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**The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS):  
Unveiling a Remedial Module for Enhancing Listening and  
Speaking Skills among English as Second Language (ESL)  
Students**

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## **The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS): Unveiling a Remedial Module for Enhancing Listening and Speaking Skills among English as Second Language (ESL) Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** This paper is an overview of the listening and speaking skills module titled ‘‘Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS)’’ developed by the writer. An action research, the FAMS module was developed in response to the urgent need to tackle issues relating to ineffective communication via the processes of listening and speaking among ESL students in the Department of English of the Federal College of Education Kano Nigeria. The purpose of designing the module is to provide students with useful and flexible resource materials that gives them the opportunity to continuously practice listening and speaking beyond the classroom.

**Methodology:** Designed on the framework of the ‘Think-Pair-Share’ collaborative approach, the module operates in such a way that students can work or navigate through tasks independently at first and then work in pairs, in groups and or in whole class as well as share ideas and collaborate on tasks and projects.

**Results:** In this paper, the researcher unveils the different sections of the module. Each sections contain informative descriptions and explanations of the contents of each units. Additionally, suggestions for the implementation as well as the benefits of using the module especially by ESL students were provided.

**Unique contribution to practice, theory, and strategy:** Even though, the implementation of the module is still in progress, it envisaged that the outcome will yield positive results. The findings from its pilot testing will be used to improve the module. Finally, it is recommended that stakeholders in Higher Education, such as the government, the private and public sectors, should provide financial support to aid the publication, mass production and dissemination of the module throughout Colleges of Education in Nigeria and beyond.

**Keywords:** *Listening skills, Speaking skills, FAMS, ESL.*

## **Introduction**

By “Foreground Approach”, as used in the title, is meant to depict the prominent role of listening and speaking skills in language acquisition and learning. Research studies have shown that listening and speaking play a complementary role in the process of language acquisition and learning; in fact, both complete each other and cannot be separated (Byrnes, 1984; Rost, 1990; Helgesen, 2003; Richards, 2008; Erickson, 2015, & Sergin, 2017). The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) is a remedial module designed to help students of English as a Second language enhance their listening and speaking abilities. As a remedial module, it was designed to provide more opportunities for practice independent of the routine classroom activities. To this end, FAMS is concerned with practice listening and speaking across the curriculum; it is not tied to any specific content.

## **Background**

It is the reality today that some ESL students perform very poorly in the four skill areas (listening, speaking, reading and writing) of the English language. Specifically, with listening and speaking skills, an observation made by the National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE) accreditation panel during the 2017 accreditation program of the Department of English pointed to these inadequacies on the part of the students. As action research, the FAMS remedial module was borne out of the urgent need to help students to improve on their listening and speaking skills so as to be able to communicate effectively. The module was designed to provide a range of self-learning and student-focused activities for listening and speaking skills development.

## **Literature Review**

Theories of Language Acquisition such as those of Pavlov’s and Skinner’s the behaviourism, Chomsky’s Nativism, Mead’s and Goffman’s Social Interactionist and Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s Cognitivism and others, have been instrumental to the development of theories that have been used to explain Second Language Learning. These theories have form the foundation of common principles and practices of language teaching and learning (Krashen, 2013; & Lightbown & Spada 2013).

From the knowledge gained from these theories, a number of methods/approaches (e.g. Grammar Translation Method, Audio-lingual Method, Silent Way Method, Direct Method, Total Physical Response, Communicative language approach, Task-based approach and so on) and strategies (e.g. Cognitive, Social, Metacognitive, Memory, Determination and so on) have emerged (O’Malley et al, 1985; Richards and Rodgers, 2001) .

Correspondingly, in their attempts to improve on traditional practices, as well as to be in tune with current best practices, researchers have investigated the processes, methods and strategies for teaching and learning listening and speaking skills in a variety of contexts, e.g. O’Malley, et al (1985) ; Molina, (1997); Myers, (2001); Dopemu, (2011); Field, (2012); Melendez, et al (2014); Tavit, (2015); Astorga-Cabezass, (2015); Burn, (2017); Erkek & Batur, (2019) and many others.

Additionally, some researchers have designed, developed and published language teaching and learning programs/modules that are meant to improve not only listening and speaking skills but also reading, writing and other aspects of the language as well. The Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) modules, and

the British Council's Learn English and its free practice IELTS modules on listening, speaking, reading and writing and so on are a few examples of programs and modules for teaching and learning. In addition, there are a number of online programs and modules designed by English language Native speakers that are meant to enhance listening and speaking, such as, Randall's ESL Cyber listening lab and others. (Higgins & John, 1984; Felix, 2001; Randall's' @ Daily ESL.com, 1998).

Generally, the conclusion, that can be drawn from the findings of these studies on the one hand, and the 'teaching points' in the various lessons from the online modules and programs on the other, is that teachers and learners have to be 'intentional' in their approach to handling listening and speaking skills in Second language learning and teaching.

By being 'intentional,' it is meant deliberate and direct teaching of listening and speaking skills, teaching about strategy and strategy use. It is on this backdrop that the Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) module was developed. The activities and tasks are 'intentionally' designed to immerse students in art of learning to listen and speak effective

### **The aim and objectives of FAMS**

The aim of FAMS is to create a flexible and user-friendly module for improving ESL students' competence in listening and speaking skills as the basis for the development of competence in language learning. The objectives include:

1. To help students to improve their listening and speaking abilities.
2. To strengthen the students' communicative competence.
3. To produce good listeners and speakers of English as a second language.

### **The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS): An overview**

The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) is activity driven; it provides models of activities for improving listening and speaking skills. It is also student-centered in the sense that activities are designed to foster and encourage self-learning. With little guidance, students can easily work through the activities on their own and at their own pace. This is true considering that the module is written in simple and straight forward language.

### **The skill areas in the FAMS module**

The two major areas of focus of this module are discussed below:

#### **Listening Skills**

Listening is an active process of constructing meaning from a stream of sounds (Buck, 2001). As an active process, it requires specific, intentional and interactive practice. It is an active purposeful process of making sense of what we hear (Buck, 2001 & Helgesen, 2003). When sounds are produced and received, meaning is constructed and, therefore, response to spoken and/or non-verbal messages is done (Buck, 2001 & Helgesen, 2003). In listening, what matters most is the amount of comprehension that the individual has responded to. The process is hinged on the fact that the individual tries to understand the intended message of the oral text to respond to oral communication. It has been reported that in relation to the language skills, the percentage of the use of listening skills with formal years of training in daily life amounts to forty five (45%)

(Helgesen, 2003; Solak & Bayar, 2007). It is to be noted that listening does not require any formal years of training; it begins from the mother's womb (Solak & Bayar, 2007). This being the case, a good choice of listening text will be necessary to improve learners' abilities, considering that students using FAMS are second language users.

### **Speaking Skills**

Speaking and listening skills complement each other. Research evidences have shown that listening and paying conscious attention to sound inputs from native speakers of a language, imitation and practice are instrumental to learning to speak in such a language especially in a second language learning situation (Krashen, 1981; O'Malley et al, 1985; Ellis, 1994; Krashen 2013 and Ogenyi, 2015).

The importance of speaking as a skill in language learning is such that without speech no communication can be most effective. It is also argued that native speakers best utter spoken words correctly but as far as non-native speakers are concerned, the ability to speak like a near-native speaker is anything less impeccable to 80 % (Helgesen, 2003; Solak & Bayar, 2007;) In other words, the speaking ability comes naturally with an individual born or grown up in an environment (Solak & Bayar, 2007; Richards, 2008; Erickson, 2015 and Sergin. 2017). It is hoped that after going through the FAMS module, students should be able to listen and speak - "to have a way with words" in an attribute that is admired and expected in those who will become leaders in, for example, business, government and schools.

### **The main features of the Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) module**

There are two major units in FAMS, namely listening and speaking skills. Each unit consists of the following:

#### **i. Learning outcomes**

These are assessment tools that allow learners to quantify their performance after they must go through the unit. They also allow teachers to assess the impact of instruction on students' achievements. The learning outcomes provide direction, guidance and feedback to learning and instruction. They also provide motivation for learning.

#### **ii. Activities**

These are activities designed to bring about and create conditions for learning. The activities in FAMS are so designed as to stimulate experiential learning and mobilise conceptual thinking and analytical discussions.

The activities are largely student-centred as such the teacher's role is simply that of a facilitator. In the module, there are three types of activities namely practice activities, further practice activities and language games.

By design, the first activity in each unit of FAMS, e.g. *Activity 1.1 and Activity 2.1*, provides the conceptual underpinning for task performance in subsequent practice activities. In other words, they serve as a backdrop for understanding the skills students learn about. In doing this, the facilitator is expected to initiate these discussions by asking the students some thought provoking questions that will facilitate general class participation. An example from the module is provided below:

### **Activity 1.1: Learning about Listening Skills**

#### **a. The concept of Listening, Listening Skills, importance and problems**

In a 15-20 minute talk, revisit the concept of listening as an important skill in language learning. Let students take notes as they listen.

It should be noted that apart from the above, all other activities in the unit are student-centered activities, such as:

- i. Practice activities: As the name implies, these activities provide the student with more and more practice opportunities using the target teaching points.
- ii. Further practice activities and games: These consist of more activities and language games to help to consolidate learning. Some of the activities and games can be conducted in the class as individual, pair or group activities and games. Some examples of further practice activities and games from the module are seen below:

#### **1.3. Further listening practice activities and games**

**a. Listen and repeat text of Tape 1 and 2, go to (@YouTube: <http://www.coreevolve.com>).**

*i. Work in pairs. Listen and repeat what is heard (from single words, phrases, clauses to longer text/ discourse) in the text of Tape 1 to your partner.*

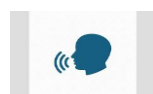
#### **Language game: Minimal pair race**

##### **Procedures:**

1. Divide the students into two groups.
2. Draw two columns on the board and label them A and B. Write any contrastive consonant or vowel sounds under each label, e.g., A is /p/ and B is /f/ or A is /e/ and B is /ei/ and so on.

##### **iii. User friendly icons/images**

These are images, symbols or graphic representations. These icons enable students to easily navigate through each of the units. Some notable icons used in FAMS include:



Practice speaking icon



listening icon



Practice dialogue



Practice listening icon



Speaking skill



Practice dialogue

(Sources: [www.flaticon.com](http://www.flaticon.com); [www.iconfinder.com](http://www.iconfinder.com))



#### **iv. Use of the Blended learning delivery mode**

The FAMS module is designed in such a way as to incorporate the use of blended learning. It was originally associated with corporate training in the business world before it was used in higher education and recently in English Language Teaching (ELT). It has been variously defined by scholars and researchers to mean a learning programme which involves the use, amalgamation, integration and combination of two modes of instruction delivery types: traditional face-to-face and technologically mediated (e.g., internet; offline and online learning, live and collaborative learning, interactive whiteboards and language laboratories) in a classroom and a single teaching and learning environment (Aborisade, 2013). These modes of instruction delivery have been incorporated in this module. For example: Activities 1 in each of the two units of the FAMS module require the use of the traditional face-to-face lecture method to revise some concepts in listening skills, while other activities in all the subsequent units are delivered using technologically mediated instruction delivery.

Generally, the online resources are from YouTube and include: Free practice listening and speaking tasks @takeeilts@britishcouncil.org; 'How to tell interesting stories'' @YouTube: <http://www.coreevolve.com>, Introduction to stress and intonation by Jennifer ESL on @YouTube @[www.englishwithjennifer.com](http://www.englishwithjennifer.com) and Sentence stress and intonation in English/A complete guide on YouTube by Pronunciation by Emma and <http://engfluent.com/imitation-tutorial>.

#### **v. Task assessment**

This is an important feature of the FAMS module. It enables the facilitator and students to measure their progress in all the tasks. It is an assessment given at the end of each task unit to consolidate learning.

#### **The roles in FAMS listening and speaking skills module**

The module is meant for students of English as Second language (ESL). However, it can also be adopted or adapted to suit students of English as Foreign language (EFL), and or English Speakers of other languages (ESOL) as well. There are two major roles namely:

##### **1. The teacher as a facilitator**

The role of the teacher in FAMS is that of a facilitator. As a facilitator, he/she is responsible for organising the class, initiating, guiding, monitoring, supervising and assessing the activities conducted during each session. To this end, for each skill area, the learning outcomes as well as students' activities have been clearly defined and specified. In this module, the teacher's role is that of a facilitator.

##### **2. The students as active participants**

The students are active participants in the FAMS module. As participants, they work in whole class, in groups, in pairs and/or individually to do the various listening and speaking tasks, activities and games in the module.

#### **Suggestions for facilitating effective listening and speaking using the FAMS module**

The main purpose of designing the FAMS module is to provide some sort of remedial program that enables students to improve their listening and speaking practices. Therefore, its content is not tied to a specific course area. FAMS is very simple, flexible and user friendly; it can be used by

all students who desire to improve their listening and speaking abilities regardless of their courses of study. However, it is important to note that despite its simplicity, flexibility and user-friendliness, students need some training to help them to understand how the module operates before they can use it as a self-study kit.

In order to fully maximize the benefits of the FAMS, it is suggested that the training should be highly student-centred and activity based. The teacher/facilitator should simply guide them through the contents and activities. It is important that students are made to navigate through the module easily and smoothly so as to encourage independence and self-discovery. As students immerse themselves in the various units of the module, all activities are to be conducted in an interactive way either in pairs, groups or in whole class.

It should be noted that in order to successfully enhance the students' listening and speaking skills using this module, a small or medium size class will be needed. This will enable them to optimize their potential. The use of large and overcrowded classrooms will not provide the needed effect. With large overcrowded classrooms, it is advised that the teacher/ facilitator divides the students into manageable sizes. Each size should be trained separately.

It is important as well as recommended that the language laboratory should be maximally utilized during the listening and speaking skills training. The digital language laboratory provides the needed opportunity for blended learning. Students can easily switch between activities, e.g., from online activities to offline ones. For example, they can go online to listen to YouTube listening and speaking audio recordings and/or real time live streaming and afterwards go offline to use the information gathered to answer questions.

All the listening and speaking tasks adopted from online IELTS and other YouTube resources require students to go online in real time to either directly use or download the materials for the tasks. Therefore, the facilitator should ensure that all contents are properly downloaded and sent to students' android mobile phones in advance. However, if the materials are only available online in 'real time', the facilitator with the help of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) staff in the language laboratory should guide the students toward accessing such materials.

As has already been mentioned, FAMS is activity driven. Therefore, it is important that students are made to carry out the language activities and games in the classroom either in pairs, in groups or as a whole class. The activities and games simplify and consolidate learning and motivate and boost interest.

### **The benefit of using the FAMS module**

The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) module helps in enhancing the students' listening and speaking skills as well as boosting their self-confidence and self-esteem thereby reducing, to the barest minimum, their apprehensions towards studying the English language. The module also provides them with the opportunity to practice listening and speaking using sophisticated native speaker models. To sum it up, FAMS module is beneficial in terms of its adoptability and adaptability. The procedures, activities and games used in the module can easily be adopted/adapted in any type of language learning context e.g. in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).



## Conclusion

As at the time of this overview, the FAMS module was still a work in progress in terms of its implementation. Trial implementation began in the 2021/ 2022 academic year. Newly admitted NCE 100 Level students into the School of Languages of the Federal College of Education, Kano will serve as the target population. From this population, about two hundred (200) randomly selected students will be trained in groups of fifty students each over the course of the semester.

The choice of NCE 100 Level students is for monitoring and evaluation purposes. As “freshers” in an NCE programme that runs for three (3) years, it will be much easier to monitor and evaluate their progress on a frequent basis as they proceed in their programmes and as they move from one level to the other. Furthermore, as freshers, it is hoped that the FAMS training will give them an early start/opportunity to improve their academic pursuits, thereby starting them on the “right footing.” The outcome of the training will enable the developer/researcher to re - evaluate the module in relation to its aim and objectives.

The Foreground Approach to Motivating Students (FAMS) was developed as a remedial listening and speaking skills learning course. FAMS is student-centred, activity-based, user-friendly and flexible. It can be used by all students irrespective of their course of study.

## Recommendation

It is recommended that stakeholders in Higher Education, such as the government, the private and public sectors, should provide financial support to aid the publication, mass production and dissemination of the module throughout Colleges of Education in Nigeria and beyond.

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