

Research Paper

The Influence of Mother Tongue (Yoruba) on the Acquisition and Proficiency of English as a Second Language among Secondary School Learners in Ogun State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study investigates the pervasive influence of the mother tongue (Yoruba) on the learning and proficiency of English as a Second Language (ESL) among secondary school students in Ogun State, Nigeria. In a multilingual context where English serves as the official language of education and administration, the role of the indigenous language, Yoruba, remains significant in the daily lives of learners. Employing a mixed-methods research design, this study collected data from 300 SS2 students and 15 English language teachers across six secondary schools in the three senatorial districts of Ogun State. Instruments included a proficiency test (covering grammar, lexis, and writing), a questionnaire on language use and attitudes, and semi-structured interviews with teachers. The findings reveal a strong transfer effect from Yoruba to English, manifesting as phonological interference (e.g., vowel conflation, absence of dental fricatives), syntactic interference (e.g., prepositional errors, calquing of Yoruba structures), and lexical interference (direct translation and code-mixing). Quantitative analysis indicates a statistically significant negative correlation ($p < .05$) between the frequency of Yoruba use in the home and scores on the English proficiency test. Qualitative data from teachers highlight challenges in classroom instruction due to these interferences, despite learners' positive orientation towards English. The study concludes that the mother tongue is not merely a background variable but an active, constraining factor in achieving target-like proficiency in English. It recommends pedagogical strategies such as Contrastive Analysis, increased

communicative practice, and teacher training programs that explicitly address language transfer issues to mitigate negative interference and foster a more additive bilingual environment.

Keywords: Mother Tongue Influence, Second Language Acquisition, Language Transfer, English Language Proficiency, Yoruba, Nigerian Education, Interlanguage

Introduction

Context and Background

Nigeria's linguistic landscape is remarkably complex, with over 500 languages coexisting within its borders (Bamgbose, 1991). The Nigerian National Policy on Education mandates that the mother tongue or language of the immediate community should be the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school, after which English takes over as the primary medium of instruction (FRN, 2013). This policy places English at the centre of the educational apparatus, making proficiency in it a critical determinant of academic success. In Ogun State, a predominantly Yoruba-speaking region, learners are thus immersed in a bilingual reality: Yoruba for intra-ethnic communication and cultural identity, and English for formal education, social mobility, and national discourse. However, the transition from a mother tongue (L1) to a second language (L2) is seldom seamless. The linguistic habits, phonological systems, and syntactic structures of the L1 invariably intrude upon the acquisition process of the L2, a phenomenon extensively documented in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature as language transfer (Odlin, 1989; Ellis, 1994). For many secondary school learners in Ogun State, this results in a unique interlanguage, a systematic but deviant form of English heavily influenced by Yoruba, which often impedes their academic performance and future prospects.

Problem Statement and Rationale

Despite the official status of English, the performance of Nigerian students in English language examinations at national levels (e.g., WASSCE and NECO) has been consistently poor. Ogun State is no exception. Examiners' reports frequently cite "mother tongue interference" as a major contributor to these failures (WAEC, 2021). While this is often mentioned anecdotally, there is a scarcity of empirical, localized studies within Ogun State that systematically delineate the specific linguistic domains (phonology, syntax, lexicon) most affected and correlate this influence with measurable proficiency outcomes. Understanding the precise nature and extent of this influence is crucial for developing effective pedagogical interventions. Without such understanding, teachers may continue to treat errors as random mistakes rather than systematic manifestations of L1 transfer, leading to ineffective correction and fossilization of errors

Aim and Research Questions

The primary aim of this study is to empirically examine the influence of the Yoruba language on the acquisition and proficiency of English among secondary school learners in Ogun State. This aim is operationalized through the following research questions:

- In what specific phonological, syntactic, and lexical ways does Yoruba interfere with the learners' use of English?
- What is the relationship between the frequency of Yoruba use in learners' home and social environments and their level of proficiency in English?
- What are the perceptions of English language teachers regarding the challenges posed by mother tongue interference and their strategies for mitigating it?

Scope and Delimitation

This study is delimited to public secondary schools in Ogun State, focusing on Senior Secondary School 2 (SS2) students who have been exposed to formal English instruction for a minimum of seven years. The study focuses on the influence of Yoruba, the dominant L1, and does not address the influence of other Nigerian languages.

Literature Review

Key Concepts and Theoretical Framework

Mother Tongue Influence and Language Transfer:

Mother Tongue Influence (MTI) refers to the observable effect of the first language (L1) on the production and comprehension of a second language (L2). In SLA theory, this is conceptualized as language transfer (Odlin, 1989). Transfer can be positive (facilitation) when similar structures in L1 and L2 aid learning, or negative (interference) when differences lead to errors.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH):

Pioneered by Lado (1957), the CAH posited that by systematically comparing the linguistic systems of L1 and L2, one could predict areas of difficulty for learners. Where structures are similar, learning would be easy; where they differ, difficulty and errors would arise. While the strong version of CAH (predictive power) has been largely discredited for its over-simplification, its weak version (explanatory power) remains valuable for diagnosing the sources of learner errors post-hoc, which is a key objective of this study (Wardhaugh, 1970).

Error Analysis and Interlanguage:

As a response to CAH's limitations, Corder (1967) and Selinker (1972) developed Error Analysis and the concept of Interlanguage. Interlanguage is the dynamic, rule-governed linguistic system that L2 learners construct, which is distinct from both L1 and L2. Errors are not seen as signs of failure but as evidence of active hypothesis testing and systematic learning. Analyzing these errors provides a window into the learner's underlying competence.

Previous Studies on L1 Influence in ESL Contexts

A substantial body of research exists on L1 influence in various ESL contexts. In Nigeria, studies have consistently shown the impact of indigenous languages on English.

Phonological Level

Atoye (2005) and Adegbija (2004) have documented the challenges Yoruba learners face with the English sound system. Key issues include the conflation of the English vowel sounds /ɪ/ and /i:/ (so 'ship' and 'sheep' are pronounced the same), the absence of the dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ (often replaced with /t/ and /d/), and difficulties with consonant clusters, which are less common in Yoruba.

Syntactic Level

Studies by Jowitt (1991) and Alabi (2007) highlight syntactic transfers. A common feature is the omission of inflectional morphemes (e.g., "She go to school yesterday" for tense, "Two book" for plurality), influenced by Yoruba which is not a morphologically rich language. Prepositional usage is another major area of difficulty due to direct translation from Yoruba (e.g., "He is on the bus" becomes "He is in the bus," calqued from the Yoruba "Ó wà inú bọ̀sì").

Lexical Level

Awonusi (2004) and Babajide (2001) have explored lexical interference, which includes false friends (e.g., using "sophisticated" to mean "complicated" as in Yoruba usage) and direct translation or calquing (e.g., "shaking body" for "dancing" from "gbìgbóná ara"). While these studies provide a robust national and regional framework, they often lack a tight focus on the specific demographic of secondary school learners in Ogun State and a mixed-methods approach that correlates linguistic data with socio-linguistic variables. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a contemporary, localized, and multi-faceted analysis.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach allowed for the collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently, providing a more complete understanding of the research problem. The quantitative strand identified and measured the prevalence of errors and their correlation with language use, while the qualitative strand provided depth and context through the experiences of teachers.

Participants and Sampling

A multi-stage sampling procedure was employed. First, two public secondary schools were purposively selected from each of the three senatorial districts of Ogun State (Ogun Central, Ogun East, and Ogun West) to ensure geographical representation, resulting in six schools. From each school, 50 SS2 students were selected using simple random sampling, giving a total of 300 student participants (Mean Age = 15.7 years, SD = 1.2). Furthermore, 15 English language teachers (2-3 from each school) were purposively selected for interviews based on their experience (minimum of 5 years).

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT): A 60-minute test was developed, covering grammar (30 items), lexis (20 items), and a guided writing essay (1 topic). The test items were designed to target areas predicted by Contrastive Analysis to be problematic (e.g., tense, prepositions, articles, phoneme discrimination). The test was validated by two experts in Applied Linguistics and pilot-tested for reliability (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.81).

Student Questionnaire: A questionnaire collected data on demographic information, frequency of Yoruba and English use at home, with peers, and in media consumption (on a 5-point Likert scale). It also included open-ended items on learners' attitudes towards both languages.

Semi-structured Interviews with Teachers: Interviews with the 15 teachers explored their perceptions of the most common errors attributable to Yoruba, their teaching challenges, and the strategies they employ to counteract MTI. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

Data from the proficiency test and the questionnaire were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentages) were used to summarize error types and language use patterns. Inferential statistics (Pearson Correlation) were used to examine the relationship between frequency of Yoruba use and proficiency scores.

Qualitative Data

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. This involved familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming them. Errors from the essay writing section were categorized and analyzed qualitatively using Error Analysis frameworks.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ogun State Ministry of Education. Informed consent was sought from school principals, teachers, and the parents/guardians of the students. Student assent was also obtained. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality; all data were used solely for the purpose of this research.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the key findings organized around the research questions and integrates a discussion of their significance.

Research Question 1: Specific Domains of Interference

Phonological Interference

The analysis of the spoken components (from the interview openers and reading sections) and misspellings in the essays revealed profound phonological interference.

Vowel Conflation

The most frequent issue was the inability to distinguish between /ɪ/ and /i:/. Words like 'seat'/'sit', 'beat'/'bit' were often pronounced identically. This is directly traceable to Yoruba's 7-vowel system (/i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u/), which lacks this specific length distinction.

Consonantal Challenges

The English dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ were consistently replaced. 'Think' was pronounced as 'tink', 'this' as 'dis'. The voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ was sometimes realized as /s/ (e.g., 'shoe' as 'su'). Consonant clusters were often broken up with epenthetic vowels, a common strategy in Yoruba phonotactics (e.g., 'street' pronounced as 'sítíríiti').

Tonal Intrusion

While English is a stress-timed language, Yoruba is tonal. Learners often imposed Yoruba tonal patterns on English words, leading to a distinct "Yoruba accent" that sometimes affected intelligibility. These findings align perfectly with the predictions of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and confirm previous studies (Atoye, 2005). The phonological system of Yoruba acts as a powerful filter through which English sounds are perceived and produced, leading to a fossilized accent if not addressed early.

Syntactic and Morphosyntactic Interference

This was the most prolific area of errors in the written proficiency test and essays.

Tense Marking

Errors in verb tense were rampant. Examples include: "She go to market yesterday" (for "went") and "I am see him last week." Yoruba does not inflect verbs for tense; tense is indicated by context or temporal adverbs. Learners directly transfer this L1 rule to English.

Prepositional Usage

This was a major challenge. Common errors included: "I am in the bus" (for "on"), "He is good in English" (for "at"), and "She divided the orange between her four children" (for "among"). These errors are classic cases of calquing, where Yoruba prepositional logic ("inú bọ̀sì" for 'inside the bus') is directly mapped onto English.

Articles

The definite and indefinite articles ('a', 'an', 'the') were frequently omitted or misused (e.g., "He is teacher," "I want to buy book"). Yoruba has no direct equivalent of the article system, making this a persistent learning difficulty.

Pluralization

Errors like "many book" and "the childs" were common. While Yoruba has plural markers, their usage is not as obligatory or systematic as in English, leading to omission or overgeneralization. The syntactic errors provide clear evidence of Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage. Learners are not producing random mistakes; they are creating a systematic, albeit incorrect, grammar for English that is heavily influenced by the underlying rules of Yoruba. The absence of certain grammatical categories in Yoruba (like articles, verb inflections) creates a significant learning burden.

Lexical Interference

Direct Translation (Calquing)

Learners produced phrases that were direct translations from Yoruba. For example: "Mr. Bello is *knocking* his head" (from "* ó n lu ori" meaning 'he is being stubborn'), "I chewed his words" (from "Mo je ọrọ rẹ*" meaning 'I obeyed him').

Code-mixing

In informal conversations and even in essay drafts, frequent code-mixing was observed: "The man just wàhálà us for no reason." (Yoruba: 'wàhálà' meaning 'trouble'). Lexical interference reflects the cognitive process of relying on the most readily available linguistic resource (L1) to express ideas in L2, especially when L2 proficiency is limited (Odlin, 1989). It also highlights the socio-linguistic reality of code-mixing as a natural feature of the Nigerian bilingual environment.

Research Question 2: Relationship between Yoruba Use and English Proficiency

Analysis of the questionnaire data showed that 78% of students reported using Yoruba "always" or "very often" at home, while only 22% reported similar frequent use of English. A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between the frequency of Yoruba use (composite score from home, peer, and media use) and the total score on the English Proficiency Test. There was a statistically significant negative correlation between the two variables, $r(298) = -0.43$, $p = .000$. This indicates that a higher frequency of Yoruba use in the learners' immediate environment is associated with lower proficiency scores in English. This finding underscores the critical role of L2 input and practice. While the mother tongue is vital for cultural identity, limited exposure to the target language in meaningful communicative contexts outside the classroom constrains the development of proficiency. It supports the notion that for L2 acquisition to be optimal, learners need substantial and quality exposure to the L2 (Krashen, 1982).

Research Question 3: Teachers' Perceptions and Challenges

Thematic analysis of the teacher interviews yielded three main themes

Awareness but Inadequate Strategy

All 15 teachers were acutely aware of MTI, describing it as their "greatest challenge." They could readily list common errors. However, most admitted that their primary strategy was reactive error correction ("I mark it wrong and write the correct form") rather than proactive, systematic teaching to address the root cause.

Lack of Resources and Training

Teachers expressed frustration with the lack of specific teaching materials designed to tackle MTI. They reported that their own training did not equip them with techniques like Contrastive Analysis or communicative drills focused on problematic areas. One teacher stated, "We know the problem is Yoruba, but we don't know how to systematically remove it from their English."

The Pressure of the Syllabus and Large Classes

Teachers highlighted that the overcrowded curriculum and large class sizes (often 50+ students) made it impossible to give individual attention to learners' persistent errors, leading to fossilization. The teachers' perspectives reveal a significant gap between identifying the problem and effectively addressing it pedagogically. This points to a systemic failure in teacher preparation and curriculum design, which does not explicitly incorporate strategies for managing bilingual classrooms where negative transfer is a predictable phenomenon.

Conclusion and Implications

Summary of Findings

This study has provided empirical evidence that the Yoruba language exerts a strong and multifaceted influence on the acquisition of English by secondary school learners in Ogun State. This influence is most pronounced in the domains of phonology, syntax, and lexicon, leading to a systematic interlanguage that deviates from Standard English. The study also established a significant negative correlation between the frequency of Yoruba use in the learners' socio-linguistic environment and their proficiency in English. Furthermore, English teachers, while cognizant of the challenge, feel ill-equipped with the pedagogical tools to effectively mitigate it.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Pedagogical Shifts

Integrate Contrastive Analysis into Teaching

Teacher training programs and curriculum developers should incorporate modules on Contrastive Analysis of Yoruba and English. Teachers can use this knowledge to predict areas of difficulty and design targeted lessons (e.g., minimal pair drills for /ɪ/ and /i:/, substitution tables for prepositions).

Promote Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Move beyond rote learning and grammar-translation methods. Create immersive, interactive classroom environments where students are compelled to use English for genuine communication, thereby increasing their exposure and practice.

Encourage Extensive Reading

Schools should establish functional libraries and promote a culture of reading English storybooks, newspapers, and magazines to improve vocabulary, internalize grammatical structures, and reduce reliance on direct translation.

Teacher Development

The Ogun State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) and the Teachers' Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) should organize regular workshops and in-service training (INSET) for English teachers focused on error analysis and strategies for correcting L1-induced errors.

Policy Considerations

- While upholding the importance of the mother tongue, the government and school administrators should encourage the use of English as a medium of communication within the school premises (e.g., during assemblies, club meetings) to create a more supportive L2 environment.
- The curriculum for English in teacher training colleges should be revised to include a mandatory course on "The Structure of Nigerian English and Mother Tongue Influence."

Suggestions for Future Research- Future studies could:

- Employ a longitudinal design to track the progression of specific errors and the effectiveness of targeted interventions over time.
- Investigate the influence of other socio-economic factors (e.g., parents' level of education, access to technology) on L2 proficiency alongside MTI.
- Explore the potential for positive transfer from Yoruba to English in areas like storytelling patterns or pragmatic competence.

Conclusion

The mother tongue is an inescapable reality in the second language learning process. In Ogun State, its influence on English is profound and largely negative in its current manifestation. However, by acknowledging this influence not as a deficit but as a systematic linguistic process, educators and policymakers can develop more effective, empathetic, and scientifically-grounded strategies to guide learners towards greater proficiency in the official language, ultimately fostering a truly additive bilingualism.

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