

**THE PROBLEM ASSOCIATED WITH THE LEARNING OF THE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN  
LAGOS NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

English Language learning is faced with myriads of challenges ranging from mother tongue interference, Lack of adequate language specialists, parental contribution and even student's attitude to the language. The study adopted descriptive survey to collect the data on the problem at hand. Questionnaires on the Learning of English Language were used to gather the data. The highlighted problems are not only common scenarios of the government owned schools but also exist in private institutions although with little variance. To solve these and many other problems, the paper opines that English learners must be extensive readers, learn to appreciate and react favourably to the qualities and charm of English, teachers should get frequent improve themselves. In addition, parents also have great role to play by communicating with their wards in English language aid effective learning.

**Keywords:** mother tongue interference, specialists, extensive, myriad, scenarios

**INTRODUCTION**

The English language, which is regarded as the nation's second language, has contributed to the progress of a good number of secondary school students in Lagos state and Nigeria at large. In Nigeria today, its popularity and acceptability have earned it the recognition of being recognized as one of the core subjects taught in schools and colleges. Although, many people would agree that there is an observable fall in standard of education in Nigeria, nobody in his/her widest imagination would have believed that university education in Nigeria has fallen to an abysmally low level as a world bank study came up with a report that university education in Nigeria has degenerated in the past 15 to 16 years. (Akindele and Afolayan 58) trace the institutionalized learning of English in Nigeria to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807. The English language, from records available, has been the most failed subject in the last ten years, not only in Lagos state, but in the nation in general. Besides, it is one of the

requirements for admission of students into higher institutions in the country. This prompted me to undergo this research work.

The role of the English Language is clearly documented in the National Policy on Education (1981) which states that “ The medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue of the language of the immediate community and at later stage the English Language (5)”. From the above, the significance of the English language in Nigeria is glaring and for this reason it should not be handled with levity. The case for English has always been overstated; it is true that English in Nigeria is a common language, but only for the educated elites. Perhaps as many as 90 percent of our people in both the urban and rural areas are untouched by its alleged communicative role. Inadvertently, due to the poor performance of students in the English Language over the years, a good number of students spend years writing and rewriting the English Language examination at the senior certificate level which lingers academic crisis.

This study will identify major areas of the decline in English language learning in selected secondary schools in Lagos State; the actual problem may have it root at the secondary level. For it is at the secondary school level that the potential undergraduate is given adequate foundation in the use of English language. A mastery of written and spoken language is highly desirable, yet its teaching and learning is best by a myriad of problems at the secondary school level (Afolayan 1996)

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The general objective of this study is to assess the impediments on the way of learning of English language in secondary school in Lagos state of Nigeria. It also sets to suggest certain solutions to the problems.

### **APPROACHES TO THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIA**

Learning English as a second language in Nigeria takes one of two approaches; the formal or informal. The choice of approaches by a learner may, however, be a function of the primary purpose for seeking to acquire skills in an L2. On the one hand, for the general purposes of educational pursuit, English is both a compulsory subject and a medium of the learning through which other curricular subjects are taught in schools. On the hand, when the knowledge of English is not sought primary for educational purpose, its learning often follows an unplanned and informal process.

### **The Formal Approach**

Four stages can be identified in the build -up of educated competence: Pre-school, Primary school, Secondary school, and Tertiary. These are, however, not often rigidly gone through by all formal learners of English as an L2 in Nigeria.

### **The Informal Approach**

This is an un-systematized process. The major tool in the hand of the learner is his/her ability to mimic. He/she picks up bits and pieces in the language which he/she attempt to string together into a network as his/her learning "progress" even though slowly. There is an evident ignorance of rules governing the language use among learner in this category.

### **PROBLEMS OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING**

Some obvious reasons for problems experienced in L2 acquisition are related to the fact that most people attempt to learn another language during their teenage or adult years, in few hours each week of school time (rather than via the contracts interaction experienced by child), with a lot of other occupations (the child has little else to do), and with an already known language available for most of their daily communicative requirements. Some less likely reasons include the suggestion that adults' tongue 'get stiff' from pronouncing one type of language (e.g. French or Japanese). It's cute idea, but there is no physical evidence to support it.

The problems encountered by learners are manifold: linguistic, psychological, sociological, political and administrative and pedagogical (Akindele and Afolayan 24). The linguistic problems are revealed in (i) the intra- lingual errors committed by learners (through overgeneralization or ignorance of rules restriction, incomplete application of rules and the building of false systems or concepts) in the use of the language. (ii) interlingual errors (e.g. inference). Such errors which occur at various linguistic levels have been analysed via the perspectives of several theories, prominent among which are contrastive analysis, error analysis and inter-language/transitional competence. Apart from physiological problems which learners may have, errors attributable to psycholinguistics can be linked mainly with the factors of motivational reasons for learning the language shows their low level of achievement in it. Despite the apparently positive attitude of many users of it vis-à-vis their mother tongue, the impersonal and distant communicative role which English plays in the lives of individuals the society keeps the standard of the language low. For the other remaining reasons, one can identify the lapses in formulation and implementation of policies by the government, deficiencies in the language curriculum, lack of adequate competent teachers, the poor administration of the school system and the lack of genuine concern by the parents.

### **Mother Tongue Interference**

Mother tongue is the child's early language. Some scholars claim that it is acquired not learnt. It is the language that one grows up with. When Chomsky theorized about the innate capacity of humans to acquire language, he referred to mother tongue. It could be an indigenous language or foreign one depending on which the child is exposed to early in life. This implies that in Nigeria, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Tiv, Edo, etc. are the majority's mother tongues but English, or Arabic, could be an MT for a Nigeria speaker whose father is a Hausa, if either of the foreign language was what he/she was exposed to.

Mother tongue interference is a well-known problem in Nigeria because of its interference in the English language. Majority of secondary school students in Nigeria already have various mother tongues before they are admitted into school. According to Trifonovitch (1981), a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he/she already has a language of the English language. He analyses in his work that this constitutes an impediment to brilliant performance of learners in the use of the English language in public: "The language situation in Nigeria is such that the keen language teaching and education in general". He also says "Experience has shown that most of the first language (L1) into the second language (L2)". This version of justification for mother tongue education makes possible a flexible approach in that it allows a variety of practices depending on the situation.

### **Lack of qualified Teachers**

Even though much is expected from a language teacher we still find out today that most of our language teachers are inexperienced and incompetent. Some of them have not read English. The English language is regarded as a subject which can be taught by a part-time teacher or non-specialist who has little or no linguistic training.

### **The Student's Environment**

A conducive and enabling environment is a requirement for effective language teaching/learning. By implication, the environment is an artificial one. Effort should, therefore, be made to introduce some measure of naturalness into the various learning environments. It is important to note that Nigeria is a multilingual setting. As far as the learning/teaching of the English language is concerned, the environment poses serious problems and challenges both for the teachers and the learner of English.

The Student's environment is also one of the major factors of problems associated with the learning of the English language; many schools, especially those in urban centres, are in areas where there is a busy movement and activities of many people. It was observed that people used the schools' premises as short-cut to paths and across the playing field in many schools. Many schools have dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs and cracked walls. Many of these

dilapidated buildings are still being used for classroom activities. A rustic environment could dampen the morale of the teaching personnel of the pupil, while a sophisticated one could be an encouragement.

The role of the environment in providing the data input can not be underestimated as this largely influences the final learning achievement, L2 acquisition takes place in a native-speakers' environment. The environment is saturated with linguistic data made available via several agents of exposure: parents, relations, peer group, teachers, books, mass media, public notices, inscriptions and advertisements. Thus, apart from self-involvement, all the above have great influence on the acquisition of language of the child.

### **Student's attitude and Its Effect on Learning**

Most scholars have blamed poor learning to student in the English language to all other factors besides student's attitude. Consequently, many recent studies have been conducted to investigate student's attitude and how it influences learning English language. Students skip class, and when they do show up it's likely due to fear of failure more than anything else. They may lack any semblance of attention during class, for example, chatting with classmates, doodling in their notebooks or, cramming their textbooks. Circumstance like those affect the learning of the English language.

### **Parental Contribution**

This concern parents' effort and attitude towards their child's learning of English; parents who want the best for their children complement school's formal effort by further encouraging their children through extra lesson, provision of learning material, making English one of the language of the home, and not exclusively that of the school.

### **Political Problem**

This concerns some administrative problem emanating from government's policy on language and education. The two are inter-related. For example, government policy encourages only integrative motivation towards the learning of English as against instrumental motivation, learning/teaching will be largely interactively motivated.

Government policy, on the other hand, may encourage either of the following:

- a) Coordinate bilingualism in a native language and English; and
- b) Compound bilingualism in a native language and English.

Government policy on language generally favours the use of English as a medium of instruction especially as from the secondary school level. English is also one of the core subjects to be

studied in the secondary school. Thus, the provision of the language policy goes a long way to influencing the learning and teaching of the English language in Nigeria.

### **Lack of Instructional resources and media**

Several studies have revealed the dominance of textbooks, dictionaries, chalkboards, work books, and posters in the teaching of English language in secondary schools in Nigeria. Modern media, such as audio and video tapes, language laboratories, programmed texts, flashcards, computers, magazines and newspapers, are rarely used. These findings agree with those Kolawole (1998) who found that the teaching of the English Language is bedevilled with many problems such as inadequate period of teaching, method of teaching and lacking adequate useful resources, which are current in the practice by the English language teachers in secondary schools in Nigeria. Students are greatly deprived without access to modern instructional media.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

In this research the researcher has used a descriptive survey design which involves an intensive study geared towards a thorough understanding of the population.

### **Sample and sampling procedure**

Multistage sampling method was adopted allowing the selection going through stages. At stage one, the researcher used stratified sampling technique to select students from five secondary schools of (Ikolaba High School, Ephraim International School, Grace High School, St. Annes Grammar school, and Jones High School) At stage two, the researcher used SS1- SS3 students in the schools. At stage three, simple random sampling was adopted.

### **Validity of the Instrument**

Validity is the degree or extent at which a test measures what it supposes to measure (Oladele, 2002). To establish and affirm the validity of the instrument, it was given to four (4) teachers in the secondary school for vetting. Having corrected all ambiguities in the instrument, it was later confirmed and affirmed as being good for use in the study.

### **Procedure for Data Analysis**

The researcher used Frequency Counts and Percentages to analyse the data collected.

## **RESULT**

The chapter deals with the analysis of data from responses of the questionnaire on a Survey of Problems facing the Learning of English language in secondary schools in Lagos State. The

students' and teachers' questionnaires were classified into two sections, section A and section B. This includes adequate facilities, student's attitudes, teachers interest, and mother tongue interference in secondary schools; this can be identified according to student's questionnaire in questions numbered 11, 12 and 16. Responses were calculated based on yes or no answers in tabular forms with specific reference to percentages. Percentage response is analysed based on student's positive answers.

**Table 1: Teaching facilities**

SCHOOLS	Q7	Q8	Q11
A	6.00	7.00	10.00
B	8.00	7.00	10.00
C	10.00	8.00	10.00
D	9.00	6.00	10.00
E	9.00	8.00	10.00
TOTAL	62%	72%	100%

(Q7): percentage Response shows that 62 percent agree with the fact that there is library in their schools

(Q8): percentage Response shows that 72 percent agree with the fact that there is library in their schools

(Q11): percentage Response shows that 100 percent agree with the fact that their teachers introduce teaching facilities like textbooks etc while teaching them

**Table 2: Student's attitude**

<b>SCHOOLS</b>	<b>Q4</b>	<b>Q6</b>	<b>Q10</b>	<b>Q13</b>
A	13-18 yrs	7.00	6.00	5.00
B	14-18 yrs	8.00	6.00	3.00
C	14-20 yrs	7.00	6.00	1.00
D	13-17 yrs	5.00	6.00	2.00
E	13-19 yrs	5.00	6.00	1.00
TOTAL	Btw 13-20 yrs	65%	60%	28%

Q4: range response shows that between 13-20 years are the ages of students between SS1- SS3 in the selected public schools.

Q5: Percentage response illustrates that 65 percent of students are interested in the learning of the English language.

Q10: Percentage response explains that 50 percent of students have special lessons on English language.

Q13: Percentage response explains that 28 percent of students admit that their environments affects their learning of the Language.

In testing the hypothesis, there is evidence that there is a significant influence of students' attitudes on their performance affect their learning of English language. This means that students' attitude is average and has contributed to the problems associated with the learning of English language.

**Table 3: mother tongue interference**

SCHOOLS	Q17	Q18
A	1.00	1.00
B	2.00	5.00
C	4.00	3.00
D	3.00	2.00
E	2.00	1.00
TOTAL	12%	23%

Q17: Percentage response explains that 12 percent of students agree that mother tongue affects their learning of English language.

Q18: Percentage response explains that 23 percent of students admit that peer groups affects their leaning of English language.

The teacher’s questionnaire is analysed based on their mean response, and used in tabular form, which includes the teacher’s interest, student’s attitude from their teachers, the teacher’s point of view, teaching strategies, and the teacher’s use of instructional materials. Percentages response will also be analysed based on the positive answers.

**Table 4: teacher’s interest**

TEACHERS	QUESTIONS
PERCENTAGE	Q5 (15.00%) Q6(9.00%) Q15(15.00%)

Q5: Percentage response shows that 15 percent of the teachers specialized in English language and literature

**Q6:** Percentage response explains that 9 percent of the teachers have more than ten years teaching experience while the other 6 percent of the teachers with less than ten years teaching experience.

**Q15:** percentage response shows that 15 percent of the teachers have been to educational seminars before.

## **DISCUSSION**

The research findings are shown in each table drawn above

Table 1 research findings show that, teaching facilities in the theses selected schools from the student's perspective show the average use of these facilities, but it is realized that this finding contradicts the perspectives of the teachers, which is that the government doesn't provide them with these facilities.

Table 2 research findings show that student's attitude, from the student's perspective, explains the average interest they have in learning the English language; instead they prefer to speak their mother tongues. This is seen as one of the problems they encounter in the effective speaking of the English language.

Table 3 research findings show that mother interference is also an important factor that affects the students learning of the English Language, because students prefer to concentrate on Pidgin English or their mother tongue when they see they are not gaining or progressing in their spoken English. This because of the lack of instructional media or materials to reinforce their learning of English Language.

Table 4 research findings show that teachers' interest is basically on grammar usage, and from these findings it is clear that the teachers assigned to teach the English language in these schools are highly qualified, because they do not have less than years teaching experience; due to this fact I will say that the problem of learning the English language mainly comes from the government due continuous strike, no provision of teaching aids, no library facilities and changing of curriculums.

Based on the research findings, problems facing the learning of the English language include:

- Lack of teaching aids or gadgets.
- Inadequate student's reading culture
- Absence of students in school
- Students' slowness in grasping lesson because of mother tongue interference
- Few reference books in library for students and teachers
- Communication breakdown/gap between the students and teachers

- Inability of students to express themselves in writing and frequent use of mother tongue in their conversations.
- Nonchalant attitude of student towards their studies
- No language library for oral practice
- Refusal of students to do their homework
- Non-availability of teacher's copy of class reader

## **CONCLUSION**

Humans are prone not only to commit language errors themselves but also to err in their judgements of those error committed by other (James 204). This study attempted to identify, describe, categorize, and diagnose the problems encountered by learners of the English language, in south western Nigeria. Just a George (1972) and Brudhiprabha (1972) found that only one-third of the second language learner's errors can be attributed to NL language transfer, this is what this study came up with. Most errors are caused by an over application of L2. The public secondary schools in Nigeria are far behind time in offering multiple pathways to the teaching and learning of the English language as a second language. Little wonder that the system has been witnessing steady decline with the percentage of students who failed English language examination fluctuating between 55% and 75% in the past ten years (Olaboopo 1998). The effect of this is that secondary school students who find their way into the university are already at a disadvantage due to poor back ground and preparation in Language education.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Public secondary schools in Nigeria should be provided with adequate and a variety of instructional media. If teachers in public secondary schools in Nigeria are to assumes new roles and use new technology- supported instructional tools, they should become familiar with the variety of the instructional delivery methods, rather than relying on textbooks, chalkboard and lecture method. Technologies such as audio and video recordings, language laboratories and computer can be more effective teaching tools for English Language lessons as they offer authentic learning experience when interwoven with existing curriculum. We are convinced that the high potential for enhanced learning through the provision of conductive- learning environment in public schools in Nigeria. It is strongly recommended that the learning environment in schools in Nigeria be given priority attention by the state and federal governments so that scholars can learn well.

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