

The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of mother-tongue interference on the learning of the English Language among Junior Secondary School students in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design and was guided by a quantitative approach. A total of two hundred (200) respondents were randomly selected from nine public secondary schools within the study area. Data were collected using a self-structured questionnaire developed on a four-point Likert scale. The instrument was validated by experts, and its reliability was established using the test-retest method, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.65. Descriptive statistics (mean and percentage) were employed to answer the three research questions, while chi-square inferential statistics were used to test the two hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that mother-tongue interference significantly affects students' mastery of the English Language in areas such as fluency, pronunciation, grammatical structure, vocabulary usage and writing skills, with mean ratings ranging from 2.70 to 3.01. Students also reported notable difficulties in grammar, comprehension of complex vocabulary, interpretation of idiomatic expressions and academic writing due to mother-tongue interference, with mean scores ranging between 2.62 and 3.01. The chi-square analysis indicated a significant relationship between the level of mother-tongue interference and students' mastery of the English Language ($\chi^2 = 53.031$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, a significant relationship was found between mother tongue interference and students' academic performance in English Language ($\chi^2 = 13.653$, $df = 9$, $p < 0.05$). The study concludes that mother-tongue interference constitutes a major impediment to effective English Language learning and academic performance among secondary school students in Ekiti State. It therefore recommends the adoption of targeted instructional strategies, professional development for teachers, and culturally responsive teaching practices to mitigate the effects of language interference and enhance students' proficiency in the English Language.

Keywords: Academic performance; English Language learning; Language transfer; Mother tongue interference; Secondary school students.

Introduction

Language constitutes one of the most fundamental attributes of human existence and social interaction. It is the primary medium through which individuals conceptualise reality, transmit culture, and engage in meaningful communication. Scholars have consistently emphasised that language does not exist in isolation but functions dynamically within human social structures and lived experiences (Daramola, 2020). It is both a repository and a transmitter of culture, serving as a vehicle for socialisation, identity formation, and cognitive development (Babatunde, 2019; Oyedokun, 2018). As a uniquely human faculty, language distinguishes human beings from other species and enables the organisation of complex social relations (Osinsanwo, 2016).

Nigeria represents one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. With over 250 ethnic groups and an estimated 360–400 indigenous languages, the Nigerian linguistic landscape reflects an extensive spectrum of cultural and communicative practices (Adegite, 2012). Among these languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba function as major regional languages, while several others, such as Tiv, Nupe, Idoma, Epira, Igala, Ijaw, Efik, Ibibio and Itsekiri serve as minority languages. Within this multilingual context, languages perform differentiated social functions depending on domains and communicative needs.

English occupies a particularly strategic position in Nigeria. As a legacy of colonial administration, English functions as the official language and serves as the principal medium of instruction, governance, law, commerce and interethnic communication. It has therefore become indispensable to educational advancement and socioeconomic mobility (Oni, 2019). Mastery of English remains a prerequisite for admission into tertiary institutions, making proficiency in the language a critical determinant of academic success. Consequently, the effective acquisition of English is not merely a pedagogical concern but a national educational priority.

Despite its importance, learning English as a second language in Nigeria is frequently constrained by the phenomenon of mother-tongue interference. Mother-tongue interference refers to the influence of learners' first language (L1) on the acquisition and use of a second language (L2), particularly in the domains of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure (Tyler, 2020). Learners often unconsciously transfer linguistic features from their L1 into the L2, resulting in systematic deviations from the norms of the target language. This transfer is especially pronounced where the grammatical, phonological and syntactic systems of the two languages differ significantly (Owolabi, 2019).

Studies have shown that the differences between Nigerian indigenous languages and English often generate negative transfer, manifesting in grammatical errors, lexical misplacement, faulty word order, and inaccurate pronunciation (Otagburuagu & Okorji, 2017; Mackey, 2018). For instance, the tendency to maintain mother-tongue syntactic ordering when forming English sentences frequently leads to structural distortions such as adjectivenoun misplacement and incorrect verb inflexions. Such errors indicate the deep-seated influence of L1 cognitive patterns on second-language production.

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

The impact of mother-tongue interference has been consistently documented in Nigerian ESL contexts. Differences in phonological inventories and grammatical systems between English and indigenous Nigerian languages have been found to impede learners’ comprehension, fluency and writing accuracy (Okorji & Okeke, 2020). These difficulties often persist even after prolonged exposure to formal English instruction, suggesting that classroom learning alone may be insufficient to counter entrenched first-language structures.

In Ekiti State, as in many other parts of Nigeria, secondary school students are bilingual learners who navigate both their indigenous languages and English in daily communication. Although English is introduced early in formal education, many students continue to exhibit persistent grammatical errors, poor sentence construction, and limited communicative competence (Adebayo, 2017). These challenges are particularly evident in tense usage, subject–verb agreement and morphological inflexions, which are features largely absent or minimally marked in many Nigerian languages (Muftah, 2016). Consequently, students often omit obligatory inflectional markers, apply them inconsistently, or rely on familiar L1 structures to form English expressions.

Given the central role of English in academic progression and national integration, the persistence of mother-tongue interference among secondary school students raises serious educational concerns. It is therefore imperative to empirically examine the extent to which mother-tongue interference affects English language learning outcomes. This study, situated within Ekiti State, seeks to investigate the nature, extent and academic implications of mother tongue interference on Junior Secondary School students’ mastery of the English Language, with a view to informing pedagogical practices and policy interventions.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions;

1. To what extent does the mother tongue interfere with the mastery level of students in the English Language?
2. What are the difficulties encountered by students in studying the English Language due to mother tongue interference?
3. What are the overall effects of mother tongue language on the learning outcomes and academic performance of students?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated for the study;

1. There is no significant relationship between the level of mother tongue interference and Students’ mastery of the English Language
2. There is no significant relationship between the effect of mother tongue language and the academic performance of students in the English Language

Literature Review: Concept of Mother Tongue

The mother tongue (MT) refers to the language acquired naturally during early childhood and which becomes the primary medium for thought, emotional expression and social communication (Adebayo, 2020). It is the first language through which children develop cognitive and social competence, and it constitutes the linguistic foundation upon which subsequent languages are built (Olagoke, 2018; Maisamari, 2019). Importantly, the mother tongue is not necessarily the language of a child’s biological parents but the language to which the child is first consistently exposed and in which early communication is established. Also, Awodun and Joshi (2022) state that the mother tongue is the “inborn” language of a child because most communication between a mother and her child is conducted in the mother’s language.

Scholars have emphasised that the mother tongue is acquired informally through imitation and interaction rather than formal instruction, and it remains deeply embedded in the speaker’s cognitive and communicative patterns throughout life (Crystal, 2016). As a result, the MT serves as the primary linguistic framework through which new languages are processed. This explains why bilingual learners often rely on MT structures when learning additional languages (Alani, 2024). Consequently, while MT development supports cognitive growth and early literacy, it may also predispose learners to linguistic transfer during second language acquisition.

Empirical evidence further suggests that early literacy in the mother tongue enhances overall language development and facilitates subsequent second language learning (Dulay et al., 2017; Ekpe, 2017). However, complete native-like proficiency in a second language is rarely achieved due to the enduring influence of MT structures on the learner’s linguistic system (Olaofe, 2020). The MT therefore functions both as a resource and as a potential source of interference in second language learning. Based on these relationships identified in the literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that explains how mother tongue interference affects students’ learning outcomes in English language education.

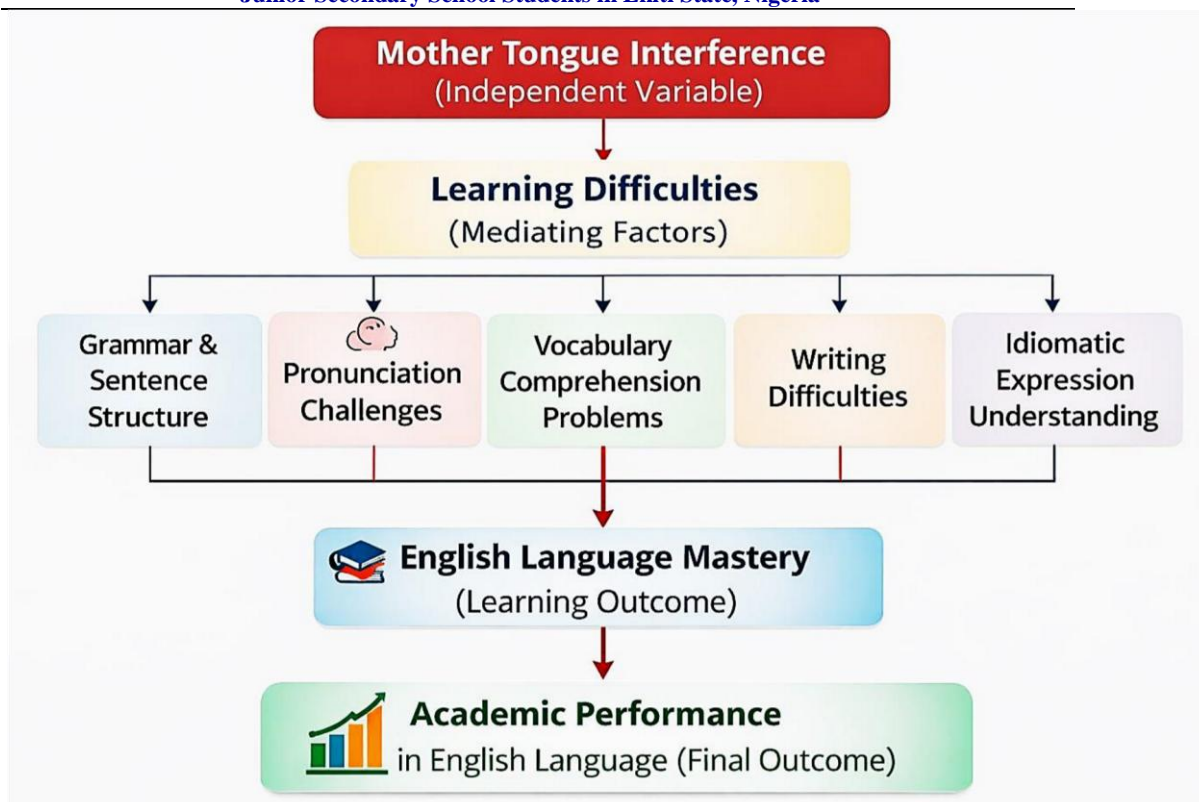


Figure 1: Study's Conceptual Model

The conceptual framework of the study posits that mother tongue interference functions as the primary independent variable influencing students' learning experiences in English language education (See Figure 1). The model assumes that the influence of the mother tongue manifests through learning difficulties, including challenges in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary comprehension, writing, and understanding idiomatic expressions. These difficulties subsequently affect students' mastery of the English language, which in turn influences their academic performance in English language learning. Thus, learning difficulties serve as mediating factors linking mother tongue interference to students' language mastery and overall academic outcomes.

Nature of Language Interference

Language interference refers to the influence of one language on another in the speech and writing of bilinguals (Gregor, 2020). It occurs when linguistic habits from the first language are transferred to the second language, resulting in deviations from the norms of the target language (Ravas, 2017). This phenomenon is particularly prominent in multilingual societies where speakers frequently alternate between two or more languages. Learners often transfer familiar sound patterns, word order and grammatical rules from their MT to the second language, leading to errors in pronunciation, sentence structure and vocabulary usage. Such

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

deviations are typically more pronounced when the structural differences between the MT and the target language are substantial (Olowoyeye & Alonge, 2014).

Scholars distinguish between positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when similarities between the MT and the target language facilitate learning, while negative transfer arises when dissimilarities lead to persistent errors that hinder communication (DejiAfuye & Olowoyeye, 2019). In the Nigerian ESL context, negative transfer predominates due to marked structural and phonological differences between English and indigenous languages (Ouma, 2019; Njoroge, 2019).

Influence of Mother Tongue Interference on ESL Learning

Mother tongue interference significantly shapes the acquisition and use of English as a second language. Learners often think in their MT and attempt to translate directly into English, resulting in structural distortions and lexical misplacement (Ogundana, 2021). This process leads to systematic grammatical and phonological errors that affect intelligibility and communicative competence (Kolawole, 2019).

Interference has been found to disrupt learners’ development of accurate grammar, pronunciation and writing skills. Errors such as faulty tense usage, incorrect subject–verb agreement, mispronunciation of unfamiliar phonemes and inappropriate word order are commonly attributed to negative transfer (MacIntyre & Gardner, 2022). These errors persist even after prolonged exposure to formal English instruction, indicating the deep-seated influence of MT on language production.

Empirical studies further indicate that the more structurally distant the MT is from English, the greater the degree of interference observed (Olowoyeye, 2014). Consequently, learners from diverse Nigerian linguistic backgrounds often exhibit regionally identifiable English accents and grammatical patterns, underscoring the pervasive impact of MT on ESL performance (Shaughnessy, 2018).

Methodology

The research design for this study was descriptive research of a survey type. Descriptive research of survey type is preplanned and structured in design so that the information collected can be statistically inferred on a population. The population for this study consists of all students in senior secondary schools in ten selected schools in Ekiti State. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select two hundred (200) students for the study. A self-structured questionnaire was used and was segmented into two parts, which are section A and section B. Section A consists of the bio-data of the respondents, while section B indicates the choice of the respondents to the items provided. The questionnaire comprised fifteen items for the respondents. An internal consistency coefficient of 0.85 was obtained using the Spearman-Brown split-half method. The descriptive statistics of frequency, percentage, and mean were used to analyse and answer the research

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

questions raised to guide the study, while chi-square inferential statistics were used to test the two hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance using SPSS version 26.

Research Question 1:

To what extent does the mother tongue interfere with the mastery level of students in the English Language?

Table 1: Responses on the extent to which mother tongue interferes with the mastery level of students in the English Language

S/N	Items	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Decision
1.	English language learning is significantly affected by the interference of my mother tongue.	75 (37.5)	35 (17.5)	45 (22.5)	45 (22.5)	2.7	Accepted
2.	I find it challenging to master English because my mother tongue influences my language skills.	80 (40.5)	45 (22.5)	45 (22.5)	30 (15.0)	2.87	Accepted
3.	I often mix words from my mother tongue when speaking or writing in English.	75 (37.5)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	30 (15.0)	2.85	Accepted
4.	Mother tongue interference hinders my fluency in English.	83 (41.5)	52 (26.0)	43 (21.5)	32 (16.0)	3.01	Accepted
5.	I frequently struggle with pronunciation due to the influence of my mother tongue.	70 (35.0)	55 (27.5)	45 (22.5)	30 (15.0)	2.82	Accepted

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

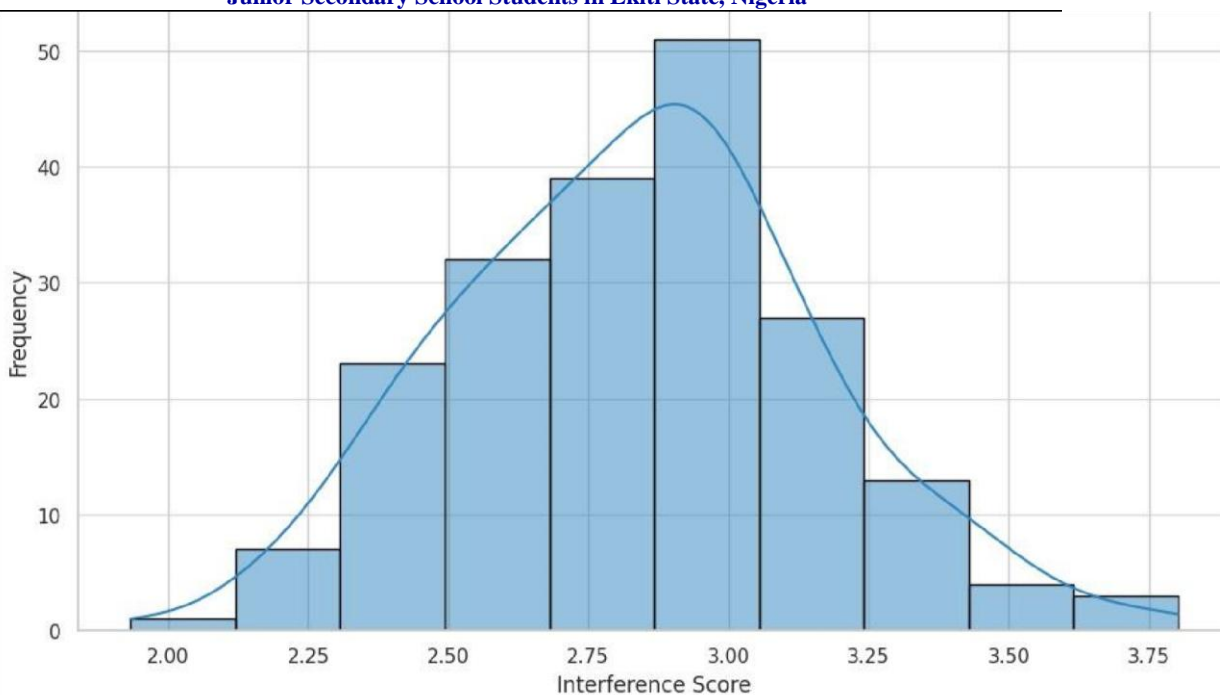


Figure 2: Distribution of mother tongue interference variable

Table 1 presents respondents’ perceptions regarding the extent to which mother tongue interference affects their mastery of the English language. The mean scores for all five items range from 2.70 to 3.01, which are above the criterion mean, indicating that all items were accepted. Item 1, which examined whether English language learning is significantly affected by mother tongue interference, recorded a mean score of 2.70. A combined 55% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. This finding indicates that more than half of the students perceive their first language as a major factor influencing their English language learning, confirming the pervasive role of the mother tongue in shaping second language acquisition.

Item 2 yielded a higher mean score of 2.87, with 63% of the respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that they find it challenging to master English because their mother tongue influences their language skills. This implies that a substantial proportion of learners experience difficulties in mastering English as a direct consequence of their linguistic background, particularly in the transfer of structures and patterns from their first language. Similarly, Item 3 recorded a mean score of 2.85, showing that a considerable number of respondents acknowledged mixing words from their mother tongue when speaking or writing in English. The high level of agreement reflects the prevalence of code-mixing and transfer-induced errors, which can negatively affect students’ communicative competence and accuracy in English.

Item 4, which focused on fluency, had the highest mean score of 3.01. This indicates that mother tongue interference is perceived as a major hindrance to

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

fluency in English. The high level of agreement suggests that learners’ speech flow, confidence, and spontaneity in English are often constrained by the influence of their native language. Item 5, with a mean score of 2.82, further reveals that many students frequently struggle with pronunciation due to mother tongue influence.

Figure 2 further illustrates this pattern through a distribution plot of the interference scores. The histogram shows that most responses are concentrated around the range of 2.5 to

3.2, which is close to the overall mean value of approximately 2.85. This clustering indicates that the majority of students reported moderate to relatively high levels of mother tongue interference. The density curve also suggests a fairly normal distribution of responses, implying that students’ perceptions of mother tongue interference are relatively consistent across the sample. Therefore, the visual distribution supports the statistical results presented in Table 1 by demonstrating that mother tongue interference is a common experience among the respondents and affects several aspects of their mastery of the English language. This supports the view that phonological differences between the first language and English constitute a major source of pronunciation difficulties, which can affect intelligibility and overall communicative effectiveness.

Research Question 2: What are the difficulties encountered by students in studying English Language due to mother tongue interference?

Table 2: Responses on the difficulties encountered by students in studying the English Language due to mother tongue interference

S/N	Items	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Decision
1.	I encounter difficulties in grammar and sentence structure because my mother tongue differs from English.	85 (42.5)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	20. (10.0)	3.01	Accepted
2.	Comprehending complex English vocabulary is challenging for me due to mother tongue interference.	70 (35.0)	65 (32.5)	50 (25.0)	15 (7.5)	2.87	Accepted
3.	Mother tongue interference affects my understanding of English idiomatic expressions.	60 (30.0)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	45 (22.5)	2.62	Accepted

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

4.	Writing essays or reports in English is more challenging because of my mother tongue's influence.	80 (40.0)	55 (27.5)	45 (22.5)	20 (10.0)	2.9	Accepted
5.	I face difficulties in English language exams, particularly in listening and reading comprehension, because of my mother tongue.	65 (32.5)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	40 (20.0)	2.7	Accepted

Table 2 presents students’ responses to specific learning difficulties associated with mother tongue interference in the study of the English Language. The mean scores for all five items range from 2.62 to 3.01, all of which are above the criterion mean, leading to the acceptance of all items. Item 1, which addressed grammatical and sentence structure difficulties, recorded the highest mean score of 3.01. A combined 67.5% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that differences between their mother tongue and English make grammar and sentence construction difficult. This suggests that structural dissimilarities between the two languages result in frequent interlingua errors, which adversely affect learners’ syntactic accuracy and overall grammatical competence.

Item 2 yielded a mean score of 2.87, with 67.5% of respondents indicating that comprehending complex English vocabulary is challenging due to mother tongue interference. This implies that limited lexical equivalence between the first language and English, as well as differences in word formation and meaning, hinder students’ vocabulary acquisition and comprehension. Item 3 recorded the lowest mean score of 2.62, yet remained above the acceptance threshold. A substantial proportion of respondents acknowledged that mother tongue interference affects their understanding of English idiomatic expressions.

Item 4, which focused on writing skills, had a mean score of 2.90. The majority of respondents agreed that writing essays and reports in English is more challenging due to the influence of their mother tongue. This highlights the tendency of learners to transfer first language structures, expressions, and rhetorical patterns into English writing, often resulting in inappropriate sentence organisation, coherence problems, and grammatical inaccuracies. Item 5 recorded a mean score of 2.70, showing that students also experience difficulties in English language examinations, particularly in listening and reading comprehension, due to mother tongue interference. This suggests that interference not only affects productive skills but also impedes receptive skills, thereby influencing overall academic performance in English.

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

Research Question 3: What are the overall effects of mother tongue language on the learning outcome and academic performance of students?

Table 3: Responses on the overall effect of mother tongue language on the learning outcome and academic performance of students

S/N	Items	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	Mean	Decision
1.	Lack of motivation in speaking English due to the mother tongue affects my communicative competence	80 (40.0)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	25 (12.5)	2.92	Accepted
2.	I believe that students who have minimal mother tongue interference perform better in English.	60 (30.0)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	45 (22.5)	2.62	Accepted
3.	The influence of my mother tongue on my knowledge of English grammar negatively affects my English language grades.	70 (35.0)	65 (32.5)	50 (20.0)	15 (7.5)	2.8	Accepted
4.	Students who do not experience mother tongue interference tend to excel in English.	85 (42.5)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	20 (10.0)	3.0	Accepted
5.	My overall academic performance would improve if my mother tongue didn't interfere with my English language learning.	60 (30.0)	50 (25.0)	45 (22.5)	45 (22.5)	2.62	Accepted

Table 3 presents respondents’ views on the overall influence of mother tongue on students’ learning outcomes and academic performance in English Language. The mean scores for all the items range between 2.62 and 3.00, all exceeding the criterion mean, indicating that the respondents generally agree that mother tongue interference has significant implications for both learning outcomes and academic performance. Item 1 recorded a mean score of 2.92, showing that a substantial proportion of the respondents agreed that a lack of motivation to speak English, arising from mother tongue influence, adversely affects their communicative competence. This implies that psychological and attitudinal factors associated with first language dominance may reduce learners’ willingness to use English actively, thereby limiting opportunities for practice and improvement.

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

Item 2 yielded a mean score of 2.62, indicating that respondents generally believe that students who experience minimal mother tongue interference tend to perform better in English. This perception suggests a clear relationship between reduced interference and improved academic performance, reinforcing the view that interference constitutes a major barrier to effective English language acquisition. Item 3, with a mean score of 2.80, reveals that the influence of the mother tongue on students’ grammatical knowledge negatively affects their English language grades. This shows that persistent interlingual transfer errors in grammar have direct consequences on assessment outcomes and overall academic achievement in English.

Item 4 recorded a relatively high mean score of 3.00, suggesting strong agreement that students who do not experience mother tongue interference tend to excel in English. This further supports the assertion that reduced interference enhances learners’ mastery of English and their capacity to achieve higher academic standards. Item 5 also recorded a mean score of 2.62, indicating that respondents believe their overall academic performance would improve if mother tongue interference were minimised. This implies that the effects of mother tongue interference extend beyond English language performance to influence students’ general academic outcomes, given the central role of English as the language of instruction.

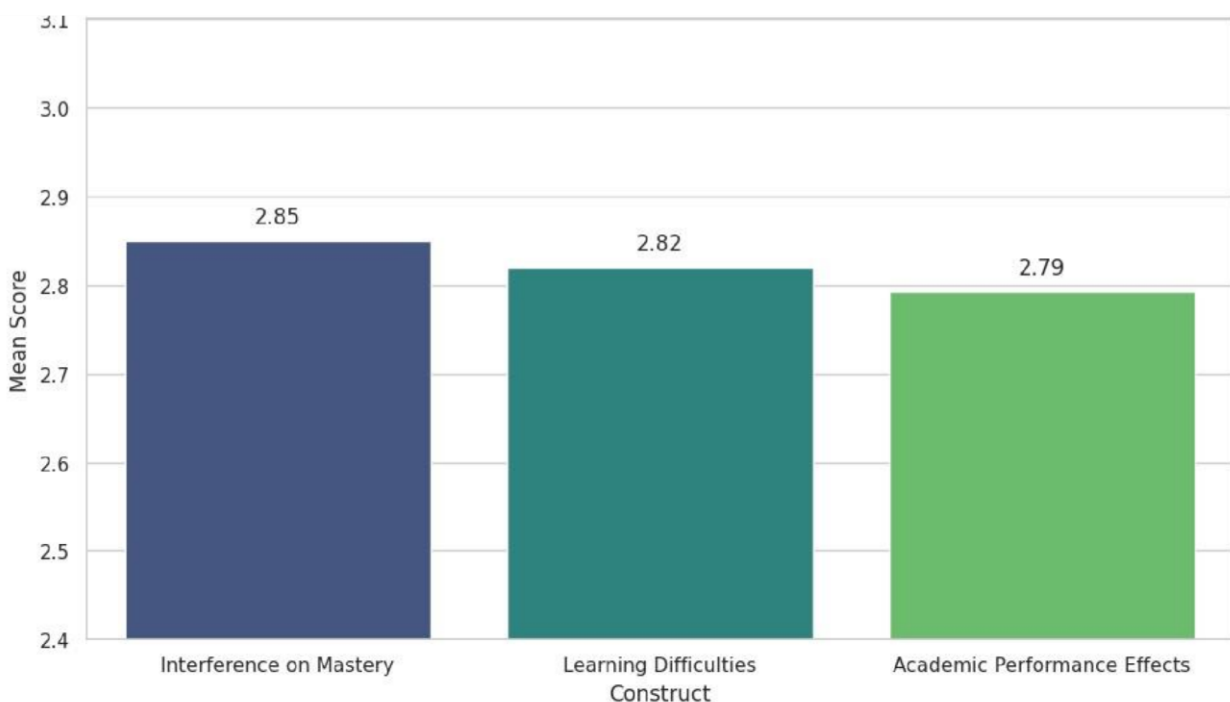


Figure 3: Comparison of mean responses across constructs

Figure 3 provides a visual comparison of the mean scores across the three constructs. The chart shows that learning difficulties recorded the highest overall mean score, followed by academic performance effects, while interference with

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

mastery recorded a slightly lower mean. The small differences among the mean values suggest that mother tongue interference consistently affects students’ English language mastery, learning challenges, and academic outcomes.

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between the level of mother tongue interference and Students’ mastery of the English Language

Table 4: Chi-Square Test analysis of the Relationship between the level of mother tongue interference and Students’ mastery of the English Language

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	
Pearson Chi-Square	53.031 ^a	9	.000	
Likelihood Ratio	250.839	9	.000	
Linear-by-Linear Association	216.096	1	.000	

N of Valid Cases 200

a. 12 cells (75.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .12.

Table 4 presents the Chi-square test results examining the relationship between the level of mother tongue interference and students’ mastery of the English language. The Pearson Chisquare value of $\chi^2 = 53.031$ with $df = 9$ and a corresponding p -value = .000 indicates a statistically significant relationship between the two variables at the 0.05 level of significance. Since the computed significance value ($p < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between the level of mother tongue interference and students’ mastery of English. The Linear-by-Linear Association result ($\chi^2 = 216.096$, $df = 1$, $p = .000$) further suggests a strong directional relationship, indicating that as the level of mother tongue interference increases, there is a corresponding decline in students’ mastery of the English language. The Likelihood Ratio ($\chi^2 = 250.839$, $df = 9$, $p = .000$) supports the Pearson Chi-square result, further confirming the robustness of the observed relationship. The findings demonstrate that mother tongue interference is significantly related to students’ mastery of the English language, affirming that increased interference is associated with reduced mastery levels.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between the effect of mother tongue language and the academic performance of students in the English Language.

Tables 5: Chi-Square analysis of the relationship between the effect of mother tongue language and the academic performance of students in the English Language

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.653 ^a	9	.014
Likelihood Ratio	314.138	9	.117
Linear-by-Linear Association	114.318	1	.038
N of Valid Cases	200		

a. 12 cells (75.0%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is .02. Table 5 presents the Chi-square test results examining the relationship between the effect of mother tongue language and students' academic performance in English Language. The Pearson Chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 13.653$, with $df = 9$ and a significance level of $p = .014$, indicates that the relationship between the two variables is statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance. Since the computed probability value ($p = .014 < 0.05$), the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that there is a significant relationship between the effect of mother tongue language and students' academic performance in English. In practical terms, the academic performance of students in English is significantly influenced by the degree to which their mother tongue affects their learning of the language. The Linear-by-Linear Association result ($\chi^2 = 114.318$, $df = 1$, $p = .038$) further supports the presence of a significant directional relationship, suggesting that changes in the level of mother tongue influence are systematically associated with variations in students' academic performance. However, the Likelihood Ratio test shows a non-significant value ($\chi^2 = 314.138$, $df = 9$, $p = .117$), which introduces some caution in the interpretation. The null hypothesis is rejected, and it is established that mother tongue language has a significant influence on students' academic performance in the English Language.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study underscore the pervasive influence of mother tongue interference on students' mastery of the English language. Empirical evidence from the study reveals that a substantial proportion of students experience considerable difficulty in achieving fluency, often struggling to express themselves coherently and articulately in English due to the persistent influence of their mother tongue. This observation corroborates the view that interference constitutes the automatic transfer of surface structures of the mother tongue to the

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

target language, governed by learners’ perceptions of transferability and their developmental stage in second language acquisition (Ellis, 1997; Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982; Olowoyeye, 2023).

The results align with extant literature, which posits that language interference impedes communicative fluency and restricts learners’ ability to communicate effectively in the target language (Dulay et al., 2020). In multilingual learning contexts such as Nigeria, the interaction between the mother tongue and English significantly shapes learners’ fluency levels. Pronunciation emerged as a particularly problematic area, with many students attributing their difficulties to the phonological influence of their mother tongue. Pronunciation errors arising from negative transfer often reduce intelligibility and impair effective communication (Crystal, 2016). This finding highlights the necessity for focused phonological instruction and intervention strategies that directly address mother-tongue– induced pronunciation challenges. Negative transfer, which occurs when the linguistic structures of the mother tongue differ markedly from those of English, was evident in the recurrent errors identified among the respondents. Consistent with Olowoyeye and Alonge (2014) and Deji-Afuye and Olowoyeye (2019), the study confirms that greater structural divergence between L1 and L2 corresponds with higher incidences of learning difficulty and communication breakdown.

Furthermore, the findings reveal pronounced challenges in writing and grammatical accuracy. Many students reported difficulties in applying English grammatical rules, structuring sentences appropriately, and organizing written discourse. The influence of the grammatical patterns of the mother tongue often resulted in syntactic deviations and nonstandard constructions, thereby affecting the clarity and coherence of students’ written expression (Alani, 2024). These outcomes reinforce earlier assertions that the grammatical systems of the mother tongue may impede the acquisition of English grammar (Olawale, 2021; Cook, 2023). Pronunciation and comprehension difficulties similarly reflect the effects of phonological and syntactic interference (Ogundana, 2021).

In relation to specific learning challenges, the study identified grammar and sentence structure, comprehension of complex vocabulary, interpretation of idiomatic expressions, and academic writing as the most problematic areas. Many students struggled to internalise English grammatical conventions that differ markedly from those of their mother tongue, a finding consistent with the views of Olowoyeye (2014), Okpara (2019), Onike (2020) and Nordquist (2018). Difficulties in vocabulary comprehension were also prevalent, suggesting that mother tongue interference limits learners’ ability to contextualise and internalise complex English lexemes—an essential component of language proficiency (Ariyo, 2023). The challenge of understanding idiomatic expressions further reflects the cultural and linguistic specificity of idioms, which rarely permit direct translation across languages (Akano, 2023).

Students also reported significant difficulties in writing essays and reports, particularly in organising ideas, structuring sentences, and achieving coherence. These challenges reflect the transfer of mother-tongue writing conventions to English, resulting in syntactic and discourse-level deviations (Crystal, 2016).

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

Collectively, these findings corroborate earlier studies indicating that learners often transfer grammatical patterns, vocabulary, and idiomatic usage from their first language to the second language, thereby generating errors and comprehension difficulties (Oni, 2020; Akano, 2023).

Importantly, the study further establishes that mother tongue interference exerts a significant negative influence on students’ learning outcomes and academic performance in English. Students reported diminished communicative competence, weak grammatical mastery, and overall poor academic performance attributable to mother tongue interference. These findings are consistent with Cummins’ (1981) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), suggesting that while students may attain conversational proficiency, their academic language development is hindered by persistent L1 interference. The data further indicate that students who experience minimal mother tongue interference tend to perform better academically in English.

Consequently, the study underscores the urgent need for targeted instructional interventions aimed at mitigating mother tongue interference. Strategies such as contrastive analysis, language transfer awareness, interactive and communicative teaching approaches, and the creation of linguistically inclusive learning environments are recommended to enhance students’ English proficiency (Ogundana, 2022; Ariyo, 2023; Cook, 2023). Additionally, continuous professional development for teachers is essential to equip them with pedagogical strategies responsive to the needs of multilingual learners (MacIntyre & Gardner, 2022).

Conclusion

This study concludes that mother tongue interference exerts a significant and pervasive influence on the learning of English among Junior Secondary School students in Ekiti State. The findings confirm that the mother tongue constitutes a major source of difficulty in students’ acquisition of English, manifesting in persistent problems in fluency, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing skills. These difficulties, arising from negative language transfer, substantially undermine students’ mastery level and academic performance in English.

The study further establishes that mother tongue interference is not confined to isolated linguistic errors but operates across multiple dimensions of language learning, thereby affecting both communicative competence and academic language proficiency. Students who experience minimal interference demonstrate comparatively better performance, underscoring the role of reduced first language transfer in facilitating effective second language acquisition. Overall, the findings highlight the urgent need for deliberate pedagogical interventions that address mother tongue interference through targeted instructional strategies, contrastive language awareness, and teacher capacity development.

“The Effect of Mother-Tongue Interference on the Learning of English Language among Junior Secondary School Students in Ekiti State, Nigeria”

Addressing these challenges is essential not only for improving students’ academic outcomes in English but also for enhancing their broader educational opportunities and social advancement in a multilingual Nigerian context.

Recommendations

The study recommends the implementation of targeted instructional interventions that directly address mother tongue interference through contrastive analysis, language transfer awareness, and focused instruction in grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. Teachers should be provided with continuous professional development to equip them with effective strategies for supporting multilingual learners. Schools should adopt culturally inclusive and linguistically responsive teaching practices that accommodate learners’ diverse language backgrounds and promote positive attitudes toward multilingualism.

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