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REDUCING MOTHER TONGUE INTERFERENCE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A STUDY OF CLASSROOM-BASED STRATEGIES

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Abstract
Mother tongue interference remains a significant challenge in English language classrooms in Nigeria, often affecting learners' pronunciation, grammar, and overall communicative competence. This study investigated classroom-based strategies designed to reduce mother tongue interference among undergraduate students in selected Nigerian universities. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining classroom observations, structured interviews, and pre- and post-intervention assessments. Findings indicate that the implementation of targeted pedagogical strategies—such as raising awareness of code-switching, peer-assisted learning, and explicit pronunciation exercises—substantially improves students' accuracy and fluency in English. The study further identifies contextual factors influencing the effectiveness of these strategies, including teacher competence, student motivation, and classroom dynamics. The results suggest that a structured, context-sensitive approach to English instruction can mitigate the impact of mother tongue interference and enhance communicative competence. This research contributes to the discourse on English language pedagogy in Nigeria by offering empirically grounded recommendations for educators seeking to improve classroom practices and student outcomes.

Keywords: Mother tongue interference, Nigerian undergraduate students, classroom strategies, pedagogical interventions, English language

Introduction

In multilingual societies, English often functions as a second or foreign language, serving as a medium of instruction, communication, and professional interaction. Among undergraduate students, particularly in non-native English contexts such as Nigeria, the influence of the first language, or mother tongue, on English learning is both pervasive and persistent. This phenomenon, commonly referred to as mother tongue interference, affects learners' pronunciation, grammar, and overall communicative competence, ultimately influencing their academic performance and professional readiness (Adegbija, 2004; Onwuka, 2017).

Background to the Study

Mother tongue interference occurs when features of a learner's first language transfer into second-language use, either consciously or unconsciously. For example, students may mispronounce English words, apply incorrect grammatical structures, or translate idiomatic expressions directly from their native language. Such interference is particularly evident in oral communication but can also affect writing skills, comprehension, and reading fluency (Ellis, 2008).

Importance of English Proficiency

Proficiency in English is critical for academic success, employability, and participation in global discourse. Undergraduate ESL students face the dual challenge of mastering complex linguistic

structures while navigating the influence of their native language. Persistent mother tongue interference can limit students' confidence in communication, hinder comprehension of academic materials, and reduce their engagement in interactive classroom activities (Harbord, 1992; Crystal, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

Despite numerous pedagogical interventions, mother tongue interference remains a significant barrier in English language classrooms. Many undergraduate students continue to exhibit pronunciation errors, literal translation mistakes, and grammatical inconsistencies due to insufficient exposure to structured corrective strategies. Consequently, there is a need for targeted classroom-based approaches that can reduce interference and promote accurate English usage (Lado, 1957; Odumosu, 2015).

Implications of the Problem

Failure to address mother tongue interference not only impairs individual learning outcomes but also affects broader educational objectives. Students who struggle with English communication may underperform in examinations, experience reduced participation in class discussions, and face limited opportunities for further academic or professional advancement. This problem, therefore, has implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and policy formulation (Bamgbose, 1991; Eze, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The present study seeks to investigate effective classroom-based strategies for mitigating mother tongue interference among undergraduate ESL students. By identifying and evaluating interventions that improve pronunciation, grammar, and overall language accuracy, this research aims to provide practical guidance for educators and curriculum developers working in multilingual contexts.

Research Objectives

Specifically, the study aims to: (1) examine the extent and nature of mother tongue interference among undergraduate ESL students, (2) identify classroom strategies employed to reduce interference, (3) evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies, and (4) provide recommendations for enhancing English language instruction in higher education settings.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What forms of mother tongue interference are most prevalent among undergraduate ESL students?
2. Which classroom-based strategies are commonly used to address these forms of interference?
3. How effective are these strategies in improving students' English language proficiency?
4. What factors facilitate or hinder the successful implementation of these strategies?

Significance of the Study

This research is significant for English language educators, as it provides evidence-based insights into effective pedagogical interventions. Teachers can apply the findings to design classroom activities that explicitly target interference patterns, thereby improving students' oral and written English skills.

Moreover, understanding the specific challenges posed by mother tongue interference can inform teacher training programmes and professional development workshops (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Significance of the Study

From an academic perspective, the study contributes to the existing literature on second language acquisition, cross-linguistic influence, and pedagogical intervention strategies. By focusing on undergraduate learners in multilingual settings, it fills a gap in research that often prioritises primary or secondary education, offering empirical evidence for higher education contexts.

Significance of the Study

The findings may also inform curriculum development and educational policy. By highlighting effective classroom strategies, the study offers recommendations for integrating structured intervention techniques into English language programmes. This can enhance curriculum relevance, address learners' specific challenges, and promote overall language proficiency at the tertiary level.

Scope of the Study

The research focuses on undergraduate ESL students enrolled in selected Nigerian universities. The study examines classroom-based interventions implemented by lecturers during English language instruction, concentrating on strategies aimed at reducing pronunciation, grammatical, and syntactic errors caused by mother tongue interference.

Limitations of the Study

While the study provides valuable insights, it acknowledges certain limitations. The research is limited to selected universities, which may not fully represent all Nigerian tertiary institutions. Additionally, the focus is on classroom-based strategies, without exploring home or informal learning environments where interference may also occur.

Justification for the Study

Despite these limitations, the study is justified due to the ongoing challenges undergraduate students face in mastering English. Effective classroom strategies can empower learners to overcome mother tongue interference, enhance communicative competence, and improve academic performance. The research therefore addresses a critical need within ESL pedagogy in multilingual settings.

Summary and Transition

In summary, mother tongue interference presents a substantial obstacle to effective English language learning among undergraduates. This study seeks to explore and evaluate classroom-based strategies that can mitigate such interference, offering practical and theoretical contributions to ESL teaching. The subsequent sections review relevant literature, outline the research methodology, and present findings that inform pedagogical recommendations.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Mother tongue interference in English language learning has attracted significant scholarly attention due to its persistent influence on learners' communication skills. Interference occurs when a learner's

native language affects second language acquisition, manifesting in pronunciation errors, incorrect grammatical structures, and literal translation of idioms (Odumosu, 2015). Understanding the mechanisms and effects of mother tongue interference is crucial for developing effective pedagogical strategies that enhance English proficiency among undergraduate ESL students.

Concept of Mother Tongue Interference

The term "mother tongue interference" refers to the cross-linguistic influence of a learner's first language on second language production (Ellis, 2008). Such interference can be phonological, syntactic, lexical, or semantic, often reflecting patterns from the native language rather than standard English. For example, a student whose first language lacks certain English phonemes may consistently mispronounce specific words, creating challenges in oral communication (Odlin, 1989).

Historical Perspectives

Historically, research on language interference dates back to the structuralist approaches of the mid-20th century, which emphasised contrastive analysis between the first and second languages (Lado, 1957). These studies argued that linguistic differences predict areas of difficulty in second language acquisition, suggesting that interference is a natural consequence of language transfer rather than learner error. Modern approaches, however, recognise interference as context-dependent and influenced by cognitive, social, and pedagogical factors.

Impact on Pronunciation and Listening Skills

Phonological interference significantly affects pronunciation and listening comprehension in ESL learners. Students may struggle with distinguishing sounds absent in their mother tongue, leading to misunderstandings in communication (Harbord, 1992). Such challenges can reduce learner confidence, discourage oral participation, and hinder interactive classroom activities, which are critical for language acquisition in tertiary education.

Impact on Grammar and Writing

Syntactic and grammatical interference also poses challenges, particularly in writing. Students often apply the rules of their native language to English, resulting in incorrect sentence structures, verb agreement errors, and misuse of prepositions (Bamgbose, 1991). These errors compromise clarity, reduce academic performance, and limit students' ability to produce coherent written texts suitable for higher education assessment standards.

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theories underpin research on mother tongue interference. Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) explains interference as the predictable outcome of linguistic differences. Meanwhile, Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967) focuses on identifying and categorising learner errors to understand underlying causes, including mother tongue influence. Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasises the role of social interaction and scaffolding in mitigating interference, highlighting classroom strategies that support collaborative learning.

Classroom-Based Strategies Overview

Effective classroom-based strategies aim to reduce mother tongue interference by providing structured, contextualised support. These strategies include explicit teaching of pronunciation, grammar exercises tailored to common interference patterns, and activities that promote English-only interaction. Teacher awareness and intervention play a critical role in identifying interference patterns and guiding learners towards accurate usage (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Code-Switching Awareness

One prominent strategy involves managing code-switching, where learners alternate between their first language and English. While occasional code-switching can facilitate comprehension, excessive reliance on the mother tongue may reinforce errors (Macaro, 2001). Educators are encouraged to set clear language-use policies in classrooms, encouraging English communication while providing scaffolding to support comprehension.

Peer-Assisted Learning and Collaborative Strategies

Peer-assisted learning and collaborative group activities have been found effective in mitigating mother tongue interference. Students benefit from peer correction, modelling, and shared practice, which promote conscious awareness of language use (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Such strategies foster a supportive learning environment, encouraging learners to experiment with English without fear of error.

Explicit Pronunciation and Grammar Interventions

Targeted pronunciation drills, phonetic training, and explicit grammar instruction help address recurring interference patterns. For instance, activities that isolate problem sounds or sentence structures enable learners to practice in a focused manner, reducing transfer from the mother tongue (Harmer, 2015). These interventions are particularly useful for undergraduate students who require rapid improvement in academic and professional communication.

Empirical Studies on Strategy Effectiveness

Empirical studies confirm the positive impact of classroom-based strategies. For example, Onwuka (2017) observed that Nigerian undergraduates exposed to structured pronunciation and grammar exercises demonstrated measurable improvement in both oral and written English. Similarly, Eze (2013) reported that peer-assisted learning reduced error frequency and enhanced learner confidence. These findings support the argument that deliberate pedagogical interventions can mitigate the effects of mother tongue interference.

Summary of Literature and Research Gap

In summary, the literature indicates that mother tongue interference remains a significant barrier to English language proficiency among undergraduates, affecting pronunciation, grammar, and communication skills. While numerous strategies have been proposed, gaps remain in empirical evidence regarding their systematic implementation in tertiary classrooms. This study seeks to address this gap by investigating the effectiveness of classroom-based interventions among Nigerian ESL learners, providing both theoretical and practical insights for educators.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of classroom-based strategies for reducing mother tongue interference among undergraduate ESL students. The quantitative component involved pre- and post-intervention assessments to measure changes in students' language accuracy, while the qualitative component utilised classroom observations and structured interviews to capture in-depth perspectives from students and lecturers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was chosen to triangulate data and enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

Population of the Study

The population comprised **undergraduate students enrolled in English language courses** across selected Nigerian universities. The study focused on students in their second and third years of study, as they have already acquired basic English language competence and are more exposed to academic English usage. The population also included lecturers who facilitate English language instruction, as they are directly involved in implementing classroom-based strategies to mitigate mother tongue interference.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to select participants, ensuring that only students and lecturers with relevant experience in ESL classrooms were included. The sample consisted of **120 undergraduate students and 10 lecturers** across three universities. Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate because it targets individuals who are most likely to provide rich and relevant data, particularly regarding the prevalence of mother tongue interference and the effectiveness of intervention strategies (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using **multiple instruments** to ensure triangulation and depth. For quantitative data, a **pre- and post-test assessment** measured students' accuracy in pronunciation, grammar, and sentence construction. Qualitative data were gathered through **structured classroom observations** and **semi-structured interviews** with lecturers and students. Observation checklists focused on language use, code-switching patterns, and student participation, while interview protocols explored perceptions of classroom strategies and their effectiveness.

Data Collection Procedure

The study was conducted over a **six-week period** during regular English language classes. Pre-tests were administered to assess baseline language performance, followed by the implementation of classroom-based strategies, including explicit pronunciation drills, grammar exercises, and peer-assisted activities. Classroom observations were conducted weekly to monitor student engagement and teacher intervention, and interviews were scheduled at the end of the intervention period. All procedures adhered to ethical guidelines, with informed consent obtained from participants and confidentiality maintained throughout the study (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analysed using **descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests** to determine significant improvements in students' English language performance. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analysed using **thematic analysis**, identifying recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to the effectiveness of classroom strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative findings facilitated a holistic understanding of how classroom interventions mitigate mother tongue interference.

Results and Findings

Quantitative Findings

The pre- and post-test assessments revealed a **significant improvement in students' English language performance** following the implementation of classroom-based strategies. On average, students' accuracy in pronunciation increased from 62% in the pre-test to 81% in the post-test, while grammatical accuracy improved from 58% to 79%. Paired-sample t-tests confirmed that these improvements were statistically significant ($p < .05$), indicating that explicit pronunciation drills, grammar exercises, and peer-assisted activities effectively reduced mother tongue interference among undergraduate ESL students.

Observational Findings

Classroom observations demonstrated a **marked decrease in code-switching behaviours** and increased participation in English-only discussions. Students were observed to self-correct when errors occurred and engage more confidently in peer-assisted learning activities. Lecturers reported that students gradually internalised correct usage patterns, particularly in sentence construction and oral communication. These observations suggest that sustained, structured interventions can foster habitual use of English in classroom interactions, reducing reliance on the mother tongue.

Qualitative Findings from Interviews

Interviews with students and lecturers revealed that the strategies were perceived as **both effective and engaging**. Students highlighted that peer-assisted learning encouraged collaborative correction and reinforced understanding, while lecturers noted that explicit instruction in problematic areas, such as pronunciation and syntax, allowed for targeted remediation. However, both groups indicated that **consistency and student motivation** were critical to achieving optimal results. These qualitative insights complement the quantitative data, providing evidence that classroom-based strategies not only improve measurable language performance but also enhance learners' confidence and communicative competence.

Discussion of Findings

Improvement in Language Accuracy

The findings indicate that classroom-based strategies significantly enhanced students' pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, confirming the effectiveness of structured interventions in mitigating mother tongue interference. This aligns with previous studies by Onwuka (2017) and Eze (2013), which reported similar improvements among Nigerian undergraduates following targeted pronunciation and grammar exercises. The quantitative results suggest that explicit instruction,

combined with repeated practice, enables students to internalise correct English language patterns, reducing transfer errors from their mother tongue.

Reduction of Code-Switching and Increased Participation

Observational data showed a notable reduction in code-switching and increased student participation during English-only classroom activities. This supports the assertions of Macaro (2001) and Harmer (2015) that managing code-switching and creating an immersive English environment encourages learners to rely less on their native language. The findings also reflect principles of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, highlighting how collaborative activities and peer scaffolding facilitate language acquisition through social interaction, enabling students to practise correct forms in supportive contexts.

Perceptions of Strategy Effectiveness

Interviews revealed that both students and lecturers perceived the classroom-based strategies as engaging and effective. Learners reported increased confidence in oral and written communication, while lecturers observed sustained improvement in language accuracy. These qualitative insights underscore the importance of motivation, consistency, and teacher guidance in implementing pedagogical interventions, corroborating the findings of Lightbown and Spada (2013). Overall, the study demonstrates that targeted classroom strategies not only improve measurable performance but also foster learner confidence and active participation, which are critical for long-term ESL development.

Implications for ESL Pedagogy

Enhancing Classroom Practices

The findings of this study have important implications for English language teaching in tertiary classrooms. The demonstrated effectiveness of classroom-based strategies, such as explicit pronunciation drills, grammar exercises, and peer-assisted learning, suggests that educators should deliberately integrate these approaches into daily instruction. Structured interventions allow teachers to target common errors resulting from mother tongue interference, thereby improving learners' accuracy and fluency. This supports a more systematic and proactive approach to ESL pedagogy rather than relying solely on incidental correction.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

The study highlights the critical role of teacher competence in mitigating mother tongue interference. Lecturers who are skilled in identifying interference patterns and implementing targeted interventions can significantly enhance student outcomes. Consequently, teacher training programmes and professional development workshops should include modules on cross-linguistic influence, classroom management strategies for multilingual learners, and techniques for fostering peer-assisted learning. Such training equips educators to respond effectively to student needs and create a more supportive learning environment (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

Curriculum Design and Policy Implications

The results also suggest the need for curriculum designers and policymakers to prioritise strategies that address mother tongue interference within English language programmes. Incorporating dedicated

instructional activities that emphasise pronunciation, grammar, and oral communication can strengthen learners' English proficiency and reduce reliance on the mother tongue. Additionally, policies encouraging consistent use of English in classroom interactions and assessment can reinforce these pedagogical strategies, ultimately promoting greater communicative competence and academic success among undergraduate ESL students.

Conclusion

This study investigated the effectiveness of classroom-based strategies in reducing mother tongue interference among undergraduate ESL students. The results indicate that targeted interventions, including explicit pronunciation drills, grammar exercises, and peer-assisted learning, significantly improve students' language accuracy and fluency. Observations and interviews further confirmed that these strategies enhance student engagement, confidence, and active participation in English-only classroom activities.

The findings reinforce theoretical perspectives on language acquisition, particularly the role of cross-linguistic influence and sociocultural interaction in shaping learner outcomes. Practically, the study highlights that structured, context-sensitive teaching approaches can mitigate interference from the mother tongue, contributing to more effective ESL pedagogy. Educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers can apply these insights to improve instructional practices and support learners' communicative competence in multilingual contexts.

Overall, mother tongue interference remains a significant barrier to English language proficiency in tertiary classrooms, but this study demonstrates that deliberate classroom-based strategies can substantially reduce its impact. By adopting evidence-based interventions and fostering supportive learning environments, educators can empower undergraduate ESL students to achieve higher levels of accuracy, fluency, and confidence in English communication.

Recommendations

Classroom Instruction

It is recommended that lecturers systematically incorporate **explicit pronunciation, grammar, and syntax exercises** into their lesson plans. Structured interventions that directly address common patterns of mother tongue interference can significantly improve students' English language accuracy. Activities such as peer-assisted learning, pronunciation drills, and targeted error correction should be consistently applied to reinforce correct usage and reduce reliance on the mother tongue.

Teacher Training and Development

Universities and educational institutions should prioritise **continuous professional development for ESL educators**, focusing on strategies to identify and address mother tongue interference. Training programmes should include workshops on cross-linguistic influence, classroom management for multilingual learners, and innovative teaching techniques that encourage student engagement. Equipping lecturers with these skills will enhance the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions and support positive learning outcomes.

Curriculum and Policy Implementation

Policymakers and curriculum developers should ensure that **English language programmes include components that specifically target mother tongue interference**. Guidelines promoting consistent

use of English in classroom interactions, assessment tasks, and learning materials will reinforce pedagogical strategies. Furthermore, integrating evidence-based teaching methods into standard curricula can foster greater communicative competence, enabling undergraduate ESL students to achieve academic and professional success in multilingual contexts.

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