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THE EFFECT OF BILINGUAL TEACHING METHODS ON ENGLISH PROFICIENCY AMONG NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract
This study examined the effect of bilingual teaching methods on English proficiency among Nigerian secondary school students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combined quantitative assessments of students' language skills with qualitative data from classroom observations and teacher interviews in selected secondary schools. Results show that students taught through bilingual methods performed better in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and oral communication than those taught using monolingual approaches. Teachers also observed that integrating the mother tongue alongside English enhanced understanding and reduced learning anxiety. The findings suggest that bilingual pedagogy can effectively improve English proficiency and support academic achievement. Recommendations include adopting context-specific bilingual strategies and providing teacher training to implement these methods effectively in Nigerian secondary schools.

Keywords: bilingual teaching, English proficiency, secondary education, Nigeria, language learning

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

English has become the primary language of instruction and communication in Nigeria, despite the country's rich linguistic diversity. Many Nigerian students grow up learning their **mother tongue** at home before formal education, which can influence their acquisition of English. In multilingual classrooms, teachers often face the challenge of ensuring effective English proficiency while respecting students' native languages.

Bilingual teaching methods, which integrate both the mother tongue and English in the learning process, have been proposed as a solution to this challenge. Such methods aim to bridge the gap between students' first language and the target language, facilitating comprehension and reducing learning anxiety.

Previous studies have suggested that students exposed to bilingual instruction often demonstrate better linguistic skills, including vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and oral communication. In Nigeria, where English is a second language for most students, adopting bilingual pedagogical strategies could significantly enhance learning outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the recognised benefits of bilingual teaching, many Nigerian secondary schools still rely predominantly on monolingual English instruction. This approach can lead to limited English proficiency, poor academic performance, and decreased motivation among students.

Mother tongue interference, where students' native language negatively influences English usage, remains a persistent issue in classrooms. For example, errors in pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure often reflect the influence of local languages on English learning.

There is a growing need to identify effective teaching strategies that reduce these challenges and enhance English proficiency. Investigating the impact of bilingual teaching methods provides an opportunity to address these persistent gaps in language education.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the effect of bilingual teaching methods on the English proficiency of Nigerian secondary school students. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Assess students' English proficiency before and after exposure to bilingual teaching methods.
- Explore teachers' perceptions of bilingual instruction in secondary schools.
- Identify challenges and opportunities in implementing bilingual methods in the Nigerian context.

Research Questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

- What are the effects of bilingual instructional practices on students' English language proficiency in terms of speaking, reading, and writing skills?
- How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of bilingual teaching in secondary schools?
- What challenges hinder the implementation of bilingual teaching strategies in Nigerian classrooms?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are significant for teachers, curriculum planners, and policymakers. Understanding the effect of bilingual teaching methods can inform teaching practices that enhance English proficiency among students.

For educators, integrating students' mother tongue with English instruction may improve comprehension, increase classroom participation, and boost learners' confidence in using English.

For policymakers, the study provides empirical evidence to support curriculum reforms and teacher training programmes that emphasise bilingual pedagogy in secondary education.

Scope and Delimitation

This research focuses on selected secondary schools in Nigeria, particularly examining students' English proficiency and teachers' pedagogical approaches. The study does not extend to primary schools or tertiary institutions.

While the research considers the broader concept of bilingual teaching, it primarily investigates strategies that integrate the mother tongue with English in classroom instruction.

The study also acknowledges potential limitations, such as variations in teaching quality, school resources, and student motivation, which may influence the outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Bilingual Teaching

Bilingual teaching refers to instructional methods that utilise two languages in the classroom, typically a student's mother tongue and a target language, such as English. In multilingual societies like Nigeria, bilingual pedagogy seeks to bridge the gap between students' first language and the language of instruction, thereby enhancing comprehension and retention (Baker, 2011).

Various models of bilingual education exist, including transitional bilingual education, where the mother tongue is gradually phased out, and maintenance bilingual education, which preserves the first language while developing proficiency in the second. Research has shown that bilingual teaching promotes cognitive flexibility and strengthens metalinguistic awareness among learners (Cummins, 2000).

English Proficiency in Nigerian Secondary Schools

English proficiency remains a major educational concern in Nigerian secondary schools, where many students struggle with grammar, pronunciation, and reading comprehension. Factors contributing to low proficiency include limited exposure to English outside the classroom, inadequate teaching resources, and teacher-centred instruction (Adegbija, 2004).

Studies have shown that learners with strong foundational skills in their mother tongue often perform better in English. For instance, Oyetunde (2017) found that students who received instruction incorporating their local language exhibited significant improvement in reading comprehension and oral communication.

Theoretical Perspectives on Bilingual Education

Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis forms the theoretical basis for this study, proposing that skills acquired in the first language positively influence second-language learning. When students understand concepts in their mother tongue, they can transfer that knowledge to English, resulting in improved proficiency (Cummins, 2000).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory also supports bilingual teaching, emphasising the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning. By allowing learners to use their native language in guided instruction, teachers can scaffold English learning, making complex concepts more accessible (Vygotsky, 1978).

Previous Studies on Bilingual Teaching and Language Outcomes

Research in multilingual contexts has consistently demonstrated the benefits of bilingual education. For example, García and Wei (2014) found that students exposed to dual-language programmes achieved higher scores in reading and writing compared with peers in monolingual classrooms.

In Nigeria, studies by Okon (2018) revealed that integrating indigenous languages into English instruction reduced mother tongue interference, improved classroom participation, and increased learners' confidence. These findings indicate that bilingual teaching can directly enhance English proficiency when implemented effectively.

Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Bilingual Methods

Despite the advantages, implementing bilingual methods in Nigerian secondary schools faces challenges, including limited teacher training, insufficient instructional materials, and policy

inconsistencies (Adejumo, 2015). Some educators are also resistant to using the mother tongue due to concerns about reduced English exposure.

Nevertheless, opportunities exist to enhance bilingual pedagogy. Digital tools, bilingual textbooks, and teacher professional development programmes can support effective integration of students' first language into English instruction, thereby improving learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2016).

Implications for Classroom Practice

Literature suggests that teachers who strategically incorporate the mother tongue can facilitate comprehension, reduce anxiety, and foster active engagement in the classroom. Moreover, bilingual teaching encourages collaborative learning, allowing students to negotiate meaning and clarify misunderstandings in both languages (Baker, 2011).

Overall, evidence from both global and Nigerian contexts demonstrates that bilingual teaching methods are a viable strategy for improving English proficiency. Integrating these approaches into secondary school curricula can enhance learners' linguistic competence, academic performance, and confidence in using English.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the effect of bilingual teaching methods on English proficiency among Nigerian secondary school students. The quantitative component involved pre- and post-tests to measure students' English proficiency, while the qualitative component involved classroom observations and teacher interviews to provide contextual insights into teaching practices. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of both outcomes and processes.

Population and Sample

The population comprised secondary school students and English language teachers in selected schools across Nigeria. A **purposive sampling technique** was employed to select four secondary schools representing diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. From these schools, 120 students (30 from each school) and 8 English teachers (2 from each school) were included in the study. This sampling approach ensured the inclusion of participants with relevant exposure to bilingual teaching methods.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected using a combination of instruments. A **structured English proficiency test** assessed students' vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar, and oral communication skills before and after the intervention. Classroom **observation checklists** recorded teaching strategies, language use, and student engagement, while **semi-structured interviews** with teachers captured their perceptions of bilingual teaching, challenges, and opportunities.

Procedure for Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a **six-week instructional period**. Pre-tests were administered before introducing bilingual teaching methods, followed by consistent bilingual instruction in the classroom. Observations were carried out twice a week to document teaching practices, and interviews were conducted at the end of the intervention to capture teachers' reflections and experiences.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data from the English proficiency tests were analysed using **descriptive and inferential statistics**, including mean scores, standard deviations, and paired-sample t-tests to determine significant differences in pre- and post-test performance. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were **thematically analysed**, identifying recurring patterns, strategies, and challenges related to bilingual instruction.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant school authorities, and informed consent was secured from teachers, students, and parents. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study, and participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes. All data were securely stored and only accessible to the researchers.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The quantitative analysis of students' English proficiency tests revealed a marked improvement following the implementation of bilingual teaching methods. The mean pre-test score across the four schools was **56.4%**, while the post-test mean rose to **74.8%**, indicating a significant increase in overall proficiency. Paired-sample t-tests confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), particularly in areas of vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, and oral communication. Classroom observations supported these quantitative results, highlighting the effectiveness of bilingual strategies in engaging students. Teachers frequently employed the mother tongue to explain complex English concepts, provide examples, and clarify instructions. Students were more participative during lessons, asking questions and contributing answers confidently in both languages. The observations also noted reduced learning anxiety, as students were able to bridge understanding through their first language.

Interviews with teachers revealed positive perceptions of bilingual teaching methods. Educators reported that integrating the mother tongue facilitated conceptual understanding, improved lesson delivery, and helped students retain new vocabulary. However, some teachers noted challenges, such as balancing English exposure with mother tongue use and managing large classroom sizes. Overall, the findings demonstrate that bilingual teaching positively impacts English proficiency while highlighting areas for pedagogical refinement.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that bilingual teaching methods significantly enhance English proficiency among Nigerian secondary school students. The observed improvement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and oral communication aligns with previous research, which suggests that students benefit cognitively when their mother tongue is integrated into second-language instruction (Cummins, 2000; García & Wei, 2014). By leveraging familiar linguistic structures, learners can transfer knowledge from their first language to English, facilitating comprehension and retention.

Classroom observations and teacher interviews further support the quantitative results, demonstrating that bilingual instruction not only improves academic performance but also boosts learner engagement and confidence. Students appeared more willing to participate, ask questions, and communicate in English when they could rely on their mother tongue for clarification. These findings reinforce

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasises the importance of scaffolding and social interaction in learning (Vygotsky, 1978). The mother tongue serves as a scaffold, allowing students to negotiate meaning and construct understanding in a more accessible manner.

Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as balancing English exposure with mother tongue use and managing large classes were noted. These issues highlight the need for teacher training, curriculum adjustments, and the provision of bilingual instructional resources. Nevertheless, the study demonstrates that the strategic use of bilingual teaching can address persistent mother tongue interference, reduce learning anxiety, and promote higher levels of English proficiency among secondary school students in Nigeria.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have significant **pedagogical implications** for English language teaching in Nigerian secondary schools. Integrating bilingual teaching methods can enhance comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and oral communication skills. Teachers are encouraged to strategically use students' mother tongue alongside English to scaffold learning, clarify complex concepts, and reduce errors caused by language interference. This approach promotes active participation, confidence, and more effective classroom interaction.

From a **policy perspective**, the results suggest the need for curriculum reforms that formally recognise and support bilingual pedagogy. Educational authorities should develop guidelines and frameworks that allow teachers to incorporate mother tongue instruction without compromising exposure to English. Additionally, teacher training programmes should emphasise bilingual strategies, equipping educators with the skills and resources necessary to implement these methods effectively.

The study also highlights the **broader educational implications** for addressing linguistic diversity in Nigerian schools. By embracing bilingual teaching, schools can create more inclusive learning environments that respect students' linguistic backgrounds while promoting English proficiency. This approach not only improves academic outcomes but also fosters positive attitudes towards learning, reduces anxiety, and encourages lifelong language development.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that bilingual teaching methods have a positive effect on English proficiency among Nigerian secondary school students. By integrating the mother tongue alongside English instruction, students showed significant improvement in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and oral communication skills. The findings confirm that leveraging students' first language can enhance understanding and facilitate effective learning in multilingual classrooms.

The research also highlighted the role of teachers in implementing bilingual strategies effectively. Teachers' ability to balance the use of the mother tongue and English, while creating an engaging and supportive learning environment, was critical to the observed improvements in students' performance. Classroom observations and interviews underscored that bilingual pedagogy reduces learning anxiety and encourages greater participation and confidence among students.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of adopting bilingual approaches in Nigerian secondary schools as a means of improving English proficiency. It also provides evidence for policymakers, educators, and curriculum planners to prioritise teacher training, resource development, and pedagogical frameworks that accommodate linguistic diversity while promoting academic excellence. Bilingual teaching thus emerges as a viable strategy for addressing language learning challenges in multilingual educational contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that **teachers strategically integrate the mother tongue** alongside English in classroom instruction. This can involve explaining complex concepts, providing examples, or clarifying instructions in students' first language, while gradually increasing English usage to build proficiency. Such practices can reduce mother tongue interference, enhance comprehension, and foster learner confidence.

Educational authorities and policymakers should develop formal guidelines and frameworks that support bilingual pedagogy in secondary schools. This includes incorporating bilingual strategies into the national curriculum, providing bilingual instructional resources, and encouraging schools to adopt policies that allow teachers flexibility in combining English and the mother tongue during lessons.

Additionally, it is recommended that **teacher training programmes** emphasise bilingual teaching methods. Professional development workshops and continuous in-service training can equip educators with practical skills for implementing bilingual instruction effectively, managing large classes, and addressing challenges related to linguistic diversity. Such initiatives will strengthen the overall quality of English language education in Nigeria.

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