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NIGERIAN POLYTECHNIC STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THE VOCATIONAL BENEFITS OF THE *USE OF ENGLISH* CURRICULUM

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Abstract
The focus of polytechnic education is on the development of *appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies. The objective of teaching*Use of English (UoE) should, therefore, be primarily to develop students' language skills so that they could practice the skills for self-reliance as advocated in the National Policy on Education. Given the dynamics of skill acquisition, this study was conducted to investigate the perception of the students on the vocational benefits they derived from the UoE curriculum. Two hundred students were randomly selected from ND and HND levels in private-, state- and federal-owned polytechnics. The UoE Vocational Benefits Questionnaire (UoE-VBQ) was designedby theresearchers**.** Results showed that students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education is very high (Mean=2.63) and students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum content is high (Mean=2.09). However, students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum; students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum implementation process; and students' assessment rating of the skill acquisition end-product of the UoE curriculum are all low with mean values of 1.63; 1.80; and 1.62 respectively. The Pearson Correlation coefficient (r = -.039) shows a negative correlation between students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education and students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum; while the t.test reveals significant differences based on school type (7.115, p>.05) and course of study (11.664, p>.05) while gender (-1.418, p<.05) and program (.565, p<.05) are not significant. The paper concluded that though the content of the UoE curriculum is adjudged to be relevant and sufficient to meet the needs of the students wanting to study it for self-reliance, the low value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum; curriculum implementation process; and skill acquisition end-product implied that from their experience, the students did not feel that they have achieved that objective of self-reliance through the study of UoE. The paper recommended that to satisfy the yearnings of the polytechnic students, provisions should be made for skillful personnel and relevant instructional materials/equipment in the teaching of UoE for the vocational and self-reliance benefits of the students.
Keywords: Curriculum implementation strategy; vocational training; language skills; self-reliance

Introduction

The etymology of the word 'polytechnic' shows that it is loaned from French and its origin is from the Greek word *polutekhnos which means 'multi-skilled' (Microsoft Encarta). A graduate of a polytechnic is therefore expected to possess more skills than one. Among the polytechnic objectives listed by Ale (2004) is 'to give training and imparting necessary skills for the production of technicians and other skilled personnel who shall be enterprising and self-reliant'. It becomes imperative therefore for every graduate of the polytechnic to learn other skill(s) apart from his course of study if he is to be self-reliant after graduation. This is the reason for the inclusion of the Use of English (UoE) in the General Studies Department.*

The National Board for Technical Education (1999) is clear about the goals of the UoE course at various levels of polytechnic education. It is variously put as: 'to provide the student with the necessary language skills…'(p.4); 'to consolidate the student's competence in the use of English

(p.10); and 'to further improve the student's level of proficiency and competence in language use' (p.15). Apart from the teaching of the rudiments of grammar, specific language skills all of which have vocational significance are listed to be taught – story writing (storytelling), drama (playwriting); registers (varieties of language use), poetry (poetic composition); and oral composition (broadcasting).

If we are guided by the objectives of polytechnic education, we must agree that there is more to the teaching of UoE in the polytechnic than passing an examination. The course is not an end in itself but a means to an end - which is to develop in the students the ability to acquire language arts skills. The focus of technical education is on the application of knowledge so, at the polytechnic level, the focus is on the development of *appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies. Therefore, the objective of teaching*UoE should be primarily to develop students' language skills so that they could through the practice of the skills attain the objective of self-realization advocated in the National Policy on Education.

Importance of Language Skills Acquisition

There is no gainsaying the importance of skill acquisition to individual and national development. Skill acquisition, according to Uzochukwu (2017), is the ability to be trained on a particular task or function and become an expert in it. To him, skill is like a key used in opening the door of fortune. As water is very essential to human life so is a skill needed in the life of every serious-minded human being. Skills can do a lot of great work in the life of every living soul. Lack of skills is a major cause of corruption. The importance of skill acquisition includes self-employment, diverse job opportunities, employment generation, effective function, and crime reduction. He believes that the reason why many technicians earn more than some university graduates is that the technicians acquire more skills than the theories the graduates were fed with when they were in universities.

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UoE *is taught* at all levels in polytechnic education and all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – are taught apart from the grammar component. In recognition of the vocational significance, different skills are taught at different levels – prose writing and drama at the first and second levels of the national diploma stage respectively. At the two higher diploma levels students are respectively taught the skills of poetry and oral composition. Others are registers (varieties of language use), public speaking, small group (leadership), and dyadic communications (interviews). The implication is that after their national diploma course, polytechnic students are expected to have picked considerable interest and skill in story-telling/writing and playwriting/acting. Students who pass through the higher diploma training should be able to diversify to poetic composition, oral delivery skills, and public speaking on diverse channels, among others.

It goes without saying that for the students to benefit maximally in the acquisition of vocational language skills via the UoE course the practical dimension of the teaching must be emphatically, adequately, and expertly handled. This is where the shortcomings of the lecture method become glaring. Despite the advantages of the lecture method, Farooq (2012) explains that learning is an

active process thus students should be encouraged to actively participate in the classroom instead of just listening to the teacher. This is especially necessary when the learning content is more practical than theoretical. The current practice of teaching the UoE in the polytechnic does not give much premium to the practical aspect. One popular topic is Registers - which requires students to be taught the varieties of language use. The objective of teaching this topic should be for the students to attain a measure of proficiency in at least one or two of the identified varieties. A student should, for instance, be able to produce in the form of a project, an advertisement of a product, a jingle, a commentary on live events, or a poetic or dramatic composition. The only way this is possible is for students to undergo hands-on training under a specialist.

Dynamics of Skill Acquisition

In the acquisition of skills, Fitts and Posner (1967) recognize three stages: cognitive (or understanding) stage, associative (or practice) stage, and autonomous (or automatic) stage. The Associative stage in comparison with the cognitive stage is quite long. In this stage, the fundamentals and mechanics of the skill are learned and put into practice more consistently and with fewer errors because the student has developed the ability to detect and correct errors. At the autonomous stage, the skill becomes habitual or automatic. In this stage, there is good consistency of performance. Skill is performed without thinking and students can give more selective attention to higher-order cognitive activities and can detect and adjust errors and disguise actions. This develops self-confidence and risk-taking in performance situations. For a student to attain this level of automaticity in skill performance there is a need for specialized handling and practical modeling and tutoring which give a tremendous boost to the triple factors of students' motivation, interest, and attitude. Learning is a tedious activity that requires proper motivation to achieve. Motivation, according to Omrod (2014), is something that energizes, directs, and sustains behavior; it gets students moving, points them in a particular direction, and keeps them going. He observes that we often see students' motivation reflected in personal investment and cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement in school activities. In his write-up on '*How Motivation Affects Learning and Behavior*', he made the following points:

- *Motivation directs behavior toward particular goals*: Motivation determines the specific goals toward which learners strive; whether to spend an evening completing a challenging homework assignment or playing with friends.
- *Motivation leads to increased effort and energy.* Motivation increases the amount of effort and energy that learners expend in activities directly related to their needs and goals. It determines whether they pursue a task enthusiastically and wholeheartedly or apathetically and lackadaisically.
- *Motivation increases initiation of and persistence in activities.* Learners are more likely to begin a task they *want to do*. They are also more likely to continue working at it until they've completed it, even if they are occasionally interrupted or frustrated in the process.
- *Motivation affects cognitive processes.* Motivation affects what learners pay attention to and how effectively they process it. For instance, motivated learners often make a concerted effort to truly understand classroom material - to learn it meaningfully - and consider how they might use it in their own lives.
- *Motivation determines which consequences are reinforcing and punishing.* The more learners are motivated to achieve academic success, the more they will be proud of an A and upset by a low grade. The more learners want to be accepted and respected by peers, the more they will value membership in the “in” group and be distressed by the ridicule of classmates.

- *Motivation often enhances performance.* Because of the other effects just identified—goal-directed behavior, effort and energy, initiation and persistence, cognitive processing, and the impact of consequences—motivation often leads to improved performance.

In his contribution to 'What Keeps Students Motivated to Learn', Schwartz (2014) harps among others on making it hands-on. The implication of this is that lecturers should not just lecture but also get the students 'to do the work being told about it' sometimes in a way that requires collaboration. She also advises making the activities interest-based and relevant because she believes students like to know why they are learning something and they want to access that information through a lens that interests them. If teachers give broad guidelines for the project and then have students do something they are interested in it will bring students along the whole time. She advises that "If you let them know, and use real-life problems, it will help them understand it and they will feel like it's worth doing".

Two other factors linked to students' motivation from the above are interest and values. Matthews (2001) opines that values are seen as antecedents of behavior. Values have a direct influence on learning behavior. When a student places high importance or value on a subject he is most likely going to develop a keen interest in it and invest much time and effort in it. Such students according to him study to learn and are motivated to go beyond the basic requirements for passing. Their learning involves a problem-solving approach and their interest carries them beyond a superficial understanding of what they are studying. These students are actively involved in the learning process and the process involves meta-cognitive activities that narrow any gaps in knowledge acquisition. In his study carried out to investigate the relationships between values and approaches to study, Matthews (2001) reports that the group that measured high on the values scale used a deep approach described by Marton and Säljö (2006) in terms of *phenomenographic* understanding - a deep process that precipitates a broad involvement in the learning process itself. Education through deep learning involves conceptual change that goes beyond the basic acquisition of information.

Whatever approach is undertaken, it is what the student does that is important. The teacher is only a facilitator, a person who enables learning activities and assists students to achieve desired outcomes (Biggs, 1999). This study is an attempt to actualize the *phenomenographic* involvement of polytechnic students in the learning of *Use of English* having appreciated its value as a vocational avenue for self-fulfillment apart from their core course of study. If this is done, the students will not mind immersing themselves in the practical activities that lead to the acquisition of language skills.

One other way to do this, according to Matthews (2001), is to awaken the interest of the students in the course. Paul(2013) defines interest as a psychological state of engagement, experienced in the moment, and also a predisposition to engage repeatedly with particular ideas, events, or objects over time. He reports that interest can help us think more clearly, understand more deeply, and remember more accurately and has the power to transform struggling performers and lift high achievers to a new plane. He explains further that:

> Interest is at once a cognitive state and an affective state; what Silvia calls a "knowledge emotion." The feelings that characterize interest are overwhelmingly positive: a sense of being energized and invigorated, captivated and enthralled. As

> for its effects on cognition: interest effectively turbo-charges our thinking. When we're interested in what we're learning, we pay closer attention; we process the information more efficiently; we employ more effective learning strategies, such as engaging in critical thinking, making connections between old and new knowledge, and attending to deep structure instead of surface features. When we're interested in a task, we work harder and persist longer, bringing more of our self-regulatory skills into play.

In his discussion on how to arouse and keep students' interest alive, Paul (2013) reports that Harackiewicz (2010) and other researchers have found more success when they encourage students to generate their connections and discover for themselves the relevance of academic subject matter to their lives. This he calls a "value intervention," because it helps students see the value of what they are learning. When students see the value of what they are being taught for their life their interest will not only be aroused it will be sustained.

When students' interest is aroused and sustained, it is most probable that their attitude will be positively affected. Writing on *Student Attitudes about Learning*, Weimer (2009) warns that it is important for us to remember that what students believe about learning and themselves as learners plays a key role in determining their success as learners. According to him, research evidence has shown that if a student believes that no matter what they do, they won't succeed in a course, even being in a course with a highly-rated effective teacher does not change the effects of those beliefs. She advises that because their beliefs matter so much, we must show students that their efforts do make a difference and explain why we propose they use certain strategies.

Demonstration of Learning in Language Arts

Fawkes (2015) underscores the importance of theoretical and practical learning when he quotes Benjamin Franklin *"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn." to* strengthen the idea that theory and the practical application of theory are equally important. This is why specialists are advocating for the practice of demonstration of learningwhich refers to a wide variety of potential educational projects, presentations, or products through which students "demonstrate" what they have learned, usually as a way of determining whether and to what degree they have achieved expected learning standards or learning objectives for a course or learning experience.

Hidden Curriculum (2014) explains that in contrast to worksheets, quizzes, tests, and other more traditional approaches to assessment, a demonstration of learning may take a wide variety of forms in schools:

- Oral presentations, speeches, or spoken-word poems
- Video documentaries, multimedia presentations, audio recordings, or podcasts
- Works of art, illustration, music, drama, dance, or performance
- Print or online publications, including websites or blogs
- Essays, poems, short stories, or plays
- Galleries of print or digital photography
- Scientific experiments, studies, and reports
- Physical products such as models, sculptures, dioramas, musical instruments, or robots
- Portfolios of work samples and academic accomplishments that students collect over time
- Presentations or slideshows that provide a summary of the skills and knowledge students have learned

In his memorandum titled Proposal for Vocational Training in Use of English (language arts skills)submitted to the College Management towards the establishment of Entrepreneurship Centre, the following areas, Olajide (2015) identified the following:

I. Writing
   a. Script writing – stories – prose, play, or poetry for sale or performance
   b. Printing and Publishing
   c. Bookbinding

II. Reading
   a. Freelance broadcasting – News-casting, Reporting
   b. Radio/T.V. program presentation – stories, social diary/comments, business promotion, etc

III. Speaking/Singing
   a. Master of Ceremonies – Alaga
   b. Stand-up Comedy
   c. Sports Commentary
   d. Cultural songs – ijala, Iremoje, Ewi, Esa, Oriki Orile
   e. Choral performance
   f. Voice Training – Mimicry
   g. Advertising /Jingles Production

IV. Musical Instruments
   a. All types of drums – drum set, gangan, iya-ilu, omele, bata, agogo, sekere, akuba, maracas
   b. Modern instruments – guitar, trumpet, saxophone, flute, accordion, violin, keyboard, etc
   c. Costuming

V. Movements
   a. Cultural Dance
   b. Choreography
   c. Acting - Solo, Duet, and Group performances
   d. Music - Solo, Duet, Group performances

VI. Listening
   a. Hearing incapacitation
   b. Inconsistent feedback

Objectives of the Study

Perception is defined as an **impression,** attitude, or understanding based on what is observed or thought (Microsoft Encarta, 2009). *In his paper on Fostering Positive Attitudes and Perceptions about Classroom Tasks*, *Marzano(1992)explains that* proficient learners believe that the tasks they are asked to perform have value, that they have a fairly clear understanding of what the tasks require, and that they have the resources necessary to complete the tasks. He harps on the importance of task value, observing that the perceived value of tasks is probably the most important to the learner's success and that learners are most motivated when they believe the tasks they are involved in are relevant to their personal goals. He advises that to develop students' positive attitudes and perceptions about learning the teacher should first *help students to perceive classroom tasks as valuable a*nd then h*elp them to be clear about classroom tasks by d*escribing how each task might look when completed or presenting models of completed tasks will help students understand what they are trying to achieve. This is the focus of his study. How much of the values of the UoE curriculum are known to the students and how high is their perception of the vocational benefits of the course?

Research Questions

The following seven questions are answered in the study:

i. What is the students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education?
ii. What is the students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum?
iii. What is the student's assessment rating of the UoE curriculum content?
iv. What is the student's assessment rating of the UoE curriculum implementation process?
v. What is the student's assessment rating of the skill acquisition end-product of the UoE curriculum?
vi. What is the relationship between students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education and their value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum?
vii. Is there any significant difference in students' perception of the vocational benefits of UoEcurriculum based on the school ownership, student's gender, course of study, and programme?

Method

Design

The study is ex post facto in nature. The variables already existed and nothing was done to manipulate the students' perceptions. It was merely captured through the instrument of a questionnaire constructed for the purpose.

Study Population, Sampling Procedure, and Sample

Polytechnic students in Nigeria constituted the study population. The samples were drawn purposively from 2 states in the southwest region giving, consideration to the proximity to researchers. Institutions were selected based on ownership – state, federal, and private. ND2 and HND2 students were selected for the study after they must have passed through 2 or 4 years of instructional processes in UoE respectively. In all, 600 study samples were selected from 6 institutions.

Instrument

UoE Vocational Benefits Questionnaire (UoE-VBQ) was constructed by the researchers. It contained 30 items in 5 sections. Respondents were requested to rate their perception of the various indices UoE curriculum, including the content, implementation, and product. Their entry-level awareness of the polytechnic education benefits and vocational content of the UoE curriculum were also included. Researchers relied on their years of experience as lecturers and the competence of the lead researcher to vouch for the validity of the instrument. The split-half reliability test yielded a coefficient of .83.

Procedure

Researchers visited the institutions, spoke with the Heads of relevant Departments, and met with the lecturers of the courses at the two levels. The course lecturers served as research assistants as they helped in the distribution and retrieval of the questionnaires. This made it possible to collect every copy of the questionnaires distributed.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The respondents were required to rate their perception of each questionnaire item on a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Partially Agree, and Disagree. The responses were given the values of 3, 2, 1, and 0 respectively. The values were reversed in items that had negative orientation. The mean values of each item, section, and whole study were calculated and interpreted as follows: 2.6-3.0 (Very High); 2.0-2.5 (High); 1.0-1.9 (Low); 0.0-0.9 (Very Low). The t. test was conducted to determine the significance of differences recorded in the responses of students by class levels (ND, HND) and school ownership (State, Federal, Private).

Table 1: Students' Awareness, Values, and Assessment Rating

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education	200	2.63	.52390	0.00	3.00
Students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum	200	1.63	.77938	0.00	3.00
Students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum content	200	2.09	.86350	0.00	3.00
Students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum implementation process	200	1.80	1.07652	0.00	3.00
Students' assessment rating of the skill acquisition end-product of the UoE curriculum	200	1.62	.77930	0.00	3.00

In answer to the first five research questions, Table 1 shows that students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education is very high (Mean=2.63) and students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum content is high (Mean=2.09). However, students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum; students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum implementation process; and students' assessment rating of the skill acquisition end-product of the UoE curriculum are all low with mean values of 1.63; 1.80; and 1.62 respectively.

Table 2: Correlation Co-efficient

Variable	N	Sig(2-tailed)	Corr. Co-eff.
Students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education Students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum	200	.585	-.039

To answer Research Question 6, the Pearson Correlation result in Table 2 shows that there is a negative correlation between students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education and students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum with a coefficient of -.039

Table 3: One-Sample t.test

	N	Mean	S.D.	S.E.M	t.	df	Sig. (2tailed)	Mean Diff	95% Confidence Interval of Diff. Lower	Upper
School type	200	1.89	.775	.054	7.115	199	.000	.390	.2819	.4981
Gender	200	1.45	..498	.035	-1.418	199	.158	-.050	-.1195	.0195
Program	200	1.52	..500	.035	.565	199	.573	.020	-.0498	0898
Course of study	200	2.43	1.127	.079	11.664	199	.000	.930	.7728	1.0872

Table 3 shows that the variables School Type (7.115) and Course of Study (11.664) are significant at a significance level of p< 05 while the variables Gender (-1.418) and Program (.565) are not significant at this level of significance. This provides the answer to Research Question Seven.

Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Very high students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education and their high assessment rating of the UoE curriculum content is confirmed by their mostly strong agreement with statements that say that the polytechnic is an institution where students learn vocational skills and after polytechnic education, it is expected that graduates ought not to be a white-collar job seeker. They also agreed with statements that say the UoE curriculum contains many very useful language skills students can learn and benefit from and the UoE programme teaches us to use English for specific purposes. This confirms the UoE curriculum indeed captured the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE's) (1999) goals of the *UoE* course at various levels of polytechnic education, variously put as: 'to provide the student with the necessary language skills…'(p.4); 'to consolidate the student's competence in the use of English (p.10); and 'to further improve the student's level of proficiency and competence in language use' (p.15). From this finding, it can be concluded that the present content of the UoE curriculum is relevant and sufficient to meet the needs of the students wanting to study it for self-reliance.

The low value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum; students' assessment rating of the UoE curriculum implementation process; and students' assessment rating of the skill acquisition end-product of the UoE curriculum implied that from their experience, even though they believed that the UoE curriculum content is adequate for students' self-reliance, they did not feel that they have achieved that objective. This fact is laid bare in their strong agreement with the statement that says: Apart from boosting the student's GPA, UoE has no vocational value. They strongly disagreed that In the UoE classes, students are made to perform language skills individually or in groups; and students are made to submit individual/group projects. These responses are mostly prompted by the shortcomings in the curriculum implementation which is anything but practical. A properly implemented UoE curriculum, according to Olajide (2010) is practical and requires the students to submit a project at the end of the course as it is done in other courses.

The negative correlation between students' entry-level awareness of the vocational benefits of polytechnic education and students' value rating of the UoE as a vocational curriculum reinforced the students' disillusionment when it comes to the implementation of the UoE curriculum. Students who had come to the polytechnic with the expectation and hope of gaining mastery in the practice of language skills soon discovered that they were being taught again what they had learned in secondary school. Most of them agreed with the statement that in UoE, polytechnic students are taught again what they had learned in secondary school. This experience is what led to their ambivalent attitude to the study of UoE as reported by Olajide, Olajide, Fadare, & Adedeji (2014)

The significant difference noticed in students' perception of the vocational benefits of UoE *c*urriculum based on School Type and Course of Study underscored the wide disparity that exists in the qualities of institutions based on ownership. When compared, federal institutions are better funded and equipped than state and private institutions so the expectation of a better handling of the UoE curriculum implementation is not misplaced. What to glean from here is that even though it could be said that some institutions are better funded and equipped, it does not show in the quality of instruction in UoE. This may not be far from the truth because when the chips are down, it is the competence of the lecturers in the language skills that will produce the required impact on student's achievement. Good equipment requires skillful instructors to produce maximum impact. This is why Olajide (2019) advocated for collaboration with language arts practitioners in the teaching of UoE. A recent study by Olajide, Olatipe, & Adedeji (2023) confirmed that UoE lecturers in polytechnicsadmitted that they cannot alone teach some vocational language skills but need the assistance of a practicing professional in the fields.

That Students' Gender and Program make no significant difference in the student's perception of the vocational benefits of UoE *c*urriculum attests to the fact that both male and female students have high expectations from the study of UoE and that the course has very rich content at both the ND and

HND levels. As stated earlier in this paper, *UoE is taught* at all levels in polytechnic education and all four language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – are taught apart from the grammar component. In recognition of the vocational significance, different skills are taught at different levels – prose writing and drama at the first and second levels of the national diploma stage respectively. At the two higher diploma levels students are respectively taught the skills of poetry and oral composition. Others are registers (varieties of language use), public speaking, small group (leadership), and dyadic communications (interviews). The implication is that after their national diploma course, polytechnic students are expected to have picked considerable interest and skill in story-telling/writing and playwriting/acting. Students who pass through the higher diploma training should be able to diversify to poetic composition, oral delivery skills, and public speaking on diverse channels, among others.

To satisfy the yearnings of polytechnic students, both male and female, at both the ND and HND levels, provisions should be made for skillful personnel and instructional material/equipment in the teaching of UoE for the vocational benefit of the students in the polytechnics.

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