



Gender Variation in Undergraduate Students' Achievement in English Language

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ABSTRACT

The study examined gender variation on Nigerian undergraduate students' achievement in Transformational Generative Grammar (ELS 301) at Delta State University, Abraka. A sample of 53 females and 30 males were drawn from the population of the third-years students of the university. An ex-post facto research design was used for the study. Students' scores for the examination conducted at the end of the course in 2017/2018 academic session were used for data analysis. The research questions were answered using mean while the independent samples t-test was employed in testing the null hypothesis at .05 level of significance. The study showed that the female undergraduate students had a better mean achievement in ELS 301, although the mean achievement of students did not differ significantly by gender. The use of other universities for more research for the purpose of generalisability was recommended.

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers at all levels of education deliver their lessons or lecturers using the official means of instruction. In Nigeria the means of instruction is English. Ijeoma (2014) opined that the most important means of communication in Nigeria is English Language. According to Ijeoma English Language cuts across different ethnic barriers, namely, culture and ethnic background.

The importance of English language as a means of instruction/communication has informed time-table planners to give the language prominent attention in schools' time-tables. More often than not English Language as a subject is taught every day in our schools. Nearly all subjects in Nigerian Schools are taught using English Language (Atanda & Jaiyeoba, 2011). It is not surprising, therefore, that government at all levels, has made concerted efforts to provide adequate human and material resources to make sure that the teaching and learning of English Language is result-oriented.

In spite of the enormous inputs of all the stakeholders in the education industry, the performances of candidates in English Language remain consistently poor. For example, the total number of candidates with credit passes and above in the subject from 2000 to 2006 has not been more than 35% of the total number of candidates that took the West African Examination Council (WAEC) examinations, as cited by Patrick, Sui, Didam & Ojo (2014). Patrick, et al. blamed the ugly trend on students' keen interest on pleasures, indulgence in

internet activities quick money syndrome in the study and the use of cell phones. The situation continues to deteriorate (Fakaye, 2012). In 2018, the situation improved slightly as the percentage of candidates who got minimum of five credits in five subjects including English Language and Mathematics was 49.98% (Inigbenehi, 2018).

Apart from the factors mentioned English language test items may be demanding for unnecessary skills or abilities from examinees. Such factors according to Nenty (1998) and Yeah (2007), both as cited on Ossai (2014) are item difficulty, item format, guessing, language ability words and illustrations. In particular such factors as gender and location can affect responses to test items in school subject (Odili, 2004; Ossai 2014). This study is examining 'Gender Variation in Undergraduate Students' Achievement in English Language'. The students were drawn from Delta State University, Abraka Nigeria. These students took ELS 301 (Transformational Generative Grammar) in 2017/2018 academic session. The course examinees:

grammatical models operating within the notion of Transformations and Re-Write Rules as first discussed by Noam Chomsky.....Standard Theory (1965). The relationship among the different versions '1957, 1968, etc. Kernel Sentences, Surface Structure, Deep Structure, Transformational Rules, Move-Alpha, WH Movement (Students' Information Handbook, 2014:11).

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Ambe-Uva, Iwuchukwu and Jubril (2008) viewed gender as a social meaning associated with being a male or a female, including the construction of identities, expectations, behaviours and power relationships that derive from social interactions. The study of gender is not just mere identification of male and female sexes (Okeke, 2003). According to the author, it means the analysis of the relationship of men and women including the division of labour, access to resources and other factors that are determined by society, opposed to being determined by sex.

The explanation made of the gender implies that its study cannot ignore what obtains in the society. The students that participated in this study come from societies or communities where women and girls are discriminated against. For instance, a married man is at liberty to cheat on his spouse with impunity. It is a taboo for a married woman to bring in a man into her matrimonial home (Okpala-Uku, 25th June, 2017). A widow is often accused of being the cause of her husband's death, and to prove her innocence, she is made to take an oath. Orji (2012) cited in Diokpala (2019) reported that in Nigeria, in general, Africa some professions such as carpentry, engineering woodwork, metal work and automobile technologies are left for men while nursing and catering profession are regarded as women's jobs.

The notion that men seem to be superior to women finds expression in the Bible. For example, Eve was formed out of the rib of Adam (Gen. 2:21-23). Similarly, in naming the ancestors (genealogy) of Jesus no mention was made of a woman (Matthew 1:1-24). It stands to reason that superiority has been endowed with man, not only by the society but by God Almighty. One can, therefore, conclude that studies concerning gender or gender variation in different fields of human endeavour are wasteful ventures. Be this as it may, there is the popular saying in Nigeria that 'What a man can do, a woman can do, even better'. Perhaps this justifies studies on variation in abilities with respect to gender.

Different scholars have provided reports, observations and studies relating to gender and language achievement. For example, Babajide (2001) reported that more females than males use English language in conducting their everyday affairs either in the public or private setting. Similarly, Babalola and Oyinloye (2012) opined that women tend to perform better in quick acquisition of language tool than men. According to the authors, women have the greater

potential to move closer to the native speaker of a language in the area of language learning.

Babajide (2001) reported that more females than males use English Language in conducting their everyday affairs either in the public or private setting. Results from empirical studies relating to gender issues on English Language have not been consistent. Some of such studies were conducted by Akabogu (2006). Babalola and Oyinloye (2012); Cotton et al, cited by Affarhan and Dauletova (2017); Erten (2009); Fakaye (2010); Van De Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme and De Munter (2007). Akabogu conducted a study on Influence of Gender on Secondary School Students' Achievement in Reading Comprehension. A sample of 260 SS2 students was drawn from eight schools in Enugu Education Zone of Enugu State. An *ex-post facto* research design was employed in the study. The finding from the study revealed that gender had no significant influence on achievement in reading comprehension.

Fakaye (2010) conducted a study on 'Students' Personal Variables as correlates of Academic Achievement in English as a Second Language in Nigeria'. A sample of 400 students were drawn from 2000 SSII students in secondary schools located in Ikorodu North and South Local Government Areas of Lagos State. Data were collected using an ability test, existing scores and questionnaire, as instruments. The data analysis revealed that students' attitude and their academic achievement in English language were positively related. The result also showed that achievement in English Language differed significantly by gender; male students performed better. The outcome of this study is not in consonance with Akabogu (2006).

The result of the studies conducted by Babalola and Oyinloye (2012) also differed from that of Fakaye (2012). Babalola and Oyinloye's study was on Language and Gender Distinctions. From a population of 408306 SSII students in Ekiti State, a sample of 240 Students was drawn. Achievement test and attitude questionnaire were used as instruments for the study. The finding from the study showed that gender had no significant influence on the ability of students to acquire the tools of language of communication.

The other empirical studies separately showed that females do better than males. (2006). Van De Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme and De Munter (2007) studied Impact of Attitudes of Peers on Language Achievement: Gender Differences. Over 6,000 students ranging from 12 years to 21 years of

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Age were drawn from Flanders in Belgium. Multilevel analysis was used in the data analysis. The finding showed that boys who had negative school-related attitudes were underachievers in language. It was also discovered that boys were influenced by their attitudes of their peers in classes than girls.

The study by Erten (2009) centred on 'Gender Differences in achievement among Turkish Prospective Teachers of English as a foreign Language. The population consisted of eighty-four third-year students in a pre-service ELT (English Language Teaching) teacher training department. Qualitative and quantitative data were collected from a sample of 38 subjects. A semi-structured interview was the instrument used in the study. Using content data analysis, the study revealed that female trainee teachers of English were more inclined to out-perform their male counterparts in the courses.

Similarly, Cotten et al. (2015), cited by Affarhan and Dauletova (2017) conducted a study on Academic Performances by Gender. The study had a sample of 431 females and 592 males selected in six academic departments of Plymouth University in the United Kingdom. The data analysed showed that the females did better than the males. The authors attributed the situation to high rate of absenteeism, the level of time and effort put in by the males compared to the females.

It appears that women are more effective in the use of language. This is probably because they have the opportunity of interacting more in the society, compared to the malefolks. Despite this belief, researches on gender disparity on the achievement in language appear to be inconsistent. For instance, in English Language there are inconsistencies in research outcomes concerning gender differential on the subject. While some reported no significant difference, others discovered significant difference. These are often reported at the post-primary school level. What is the situation at post-secondary level? This is the problem of the study.

Research Questions

The researcher generated the following research questions to direct the study:

1. What is the mean achievement of male students in ELS 301?
2. What is the mean achievement of female students in ELS 301?
3. What is the difference in the mean achievement of students in ELS 301 by gender?

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at .05 level of significance:

1. The mean achievement of students in ELS 301 does not differ significantly by gender.

METHODOLOGY

An *ex-postfacto* research design was used in the study. The scores already exist in the students' department. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, three research questions and one null hypothesis were generated. The study comprised a population of 167 300-level students drawn from the Department of English and Literary Studies, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. A sample of 83 students consisting of 30 males and 53 females was selected for the study. Their age ranged between 20 years and 26 years. Their official language is English, although some of them have a smattering of French, Hausa and Igbo languages. A small percentage of the students came from middle socio-economic background. The others, in majority come from low socio-economic group, typical of Nigerian society. Delta State University, Abraka Nigeria is owned and funded by the Delta State Government, a region in the Niger Delta. The sample was selected through a systematic random sampling technique. The names of the students were written down serially. A starting point, number one, was chosen. The participants were selected at intervals of two.

The University draws students mainly from the catchment areas that speak such languages as Urhobo, Isoko, Ukwuani, Itsekiri, Ika and Aniocha-Oshimili. These are all minority tribes in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Delta State University is situated in Abraka, where Urhobo language is well spoken. Pidgin English is widely spoken in this town. This has spread to the university where majority of the students communicate mainly in pidgin, except in highly official matters. This is capable of affecting the standard of spoken English because it is believed that practice makes perfect.

Another important characteristic of the participants in this research is that the students were admitted into the University for a four-year Programme. A four-year programme, in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Arts is specifically for candidates with School Certificate or GCE Ordinary level. Such candidates must obtain at least five credits in the relevant subjects, including English Language and Mathematics. Besides, they must pass through two screening tests, Unified Tertiary Matriculation

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Examination (UTME) and Post-Unified Tertiary Matriculation Examination (Post-UTME).

The three-year programme is for candidates with diplomas or the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE), in addition to the basic School Certificate requirements. They are regarded as direct entry candidates. Two screening tests are also conducted for this category of candidates.

The students who form the sample of this study fall into the two categories described. Irrespective of gender, the mode of entry (three-years or four-years) may have a bearing on the academic achievement of the students. It is widely believed that mode of entry is a factor in the academic achievement of undergraduate students in Nigeria. Besides, the economic hardship that is prevalent in the country is capable of impacting negatively on the academic achievement of the students in question. Many of the students are forced to take low quality meals, at most two times a day.

The library is another factor which can impact on the achievement of the students. It appears the University's Library is not adequately stocked with books for use by students. Students resort to the use of phones. This amounts to the survival of the fittest. Not every student can afford to buy sophisticated cell phones. This may account for poor quality in assignments done by students.

Students' scores in ELS 301 (Transformational Generative Grammar) for

2017/2018 academic session were used in the study. These scores were collected from the students' Department. The course is a core course which must be passed by the students. The questions are the free response type, which were scored by the course lecturer. The examination attracted 70% while continuous assessment was 30%. A student is expected to have a minimum of 45% in order to pass the course. The examination questions were deemed to be valid and reliable, since the test is standardised. It was not possible for the researcher to obtain the psychometric properties of the instrument.

The researcher formally wrote to the Department of English and Literary Studies, in Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. Thus, permission for the collection of scores was granted. In order to protect the identity of the students, their names were omitted from the data obtained. The scores were tied to their serial numbers.

The data obtained were collated, coded and entered into a computer system through SPSS statistical programme. The data were, thereafter, screened for errors. The mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, using a benchmark of 50%, which is the average performance in the grading system of Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria. The independent samples t-test was used to test the hypothesis at .05 level of significance.

RESULTS

Answers were provided for the research questions as follows:

Research question 1: What is the mean achievement of male students in ELS 301?

Table 1: showing the mean achievement and standard deviation of male students in ELS 301

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remark
Male	30	50.93	11.60	Average Performance

Table 1 shows that the mean achievement of male students in ELS 301 is 50.93. The standard deviation is 11.60. The mean achievement of 50.93

indicates an average performance in the grading system of Delta State University, Abraka.

Research Question 2: What is the mean achievement of female students in ELS 301?

Table 2: showing the mean achievement and standard deviation of female students in ELS 301

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Remark
Female	53	52.60	11.95	Average Performance

Table 2 shows that the mean achievement of female students in ELS 301 is 52.60. The standard deviation is 11.95; the mean achievement of 52.60

indicates an average performance in the grading system of Delta State University, Abraka.

Research Question 3: What is the difference in the mean achievement of students in ELS 301 by gender?

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Table 3: showing the mean difference of male and female students in ELS 301

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Difference in Mean	Remark
Male	30	50.93	11.60	1.67	In favour of females
Female	53	52.60	11.95		

Table 3 shows that the mean achievements of male and female students are 50.93 (SD = 11.60) and 52.60 (SD = 11.95) respectively. The mean difference is 1.67 in favour of female students.

Hypothesis: The mean achievement of students in ELS 301 does not differ significantly by gender.

Table 4: showing independent samples t-test analysis of students' achievement in ELS 301 by gender

Variable	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	df	Significance	Remark
Male	30	50.93	11.60	-.618	81	.538	Not Significant
Female	53	52.60	11.95				

$\alpha = 0.05$

Table 4 shows that the computed t is -.618 and the p-value is .538. Testing at an alpha level of .05, the p-value of .538 is greater than .05; hence, the null hypothesis of no significant difference in students' achievement in ELS 301 by gender was accepted. This implies that the mean achievement of students in ELS 301 does not differ significantly by gender.

DISCUSSION

The answers to research questions one and two indicate that the mean achievement of male undergraduate students in ELS 301 is 50.93. Similarly, the mean achievement of female undergraduate students is 52.60. In the grading system that obtains in Delta State University, Abraka, the achievement of the two different groups are average. The letter grade for the scores is 'C'. A student who consistently obtains a score from 50 to 59 is sure to make Second Class (Lower Division) Degree.

Research question three shows that female undergraduate students had 1.67 points more than their male counterparts. Although the female students had the upper hand in the mean achievements, the standard deviations, from tables 1 and 2, that is 11.60 for the males and 11.95 for the females, indicate that the scores obtained by the female students appeared to have varied more compared with those obtained by their male counterparts. In other words, the scores from the male students seemed to be closer to the mean.

The result from the hypothesis test, as shown in table 4, indicates that there was no significant difference, by gender in the mean achievement of undergraduate students in ELS 301. This result is in consonance with the studies of Akabogu (2006) and Babalola and Oyinloye (2010) but inconsistent with Fakaye (2010). Akabogu (2006) reported that achievement in reading comprehension

was not significantly influenced by gender; similarly, the study conducted by Babalola and Oyinloye in 2010 showed that gender had no significant influence on the ability of students to acquire the tools of language of communication. On the contrary, Fakaye (2010) conducted a study which revealed that achievement in English Language differed significantly by gender. The study showed that male students had better performance compared to their female counterparts.

The findings from the studies of Van De Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme and De Munter (2007), Erten (2009) and Cotton et al (2015) are contrary to the result of this study. The results from the three different studies showed that females did better than their male counterparts. Findings from these studies also disagreed with the result obtained by Fakaye (2010) that boys had an edge over girls.

Even though this study showed that there was no significant difference in the mean achievement of students in ELS 301 with respect to gender, the result showed that female students were better than their male counterparts. This finding is in line with works of Cotton et al (2015); Erten (2009); Van De Gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme and De Munter (2007). The result also agrees with the report of Babajide (2001); Babalola and Oyinloye (2012). While the latter affirmed that females tend to do better in quick acquisition of language tool than males, the former observed that more females than males use English language in conducting everyday activities, either in the public or private setting.

The apparent superiority of the female students in this study is in line with the reports of Babajide (2001), who observed that more females than males use English Language in conducting their daily affairs, either in the public or private setting.

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CONCLUSION

This study has shown that undergraduate students' achievement in ELS 301 did not differ significantly by gender. This signifies absence of differential item functioning. It is therefore, that other courses or more should be taken in the same institution or other universities for more studies for the purpose of generalizability.

LIMITATION

This study has shown that there are still inconsistencies in students' achievement in English Language by gender. One other interesting point to be deduced from the study is that gender-neutrality of the result signifies that item differential functioning in terms of gender is not prevalent. This researcher, however, feels that the sample size may be a shortcoming in the study. It is therefore, suggested that studies with larger samples be conducted in the same university or other universities. Perhaps, the situation may vary with sample or population.

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