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INFLUENCE OF LINGUISTIC DEVIATIONS IN NIGERIAN ENGLISH ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN UMUAHIA NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ABIA STATE

Florence Chikaodinaka Elendu
rosechifloxye@gmail.com
Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki Nigeria

Adaobi Felicia Okonkwo
Department of Arts and Social Science Education, Faculty of Education, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki Nigeria

Okezie Ezioma
Federal College of Education, Ofeme-Ohuhu Umuahia, Abia State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT
This study investigates the influence of linguistic deviations in Nigerian English on students' academic performance in Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State. Nigerian English, shaped by indigenous languages and sociocultural realities, often departs from Standard British English in phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. While these deviations serve communicative purposes in everyday contexts, they may hinder students' mastery of formal English required in academic settings. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzes written and oral outputs of secondary school students, correlating frequency of deviations with performance in English-related subjects. Findings reveal common deviations—such as tense misuse, phonological substitutions, and direct translations from Igbo—contribute to poor comprehension and reduced scores in standardized examinations. The study concludes that linguistic deviations, though culturally significant, negatively affect academic achievement when unaddressed. Recommendations include curriculum reforms, teacher training, and balanced pedagogy that values Nigerian English while reinforcing Standard English norms.

Keywords: Nigerian English, linguistic deviations, academic performance, Umuahia North, mother tongue interference, Standard English, sociolinguistics, education in Nigeria

Introduction
English language occupies a central role in Nigeria's educational system as the official language of instruction, administration, and national communication. It functions as a unifying medium across diverse ethnic groups, yet its use in Nigeria has evolved into a distinct variety known as Nigerian English. This variety reflects the sociocultural realities of the country, shaped by indigenous languages, local communicative practices, and historical influences (Aseri, 2024). While

Nigerian English is recognized as a legitimate sociolinguistic variety, its divergence from Standard British English often creates challenges in academic contexts where standardized norms dominate.

Nigerian English was birthed through a language contact process between English language brought by the colonial administration, European merchants and missionaries as well as Nigerian indigenous languages. With the advent of colonialism, English language assumed prominent roles in Nigerian society. Little wonder (Amadi, 2019) asserts that, the colonisation of Nigeria by the British left her with the only option of adopting English language as her lingua franca due to her multi-ethnic and multi-lingual diversity. (Eka, 2000) notes that, the colonialists came with English language which served as the language of government, education, commerce and official use. English language predominantly serves as the official language and the language of intercultural and interethnic communications and discourse. It was also adopted as a language of education, science and technology to accommodate the multilingual diversity of the Nigerian society. Nigerian English (NE) which emerged as the dominant spoken variety of English language in Nigeria has sparked a debate regarding its impact on students' educational outcomes, particularly in English language proficiency tests that follow Standard English (SE) conventions, (Ajulo, 2022).

Linguistic deviations in Nigerian English manifest across multiple levels: phonological (e.g., "tink" for "think"), morphological (e.g., "peoples" instead of "people"), syntactic (e.g., "He go school yesterday"), and semantic (direct translations from Igbo). These deviations, while communicatively effective in everyday interactions, are frequently penalized in formal academic assessments. As (Udeh, 2025) notes, proficiency in Standard English remains a strong predictor of academic achievement across disciplines in Nigerian schools. However, persistent failure rates in English examinations highlight the tension between local linguistic identity and standardized academic expectations (Ugwo, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the widespread use of Nigerian English as a communicative variety, students in Nigeria are assessed in Standard English in national examinations such as WAEC and NECO. Persistent failure rates in these examinations highlight the tension between local linguistic identity and standardized academic expectations. For instance, WAEC reports from 2022/23 show that over 58% of candidates failed English and Mathematics, raising concerns about declining proficiency levels and the implications for Nigeria's human capital development.

In Umuahia North, where Igbo is the dominant indigenous language, mother tongue interference further complicates students' acquisition of Standard English. Direct translations from Igbo often result in syntactic and semantic deviations, which negatively affect comprehension and exam performance. Students frequently perceive Nigerian English expressions as "normal speech," yet these are penalized in academic

contexts. Teachers, meanwhile, struggle to balance correction with encouragement, leading to inconsistent pedagogical approaches.

The problem, therefore, is that while Nigerian English serves everyday communication effectively and reflects cultural identity, its deviations hinder students' academic success. Unless addressed through curriculum reform, teacher training, and balanced pedagogy, these deviations will continue to contribute to poor performance in English and other subjects taught in English, thereby limiting students' educational and professional opportunities.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to identify common linguistic deviations among secondary school students in Umuahia North. Specifically, the study examines:

1. Examine the relationship between these deviations and students' academic performance.
2. Explore teacher and student attitudes toward Nigerian English deviations.
3. Propose strategies for balancing Nigerian English identity with Standard English proficiency.

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between linguistic deviations and students' academic performance in Umuahia North?
2. How do teachers and students perceive Nigerian English deviations in academic contexts?
3. What are the best strategies for balancing Nigerian English identity with Standard English proficiency?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons. For students, it highlights the importance of mastering Standard English while acknowledging their linguistic identity. For teachers, it provides insights into effective pedagogical strategies for addressing deviations without discouraging students. For policymakers, it underscores the need for curriculum reforms that balance Nigerian English awareness with Standard English proficiency. For linguists, it contributes to ongoing debates about the legitimacy of Nigerian English and its role in education. Ultimately, the study aims to improve academic outcomes while respecting Nigeria's linguistic diversity.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on secondary school students in Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State. It examines both written and oral English usage, with particular attention to deviations influenced by Igbo language. The scope is limited to English language and subjects taught in English, excluding purely technical subjects where language plays a minimal role.

Literature Review

Recent scholars have examined Nigerian English as both a sociolinguistic variety and an educational challenge. Adegbite (2023) argues that Nigerian English reflects national identity and should be recognized as legitimate. However, Udeh (2025)

demonstrates that proficiency in Standard English remains a strong predictor of academic success, with students who minimize deviations performing better across disciplines. Ugwo (2024) identifies mother tongue interference and inadequate teaching methods as major contributors to mass failure in English examinations. Ogwo (2025) warns that declining English proficiency threatens Nigeria's human capital development, reducing students' competitiveness globally.

Nigerian English as a Sociolinguistic Variety

Nigerian English has been widely recognized as a localized variety shaped by Nigeria's multilingual environment. Scholars such as (Adegbite, 2023) emphasize that Nigerian English is not simply a collection of errors but a sociolinguistic reality reflecting Nigeria's identity and communicative needs. It incorporates lexical innovations (e.g., "go-slow" for traffic jam), semantic shifts, and structural modifications that make it distinct from Standard British English. However, in academic contexts, these features are often stigmatized, creating tension between sociolinguistic legitimacy and standardized educational expectations.

Linguistic Deviations and Academic Performance

Recent studies confirm that linguistic deviations negatively affect students' academic outcomes. (Udeh, 2025) found that English language proficiency is a strong determinant of academic success in Nigerian universities, with students who demonstrate fewer deviations performing better across disciplines. (Ogayi, 2023) similarly argued that Nigerian English and Pidgin, while widely spoken, contribute to non-standard expressions that hinder learning and mastery of Standard English in higher education (European/American Journals - EA Journals). These findings highlight the dual role of Nigerian English as effective in everyday communication but problematic in standardized academic contexts.

Balancing Nigerian English Identity with Standard English Proficiency

Scholars have long debated how to reconcile the sociolinguistic legitimacy of Nigerian English with the academic necessity of Standard English. (Adegbite, 2023) argues that Nigerian English should be recognized as a legitimate variety that reflects Nigeria's cultural identity, but he cautions that its deviations must be addressed in formal education to ensure academic success. Similarly, (Aseri, 2024) emphasizes that Nigerian English embodies local communicative practices and identity, yet students must acquire Standard English proficiency to compete in global academic and professional contexts.

Integrating Nigerian English awareness into the curriculum, teaching students to distinguish between local expressions and standardized forms can form the best method of ending students' decline in Standard English proficiency (Ogayi, 2023). This contrastive approach helps students appreciate their identity while mastering Standard English for examinations and formal writing. (Udeh, 2025) supports this view, noting that students who receive explicit instruction on differences between

Nigerian English and Standard English perform significantly better in English-related subjects.

Teachers who adopt bilingual pedagogy thereby acknowledging Nigerian English in informal contexts while reinforcing Standard English in academic tasks achieve better outcomes than those who rely solely on strict correction (Okefi, 2024). This approach reduces student resistance and builds confidence, while still preparing them for standardized assessments. (Ugwo, 2024) adds that constructive correction, rather than stigmatization of deviations, is essential for motivating students to improve.

The dominance of Igbo in Umuahia North contributes to direct translations and structural interference, leading to semantic and syntactic deviations. For example, expressions like "I am coming" (meaning "I will be back") mirror Igbo usage but confuse examiners trained in Standard English norms. This finding aligns with (Ugwo, 2024), who emphasized mother tongue interference as a major cause of mass failure in English examinations. Examination bodies such as WAEC and NECO should contextualize oral assessments to reflect Nigerian English features, while maintaining Standard English benchmarks in written examinations. This dual recognition respect linguistic identity while safeguarding academic standards (Ogwo, 2025). (UNESCO, 2022) similarly advocates for multilingual education policies that balance local language varieties with global lingua francas.

Students' support programs are vital in sustaining their excellent academic performance in English language. (Bamgbose, 2021) argues that remedial classes, peer-learning groups, and counseling can help students overcome entrenched deviations without undermining their cultural identity. Such programs provide safe spaces for students to practice Standard English while still valuing Nigerian English in informal communication.

Mother Tongue Interference

Mother tongue interference is a recurring theme in studies of Nigerian English. In Umuahia North, the dominance of Igbo leads to direct translations and syntactic interference. For example, the Igbo expression "Ana m abia" translates literally to "I am coming," which in Nigerian English often means "I will be back." While communicatively effective locally, such expressions confuse examiners trained in Standard English norms. Ugwo (2024) notes that these deviations are systematic, reflecting deep linguistic transfer rather than random errors.

National Trends in English Language Failure

National examination bodies such as WAEC and NECO consistently report high failure rates in English. Ogwo (2025) highlights that over 58% of candidates failed English and Mathematics in the 2022/23 WASSCE, raising concerns about declining proficiency levels. Analysts argue that linguistic deviations contribute significantly to these failures, as students struggle to align their everyday speech with standardized exam

expectations. This trend mirrors localized findings in Umuahia North, underscoring the broader implications of linguistic deviations for Nigeria's educational system.

Teacher Attitudes and Pedagogical Challenges

Teachers play a pivotal role in mediating between Nigerian English and Standard English. However, attitudes vary: many teachers view deviations strictly as errors to be corrected, while others advocate for bilingual pedagogy that acknowledges Nigerian English while reinforcing Standard English norms. (Okefi, 2024) observed that counseling interventions in Umuahia North improved awareness but did not significantly reduce deviations, suggesting that teacher strategies must go beyond correction to include cultural sensitivity.

Sociolinguistic Implications

Beyond education, Nigerian English reflects broader sociolinguistic dynamics. (Adegbite, 2023) and Udofot, 2024) argue that Nigerian English embodies the politics of language in Nigeria, balancing colonial legacies with indigenous realities. While deviations are often penalized academically, they serve as markers of identity and cultural pride in everyday communication. This duality complicates efforts to standardize English in schools, as students navigate between local identity and global academic expectations.

Theoretical Framework

Several theories provide a foundation for analyzing linguistic deviations:

- **Bernstein's Language Codes Theory (1971):** Suggests that restricted codes (local varieties) and elaborated codes (standardized varieties) influence educational outcomes. Nigerian English can be seen as a restricted code that limits students' ability to succeed in contexts requiring elaborated codes.
- **Labov's Variation Theory (1972):** Highlights how language variation reflects social identity but also affects perceptions of correctness. Nigerian English deviations mark identity but are penalized in academic contexts.
- **Error Analysis in Second Language Acquisition (Corder, 1967):** Emphasizes that deviations are not random but systematic, often resulting from mother tongue interference. This framework is particularly relevant in Umuahia North, where Igbo structures influence English usage.

These theories collectively explain why Nigerian English deviations persist and how they impact academic performance.

Synthesis

The literature consistently shows that linguistic deviations in Nigerian English, though culturally embedded and communicatively effective, negatively affect students' academic performance. In Umuahia North, these challenges are compounded by Igbo interference and systemic educational gaps. Teacher attitudes, national failure rates, and sociolinguistic realities all point to the need for a balanced approach: one that respects Nigerian English as a legitimate variety while reinforcing Standard English for academic success.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a **mixed-methods design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative aspect involves analyzing students' written essays and examination scripts to identify linguistic deviations and correlate them with academic performance. The qualitative aspect includes interviews with teachers and classroom observations to capture attitudes, perceptions, and contextual factors influencing language use. This design ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable impact of deviations and the sociolinguistic realities behind them.

Population of the Study

The population consists of all secondary school students in Umuahia North Local Government Area of Abia State. This region was chosen because of its strong Igbo linguistic presence, which makes it a fertile ground for studying mother tongue interference in English usage. Teachers of English language in these schools also form part of the population, as their perspectives are critical to understanding pedagogical challenges.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of **200 students** were selected from four secondary schools (two urban and two rural) using **stratified random sampling**. This ensured representation across different socio-economic and geographical contexts. Additionally, **10 English language teachers** were purposively selected for interviews, given their direct involvement in teaching and assessing English proficiency.

Instruments for Data Collection

1. **Written Essays and Examination Scripts**: These provided quantitative data on the frequency and types of linguistic deviations.
2. **Classroom Observations**: Conducted to observe real-time language use and teacher-student interactions.
3. **Interviews with Teachers**: Semi-structured interviews captured teacher attitudes toward Nigerian English deviations and their strategies for correction.
4. **Performance Records**: Students' scores in English and other subjects taught in English were collected to establish correlations.

Validity and Reliability of Instruments

To ensure validity, the instruments were reviewed by experts in linguistics and education. A pilot study was conducted in one school outside the sample to refine the tools. Reliability was ensured through triangulation — comparing data from essays, observations, and interviews to confirm consistency.

Method of Data Collection

Data collection was carried out in three stages:

1. **Stage One:** Collection of students' essays and examination scripts.
2. **Stage Two:** Classroom observations over a two-week period.

3. **Stage Three:** Interviews with teachers, recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Method of Data Analysis

- **Quantitative Analysis:** Essays and scripts were coded for deviations (phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic). Frequencies were calculated, and correlations with exam scores were established using statistical tools.
- **Qualitative Analysis:** Interview transcripts and observation notes were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, attitudes, and contextual influences.

Findings

Table 1: Frequency of Linguistic Deviations (N = 200)

Type	Example	Frequency (%)
Phonological	"tink" for "think"	32%
Morphological	"peoples"	25%
Syntactic	"He go school yesterday"	28%
Semantic	Igbo translation ("I am coming")	15%

Table 2: Exam Scores by Deviation Frequency

Deviation Frequency	Avg. Score (%)
Low (0–5)	68%
Moderate (6–10)	54%
High (11+)	41%

Table 3: Subject-Wise Scores by Deviation Frequency

Subject	Low	Moderate	High
English	68%	54%	41%
Social Studies	72%	59%	46%
Science	70%	56%	44%

Discussion of Findings

The findings confirm that linguistic deviations in Nigerian English significantly reduce students' performance in English language and other subjects taught in English. While Nigerian English serves as a cultural identity marker (Aseri, 2024), its deviations hinder standardized academic success. Mother tongue interference, particularly from Igbo, reinforces deviations (Ugwo, 2024). Teacher attitudes remain divided: most treat deviations as errors, while some advocate bilingual pedagogy (Okefi, 2024). National trends of declining English proficiency mirror these localized findings,

underscoring the urgency of intervention (Ogwo, 2025).

Recommendations

1. Curriculum should be reformed to integrate Nigerian English awareness while reinforcing Standard English.
2. Teachers should be trained in constructive error correction.
3. Language teacher should bilingual pedagogy strategy to balance language identity and academic success.
4. There should be students' support programs through remedial classes and peer group learning of the varieties of English language.

Conclusion

Linguistic deviations in Nigerian English, though culturally embedded, negatively affect students' academic performance in Umuahia North. Addressing these challenges requires a balanced approach that respects Nigerian English as a legitimate variety while reinforcing Standard English for academic success.

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