L1 features with their different influence on learning English vowel sounds in the different instructional delivery modes constantly mitigated by activities that included pair activities, vicarious influence and mindset.

This study examined the effect CLT on the mean performance of students in English vowel sounds with specific reference to gender-based impact of CLT on the mean performance of secondary school students in Cross River Northern Senatorial district, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study answered the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference in the general mean performance of secondary school students in English vowel sounds based on the use of CLT or the conventional approach in Northern Senatorial district of Cross River state?

2. What difference exist in the mean gain score of male and female students taught English vowel sounds using CLT in Cross River Northern Senatorial district?

Hypotheses

The research tested the following hypotheses:

- H01:** There is no significant difference in the mean performance of secondary school students in English vowel sounds based on approach (CLT approach or the conventional approach) in Northern Senatorial district of Cross River.
- H02:** There is no significant difference in the mean gain score of male and female students taught English vowel sounds using CLT in Cross River Northern Senatorial district, Nigeria.

Methodology

The study used a non-randomized pre-test and post-test quasi-experimental research design. The population of the study consists of all the senior secondary school students in Cross River Northern Senatorial district comprising Obudu, Obanliku, Bekwarra, Ogoja and Yala Local Government Areas. An intact class with one secondary school from one Local Government Area in Cross River North was selected through simple random sampling for the study. The instrument titled Communicative Language Teaching Test of English Vowels Performance Test (CLTEVPT) adopted from 2021-2023 past questions of West African Examination Council (WAEC) was administered in a pre-test and post treatment test with the items number shuffled for participants to respond to for data collection. Participants were taught vowel sounds using CLT method as treatment. The duration of the study was eight weeks: week one for pre-test, week two to six for treatment and the eight week for post-test. Being standardized items, the study relied on the validity and reliability already established by WAEC, which conducts the final High School equivalent secondary school examinations and issues certificate on completion of Secondary school education in English speaking countries of West Africa (Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia and Sierra Leone). The data obtained from the tests were analysed using mean score, standard deviation and t-test statistics with a significance index at 0.05.

Results

Testing of Hypotheses

The research questions are answered adequately in the corresponding hypotheses tested and the outcomes presented thus:

- H01:** There is no significant difference in the mean performance of secondary school students taught English vowel sounds with CLT and those taught with conventional method in Northern Senatorial district of Cross River State.

Table 1: Result of t-Test Analysis on the Difference in the General Mean Performance of Experimental and Control Group Students in English Vowel Sounds

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	Df	Sig(2-tailed)	Decision
Experimental	39	9.872	2.6943	3.392	67	.001	Rejected
Control	30	7.850	2.2520				

P-Value of $0.001 < 0.05$

The analysis shown in Table 1 shows the value of 0.001 as less than the 0.05 significant level. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected, which means, there was a significant difference in the general mean performance of students taught English vowel sounds using the communicative teaching method and their counterparts taught using the conventional method.

H₀₂: There is no significant difference in the mean performance of male and female students taught English vowel sounds using CLT method in Cross River Northern Senatorial District.

Table 2: Result of t-Test Analysis on the Difference between Male and Female Students Mean Scores after being Taught English Vowels Using Communicative Language Teaching method.

Test	N	Mean	SD	t-value	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Decision
Male	12	9.167	2.0263	-1.058	37	.297	Accepted
Female	27	10.148	2.9050				

P-Value of $0.297 > 0.05$

The result in Table 2 shows a significant value of 0.297, which is more than the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis is accepted, which means, there is no significant difference in the mean performance of male and female students taught English vowel sounds using Communicative Language Teaching method. The outcome of the hypothesis testing could have resulted because both the male and female students have similar background and the treatment period has not become prolonged to become the regular teaching method to enable attainment of significant difference in performance.

Discussion of Findings

In a study similar to this study, Khaghaninejad and Maleki (2015) examined the effect of two methods of instructing English words' pronunciations on Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension in a quasi-experimental research design and the results of the analysis revealed instruction on suprasegmentals which shares some features with the CLT method had more profound effect on the performance of students than those in the control group. Other researches (Ushie & Basake, 2021; Fitriyani, 2020; Yanti, 2020; Banjarnahor (2019); Orlando, et al. 2019; Toro, et al. 2018; & Ratih 2017) separately found that communicative language teaching method significantly enhanced students' pronunciation of speech sounds more than the conventional method. Finding that students exposed to CLT method record significant difference in their performance compared to those exposed to the conventional instruction could be attributed to the increased students' engagement in the CLT instructional process among students in the experimental group. Impliedly, when students are actively engaged in the instructional process as found in CLT method, there will be improved performance.

The outcome of the also reveal that the use of CLT significantly improves students' general performance in English vowel sounds even though there are varying degrees of improvement when considered on the basis of gender. Interestingly, the finding is consistent with those of Yede (2020), for instance, who investigated the effect of CLT on communicative performance of secondary school students in Lagos state, Nigeria and her study found the traditional method could not promote adequate communicative competence expected of the learners of English as a Second Language at the secondary school level. The performance of the control group in the post-tests is low as compared to the experimental group. A similar finding was made in a study on the effect of pronunciation awareness training on listening comprehension skill of tertiary level English as Foreign Language (EFL) students (Ak, 2012). The study found that both the experimental and the control groups performed at a statistically significant level by the end of the 6-week period but the fact that the experimental group performed at a significantly higher level implies that the pronunciation awareness training was more effective in developing listening comprehension skills than their regular English classes. Though the female students performed a bit better than their male counterparts, it was not significant for note. Outcome of this study of no significant difference in the mean performance of male and female students taught English vowel sounds offers a contrast to Adeniyi's (2017), where most of the students (78= 65.0%) committed segmental errors and a significant difference exist between students' pronunciation errors based on teacher's gender; while students' gender, school type, parents' educational qualification and school location had no significant difference.

The finding may be a manifestation of the common L1 orientation shared by the students and the common vowel sounds classroom to which all the students are exposed.

Conclusion

The study concludes that CLT method is effective for improving students' performance in English vowels. The method is considered of immense benefit and effective for its somewhat immersive tendencies that gives students ample opportunities to always use the target language in authentic form. This opportunity makes it possible for the students to encounter the sounds in common live communication and not simulated situations. The method practically underscores the fact that genuine language learning is one that stimulates needs-driven regular communication in the vowel sounds of the language and not by rote learning. It is, therefore, safe to conclude that CLT method has profound effect on the performance of students irrespective of their gender.

Recommendations

- i. Teachers of English sounds should familiarise themselves with the strategies of CLT as part of deliberate efforts at improving their teaching ESL and enhancing students' mastery of the vowel sounds.
- ii. Cross River State Government and other school proprietors should fund and facilitate continuous retraining of English language teachers. This practice would get the teachers updated on more students involving vowel sounds teaching strategy.
- iii. It would be immensely helpful to students when teachers and parents encourage the use of English language as medium of communication beyond the school environment. This would boost confidence and familiarise students in the study area to vowel sounds; and prepare them for higher learning and the global world of work.

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