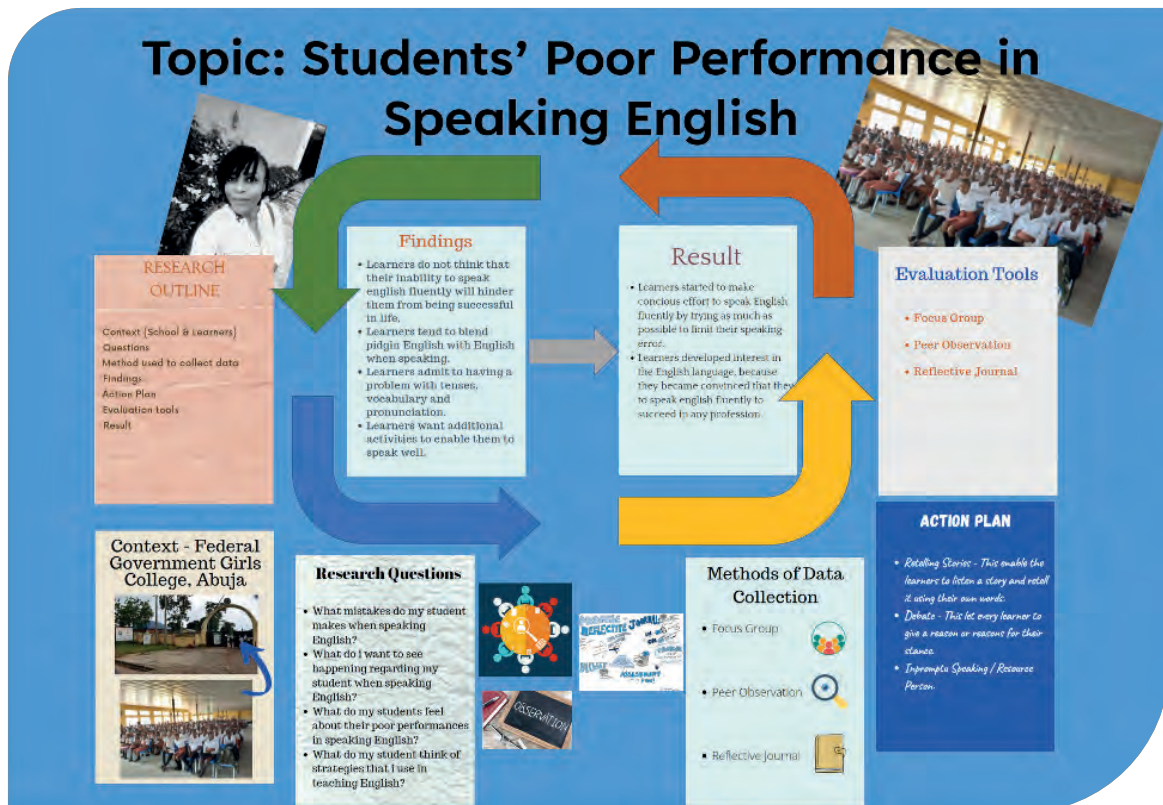




# Students' poor performance in speaking English

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Country : Nigeria





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## Teaching context

I teach English language at the Federal Government Girls' College, Bwari, Abuja in Nigeria. I teach teenagers who are 13–15 years old. The students take English language classes three periods weekly (a total of 3 hours 20 minutes). The school is a public one sponsored by the federal government, so it encompasses children from the high, middle and low classes of the country. Most of the students speak their native language or Pidgin English at home and with friends. Hence, this affects them in speaking English fluently. More so, the students make mistakes when speaking English and are not bothered by it because they do not believe that they need to speak fluently to be successful in life.

A very popular opinion in the country is *Who English epp?* (Who does speaking good English help?). As a result, they perform poorly in the English language, both in speaking and writing and even in their exams. Parents also contribute to this because they would rather pay for their children's extra classes in other subjects but English. They pay more attention to other foreign languages, such as Chinese, French and Spanish, than to the English language.

## Focus of exploration

I chose to explore the speaking skills of my students because they performed poorly during speaking activities and they seemed not to be bothered about it. I have noted that they have problems with their pronunciation, vocabulary and use of tenses and, as a result, they even code-mix. When I started working with them, they usually described me as that teacher that speaks *fone* (a term Nigerians use in describing someone who speaks fluent English) and they liked it. This made me think that I may have a positive impact on them, and they can learn to speak well as a result.

This gave rise to my research. I wanted to know the reason for their poor speaking skills and what they think of the strategies I use in teaching them and the general classroom activities.

The questions that guided me during my exploration are:

1. **What mistakes do my students make when speaking English?**
2. **What do I want to see happening regarding my students when speaking English?**
3. **What do my students feel about their poor performances in speaking English?**
4. **What do my students think of the strategies I use in teaching speaking?**

## Methods of data collection

To answer my exploratory research questions, I used the following data-collection methods: focus group, peer observation and a reflective journal. The focus group was made up of eight students. I selected them based on their performance in the last examinations they had (these covered the high, middle and low grades). The focus discussions were guided by five questions that were designed to help me know what students feel about learning to speak English fluently and the methods I use in teaching them. Two colleagues observed the four lessons during the course of the research. I also wrote reflections as I thought about what I wanted to see happening when my students spoke in English.

## Findings

From my reflection of students' spoken and written work, I have noted that my students make mistakes/errors when speaking English. They say things such as 'When did you came to school?', 'Abeg give me your pen na?' They pronounce words differently, for example plumber as 'plomba', thereby sounding the 'b' which ought to be silent. My colleague who did the classroom observation also observed that the mistakes made by students included wrong use of tenses, poor pronunciation of words and low vocabulary levels. While there was laughter in the class after a student made an error, no correction or support was provided to improve the performance.

During my reflection, I noted that I wish to see my students perform excellently in the English language, be it spoken or written, and also in their exams. I want to see my students develop a passion for speaking well. I want to see them take the English language as a subject more seriously than they do other subjects.

The focus group discussion revealed that the students are aware that they make mistakes/errors when speaking English. One student said, 'I know my English is not good because my classmates laugh when I speak and the teacher also corrects me.' Despite this situation, the students do not seem keen to change. They believe that once they are able to communicate their thoughts to their listeners, that is enough. They do not feel bad when they fail their English language exams because they believe it is the norm to fail. In my reflection, I remembered one student saying to me during a casual discussion, 'You no fit get A for English.' 'A' is a letter grade for distinction, and students have already concluded that no matter how much they study, they can never have a distinction in English because of how 'difficult' it is to have a pass in it.

In terms of the strategies I use to teach speaking, students did not declare a problem with my method of teaching. However, they wanted more extracurricular activities introduced to them. During the focus group discussion, the students said they would love the introduction of mobile apps, especially games to help them. Some feel that the provision of more literary texts will help them build their vocabulary when they read, while others asked for fun activities to be introduced.

## Action plan

Based on the findings, I implemented the following actions in four classes.

- 1. Debates: I picked a controversial topic and the students would speak on it.**
- 2. Impromptu speaking: students read comprehension passages and gave oral answers.**
- 3. Retelling stories: students listened to stories and retold them using their own words.**

## Methods of evaluation

To evaluate the effects of the action plan, I used peer observation, focus group and reflection. I asked a colleague to observe how my students respond to questions and focus on how they construct their sentences. I also held focus group discussions with students and kept a reflective journal.

## Findings after intervention

The data showed that students enjoyed the activities we carried out during the action plan. In my reflections, I realised that the students were more active and the lessons were noisier as my students did the fun activities. In fact, one of the students said, 'I like it when we have debates like the topic A bicycle is better than a car because I can share my ideas which I believe in and also listen to my friends supporting their side of the debate.' This reveals that the students were attracted to interesting ways of using their acquired language, and debates on controversial issues helped them to do this, as they got passionate and involved in the discussion. When describing the experience, the students used phrases and words like 'it was all fun', 'interactive' and 'interesting'. One student observed this and said: 'This has helped me to work together with others as a team and it made it easier for me to research for information, build my vocabulary and practise pronunciation. So I get to do all three in one.'

In actual fact, almost half the students said that retelling stories helped them to express themselves. Additionally, 22 per cent considered impromptu speaking to be a good way of making them always be prepared to speak. My colleagues who carried out the classroom observation commented that the students were engaged in the fun activities and were willing to make presentations when called upon. One student supported this by saying, 'We are convinced that we need to speak fluently to succeed, but we also need tasks that are interesting to participate in not just on special days but often.' As a result, they requested more fun activities during their normal lessons.

The findings also reveal that students now ask questions in class with a keen consideration of grammar and the proper use of tenses. For instance, before now, a student could say 'Please borrow me your pencil', but now they have learned to say 'Please lend me your pencil.'

Pronouncing words in groups during oral English lessons motivated them to fully participate. All the students said they felt comfortable pronouncing words in groups rather than in isolation because it shifts attention from them. One student said: 'I feel confident pronouncing words during oral drills because I know that it is a group responsibility to present well. I can also practise on my own and speak confidently not only with my close friends but with anyone.'

## **My learning and future actions**

From what I learned during this process, my method of teaching will change because I will include more of the activities we carried out during the action plan in their lessons. They will work more in groups since it eases their anxiety when speaking. This new method will help students relate easily to things they are familiar with, thereby prompting them to participate freely or, as the case may be, speak freely in class because the topics we will consider during such activities will deal with things, objects, feelings and people they are familiar with. They will be introduced to more audio recordings for lessons as well, since it will help them more in their pronunciation. This will mean more work on my part as the school does not provide support for all of these.

## **What I learned**

What I have learned from this experience is that I must listen to my students to know what they want so as to teach them better, because I might think that I am giving them what they want, while they want something else. I have also learned that I need other teachers to succeed, and to achieve this, I need to connect with them. I have connected with other teachers of English and they have helped me during this research. I have also learned that as a teacher, I am also a learner, because I do not know everything. I need to learn new things to be a good teacher to my students. Sometimes, to be a successful teacher, we need to go the extra mile in our learning and teaching, such as working extra hours with the students. There are things needed for my teaching that the school will not be able to provide due to funds, but since they are important for my students to perform well, I can look for alternatives or another means to get those items.

I have also learned that the environment exerts a powerful influence on young people, and they bring these things to school. So they need to be helped to see the right part. In the case of my research, it is a wrong notion not to pay attention to their speaking because it is of no use to them. This is what their environment made them believe, but they now have the correct view.