

## Effects of Assertive and Aggressive Communication Styles on Students' Self-Esteem and Achievement in English Language

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### Abstract

The study investigated the effects of assertive and aggressive communication styles on students' self-esteem and achievement in English language. Studies have often shown that the way a student evaluates himself/herself (self-esteem) sometimes determines their level of academic achievement. Students' level of self-esteem could be enhanced or hindered by a number of factors which may include the communication style adopted by the teacher during classroom interaction. Hence, there is the need to conduct this study. The study adopted an ex-post-facto type of descriptive research design. 126 students from four purposively selected schools, and four English languages teachers participated in the study. A self-esteem questionnaire ( $r=0.79$ ) and the examination scores of students were used for data collection while t-test was used for data analysis.

The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the self-esteem scores of students taught by assertive and aggressive teachers in favour of the assertive group, there was a significant difference in the English language achievement of students taught by assertive and aggressive teachers in favour of the assertive group, there was also a significant difference in the English language achievement of students with high and low self-esteem. Based on these findings, it was recommended that teachers should adopt communication styles that promote positive teacher-student relationship.

**Key words:** Aggressive communication; Assertive communication; Self-esteem; Achievement

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### INTRODUCTION

Language is a unique possession of mankind. It is the greatest asset of the human race and the significant variable that distinguishes man from other animals. Although all animals communicate to survive, no animal language has been discovered to match the linguistic activities and communicative elements of the human language. As far as animal behaviour is concerned, Yule (2007) observes that animals may produce a particular behaviour in response to a particular sound stimulus, they do not actually "understand the meaning of the word uttered. Consequently, Sapir (1921) as cited in Ogunyemi (2014) describes language as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by a means of voluntarily produced symbols. One obvious fact from the definition given above is that language is a veritable tool for communication among humans.

Several languages exist in the world but in recent years, the dominance of English as a global language has been reinforced by the emergence of the United State as the sole superpower and the growth of international trade as part of a phenomenon generally labelled globalization (Bruthiaux, 2003). Udofot (2003) observes that at the close of the twentieth century, English language metamorphosed from the official language of education, government and business to the lingual franca as well as the convenient language of both official and intimate record keeping and communication. English language no doubt performs so many functions in the linguistic sphere of Nigeria. In the educational sector, English language has been adopted as the language of instruction from the upper primary school to the university level.

In the process of instruction in schools, communication between the teacher and learners is very important. Communication according to Wallace and Roberson (2009) is a process involving several steps among two or more persons for the primary purpose of exchanging information. As an act of knowledge impartation, it is evident that teaching has to do with the exchange of information between the teacher and the learners. This is perhaps the reason behind the submission of Kenneth (2007) that without communication, teaching and learning will not take place.

Although the main aim of teaching is to bring about learning, it should be noted that not all teaching activities cause learning. Factors such as teachers' personal quality, physical condition of the classroom, students' interest and teachers' communication styles interact to bring about meaningful learning (Ogunyemi, 2014). In view of this, Okeowo (2009) observes that the key role of the teachers is not just to teach the students but also to ensure that they are learning by adopting good communication/techniques styles which abound in the classroom.

Communication style according to Nzekwe (2013) refers to the various strategies including verbal, non-verbal and caring approaches which teachers employ to make learners understand their instructions effectively. Urea (2013) sees communication styles as consisting of individual characteristics reflected in the communication act which refers to specific ways of receiving/decoding messages, personal qualities of processing/interpreting messages, and specific ways of expressing the response/feedback. Both teaching and learning has been seen as depending on the teacher, so an effective teacher has been conceptualized as one who produces desired results in the course of his/her duty by adopting styles of communication that will enhance the clarity of his/her instruction in the classroom (Nzekwe, 2013).

According to Leary (1957) as cited in Esan (2018), teacher's communication style is an important aspect of the learning environment because students' perception of teachers' communication styles is strongly related to students' learning outcomes and satisfaction about the teacher and the lesson. Duta (2010) also observes that communication skills and work motivation have a high correlation with the quality of instruction as the teacher's communication style can influence the interest and attitude of the students by creating a fun-filled learning atmosphere. Teachers with good communication skills and styles will likely create a more successful teaching and learning ambience for learners.

Asikhia (2010) supports the view above by observing that students' poor achievement in school is often attributed to poor communication style by the teacher which includes non-use of verbal reinforcement strategy, unpleasant comments about pupils' performance which could damage their ego and destroy their self-esteem. Self-esteem according to Blassovich and Tomaka (1991) is defined as the perception of self-worth, or the extent

to which a person values or appreciates himself/herself. In the opinion Harris (2009), self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth, or the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes, or likes himself/herself.

Scholars have established a strong link between students' self-esteem and their learning outcomes in English language (Ogunyemi, 2014). Researches have also demonstrated that students' feelings and emotions are important to learning (Esan, 2018). Hence, teachers must know how to communicate effectively and appropriately to students because the communication styles employed have effects on the way students feel about themselves which in turn affects their achievement in learning.

Every nation wants to educate its young one by providing them cordial and friendly learning environment at school which will allow them develop a high level of self-esteem, ensures better academic achievement and prepares them to contribute meaningfully to the development of the society. Teachers have thus been saddled with the responsibility of ensuring a friendly learning environment where learners are encouraged to attain their full potentials. To achieve this, Uzair, Shahid, Pervez and Iram (2017) opine that the teacher should employ good communication styles by avoiding the use of unpleasant words during classroom interaction. To them, politeness, intimacy, nearness and close relationships between the teacher and the students should be maintained. This is because students who learn from friendly teachers perform extremely well in class while those who learn from aggressive teachers may not perform up to the level expected of them. For instance, students who are communicated to negatively by constantly receiving overly critical assessment from their teachers will likely have a low self-esteem which will in turn severely hinder their level of academic achievement.

According to Esan (2018), two major communication styles are prevalent among secondary school teachers in Nigeria. These are aggressive communication style and assertive communication style. The aggressive communication style is that in which the teacher expresses his/her feelings and opinion and disseminates information in such a way that violates the rights of the pupils. Aggressive communicators are usually abusive either verbally or physically. On the other hand, assertive communication styles is a style in which an individual clearly states their opinions and feelings and firmly advocates for their rights and needs without violating the rights of their learners. From the foregoing, this research aims at investigating the different communication styles used by English language teachers in Ondo State and the effects of these on students' self-esteem and achievement in English language.

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## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

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The way a student perceives himself/herself is usually determined by some factors because self-esteem or a

student's assessment of his/her own worth is subjective. This implies that a student's level of self-esteem is determined by certain factors within the classroom of which the teacher's communication style is one. There are different communication styles which are employed by teachers during the teaching and learning process. Some communication styles are based on warmth, respect and empathy while others are authoritative. Self-esteem plays an important role in a student's academic success. Low self-esteem caused by teachers' wrong communication may negatively affect students' academic achievement as a result of his/her unbelief in himself/herself to be capable of success. Since researches have shown that two major communication styles are prevalent among secondary school teachers in Ondo State, this research therefore aims at investigating the influence of aggressive and assertive communication styles on students' self-esteem and achievement in English language.

## HYPOTHESES

The following hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

**H<sub>01</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the self-esteem score of students taught by teachers using aggressive and assertive communication styles.

**H<sub>02</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the English language achievement of students taught by teachers using aggressive and assertive communication styles.

**H<sub>03</sub>:** There is no significant difference in the English language achievement of students with low and high self-esteem.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SPEECH ACT THEORY

The Speech Act theory was developed by Austin (1975) who believes that people not only use language to assert things but also to do things. This implies that language has the dual role of assisting its users express their thoughts, feelings and opinions and imposing one's will on others. The theory could thus be conceived of as a theory where the effect of an utterance is analysed in relation to the speaker and listeners' behaviours. The theory is divided into three different categories: the Locutionary Act, Illocutionary Act, and the Perlocutionary Act.

The Locutionary Act is seen as the act of saying something in such a way that it conveys a clear and understandable meaning to the listener. On the other hand, Illocutionary Act is what is majorly referred to as Speech Act and has to do with the performance of an action sent by the Illocutionary (Esan, 2018). The Perlocutionary Act on which this present study is based, refers to the effect of what is said on the attitude, feelings, emotions, self-esteem, actions and thoughts of the receiver. In the classroom situation the speech act theory applies to the effect of what is said by the teacher and how it is said (communication style) on pupils' learning outcomes.

## COMMUNICATION STYLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Communication may be described as any process by which people share ideas, information, feelings, personal biases and prejudices. In the classroom situation, the teacher and the students engage in a wide range of communication. Kenneth (2007) asserts that without communication, teaching and learning cannot take place. According to Norton (1983) classroom communication style is multifaceted and a person does not have a single communication style but aspects of many styles. Some of the communication styles identified by him include attentive, relaxed, friendly, precise, dominant, impression leaving, open, dramatic, animated and argumentative.

Esan (2018) narrowed down classroom communication styles to four main styles: assertive, aggressive, passive, and passive aggressive. Assertive communication style is a style which translates into an ability that allows an individual highlight their rights and legitimacy, respecting all people around them (Ashman & Lawler, 2008). In the opinion of Heffner (1989), being an assertive communicator promotes classroom instructions because teachers using the assertive communication style stand for objectivity while at the same time considering other people's opinion.

Aggressive communicators are individuals who seek a position of superiority which is often likened to authoritarianism (CastelFranchi, 2007). The United Kingdom Violence Intervention and Prevention Centre (n.d) describe aggressive communicators as those who express their feelings and opinions and advocate for their needs in a way that violates the rights of others. They are usually verbally and physically abusive; they try to dominate others, use humiliation to control others, speak in loud and demanding manner, are not good listeners, blame others and react negatively to situations.

On the other hand, passive communicators are those who fail to assert their rights, do not express their opinions and feelings, allow others infringe on their rights, always fidgeting and avoiding eye contact. The passive assertive communicators are described as people who are passive on the surface but are acting out in anger in a subtle and indirect way. These people do not deal directly with situations; they rather employ manipulation to express their feelings. They also use facial expressions that do not match their feelings. Whatever, communication style the teacher employs in the classroom, it should be such that will be beneficial to learners, ensure smooth classroom interaction, and make teaching and learning effective.

## COMMUNICATION STYLES AND SELF-ESTEEM

In the opinion of Harris (2009), self-esteem refers to an individual's sense of his or her value or worth and the extent to which a person values, approves of, appreciates, prizes or likes himself or herself. Self-esteem is influenced

by a number of factors which include the communication style employed by the teacher during the teaching/learning process. The communication style employed by a teacher has a lot of influence on how students feel about themselves and consequently affects their self-esteem. Asikhia (2010) observes that when a teacher gives unpleasant comments about pupils' performance, it could damage pupils' ego and self-esteem. Mruk (2013) supports this by pointing out that teachers who communicate positively with their learners are likely to be seen as role models by the pupils thereby providing support that would contribute to the building of positive self-esteem in the students.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study is an ex-post-facto type of descriptive research design. The population of this study consists of all senior secondary school students and English language teachers in Akoko North East Local Government Area of Ondo State. The purposive sampling technique was used to select four schools from the local government area. Two of the schools selected have teachers who adopt the aggressive communication style while the remaining two schools have teachers who use the assertive communication style. In all, 126 senior secondary schools 2 (SSS2) students selected from four

classes in the selected schools participated in the study.

A self-esteem questionnaire ( $r=0.79$ ) was used to collect data on students' self-esteem. It contains 25 items on a four point likert scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The examination scores of students in the last examination conducted by the schools were used to determine their achievement in English language. A coding sheet for observing teachers' communication styles adopted from Esan (2018) was used to determine teachers' communication styles. It contains 21 items that describe the features of different communication styles adopted by teachers during classroom instruction. The inferential statistics of t-test was used to analyse data collected for the study.

## RESULTS

The gathered data were analyzed and interpreted within this section using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Formulated null hypotheses were tested using Paired Sample t-test. The results were all summarized in the tables below.

**Hypothesis 1:** There is no significant difference in the Self-esteem scores of students taught by teachers using aggressive and assertive communication styles.

**Table 1**  
**Paired t—test showing the differences in self-esteem scores of students taught by Teachers using aggressive & assertive communication styles**

		Paired Samples Statistics				Paired Differences				
		Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference		T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
						Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Assertive self-esteem scores	69.8413	63	11.21952	1.41353	7.28633	14.90415	5.823	62	.000
	Aggressive self-esteem scores	58.7460	63	11.18895	1.40967					
Pair 1	Assertive self-esteem scores - aggressive self-esteem scores	11.09524		15.12391	1.90543					

Significant at  $P < 0.05$

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare self-esteem scores of students taught by teachers using assertive communication style and aggressive communication style. The table for the t-test analysis shows that there was a significant difference in the self-esteem scores of students taught by teachers using assertive communication style ( $M = 69.84$ ,  $SD = 11.22$ ) and aggressive communication style ( $M = 58.75$ ,  $SD = 11.19$ ) conditions;  $t(62) = 5.823$ ,  $p = .000$ . These results

suggest that students who were taught using assertive style had higher self-esteem scores than their counterparts who were taught using aggressive communication style. Specifically, our results suggest that when our students are addressed calmly, their self-esteem increases.

**Hypothesis 2:** There is no significant difference in the English language achievement of students taught by teachers using aggressive and assertive communication styles

**Table 2**  
**Paired t—test showing the difference in the English language achievement of students taught by teachers using aggressive & assertive communication styles**

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Pair 1	Assertive English scores	59.8413	63	6.68944	.84279
	Aggressive English scores	50.1429	63	6.82703	.86012



		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Assertive English scores - aggressive English scores	9.69841	9.06897	1.14258	7.41442	11.98240	8.488	62	.000

Significant at P< 0.05

Continued

The result in Table 2 compares English language achievement of students taught by teachers using aggressive and assertive communication styles. The t-test analysis shows that there was a significant difference in English language scores of students taught by teachers using assertive communication style (M = 59.84, SD = 6.69) and aggressive communication style (M = 50.14, SD = 6.83) conditions;  $t(62) = 8.488, p = .000$ . These results

imply that students who were taught using assertive style performed better than their counterparts who were taught using aggressive communication style. The results show that our communication styles have influences on our students.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is no significant difference in the English language achievement of students with low and high self-esteem

**Table 3**  
Paired Sample t—test showing the difference in the English language achievement of students with low and high self-esteem

		Paired Samples Statistics			
		Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Pair 1	High Self-Esteem	62.4615	13	4.78914	1.32827
	Low Self-Esteem	43.8462	13	3.38738	.93949

  

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	High Self-Esteem Scores - Low Self-Esteem	18.61538	4.55592	1.26358	15.86227	21.36850	14.732	12	.000

Significant at P< 0.05

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare English language achievement of students with high and low self-esteem scores. The table for the t-test analysis shows that there was a significant difference in the English language Achievement of students with High Self-esteem (M = 62.46, SD = 4.79) and students with Low Self-esteem (M = 43.85, SD = 3.39) conditions;  $t(12) = 14.732, p = .000$ . These results suggests that students who had high self-esteem performed better than their counterparts who had low self-esteem.

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

From the results above, there was a significant difference in the self-esteem scores of students taught by teachers using assertive and aggressive communication styles. This result agrees with the findings of Asikhia (2010) who observes that unpleasant comments and harsh criticism by the teacher may damage students' self-esteem. The results also confirm the opinion of Uzair et al (2017) that students who are constantly exposed to negative communication by their teachers usually develop a very low esteem. Other scholars like Agbo (2006) and Nzekwe (2013) also agree that when students are shown love and affection, they develop a high level of self-esteem which in turn leads to high academic

performance. In line with the findings above, teachers are encourage to use words and phrases that are encouraging, motivating, inspiring, and praising which are extremely powerful in improving students level of self-esteem.

Results on hypothesis 2 reveal that there was a significant difference in the English language achievement of students taught by teachers using assertive and aggressive communication style in favour of those taught by assertive teachers. This corroborates the findings of Uzair et al (2017), who observe that students taught by aggressive teachers may not perform up to the level expected of them. This might be because such students are easily discouraged and less motivated to aspire to attain excellence. This is also in line with the observation of Duta (2010) that teacher's communication styles can influence the interest, attitude and academic achievement of students. This implies that effective communication is a determinant of students' academic achievement. Similarly, Wu, Hugh and Kwok (2010) observe that the relationship between the teacher and students as well as teacher's communication style play a vital role in students' academic achievement. Hence, teachers need to adopt good communication styles that will serve as catalysts for improved academic performance.

From hypothesis three, it was discovered that there was a significant difference in the English language

achievement of students with low and high self-esteem in favour of students with high self-esteem.

This finding agrees with the submission of Ogunyemi (2014) that the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is one that is regarded by many educators as a well-established fact. Scholars like Harris (2009) and Ogunyemi (2014) opine that students' level of self-esteem correlates positively with their academic achievement. This implies that a high self-esteem translates to a high academic achievement in school. This might be because students with high level of self-esteem have the required confidence to tackle difficult problems and the willingness to persist in the face of initial failure.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The focus of this study has been to examine the effects of assertive and aggressive communication styles on students' self-esteem and English language achievement. The study has been able to establish that the communication style adopted by the teacher during classroom interaction play a significant role in enhancing students' self-esteem and achievement in English language. The assertive communication style was found to be more effective in raising students' self-esteem level and their general academic achievement. Hence language teachers are encouraged to adopt communication styles that are constructive, positive, friendly, objective and respectful. The classroom atmosphere should be friendly while the teacher avoids the use of unpleasant and derogatory words. A good/positive teacher-student relationship should be maintained at all times.

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