

Impact of the Mother Tongue and Culture of Rural Nigeria on Student Achievement in English

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Abstract: Many secondary school students in Nigeria fail English in the West African school certificate examination and fail to attend college because a passing grade in English is mandatory for students wishing to study at the university. Most of the students who fail English are from rural area schools. This qualitative study utilized the historical research methodology to examine facets of Nigerian social and cultural life, including the mother tongue, possibly impacting student achievement in English at rural and urban schools. Documents from the national archives, West African Examination Council (WAEC), and semi-structured interviews of teachers across two southern states of Nigeria provided data for analysis. Relying on Chomsky's theory of language acquisition as a framework, the study found that past colonial policy delaying the exposure of village school children to English created the age-long proficiency gap, presenting contemporary educators with the challenge of finding the appropriate restorative.

Keywords: mother tongue, Nigerian social and cultural life, West African school, West African Examination Council (WAEC).

1. INTRODUCTION

Language is crucial in all spheres of human activities, most especially in education. Bruner's (1966) learning theory holds that language must be part of any premise of cognitive development because it serves as the medium that facilitates instruction and exchange and acts as the instrument by which the learner brings order to their life. Bunyi (1999) added that language enables coherent interactions between the teacher and the students and between the learners themselves, implying that both the teacher and the students clearly understood the language of instruction enough to cause interactions and continued interest in what goes on in the classroom.

Trudell (2018) argued that the expression of such understanding would, no doubt, help provide administrators and policymakers with adequate information about the appropriate language of instruction, especially in a Nigerian setting with multiple local languages of over four hundred and fifty (450) different tribes that live side-by-side in the country. In this context, reliance on only legislative and sociocultural references to pick a language for curricular content delivery without considering how the language would engender bonding between teacher and students may impede the intended cognitive benefits of such a determination.

This study examined how the dichotomy between the language of the community and the adopted second language used as the medium of instruction might impact student achievement, especially in rural Nigerian communities where the use of the mother tongue is predominant. Although English is the official language and the language of the school curriculum in Nigeria, it is a second language to most Nigerians, particularly in rural locations. The situation creates room for errors and misinterpretation because of the difference between English and the native language in which the students have developed much proficiency even before school enrolment. In this context, Taiwo (2009) argued that the contact between English and the Nigerian languages did affect both foreign and local tongues. For instance, the indigenous languages interfered with how Nigerians speak English, affecting linguistic areas such as syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and phonology.

Background of the Study

Student achievement gaps between rural location schools and their urban counterparts exist in several parts of the world. In Nigeria, the gap is more visible in the annual West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), in which many students fail to attain the passing grade required in English to enter the University. This study examined why urban students outperform their rural counterparts in the annual exit examination.

Several studies adduced factors like government allocations, parents' economic status, quality of teachers, poor school infrastructures, teacher self-efficacy, and so forth to the differences in urban-rural school performances. For instance, Cartwright and Allen (2002) found that most rural parents have jobs with lower occupational status than their urban counterparts, while Baum et al. (2018) observed that students from a higher socio-economic background in the urban city of Lagos were more likely to have access to schools with a higher achievement rate than schools in rural and less affluent locations, thus suggesting that socio-economic factors can influence the student achievement gap between rural and urban schools. In another Nigerian study, Amadi et al. (2018) found that school location influenced the student achievement gap in reading between pupils from urban schools and their equivalents from rural schools, with urban students doing significantly better. They attributed the superior performance of students from urban schools over their rural counterparts to the substandard learning conditions, lack of qualified teachers in rural schools, and other socio-economic determinants that limit the full cognitive development of learners from poor economic backgrounds.

According to the 2018 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) for Nigeria sponsored by the World Health Organization and UNICEF, there are approximately 110 million children between the ages of five and eighteen in the country. This accounts for about 52% of the total national population. Over 22.4 million of these children (Varrella, 2020) were in public primary schools where the local languages remained largely the medium of class instruction. And, because many of these students may join secondary school at the age of eleven and start receiving English language coaching, it is essential to address the issue before any more unsatisfactory results contribute to the unwelcome annual statistics of the achievement gap.

Design of the Study

The research strategy is qualitative, defined by Aspers and Corte (2019) as an iterative process providing improved understanding to the scientific community as research uncovers more profound knowledge of the phenomenon studied. This study utilized the historical research methodology to examine the role that the native language in each community plays in this problem, examining if the adoption of English for class instruction may have resulted in the student achievement gap between rural and urban schools in the annual exit examinations, especially at the secondary school level in Nigeria. It specifically examined whether the home language might generate a cognition overload and confusion for the child in learning the English language, thus creating achievement gaps between rural and urban students. Furthermore, it investigated the various pedagogical practices employed over time to determine if teacher attitude might have affected the students' interest and performance in the English language.

As suggested by Schoonenboom and Johnson (2017), the semi-structured interviews served as a supplement to the historical research, which was the primary element of the study. The historical design aspect of the method involved collecting data from various sources, including the national archives, the West African Examination Council's database, the British Council library in Lagos, and the reference sections of the National Library and the University of Ibadan Library. I opted for the historical research methodology for a few reasons. Firstly, delving into past events assists society in understanding how contemporary issues developed, their characteristics, and how past generations found successful and unsuccessful solutions (Mason et al., 1997). The study examined the trend in the Nigerian education system since the introduction of Western education in the country during the first half of the 19th century.

Although the period from the mid-19th century to the present is lengthy, the problem of poor performance of Nigerian students in Ordinary Level English tests has persisted over the years. Therefore, historical research is the most fitting approach for such an investigation due to its unique ability to collect and evaluate vast amounts of historical data in terms of scope and duration. It helps to reconstruct the past logically and objectively by collecting, assessing, validating, and integrating evidence to authenticate data and arrive at logical outcomes regarding specific issues (Connaway & Powell, 2010; Porra et al., 2014).

The second reason historical research was a preferred method for investigation is it did not interfere with the learning process of the schools under research because the researcher did not have direct contact with any students during the

investigation process conducted in the school library. Thirdly, this method did not pose any risk to the students because the researcher neither observed the students in their classrooms nor did the data collection process include student identifiers with the activity data from the school.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge in the African context, in precolonial Nigeria, was socially constructed by the dynamics of the culture of the indigenous community. The family groups, age grades, artisan guilds, and elders' councils provided the platforms for socialization and assimilation of societal values and norms. The local language was part of the underlying drives encrypted in the bond between epistemology (the theory of knowledge) and ontology (the perception of reality) among the natives.

But the episteme of the Western-type education may have ignored the social dynamics in the African system, thus creating dysfunction in the interplay between formal learning and culture. It offered the natives a new learning model of acculturation that did not show much regard for existing social dynamics. The imposed foreign way jettisoned hitherto meaningful symbols of relevance in the people's order of communal relationships. It overlooked what the natives considered as emblems of self-evaluation, replacing their conceptual framework of learning with a Western epistemology. As Thompson (2011) argued, there is significant potential for confusion where ontology and epistemology drift out of alignment.

Özdemir and Clark (2007) suggested that in a conceptual change circumstance such as that caused by the imposition of a foreign-style education on groups of African communities, the learner's experience is considered as representing either a logical, unified framework of a theory-like situation or as a collection of semi-independent elements. This study explored the underlying concepts within the foreign and local cultures in the context of these two conceptual leanings. Considering these options, the hypothesis is that the Nigerian learner's experience during the colonial era was a collection of semi-independent elements because their assimilation of the English language and content of the curriculum, over time, was in bits and pieces.

As a part of the research process, one of the steps undertaken was to determine epistemology within the context of Piaget's construct of learning, examining if and how the European and African learning concepts aligned with Piaget's learning theory. Ferrari et al. (2001) argued that Piaget was genuinely concerned about the link in epistemology between a subject and the object to create awareness, emphasizing that the learner constructs knowledge from their experience of preexisting mental frames or schema. With that in mind, it is necessary to examine the constructivist theory of knowledge in light of Nigerian indigenous practices. The question that arises is whether colonial Britain was aware of or deliberately ignored the possible constructivist trait among precolonial Nigerian tribes.

In the African context, the constructivist approach to learning allows students to develop new understandings based on their experiences. This approach is exemplified in Nigeria, where young women from different tribes are trained in the rudiments of dance during rehearsals. Each participant builds on this knowledge, creating unique movements that are in sync with the rhythm of the drumbeats. This is consistent with the idea of learning as an ecology of quasi-independent elements, as proposed by Özdemir and Clark (2007).

On the ontological side, African communities hold on to a view of life where symbols and tokens define roles and statuses - where learning is associated with a perspective of roles in life. This study examined how this African contextual concept of learning fared during the people's first experience with the British approach to education and life, showing the moment of divergence between the two cultures and the consequent impact on the Africans under a Western learning system. Uzomah (2018) sought to identify this point of deviation with the argument that from the start, colonial Britain never intended to expand the African autochthonous knowledge and cultural values but to enfeeble African history and subjugate the beliefs of the indigenous population to ensure the dominance of the so-called Western civilization.

The study also examined if there is a connection between the Vygotskian concept of mediation and learning English as a second language to determine whether colonial Britain tried to introduce teacher intervention to help tribes understand the imposed foreign language and learning culture. According to Guerrero Nieto (2007), the Vygotskian-type teacher mediation can affect assimilation and total enculturation because, in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, language is crucial in human activities within cultural contexts. Therefore, steps in the colonial period to align English with the local culture may have impacted how Nigerians learned the language.

Research Questions

This research sought to investigate the grand tour research question of why students in rural areas tend to perform worse in English in the School Certificate Examination compared to their counterparts in urban areas. To this end, the study investigated two sub-questions (RQ1 and RQ2), which were derived from the main research question and served as guidelines for the study.

1. **Sub-question 1 (RQ1)** - "What factors might hinder students in rural and urban schools from mastering English?"
2. **Sub-question 2 (RQ2)** - "What are the consequences of the resulting disparity in academic performance between rural and urban schools for education in Nigeria?"

RQ1 - The research examined factors such as parental resistance, interference with the local language, teacher effectiveness, infrastructure, and school location to test the assumptions related to the first sub-question. The study concluded that although most parents don't speak English, they prefer their children to be taught in English since that is the language of instruction. These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Anas and Liman (2016) and go against the assumption that non-English speaking parents prefer their children to be taught in their native language.

RQ2 - According to Noguera (2013), to identify the root causes and solutions to the student achievement gap, it is essential to carefully examine schools that have successfully bridged the gap and learn from them. To this end, the study sought to identify one or more rural area schools (from WAEC records) that have shown progress in recent years and investigate their success strategies, while also exploring whether poor English scores caused the achievement gap between rural and urban schools.

The research carefully investigated the number of students who passed or failed the English language section in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination because the results of the English language exam impact the future academic achievements of students in Nigeria. A high number of students failing the English language exam from urban and rural areas indicates that millions of Nigerian children of college age may fail to meet the required standard for college admissions. This is because a pass at the credit level in English and Mathematics is the minimum requirement for university admission.

Findings

The query under the first sub-question in the study was whether the adoption of English for class instruction may have resulted in the achievement gap between rural and urban schools in the annual exit examinations. Narrative analysis of historical documents found in the National Archives affirms that the foundation for such a correlation is rooted in the colonial history of Western-type education in Nigeria. Sir Bernard Bourdillon, as Governor-General of Nigeria, in 1944, established the education policy to expose students in town schools to English early in the elementary class, while those in similar grades in village schools received instruction in their mother tongue until much later in their education (Bourdillon, 1944, Ten Year Education Plan).

Viewed against Chomsky's second language acquisition theory, the Bourdillon policy provided the foundation for underperformance in English by students from rural schools. According to Noam Chomsky's hypothesis, children possess an innate ability to learn language. However, individuals who are exposed to a second language later in life do not acquire the language as efficiently because the language acquisition ability of a child diminishes with age. The theory contains the answer to the gap in student achievement in English between rural and urban Nigeria. It is noteworthy that Al-Qahtani (2013) found in a Saudi study that "achievement in English was associated negatively and significantly both with the age of [initial exposure] to the language and the level at which the student started to learn English formally."

So, English, perse might not be the problem, but the time in the life of the village student at which they left the hoes and machetes on their family farms to begin formal learning in English. Considering Bourdillon's (1944) different tracks education policy and following Cummins's (1979) linguistic interdependence hypothesis, the problem is in the submersion type program that examines town and village school children under the same test conditions. In the Nigerian context, when examiners compare the use of English by the village schoolchildren with that of town schoolchildren exposed early to the language, they tend to treat the villager's "lack of proficiency in the school language as limited intellectual and academic ability" (Cummins, 1979).

Data collected from the semi-structured interviews with educators reveal that the mother tongue and other factors can impact student performance in English and general student achievement. Violent student mafia activities in schools emerged during

the interviews as likely to pose further learning problems for the students. As shown in the figure below, English as the medium of instruction is a factor of moderate relevance concerning its impact on learning. The figure also reveals that the mother tongue and the increasing involvement of mafia-like student gangs in the school environment are the two main factors that hinder the student's academic performance. The mother tongue was the primary language used by the gangs, which made it difficult for the students belonging to these gangs to use English even on the school campus.

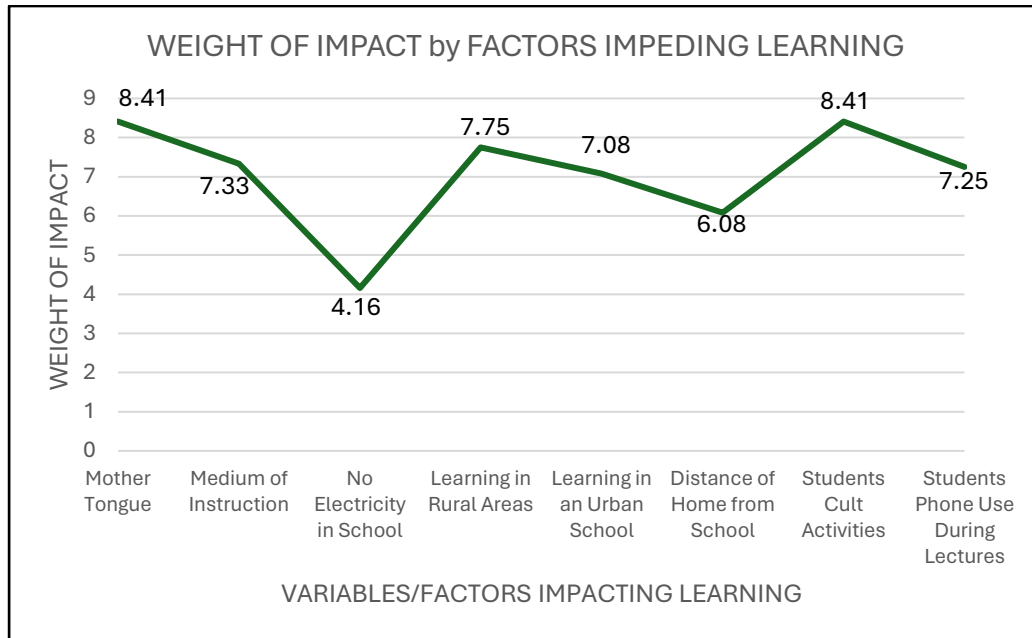


Figure 1: Factors that affect students learning

Although the adoption of the mother tongue as an alternative medium of instruction was outside the focus of this study, the research found that most teachers admitted they regularly code-switched and preferred that the country adopt the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. In line with this thought, this study also examined "parents' resistance" as one of the factors likely impeding students' performance in English and found from the responses of all the interview participants that parents of students support the teaching of their children in English. The finding agrees with Anas and Liman (2016) that most non-English speaking parents support English as the medium of instruction for their primary school children in environments where English is the lingua franca.

The study also found data from the National Archives and other libraries that revealed that while the British taught English to the natives, they equally advocated instruction in the mother tongue, especially at the elementary school level, because the purpose of these elementary schools at the rural location was for most students to become better farmers after graduating from the schools (Bourdillon, 1944. Ten-Year Educational Plan).

But while the British colonial policy advocated different education tracks for urban and village school children, it, however, embraced the Piagetian cognitive development theory of learning in a schema. The Schema theme is one of the theoretical foundations of this research and can be seen in most of the colonial statements about educating the natives. For example, the Bourdillon administration believed that the best way to learn was to closely relate the course of lessons to daily life and use examples derived from familiar habits of expression. (Burns, 1969. Bourdillon, 1944).

Concerning the methods employed by teachers to ensure that the students understood English as a second language, this study found no formal teacher mediation strategies among many instructors (although a few tried some form of teacher facilitation). However, it found that overcrowding in many classrooms gave the teachers little or no time for attention to the many students who struggle with English. The researcher found that a particular secondary school, with 176 students in three distinct streams, had the smallest number of students in the final-year (SS3) English classes, indicating that English classes in almost all schools were overcrowded. Earlier studies (e.g., Antón, 1999; Gibbons, 2003) have established that applying the Vygotskian model of teacher mediation in the interaction between teacher and student is essential to the learner's acquisition of a second language (Kozulin, 2004).

3. DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The table below shows a statistically significant difference in English Language exam scores between rural and urban students, which could be due to disparities in their exposure to the language. For instance, students in rural areas may have more interference from their mother tongue and may use different language in their day-to-day communication compared to urban students. Additionally, the focus on English language learning by students and their teachers may also differ based on where they live. However, this study was based on the theoretical foundations and conceptual directions provided by Jerome Bruner, Noam Chomsky, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky, who studied how students learn. These theories nourished the criteria used to arrive at the research conclusions.

Table 1

T-test for Performance of Rural and Urban Students

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Estimated Exam Score	Equal variances assumed	72.796	.000	-30.188	90855	.000	-2.09486	.06939	-2.23087	-1.95884
	Equal variances not assumed			-30.083	80194.495	.000	-2.09486	.06964	-2.23134	-1.95837

Considering first Jean Piaget's cognitive development concepts of constructivism and schema, Huitt (2003) explains that the Piagetian theory holds that (1) learners construct knowledge as they attempt to adjust their experiences (2) in the context of preexisting mental structures or schemes. In that regard, this study found, from archival documents, that a link existed between the Piagetian concept of schema and the British colonial educational belief that the effective acquisition of new knowledge by the student hinged on previous assimilated learning from familiar environments. In other words, colonial educators believed that effective student learning might occur when teachers guide the learner to new concepts regarding earlier experiences within their native surroundings.

This research also examined the available archival records of classroom instruction in colonial times by reviewing the colonial approach to teaching in line with Vygotsky's social constructivist model of pedagogy (Jaramillo, 1996), which held that the interaction of students and teachers in the classroom jointly constructs knowledge and improve comprehension. In the context of English as the second language for instruction, Vygotsky's theory of teacher mediation expects that the teacher follows the student through the zone of proximal development to the outcome.

Furthermore, evidence from archival documents confirms that the colonial administrators adopted a policy that mandated teachers to link images from the everyday life experience of the learner into pedagogy to aid understanding – more like Piaget's concept of associating the acquisition of new knowledge with existing schema.

The concept of a language of teaching fits within Bruner's (1966) consideration that language must be part of any premise of cognitive development because it serves as the medium that facilitates instruction and exchange and acts as the instrument by which the learner brings order to their life. Noam Chomsky's concept of language aligns closely with Bruner's model because, according to Chomsky (2017), language is the most prominent intellectual framework for exceptional personal achievements among humans endowed with the capacity to create language, which enables them to compose the structures for the expressions of thought and speech. The ability to acquire languages is innate in children, facilitated by a language acquisition device (LAD) that enables them to learn a second language with ease.

Extant literature that discussed relevant studies about the current understanding of the discussed models and topic of the research include Arung et al.'s (2019) review of Grounded research that employed the preferent theory of learning to explore the best ways to teach English as a second language and as the language of instruction. It suggested that English teachers should help non-English-speaking learner to generate a sense of liking for the language rather than leave the learning process strictly within the cognitive and motivation domain. Deng and Zou (2016) confirmed Chomsky's theory on language in their

study that compared the ease children acquire the first language with how adults cultivate a second language. They found that children possess language skills that enable them to master their native language comfortably under non-teaching conditions. Their result corroborates the finding of Al-Qahtani (2013) that non-English speakers exposed early to the English language are more proficient with the language than individuals exposed late to English because LAD diminishes with the age of individuals.

Considering that this study is about the performance of non-native speakers in English, which has a well-documented record in the country, the historical design was possibly the most suitable methodology to investigate the origin of the gap in proficiency in the language over time among rural and urban area schools. The study used appropriate tools to analyze data from the semi-structured interviews with teachers, the archives of the West African Examination Council, and archival documents from the National Archives and other library sources to interpret and provide answers to the research questions. This connectivity of the initial findings in support of the four listed scholars helps to bring focus of the answers collected via the specific research questions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The following narratives highlight the findings from the grand-tour research question, the two research sub-questions, and other issues of concern in the study. The research problem emanated from records of published school certificate results that showed mass student failure in English in the exit secondary school exams across the country. These results reveal that most of the annually reported low scores are from students in rural area schools. And because English plays a significant role in the education of the future technocrats and leaders of the country, the task of this research was not only to examine the accuracy of the much-touted rural/urban gap but also to determine why such a gap in English proficiency might occur.

One finding from this study is that class overcrowding might negatively impact teacher efficacy and student success because the teacher does not have enough time to attend to students who struggle with English or any other subject. Batool and Shah (2018) found that teachers with less than adequate professional training and who teach in overcrowded classrooms are not likely to be high in teacher efficacy.

Gibbons (2003) and Antón (1999) separately investigated the effects of the Vygotskian model of teacher mediation on the mastery of a second language, finding that the interaction between the teacher and the student is essential to the learner's effective acquisition of the language. In effect, overcrowding prevents teachers from utilizing the opportunity for close collaboration with students to facilitate their work towards exploring the constructivist tendencies, which Piaget argues are innate in individuals as they learn in schema.

Another finding under this research question is that the mother tongue as the language of everyday conversation might contribute to but does not wholly obstruct students from developing competence in the English language. In the context of the research topic concerning the contact between the mother tongue and English as a medium of instruction, this finding sits well within the Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which sees language as key within human activities in cultural contexts. The study also explored whether colonial administrators were considerate of the language and culture of the natives when they chose English as the lingua franca. The archival data indicated that the colonial educators believed that the natives should first become literate in their mother tongue within their cultural environment before acquiring English as a lingua franca.

On why it seems that the mother tongue was a hindrance to the proper acquisition of English as a second language, Touchie (1986) argued that proficiency gained from several years of dependence on the first language for communication might cause an individual to make morphological, phonological, lexical, and syntactic errors which form part of the difficulties adults encounter while attempting to acquire a second language. In this regard, Adeyemi et al. (2019) noted that such mother tongue interference brings about challenges in pronunciation and writing in English, with the student showing a lack of confidence and poor communication skills as a result.

But Cummins' (1979) developmental interdependence and threshold hypothesis noted that the mother tongue does not extinguish the improvement of competence in a second language. Competence in the second language emanates from the nature of competence already attained in the primary language when the child focuses more on the second language. Cummins' hypothesis does not contradict Chomsky's but implies that a student who shows competence in the primary language is likely to develop competence also in the language of instruction. Piper et al. (2018) affirmed this hypothesis in a study that found that the native language helps rather than creates cognitive confusion.

But as Deng and Zou (2016) observed concerning Chomsky's language acquisition theory and the place of LAD in the child's capacity to acquire languages, the older the individual is before attempting to acquire a second language, the more the first language interferes with the efforts to acquire the second language. Such appeared to be the case in rural Nigeria in the colonial era and the years immediately after independence.

5. SUMMARY

This study explored how using a second language as the medium of instruction might affect student performance in rural Nigerian communities where the mother tongue is predominant. The research was prompted by the fact that many secondary school students fail every year to attain the required grades in English, which is a prerequisite for university admission. I reviewed existing literature on studies about using English as the medium of instruction in non-English speaking environments. I narrowed my focus on the historical research methodology as I found it to be the most suitable for investigating the policies and intentions of the colonial administration that could impact the current academic performance of students in English. The selection of appropriate research instruments and data analysis tools met the expectations, and provided answers to the various research questions, producing results that could potentially change the educational direction in rural Nigeria.

There were several objectives for this study, which adopted the historical research methodology to determine if a student achievement gap in English existed between rural and urban schools in Nigeria and if the local language or other environmental factors might trigger such a student achievement gap. Other objectives included determining if the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in early childhood education can impact performance in English at the secondary school level and if the student achievement gap extends beyond English to other facets of the student's education.

Of particular concern is the current problem of overcrowding in public schools which is hurting the effectiveness of teachers. Classrooms with too many students can make it difficult for teachers to give each student the individual attention they need to excel. To address this issue, a study has recommended several solutions.

Firstly, it is recommended that more English teachers be hired to help ease the burden on existing teachers. This will allow for smaller class sizes and give students more opportunities to engage with their teacher and ask questions.

Secondly, expanding physical structures such as classrooms and school buildings can provide more space for students and help alleviate overcrowding. This can also lead to a more comfortable learning environment for students and teachers alike.

Finally, commissioning research to acquire suitable digital technology for language labs can be a great way to improve language education in public schools. With the right technology, teachers can provide more interactive and engaging lessons that help students learn better.

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