

Navigating Language Barriers: Mother Tongue Interference in English Proficiency among Secondary School Students in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of mother tongue interference on English language usage among secondary school students in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria. As a post-colonial nation with over 500 indigenous languages, Nigeria faces challenges in English acquisition within its multilingual context. The research aims to identify the specific obstacles students face, explore factors hindering their English language learning, and assess teachers' perceptions of how mother tongue interference affects student performance in English language. Employing a descriptive survey design, data were collected from 90 respondents across 12 public secondary schools using structured questionnaires. The findings reveal significant linguistic interference at morphological, syntactical, and phonological levels, exacerbated by socio-economic challenges and inadequate teaching methods. These results highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to enhance English language proficiency and improve educational standards in the region. This study offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers aiming to mitigate the effects of mother tongue interference on English acquisition among secondary school students in Egor.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Interference, English Language, Acquisition, and Secondary School Students

Introduction

English is a global language, widely spoken as a native language in countries such as Britain and America, and recognized as the official language in approximately 70 nations. In many post-colonial contexts, especially in Africa, English has transitioned into a crucial mode of communication, becoming the official language in several countries. UNESCO's 1953 report highlighted the importance of mother tongue instruction, emphasizing its psychological, sociological, and educational benefits, which facilitate better learning and community identification (UNESCO, 1953,).

In Nigeria, where over 500 indigenous languages exist. English serves as the official language for administration and commerce. Its role as a lingua franca among diverse ethnic groups underscores its significance in enhancing communication across the nation. As Salami (2012) noted, there is an urgent need to improve English language proficiency among school children, particularly as English education begins as early as primary school, with students encouraged to communicate solely in English while on school premises.

However, the prevalence of mother tongue usage presents challenges in achieving effective English communication skills. This raises concerns about the impact of mother tongue interference on English language acquisition among students. Awoniyi (2014) defined mother tongue as the language learned in early childhood, shaping thought and communication. Research indicates that the interplay between English and Nigeria's indigenous languages has led to noticeable interference and pedagogical issues in English education (Brown, 2016). Recent studies have shown a decline in English proficiency among secondary school students, with Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2018) noting a rise in failure rates in English examinations from 53.36% in 2016 to 72.71% in 2018. This deterioration, attributed to inadequate language environments, has negatively impacted academic performance and employability, highlighting a critical need for further investigation into mother tongue interference in English language use among secondary school students in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State.

Statement of Problem

In a diverse society like Nigeria, where multiple languages coexist, the acquisition and use of a second language, particularly English language, are essential for promoting

mutual understanding. In Egor Local Government Area of Edo State, while Bini is the predominant language, many residents speak other indigenous languages, contributing to the region's multilingual landscape. English serves as the primary medium of communication due to Nigeria's colonial history with Britain. However, observations of secondary school students in Egor reveal significant linguistic interference at morphological, syntactical, and phonological levels, highlighting the need for this study to explore the underlying issues.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to investigate mother tongue interference in English language usage among secondary school students in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. identify the challenges students face in speaking English
2. explore the factors hindering their acquisition of English as a second language
3. assess teachers' perceptions of how mother tongue interference affects student performance in English
4. Contribute to existing literature to support future research.

Research Questions

This research was directed by the following questions:

1. Students in Egor L.G.A, Edo State, face pronunciation difficulties, grammatical errors, and code-mixing due to interference from their mother tongue when speaking English.
2. Students' difficulties in learning English as a second language are influenced by factors such as limited exposure to English, lack of instructional materials, and ineffective teaching methods.

3. Teachers perceive mother tongue interference as a major barrier to students' proficiency in English, negatively affecting their academic performance in secondary schools in Egor L.G.A, Edo State.

Hypotheses

The study was guided by the following hypotheses:

1. There are significant differences when these students speak a language other than their mother tongue.
2. Code-mixing and code-switching are common in language interference.
3. Students recognize the influence of their indigenous language's intonation patterns when speaking their second language.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to highlight the factors that contribute to mother tongue interference in learning English. It would assist both teachers and students in identifying challenges related to this interference. Additionally, the research would serve as a valuable resource for future studies on mother tongue interference, particularly in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study focuses specifically on mother tongue interference among secondary school students in Egor Local Government Area of Edo State.

Methodology

The study employs a descriptive survey design to collect data from 12 public secondary schools in the Egor Local Government Area of Edo State. This approach allows the

researcher to gather insights about the current situation through questionnaires. A sample of 90 respondents was selected using stratified random sampling, with eight individuals chosen from each school. The questionnaire consisted of two parts: Part A collected demographic information, while Part B included three sections addressing the challenges of using mother tongue in spoken English, factors affecting English language learning, and teachers' perceptions of mother tongue interference in students' performance. Questionnaires were administered to students in grades SS1-SS3, and the data were analyzed using statistical methods.

A four-point Likert scale was used with the following options: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). Mean ratings of 2.5 was used as the benchmark

RESULT

Presentation of Socio-Demographic Characteristics

Below is the description of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Table 1: Gender Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
Male	23	25.55%
Female	67	74.44%
Total	90	100.0%

Table 2: Age Distribution of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
12-14 Years	3	3.33%
14-16 Years	52	57.78%
17 Years and above	35	38.88
Total	90	100.0%

Research Question 1: What challenges related to their mother tongue do students encounter when speaking English in Egor L.G.A, Edo State?

Table 3: Mean responses on challenges mother tongue brings to students in the use of spoken English

S/N	Items	SD	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
1	There are variations in both the forms and meanings of English compared to the native language	45	35	10	0	3.38	Agreed
2	Students often substitute a sound with one from their native language if that particular sound is absent in their mother tongue.	50	20	12	8	3.24	Agreed
3	Students struggle with using the English language because they have already developed communicative competence in their native language.	48	40	2	0	3.51	Agreed
4	The learner chooses features from their own language that are similar to those of the target language.	52	30	6	2	3.47	Agreed
5	Students often spell English words as though they are writing in their native language.	60	10	15	5	3.39	Agreed

Table 3 indicates that:

1. **Differences in Forms and Meanings** – Students struggle with variations between English and their native language (**Mean: 3.38**).
2. **Phonetic Substitutions** – They replace unfamiliar English sounds with similar ones from their mother tongue (**Mean: 3.24**).
3. **Language Competence Interference** – Prior fluency in their native language makes English usage more difficult (**Mean: 3.51**).
4. **Language Transfer** – Learners apply features from their native language that resemble English (**Mean: 3.47**).
5. **Spelling Influence** – Students spell English words based on their native language's writing system (**Mean: 3.39**).

The **mean average of all responses is 3.40**, indicating a strong agreement that mother tongue interference significantly impacts students' spoken English proficiency.

Research Question 2: What factors contribute to students' difficulties in learning English as a second language?

Table 4: Factors responsible for the students' inability to learn English Language as a second language

S/N	Item	SD	A	D	SD	Mean	Remark
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6	Students' low socio-economic backgrounds hinder their ability to learn English as a second language.	48	40	2	0	3.51	Agreed
7	The methods used for learning English are a key reason why students struggle to acquire it as a second language.	50	25	10	5	3.33	Agreed
8	Cultural factors play a role in students' inability to learn English as a second language.	40	20	15	5	2.83	Agreed
9	Teachers are not effectively teaching the English language	48	40	2	0	3.51	Agreed
10	Teachers' knowledge and personality impact students' ability to learn the English language.	20	15	40	15	2.44	Disagreed
11	The student-teacher relationship influences students' ability to learn English as a second language.	30	15	30	15	2.67	Agreed
12	Students' attitudes toward English contribute to their difficulty in learning the language.	48	23	12	7	3.24	Agreed

Table 4 reveals that respondents largely agreed that most identified factors contribute to students' challenges in learning English as a second language. However, they disagreed that teachers' knowledge and personality play a significant role. The mean scores for the statements ranged from 2.44 to 3.51, with all but item 10 surpassing the cut-off point of 2.50.

Research Question 3: How do teachers perceive the impact of mother tongue interference on students' performance in English in secondary schools in Egor L.G.A, Edo State?

Table 5: Perception of teachers on mother tongue interference on the performance of students in English Language in Secondary Schools in Egor L.G.A.

S/N	ITEM	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Remarks
13	The learner's attempt to speak in their native language is shaped not only by the sounds that exist in that language but also by how those sounds are organized.	28	15	32	15	2.62	Agreed
14	Morphological and syntactical systems from the mother tongue are frequently directly transferred to English utterances.	35	20	30	5	2.94	Agreed
15	The mother tongue interferes with the use of English tenses, countable and	38	22	26	4	3.04	Agreed

	uncountable nouns, articles, and prepositions.						
16	A child who thinks in their mother tongue but tries to express themselves in a foreign language often experiences significant linguistic confusion and difficulty.	20	34	18	18	2.62	Agreed
17	Errors in the first language hinder the acquisition of English skills, negatively affecting learners' performance in the language.	18	17	38	17	2.40	Disagreed
18	Interference involves either positive or negative transfer of linguistic knowledge from one language to another during performance.	31	22	28	9	2.83	Agreed

Table 5 indicates that:

1. **Phonetic Influence** – A learner's attempt to speak English is influenced by the sounds and structure of their native language (**Mean: 2.62**).
2. **Morphological & Syntactical Transfer** – Native language structures are frequently transferred to English speech (**Mean: 2.94**).
3. **Grammar Interference** – The mother tongue affects English tenses, articles, prepositions, and noun usage (**Mean: 3.04**).
4. **Linguistic Confusion** – Thinking in the native language while speaking English leads to difficulties (**Mean: 2.62**).
5. **Impact of First Language Errors** – Teachers **disagreed** that errors from the first language significantly hinder English learning (**Mean: 2.40**).
6. **Language Transfer** – Teachers acknowledge that mother tongue interference can have both positive and negative effects on English performance (**Mean: 2.83**).

With a **mean average of 2.74 which is above the mean cut off of 2.5**, the findings suggest that while **mother tongue interference influences students' English proficiency, its impact varies**, with some aspects being more disruptive than others.

Findings Based on the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There are significant differences when students speak a language other than their mother tongue.

- The findings from **Table 3** confirm that students struggle with **variations in forms and meanings** (Mean: 3.38) and **language transfer** (Mean: 3.47), indicating that their native language significantly influences how they use English.
- **Table 5** also supports this, as teachers agree that **morphological and syntactical structures** from the mother tongue are frequently transferred to English (Mean: 2.94).

Conclusion: Accepted – There are notable differences when students speak English compared to their mother tongue.

Hypothesis 2: Code-mixing and code-switching are common in language interference.

- The **high mean scores in Table 3** (e.g., phonetic substitutions: 3.24, spelling influence: 3.39) indicate that students incorporate elements of their native language into English.
- **Table 5** further supports this with a mean of 2.83 for language transfer, suggesting that interference involves both **positive and negative linguistic transfers**.

Code-mixing and code-switching are implied as common occurrences.

Hypothesis 3: Students recognize the influence of their indigenous language's intonation patterns when speaking their second language.

- **Table 3** highlights that **students substitute sounds** when speaking English (Mean: 3.24), and their existing communicative competence in their native language affects their English use (Mean: 3.51).
- **Table 5** shows that students' speech is influenced by their native languages **sound system and structure** (Mean: 2.62).

Students acknowledge how their native language affects their English pronunciation and speech patterns.

Discussions of Findings

The findings reveal several challenges related to mother tongue interference in students' spoken English. Table 3 points out issues such as discrepancies in forms and meanings between English and the native language, problems with phoneme replacement, and learners' reliance on features of their native language, all of which negatively affect English communication.

Table 4 identifies several factors that hinder students' ability to learn English as a second language, including poor socio-economic backgrounds, types of learning media, cultural influences, inadequate teaching methods, and teachers' knowledge and attitudes.

Table 5 indicates that teachers believe students' attempts to speak English are influenced not just by the sounds of their mother tongue but also by its phonetic, morphological, and syntactical structures. Teachers note that this interference complicates the use of English tenses, countable and uncountable nouns, articles, and prepositions. This implies that the assumption that learners naturally acquire English skills through classroom activities is misguided, resulting in a lack of confidence during English conversations. To tackle these challenges, it is essential to address specific phonetic aspects of spoken English within the Nigerian context, helping learners develop a more native-like accent.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that mother tongue negatively impacts secondary school students' use of English in Egor L.G.A. of Edo State, disrupting effective communication, particularly between teachers and students. Additional factors hindering English learning include socio-cultural backgrounds, learning media, and ineffective teaching methods employed by English teachers. Feedback from English teachers confirms that students lack the necessary communicative skills in the language. Overall, the poor proficiency in English poses a significant risk to educational standards in the area, the state, and the country if these issues are not addressed promptly. English teachers should work to rectify these challenges in the classroom.

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