

Effects of Mother Tongue on Students' Academic Performance in Taraba State University, Jalingo: An Overview of English Language

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Abstract

This study investigates the affects of mother tongue interference on students' performance in English speaking, writing, and overall academic achievements at Taraba State University. The participants included 20 lecturers and 50 students, representing 30% and 70% of the total sample population, respectively. The primary objective was to explore how the frequent use of the mother tongue affects students' proficiency in English and their academic success in English language courses. The study is grounded in interlanguage theory, which explains how learners' native language influences their second language acquisition. Using a descriptive research design, data were collected through a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire, with responses ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The major findings revealed that 20 lecturers agreed and 50 students strongly agreed that mother tongue interference negatively affects English speaking and writing skills. Similarly, 17 lecturers agreed, and 45 students strongly agreed that it also affects students' academic achievements in English courses. The study concludes that mother tongue interference is a significant barrier to English language proficiency and academic performance. Based on these findings, it is recommended that educational institutions provide professional development for lecturers and offer language support programs for students. Furthermore, policymakers should implement curriculum reforms that balance the use of mother tongue and English to enhance learning outcomes.

Keywords: *Mother tongue, English, Academic achievement, Interlanguage, Taraba State University.*

Introduction

The rationale for teaching and learning English in Nigerian tertiary institutions, such as Taraba State University, lies in the need to develop communicative competence in both speaking and writing. English plays a crucial role as the language of instruction, an official language, and a national language. It is also widely recognized for its global significance. Given these factors, the study emphasizes the importance of identifying and addressing challenges faced by L2 learners in the study area. The goal is to ensure that students achieve the desired level of linguistic competence for effective communication in English (Moses, Baba & Abubakar, 2018).

Linguistic competence reflects an individual's knowledge of language forms, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Alo, 2003). Dell Hymes introduced the concept of communicative competence to explain the knowledge speakers and listeners possess to communicate appropriately in different social contexts (Chomsky, 1965). This notion is central to sociolinguistics and other socially oriented approaches to language studies. Communicative competence refers to the ability to use language in a culturally appropriate manner, making meaning and accomplishing social tasks with fluency and efficiency through interaction (Tarvin, 2014). In this context, communicative competence is seen as the ability to use English according to its rules and conventions, enabling proper interaction in educational settings.

This study focuses on English as L2 within the framework of communicative competence, particularly in Taraba State University. It investigates the challenges that arise when students rely on their mother tongue, both during and after English classes. The persistent use of the mother tongue interferes with the learning process of English, creating barriers to achieving the desired communicative competence. Previous studies have noted that the mother tongue can affect academic performance in English, but most have not examined its specific impact in this context. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap in the literature by exploring how the mother tongue affects students' academic performance in English at Taraba State University.

To fully engage in communication, L2 learners must develop certain competencies. They require the biological ability to articulate the appropriate sounds, a brain that can formulate ideas, and mastery of the English language structure to express complex messages. They also need an understanding of how to order words correctly and awareness of the social context in which communication takes place. Furthermore, they must be cognizant of the beliefs and knowledge of others, understanding how their utterances will be interpreted. This study investigates how reliance on the mother tongue influences these processes, particularly in speaking and writing, and aims to offer solutions for improving English proficiency among students at Taraba State University.

Statement of the problem

It is the responsibility of language teachers to assist L2 learners in using English effectively in real-life situations. Students must engage with and process the English language they have encountered during their educational experience. This is crucial for their success in various socio-cultural contexts, such as classrooms, workplaces, or business environments. Without sufficient access to the English language, students have fewer opportunities and less power to participate as equal members of social interactions. Over-reliance on the mother tongue places them at a disadvantage, necessitating a strong understanding of the target language to manage the interactional challenges they face. The issue here is directly linked to the academic performance of students at Taraba State University in English, which has been declining in recent years. Outcomes at the university reflect this decline. For example, English remains one of the major challenges students have faced since the institution's establishment. Despite being in existence for over many years, English continues to be a significant academic hurdle, largely due to the frequent use of the mother tongue, which negatively affects students' academic performance in English.

Aim and objectives

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of mother tongue usage on students' academic performance in English at Taraba State University, Jalingo. The specific objectives are to:

- I. determine how the frequent use of the mother tongue affects students' performance in English speaking and writing skills.
- II. assess the extent to which mother tongue interference affects students' overall academic achievements in English language courses.

Research Questions:

- I. How does the frequent use of the mother tongue affect students' performance in English speaking and writing at Taraba State University?
- II. To what extent does mother tongue interference affect students' overall academic performance in English language courses?

Conceptual review

An overview of Taraba State University

Taraba State University (TSU), Jalingo, was established in 2008 with the primary aim of providing quality education and fostering the intellectual development of students within and outside the state. The creation of the university was part of a broader effort by the Taraba State government to improve access to higher education in northeastern Nigeria. Since its inception, TSU has grown into a centre for academic excellence, offering a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs across various faculties, including the arts, sciences, education, and social sciences (Ali & Ibrahim, 2019).

English language plays a crucial role in the university's academic environment, as it is the primary medium of instruction across all disciplines. The importance of English in Nigerian tertiary education is deeply rooted in the country's colonial history and its status as an official language. According to Oyetade (2014), English continues to dominate as the language of instruction in Nigerian universities due to its unifying role in a multilingual society. At TSU, proficiency in English is not only essential for academic success but also for effective communication in diverse social and professional contexts. The university's General Studies Unit mandates English language courses for all first-year students, ensuring they develop the necessary linguistic competence to succeed in their respective fields (Alo, 2003).

Furthermore, TSU's curriculum reflects the importance of English as a global language, recognizing its role in advancing students' academic and professional careers. Scholars like Bamgbose (2011) emphasize that English, as the language of education in Nigeria, offers students access to global knowledge and opportunities. Thus, the university's connection to English language education remains central to its mission of producing graduates who can compete both nationally and internationally.

Concept of mother tongue

The concept of "mother tongue" generally refers to the first language or native language that an individual acquires from birth. According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2020), the mother tongue is the language that a child learns in the home environment and becomes proficient in through natural interactions with family members. It forms the foundation for the individual's later language development and cognitive abilities. For Skutnabb-Kangas, the mother tongue is more than just the first language spoken; it is integral to a person's cultural and social identity.

In a similar vein, Baker (2011) emphasizes that the mother tongue serves as the primary medium through which an individual first encounters the world, develops thinking processes, and constructs their reality. He explains that the mother tongue is crucial in early education because it provides a linguistic framework that supports learning additional languages and subjects. Baker argues that the mother tongue can affect academic performance when it is not utilized in the education system, especially in multilingual settings.

Crystal (2010) offers another perspective by asserting that the mother tongue is a key element of cultural transmission and preservation. He notes that when a language is passed down through generations, it keeps traditions, values, and communal identity alive. The mother tongue acts as a vehicle for expressing emotions, thoughts, and heritage in ways that other languages may not.

In summary, the mother tongue is fundamental to individual identity, learning, and cultural continuity, as observed by these scholars.

English language and university education nexus

The nexus between English language and university education is critical, particularly in multilingual nations like Nigeria, where English serves as the medium of instruction. English is not only a subject of study but also the primary language through which knowledge is imparted across various disciplines. Scholars emphasize the role of English in fostering academic success and enabling students to access global knowledge. For instance, Oyetade (2014) points out that English facilitates communication in academic settings and remains the dominant language of instruction in Nigerian universities. Without proficiency in English, students often struggle with understanding complex concepts, participating in discussions, and performing well in examinations.

English also enhances students' employability and global competitiveness. According to Bamgbose (2011), English functions as a bridge to the international academic community, giving students access to a wide range of scholarly materials and opportunities. Proficiency in English enables students to engage with the global economy and participate in international collaborations.

Moreover, as highlighted by Alo (2003), the teaching of English in universities is essential for developing communicative competence, which is necessary for both academic and professional success. Universities, therefore, play a pivotal role in improving students' English language skills, ensuring that they are well-prepared for the demands of the global job market.

Empirical review

Garba (2019) investigated the effects of Hausa, a native language in northeastern Nigeria, on students' academic performance in English at tertiary institutions. The study used a mixed-method approach, collecting data through surveys and focus group discussions with students from two polytechnics. Results indicated that interference from Hausa phonology and syntax negatively impacted students' writing and speaking proficiency in English, leading to lower academic performance. Garba recommended enhanced phonetic training to mitigate L1 interference but did not provide a comprehensive solution for non-Hausa students. While the study sheds light on phonological and syntactic interference, its limitation lies in the narrow scope focused solely on Hausa-speaking students, neglecting other native languages in the region.

Adewale and Yusuf (2020) explored the impact of Yoruba as a native language on students' English performance in polytechnics across Nigeria, focusing on southwestern institutions. Their findings suggested that Yoruba's tonal nature causes students to mispronounce English words, leading to reduced comprehension and poor academic outcomes. They employed a quasi-experimental design with pre-tests and post-tests to compare groups taught using bilingual methods and monolingual methods. While bilingual education improved performance, their study's limitation lies in its exclusive focus on Yoruba, ignoring how other native languages might differently affect English learning, particularly in non-southwestern contexts.

Baba (2021) examined the relationship between Kanuri, another native language in northeastern Nigeria, and students' performance in English at polytechnic institutions. Using a cross-sectional survey design, Baba analysed responses from 300 students in Yobe State, finding that Kanuri-speaking students struggled with English grammatical structures, which affected their academic writing. The study highlighted that L1 interference in sentence construction was a significant barrier to mastering English. However, a notable limitation was its reliance on self-reported data without direct assessment of English performance through objective tests or academic records, making it difficult to measure the actual impact.

Therefore, the existing studies focus narrowly on single native languages (Hausa, Yoruba, and Kanuri) and often rely on limited methods such as self-reports or regional case studies. The present study will fill these gaps by conducting a more comprehensive investigation of the effects of multiple mother tongue languages on English academic performance, using both qualitative and quantitative data, in Taraba State University. This broader scope will provide a more inclusive and accurate picture of language interference in English learning across different linguistic groups.

Theoretical framework

The Interlanguage Theory, proposed by Larry Selinker in 1972, forms the theoretical foundation of this study. Interlanguage refers to the evolving linguistic system that language learners develop as they acquire a second language. According to the theory, learners blend rules from their mother tongue (L1) and the target language (L2), resulting in a hybrid linguistic system. This process occurs as learners try to communicate in the target language but face interference from their native language structures, including writing and speaking in the context

of communication within the study area. The students learning English may unconsciously apply patterns from their mother tongue, leading to difficulties in mastering English grammar and vocabulary. This theory helps explain why students' performance in English may be impacted by linguistic interference from their first language. By anchoring the study in this framework, the research explores how this interlanguage development affects academic outcomes in English.

Method

Research design

This study utilized a descriptive survey design, which is appropriate for investigating and understanding existing conditions, relationships, opinions, and trends within the population under study. A descriptive survey seeks to provide an accurate depiction of the present situation, while also considering how past events or influences may have contributed to current conditions. This design is well-suited for examining ongoing processes, effects, and emerging patterns, offering insight into how various factors interact within a specific context. By focusing on the current state of affairs, the study aims to present a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

Population and sample

For this study, a simple random sampling technique was employed to ensure a fair and unbiased selection of participants. The sample comprised 30 academic staff members and 70 students drawn from Taraba State University. In total, 30 lecturers and 70 students were involved in the study, representing a diverse group within the institution. The random sampling method ensured that all participants had an equal opportunity to be chosen, thus enhancing the credibility and generalizability of the results. This approach not only provided a comprehensive sample but also allowed the researchers to gather data from both faculty and students, offering a balanced perspective.

The combination of lecturers and students in the sample enabled a thorough investigation of the conditions and relationships within the educational environment, contributing to a more holistic understanding of the research topic. By carefully selecting participants across different faculties and departments, the study aimed to capture a broad spectrum of insights that would be applicable to the wider context of educational environments in similar settings.

Data analysis

The data collected from the study was analysed using simple percentage. This ensured an easily understandable representation of the responses. Simple percentage calculations allowed for a clear depiction of the distribution of responses across the participant groups, enabling the researchers to identify trends and relationships within the data. This approach facilitated an accurate and comprehensive understanding of the research findings, providing valuable insights into the conditions and opinions of the participants.

Judgement rule:

Any response below 24% is considered an insignificant finding and is excluded from the analysis. This is based on using simple percentage as the data analysis instrument.

Results and discussion

In this study, the analysis of the impact of frequent use of the mother tongue on students' performance in English speaking and writing skills was conducted using a sample population composed of lecturers and students. The total population was divided, with 30% of the sample being lecturers and 70% being students. The findings were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).

According to the results, a significant majority of the respondents indicated that the frequent use of the mother tongue affects students' performance in English. Out of the sample, 20 lecturers (representing 30% of the population) agreed that this was an issue, while 50 students (representing 70%) strongly agreed.

The analysis of the lecturers' responses, who constitute 30% of the total sample population, indicates that 20 lecturers (28.6% of the entire sample) agreed that the frequent use of the mother tongue negatively affects students' performance in English speaking and writing skills. This unanimous agreement among the lecturers suggests that they recognize mother tongue interference as a significant barrier to English language proficiency, especially in academic settings where English is the medium of instruction.

Similarly, the students, making up 70% of the sample population, showed a strong consensus on the issue. Out of this group, 50 students (71.4% of the total sample) strongly agreed that the frequent use of the mother tongue hinders their ability to excel in English speaking and writing. This overwhelming agreement from the students highlights their direct experience with the challenge and reinforces the lecturers' observations.

Harmonizing these responses, it is clear that 100% of both lecturers and students acknowledge the negative impact of the mother tongue on English language performance. The lecturers' 28.6% agreement and the students' 71.4% strong agreement collectively underscore the pervasive nature of this issue in the study area. The data reveal that mother tongue interference is a shared concern, pointing to the need for effective educational strategies to mitigate its effects on students' English language development. Therefore, the findings suggest an urgent call for language intervention programs aimed at enhancing students' proficiency in English without undermining the importance of their mother tongue.

For the second research question, 17 lecturers, representing 24.3% of the total sample population, agreed that mother tongue interference affects students' overall academic achievements in English language courses at Taraba State University. This response from the lecturers highlights their recognition of the negative impact of the frequent use of the mother tongue on students' academic performance. The lecturers' perspective reflects a broader understanding of how language interference can undermine students' success, especially in courses where proficiency in English is essential for academic achievement.

On the other hand, 45 students, representing 64.3% of the total sample population, strongly agreed that mother tongue interference significantly affects their academic success in English courses. This strong agreement among students emphasizes their direct experiences with the challenges they face in excelling academically due to the influence of their native language.

The students' response underscores the reality that mother tongue interference is a barrier to achieving better academic outcomes in English-based courses.

Harmonizing these responses, it is evident that both lecturers and students recognize mother tongue interference as a significant factor affecting students' academic performance in English language courses. With 24.3% of lecturers agreeing and 64.3% of students strongly agreeing, the combined 88.6% of respondents indicates a substantial concern regarding the negative effects of mother tongue interference. This finding emphasizes the need for targeted interventions and support to help students improve their proficiency in English and enhance their overall academic performance at Taraba State University. Addressing this issue could result in better learning outcomes and academic achievements across English-related courses.

Conclusion

In both research questions, the findings show a strong consensus among lecturers and students that mother tongue interference negatively affects students' performance in English, both in terms of speaking/writing skills and overall academic achievement. With 100% of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing, this points to the urgent need for strategies to address mother tongue influence in educational settings, particularly in improving English language proficiency and overall academic success. These findings suggest implementing language intervention programs and support systems for students to enhance their English skills in Taraba State University and beyond.

Recommendations

- I. For lecturers: Educational institutions should provide professional development opportunities for lecturers to help them design instructional strategies that minimize the impact of mother tongue interference on English language learning.
- II. For students: Schools should implement language support programs, such as English immersion workshops, to help students improve their proficiency in English and reduce the negative effects of mother tongue interference on their academic achievements.
- III. For educational policymakers: Policymakers should develop and enforce curriculum reforms that promote a balanced use of the mother tongue and English, ensuring that students strengthen their English language skills without compromising their native language.

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