

English and Communication Skills in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: The State of the Art

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Introduction

The importance of the English language in the Nigerian environment is high. It cannot be described as a Foreign language (FL), but a second language (SL). The use of the English language pervades all spheres of Nigerian life in various domains - education, civil service, religion, social, economic and family. It is, therefore, not a surprise why so much importance is attached to the effort in making the students at the highest level of education competent in the language. For instance, after graduation from the tertiary institution, the graduates need to convince their employers, through effective use of the spoken and written media, that they are competent in the language of communication. The language does not only equip the students for academic purpose, but also for the labour market. In order to avail the Nigerian child the opportunity of enhancing his competence in the language, specific steps are taken by the Nigerian government. For instance, English language is mandated to be taught as a subject in the junior primary and both as a subject and a medium of instruction from senior primary to the tertiary level in Nigeria (FGN, 2004). The assessment of the implementation and adherence to the policy is a point for another discussion as Bodunde (2004) has established the abysmally low implementation of the policy in the primary school. Even when it is not properly implemented at the first two levels of education (primary and secondary), its use is not negotiable at the 3rd level of educational system. The bandwagon effect of the

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implementation at the secondary level on students is an evidence that there is still much to be done in terms of proficiency in the language of education in the tertiary institutions. A case is an excerpt of written response of a student in a tertiary institution to the question ‘*why didn’t you register on time?*’ She could not express herself orally and was instructed to write her response:

*I no come for regista last week because I travel.
I broke through last week. Sory ma I beg you regista me*

instead of

*I did not register last week because I travelled.
I did not have money then. Please ma, register me.*

The move to enhance the competence and learning of students of tertiary institutions in language of education (English) in Nigeria led to the introduction of a course in English language after having spent an average of 12 years learning and using the language in primary and secondary levels. The course whose title varies from one tertiary institution to another and is usually referred to as Use of English (UE), English and Communication Skills (ECS), or English for Academic Purpose (EAP) was introduced in 1981 (Bodunde, 2006). It is one of the compulsory courses as directed by the controlling and activity-regulating bodies of the universities (National University Commission, (NUC)); National Certificate of Education Council (NCECC), a body in charge of Colleges of Education; and National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), the controlling body of Mono- and Polytechnics. The course is run at the discretion of most institutions for one or two semesters in 100 level, while others have it a semester each in 100 and 200 levels.

Various researchers (Hutchinson and Waters 1987; Ahsan 2009; Mohammadi and Mousavi 2013) have commented on the effectiveness of the ECS or EAP programme as it relates to the communicative output of the undergraduates in the recent time. Some researchers are of the opinion that ECS does not appear to be yielding the expected fruit (Owolabi, 2005). This observation is hinged on the fact that the curriculum is grammar-based thereby delimiting the interest of the students in the Course (Aborisade, 2004). Lecturers often concentrate on the teaching and the learning process at the expense of its effectiveness. It is our belief that the effectiveness of the programme can only be measured by its appraisal in the Nigerian tertiary institutions. The outcome of such research will provide insight into where and what to pay attention to, and how to facilitate the where and the what.

There is the need therefore, to assess the course that occupies the central place in the education of students in the tertiary institutions and which provides effective functioning after graduation.

The Study

The objectives of this paper are to:

- i. give the state of the art of EAP/ ECS/UE in the Nigerian tertiary institutions in terms of the human, physical, institutional contribution and attitudinal disposition towards the teaching of the course;
- ii. identify the shared and isolated challenges faced by the teachers of EAP/ECS or UE in the tertiary institutions;
- iii. proffer possible solutions to the challenges and suggestions for better teaching and learning process of EAP/ ECS/UE (ECS henceforth in this study)

Research Questions

- i) What is the state of art of ECS in the Nigerian Tertiary Institutions in terms of the human, physical, institutional contribution and attitudinal disposition towards the teaching of the course?
- ii) What are the challenges faced by the ECS teachers in the tertiary institutions?
- iii) What are the possible solutions to the challenges and suggestions for better teaching and learning process of ECS?

Sample

Fifty three lecturers of English and Communication Skills from fifty three tertiary institutions in Nigeria, made up of thirty one from Universities, twelve from Polytechnics, and ten from Colleges of Education (CoE) were the subject of the study. Twenty six of the universities are public while five are private. Twenty of the public universities are conventional while 6 are specialized; four of the private universities are conventional while one is specialized. All the twelve Polytechnics and ten Colleges of Education are public institutions.

Methodology

Fifty three lecturers representing fifty three tertiary institutions responded to a set of questionnaire specifically set to inquire about the state of the art of ECS in the Nigerian tertiary institutions. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. Section one sought information on school type, contact hours, domicile of ECS, class size, attitude of stakeholders [students, lecturers, institutions] to ECS, teaching facilities, and methods of teaching. The second section requested responses on challenges faced by ECS teachers and the way forward. The responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (simple percentage and bar chat).

of Education. The responses on EAP from 53 different tertiary institutions can be generalized on EAP because the results provide information on type of school, whether public or private; conventional or specialized (Table 1).

Domicile of ECS in Tertiary Institutions

Information was sought on the department that anchors ECS. The response is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: ECS Anchor Department

Domicile of ECS	University		Polytechnic		CoE		Total		
	Private		Public		Public				
	C	S	C	S	C	S			
Centre	-	-	4	-	-	-	-	4	
General Studies	2	1	7	6	-	12	6	-	34
English	2	-	9	-	-	-	4	-	15
Total	4	1	20	6	-	12	10	-	53

The result shows that the ECS programme is anchored in the Department of General Studies (DGS) in most of the tertiary institutions as 34 out of the 53 are anchored in DGS. A further breakdown of Table 2 shows that 3 of the 5 private universities and 13 of the public ones domicile the programme in DGS. Fifty five per cent (19) of the institutions with ECS in DGS

are specialised which may be due to the fact that such institutions do not have College or Faculty of Arts which readily serves as its residence. Six out of 10 (60%) of the sampled Colleges of Education, and all sampled Polytechnics have it taught in the Department of General Studies. Four out of the sampled universities anchored the programme in a Centre for General Studies (CGS) which houses other courses apart from ECS.

Eleven (35.5%) of the 31 conventional universities have it housed in the English Department where it is taught by any of the English lecturers, who because of other duties, are not as committed as the ECS lecturers whose primary duty it is to teach the course. Anchoring ECS in General Studies Department creates easy opportunity for ECS lecturers to share experience and collaborate in their research work.

Contact Hours

Figure 1 reveals that 77.3% of the institutions of the respondents offer ECS two hours a week, while 22.7% offer it four hours a week. The breakdown shows that 43.4%, 18.8% and 15.1% have two contact hours of ECS in the Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges of Education respectively. Twelve institutions offer ECS four hours a week.

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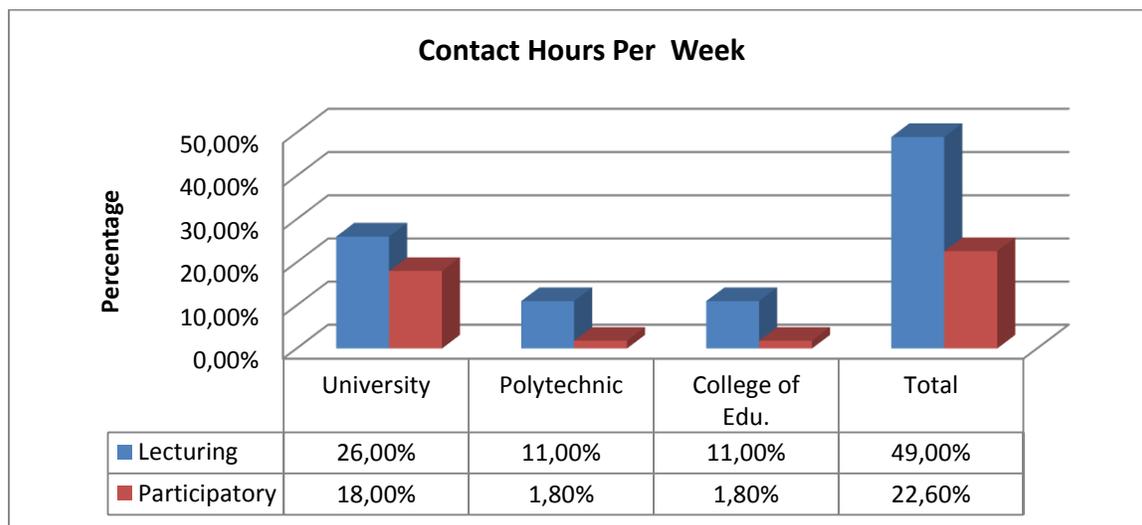


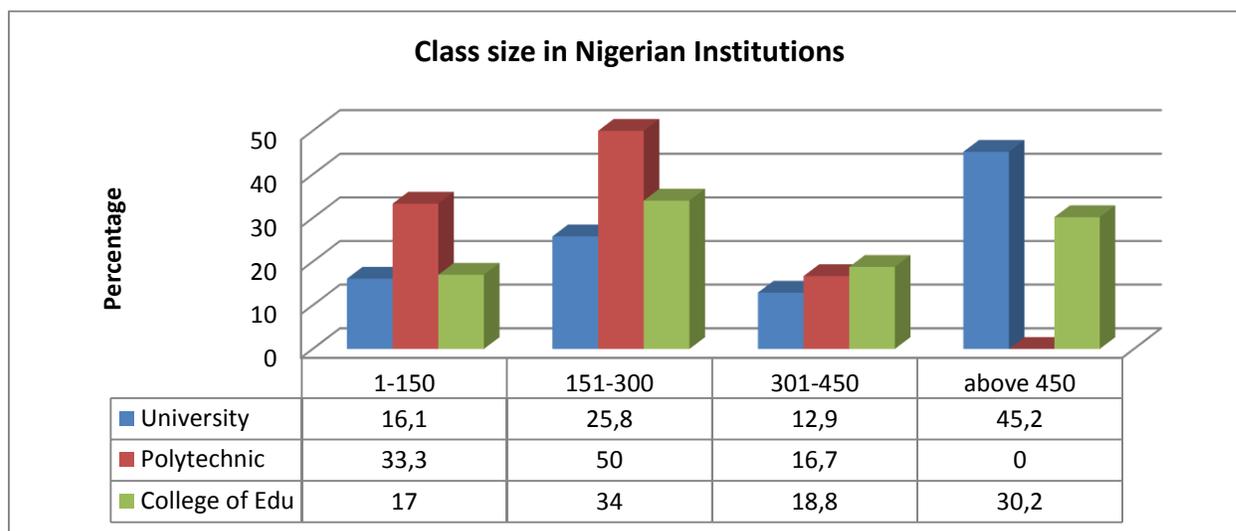
Figure 1: ECS Contact Hour per week in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

This is in line with NUC stipulation that communication in English should be taught 2 hours per week for two semesters (BMAS 2007:19). Some institutions have the 4 hours spread over two years with the first 2 hours taught in 100 level, and the other 2 hours at 200 level. However, there are institutions that choose to have the four hours in 100 level. This might seem cumbersome and not student-friendly and this situation probably accounts for the low number of institutions (22.7%) that adopt the 4/week contact hours. Earlier research has revealed that a spread of the contact hours up to 300 level is desired by the students (Bodunde, 2005). The spread provides opportunity for students to interact more with the ECS lecturers, and enhance their competence in the situational use of the target language (English) as they progress in their studies.

Class Size

It is observed that in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, 34% of the ECS class size is between 151 and 300 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A Sample of ECS Class Size in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions



The breakdown shows that a class size of between 151 and 300 is typical of ECS classroom in Nigerian tertiary institutions as shown in the Polytechnics and Colleges of Education. The modal class of each group and the cumulative percentage (Figure 2) justify the assertion. However, in the university, a class size of 450 and above is the most prevalent since this is the modal class as shown in Figure 2. A class size of less than 150 does not exist in the Colleges of Education, while a class size of 450 and above is not found in the Polytechnic. Ineffective teaching resulting in inadequate learning is likely in a large-sized language class. This is because some of the students may not concentrate as a result of distraction during lectures, particularly when the classroom is not big enough to accommodate them. The teacher's skill in classroom management is put to test thereby impinging effective classroom interaction. Coleman's (1989) findings show pedagogical, class management and affective constraints in managing large classes. In the same vein, Ekpe (2005) observes that large class size affects teaching, students' performance and classroom management. Bodunde's (2005) finding shows students' observation on the effectiveness of small class size on teaching and learning quality making students advocate its adoption for ECS classroom lectures. Aborisade (2009) comments on the nature of class size in African educational setting and submits that these are usually too large to contend with, by both the teachers and even the students.

Students, Lecturers and Institution Management's Attitudes to ECS

Inferences from respondents' submission on the attitudes of students, lecturers of core subjects and institution's Management, as stakeholders to ECS are considered in Table 3. It is very important to consider the attitude of students to ECS as they form the nucleus of the course.

Table 3: Students, Core-Subject Lecturers and Management Staff's Attitudes to ECS

Students' Attitude	University	Polytechnic	CoE	Total
Positive	20(65%)	7(58%)	2(20%)	29(55%)
Negative	3(10%)	2(17%)	1(10%)	6(11%)
Indifferent	8(25%)	3(25%)	7(70%)	18(34%)
Total	31(100%)	12(100%)	10(100%)	53(100%)
Core-Subject Lecturers' Attitude				10
Positive	17(55%)	5(42%)	2(20%)	24(45.2%)
Negative	10(32%)	3(25%)	1(10%)	14(26.4%)
Indifferent	4(13%)	4(33%)	7(70%)	15(28.4%)
Total	31(100%)	12(100%)	10(100%)	53(100%)
Management Staff's Attitude				
Positive	25(80.6%)	10(83.3%)	8(80%)	43(81.1%)
Negative	0	0	0	0
Indifferent	6(19.4%)	2(16.7%)	2(20%)	10(18.9%)
Total	31(100%)	12(100%)	10(100%)	53(100%)

About 65%, 58% and 20% of the students in the University, Polytechnic and College of Education respectively show positive attitude to the course. A high level of indifference (70%) is shown among the students in the Colleges of Education, the institutions meant for teachers' preparation in various disciplines, and language of instruction in schools! This may pose a serious danger to the use of English as the medium of instruction as those who are expected to teach English are averse to learning it! In contrast to this, available data reveals that many Polytechnic students show better positive attitude. In all, more than half of the student population shows positive attitude to ECS.

Most (55%) core-course lecturers in the University show positive attitude towards the teaching of ECS whereas as high as 80% in the Colleges of Education have a negative attitude or are indifferent to the teaching of the ECS. Though 42% of Polytechnic core-subject lecturers are affirmed to have positive attitude towards the teaching of ECS, a higher percentage (58%) constitutes those who are not interested in the teaching of the course. In essence, it is both the teachers and students of Colleges of Education that show high level of indifference to ECS. Generally, the analysis shows that most of the core-subject lecturers show aversion to the teaching of ECS. They are of the opinion that the ideas passed across is the only important thing – the means (language) through which this is done need not cumber the students.

Furthermore, Table 3 also shows Management's positive attitude to the teaching of ECS with the Polytechnics manifesting the highest level of positivity. Predictably, the Management of Colleges of Education showed the highest level of indifference. It is, however, encouraging that none of the Management of the tertiary institutions shows negative attitude to the Course. This means that the institutional support needed for effective running of the Course is provided.

Teaching Facilities

The state of the facilities for ECS is merely average considering the large size of most ECS classes. Thirty-one (58.4%) out of the 53 institutions sampled, have auditoria or classrooms that can conveniently accommodate large class for ECS lectures. Public Address System (PAS) is available for teaching in only 17 (32%) of the institutions. Coping with a large class without the use of PAS wears the teacher out and puts the students on edge thereby affecting the input and output of the teachers and students.

Table 4: Facilities for ECS Teaching

Institutions	LL	A/BC	IF	PAS	MM	RT
University	8	21	16	10	15	2
Polytechnic	2	6	8	4	1	-
CoE	6	4	3	3	3	8
Total	16	31	27	17	19	10

Legend: LL (Language Laboratory); A (Auditorium); BC (Big Classroom); IF (Internet Facilities); PAS (Public Address System); MM (Multimedia); RT (Recorded Text)

Sixteen (30%) out of the 53 institutions had language laboratory which is a major requirement for teaching the speaking skill aspect of ECS. A breakdown shows 8 (15%), 2 (3.7%), 6 (11.3%) are from University, Polytechnic and College of Education respectively with College of Education recording 60% availability of language laboratory. This may be connected with the fact that such institutions are for the training of teachers. Effort is geared towards teaching

teachers-in-training correct and Received Pronunciation (RP). It is rather unfortunate that in this technological age, only 27 institutions (50.9%) have functional internet facilities.

Eighty percent of the sampled Colleges of Education have task-based text books while other institutions rely on available textbooks or materials. The use of books that specifically address the needs of the students is an added instructional material, particularly in large classes. Both teachers and students need to make use of the facilities to enhance teaching and learning; and capacity building. The restrictive use of books is limited to 10 institutions mostly in the Colleges of Education.

Method of Teaching

The teaching methods adopted in teaching ECS are indicated on Figure 3.

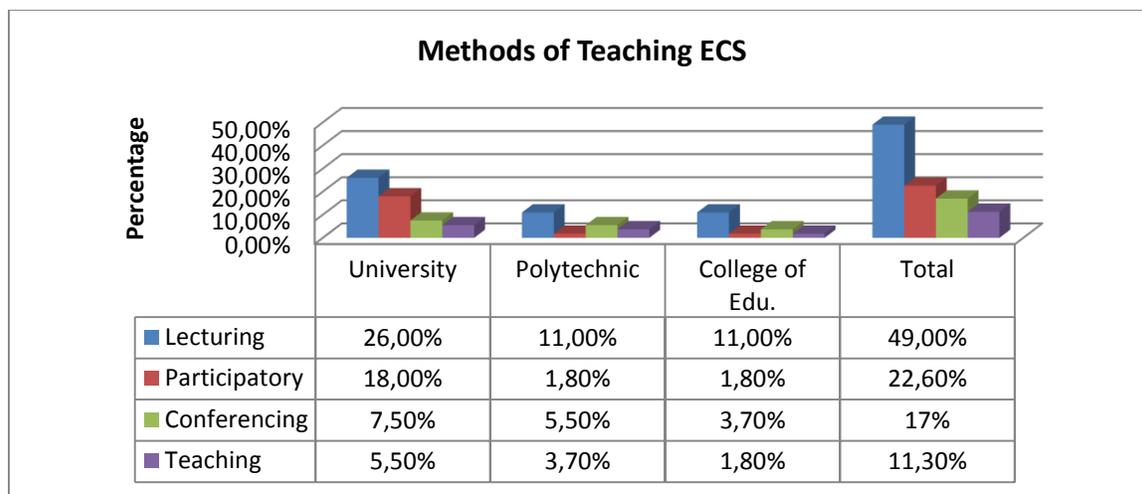


Figure 3: Methods of Teaching ECS

The most-used method is lecturing with 49.1 % of the institutions adopting the method. This is followed by participatory approach with a record of 22.6%. Figure 3 shows that the participatory approach, which is interactive, is rarely used in institutions other than the university. Class size may be responsible for this. In language classes, participatory approach encourages optimal output. An interactive approach, depending on what is to be taught, is

described as best for language teaching and learning (William, 1990; Hackathorn et. al. 2011), and even students adjudge participatory approach best for ECS (Bodunde 2005). Large class-size, however, militates against this and this is why the use of multimedia for presentation and illustration is desirable in such classes. Figure 3 also reveals that contrary to expectation, ‘teaching’ is the least used method in the Colleges of Education. This is surprising as institutions for the training of teachers, teaching and participatory methods ought to have been popular means of knowledge dissemination.

Previous Assessment of Institutions on Students’ Perception of ECS

Students’ perception of courses offered is highly important as it serves as input in the needs assessment and eventual improvement in curriculum development and course delivery (Johns 1991; Azeez 2001; Mohammadi and Mousavi 2013).

Table 5 indicates that very few of the institutions had carried out an assessment of the students’ perception of the teaching of ECS.

Table 5: Previous Assessment of the ECS Course

Type of Institution	No Previous Assessment	Had Previous Assessment
University	24 (77.4%)	7 (22.6%)
Polytechnic	5 (41.7%)	7 (13.2%)
CoE	10 (100%)	0
Total	39 (73.6%)	14 (26.4%)

Thirty-nine (73.6%) of the institutions, out of the fifty-three institutions have never conducted any assessment of the students’ opinion on ECS. It is of note that none of the Colleges of

Education ever conducted such assessment. Failure to conduct such assessment prevents information on need analysis which would have led to better handling of the course.

It was gathered from the 14 institutions that had conducted an assessment of students' perception of ECS that students' opinions vary from burdensome (42.8%), useful (28.6), and relevant (14.2%) to appreciative (14.2%). Many of the students in the University and Polytechnic view ECS as burdensome. This may be because polytechnics are science and technology-based. University students, especially those in specialized institutions are of the opinion that they have learnt enough of English language in the secondary school and, therefore, need learn no more. In the overall analysis, however, majority of the students are said to express positive and encouraging opinions.

Table 6: Students' Perception of ECS

Institutions	Useful	Relevant	Appreciative	Burdensome	Total
University	2 (28.6%)	1 (14.2%)	1(14.2%)	3 (42.8%)	7(50%)
Polytechnic	2 (28.6%)	2 (28.6%)	0 (0)	3 (42.8%)	7(50%)
CoE	0	0	0	0	0
Total	4 (28.6)	3 (21.4)	1 (7.2)	6(42.8)	14(100)

Challenges faced by ECS Teachers

Teachers of ECS gave a catalogue of challenges faced in teaching the course. Table 7 shows an array of such challenges in ranking order. Individually and cumulatively, large class size tops the list (58 %). This challenge, as revealed in Figure 2, seems enormous to the teachers. Bodunde (2005) discovered that students also opine that large class size poses a great

challenge to ECS learning process. Students decry situations where they have to struggle for seats, and be cramped into small classrooms with no provision for public address system for ECS lectures. This makes the learning environment unattractive. Consequently, the students' interest in the course begins to wane because there is a link between motivation and interest.

Table 7: Challenges faced by ECS Lecturers

Challenges	U	Poly.	CoE	Total
Large Class Size	18	7	6	31
Inadequate Facilities	8	7	4	19
Apathy from students	9	6	3	18
No Language Laboratory	12	5	1	18
Poorly Prepared Students	7	3	3	13
Apathy from Content Teachers	5	4	3	12
Inadequate Teachers	3	3	2	8
Truancy (Students)	3	3	2	8
First Language (L1) Interference	5	2	1	8
Negative Attitude to ECS Lecturers	3	1	3	7

Inadequate language laboratory and poorly prepared students ranked 4th and 5th respectively. A poorly prepared student poses a great challenge to teachers because more time is spent in repairing the damage that has been done in such a learner. Ironically, such a student may see himself as good, so it becomes difficult to affect him positively. An instance is the quotation at the introduction of this paper ascribed to a 300 level student. The student was to be helped but

she felt belittled being asked to start learning word formation. English language pronunciation is a big problem to most undergraduates. This is a problem that ought to have been settled either at the primary or secondary school level. The absence of language laboratory at the tertiary level makes the problem perennial. The apathy towards the teaching of ECS is revealed in the attitude of teachers of core-subjects to ECS teachers and the students especially when a clash occurs on the time-table. They are often of the opinion that ECS is not as important as the core courses. Ironically, when there are problems associated with the communicative ability of the students, accusing fingers are pointed at ECS teachers as not doing enough to alleviate students' errors. Some ECS teachers, as identified in this study, experience low esteem resulting from the effect of this negative attitude.

Suggestions on Improving the Teaching of ECS

Table 8 provides, in ranking order, some suggestions on improving the teaching of ECS.

Majority of the respondents advocated a reduction in class size. This will minimize the limitations faced by the lecturers and reduce students' apathy towards ECS lectures. In effect, class management will be easier and distractions will be reduced. Interaction, an important aspect of language acquisition and learning, will be strengthened thereby enhancing the learning and teaching process. This suggestion implies more facilities –classrooms, and provision of basic teaching materials.

Table 8: Suggestions on Improving the Teaching of ECS

Suggestions	U	Poly.	CoE	Total
Reduction in Class Size	15	4	4	23
Provision of Adequate Facilities	10	5	3	18
Organising Seminars for lecturers on ECS	8	4	4	16
Staff Training on Emerging Teaching Technologies	9	4	3	16
Provision of Language Laboratory	10	5	1	16
Better Staffing	9	3	3	15
Students' Language Need Assessment	9	3	3	15
SWOT Analysis of Teaching Methods	8	2	3	13
Inclusion of Literary Studies in ECS Curriculum	6	4	3	13
Motivation of Teachers	6	3	2	11
Better Institutional Support	5	3	3	11
Extend ECS Contact to 300 level	4	3	2	9
Revisit Admission Procedure	4	2	1	7

It is also expedient to increase the number of teachers who will undergo regular training in order to keep abreast of developing teaching methodologies and technologies. A consideration of extension of ECS beyond the first two years will greatly improve students' communicative abilities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The importance of ECS in facilitating and enhancing students' learning and performance cannot be over-emphasised. This study shows that despite the challenges faced by ECS teachers, the Management of the institutions polled still conform to the stipulations of NUC on the contact hours required to teach the course. In order to achieve the set goals of the course, institutions should make available teaching facilities which will make the course as interesting as possible; taking advantage of digital technologies in teaching and providing avenues for interactive and participatory teaching and learning. The provision of well-equipped language laboratories would help improve speaking skills and correct deficiencies. Moreover, it is recommended to have a re-orientation of core-course lecturers and the students towards ECS such that they are encouraged to place on it as much premium as they place on the core courses. Students need to be motivated in order to gain their interest in the course. The introduction of blended learning whereby students are encouraged to make use of available resource like their cell phones in learning would be highly motivational. It is also suggested that, an assessment of the impact of the course on the students need be conducted regularly so as to facilitate the review and improvement of teaching methodologies.

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