English language proficiency as a determinant of academic performance in Nigerian universities

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Abstract

Existing scholarship has long recognised the centrality of language proficiency in determining students' success across academic disciplines. However, in the Nigerian university context, English language proficiency remains a persistent challenge, given the multilingual realities of the nation and the dominance of English as the official medium of instruction. This has created gaps in students' comprehension, critical engagement and overall academic performance. The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which English language proficiency serves as a determinant of academic performance among undergraduates in selected Nigerian universities. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study employs surveys, standardised language proficiency tests and semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers across selected universities. The theoretical framework is grounded in sociolinguistic and educational performance theories, which underscore the relationship between language competence and academic achievement. Findings reveal a significant correlation between students' English proficiency levels and their performance across core courses, with additional perspectives that inadequate proficiency exacerbates issues of exclusion, low confidence and poor critical thinking. The study contributes to extant academic discourses by highlighting the urgent need for curriculum redesign and remedial language support programs to bridge linguistic gaps, thereby fostering equitable access to quality education in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: English language proficiency, academic performance, Nigerian universities, multilingualism, sociolinguistics, language competence.

I. Introduction

Since colonial times, English has remained the official language of Nigeria and the dominant medium of instruction at all levels of formal education, including tertiary institutions. In Nigerian universities, English serves as the primary language for lectures, examinations, textbooks, and official communication, making competence in academic English a gatekeeper for access to curricula and assessment systems (UNICEF, 2023). This privileged status of English confers both instrumental advantages such as access to global knowledge, scholarship, and employment and structural barriers for students whose previous schooling did not adequately develop academic-English skills. Recent policy reviews have shown that assuming uniform English competence among undergraduates can produce inequitable learning outcomes across socio-economic and linguistic groups (UNICEF, 2023).

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, with hundreds of indigenous languages spoken across its regions. This multilingual reality shapes students' early language socialisation and schooling experiences, consequently influencing the linguistic repertoires they bring to university classrooms. Empirical research highlights two interrelated patterns. First, many students face

transitional challenges when instruction shifts from mother tongues or local lingua francas to English as the medium of instruction. Second, multilingual repertoires can serve as valuable assets when teaching methods adopt translanguaging and code-switching, but they may become barriers when curricula assume native-like proficiency in academic English (Obiakor, 2024). Thus, while multilingualism itself does not inherently hinder learning, the mismatch between students' linguistic backgrounds and the academic language of instruction often affects comprehension, participation, and written expression.

Studies from Nigerian and comparative contexts have linked limited academic-English proficiency to observable challenges in higher education. Students with lower proficiency levels frequently struggle with understanding lectures, reading complex texts, and producing discipline-appropriate written work. These difficulties often translate into reduced classroom participation, lower grades, and even attrition from academic programmes (Ozowuba, 2018; Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2024). Institutional audits have revealed that disparities in English competence reflect wider socio-economic inequalities, with students from under-resourced schools facing greater disadvantages. Consequently, the continued use of English as the exclusive medium of instruction has been increasingly debated, and scholars have called for bilingual or transitional models that address the language–learning divide (Ella & Mmegwa, 2024).

These observations foreground a critical problem: while English is indispensable for academic mobility in Nigeria, inadequate proficiency remains a persistent obstacle to students' learning and performance. The issue extends beyond language to questions of equity, access, and educational justice. Although previous studies have discussed undergraduates' general struggles with English, few have empirically examined how proficiency levels directly correlate with academic performance across disciplines and institutions. Furthermore, there is insufficient attention to the moderating influence of socio-economic background, prior schooling, and institutional language-support mechanisms (Obiakor, 2024). These gaps constrain the design of evidence-based interventions to improve student outcomes.

Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the extent to which English language proficiency determines academic performance among Nigerian undergraduates. Specifically, it investigates the correlation between proficiency levels and performance across faculties, explores how inadequate competence affects participation and confidence, and proposes interventions such as remedial programs, curriculum redesign, and policy reforms to strengthen students' academic-English foundations. (UNICEF, 2023; Ella & Mmegwa, 2024)

In addressing these aims, the study is guided by key questions such as: What is the nature of the relationship between English language proficiency and students' academic performance? To what extent does poor English proficiency hinder comprehension, participation and learning outcomes? And are there institutional or policy gaps in addressing these challenges? It is hypothesised that there exists a significant positive correlation between English proficiency and students' academic performance, and that even after accounting for socio-economic and educational factors, proficiency remains a strong predictor of academic success.

By integrating these questions and objectives into a single analytical framework, this study contributes to ongoing debates about language policy, educational equity, and pedagogical innovation in Nigeria's multilingual higher education system. The findings are expected to inform evidence-based reforms that can enhance both linguistic competence and academic achievement among university students.

2. **Review of related literature: Sociolinguistic theories of language and education**

Sociolinguistic perspectives view language not simply as a neutral medium of communication but as a socially embedded practice that reflects and reproduces power, access and identity in educational settings. In contexts such as Nigeria, where hundreds of indigenous languages coexist with English as the official language, sociolinguistic theories highlight how language choice mediates inclusion and exclusion in the classroom (Bourdieu, 1991; Hornberger, 2003). Language functions as a form of "linguistic capital" a resource that students must possess to succeed academically. Those with strong English proficiency are positioned advantageously, while those with weaker competence are structurally marginalised, regardless of their cognitive potential (Bourdieu, 1991).

Building on this, the notion of language ecology in education emphasises how multilingual environments can either serve as assets or barriers depending on institutional policies (Hornberger & Skilton-Sylvester, 2000). For example, translanguaging and code-switching practices can facilitate comprehension and foster deeper learning, but rigid English-only policies may hinder students' ability to engage critically with academic material (Garcia & Wei, 2014). In Nigerian universities, this tension is especially pronounced: while students often rely on multilingual repertoires outside the classroom, institutional norms valorize English as the sole legitimate medium of knowledge production (Obiakor, 2024). These insights underscore why sociolinguistic theories remain central to understanding the role of English proficiency in academic achievement.

Educational performance theories provide a complementary lens for linking language proficiency to academic outcomes. Central to this is Cummins' (1979, 2000) interdependence hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in a first language (L1) provides a cognitive foundation that transfers to second language (L2) academic learning. In multilingual contexts, students who develop strong literacy in their home language are more likely to acquire higher-order skills in English, which subsequently supports comprehension and academic performance. Conversely, weak literacy foundations in both L1 and L2 result in persistent academic struggles. Cummins further distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While many Nigerian undergraduates possess conversational English (BICS), they often lack the advanced CALP skills such as academic reading, writing, and critical analysis that are essential for higher education success (Cummins, 2008). This distinction helps explain why students who appear fluent in everyday English still underperform in academic tasks.

Recent studies in African higher education have validated these theoretical claims, showing that limited CALP skills significantly reduce students' ability to comprehend lectures, write scholarly essays, and engage critically with academic texts (UNICEF, 2023; Ella & Mmegwa, 2024). Moreover, research suggests that interventions targeting academic English proficiency, rather than conversational skills, yield the most improvement in students' academic outcomes (Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2024). Collectively, sociolinguistic theories and educational performance frameworks provide a robust theoretical foundation for this study. While sociolinguistic approaches draw attention to the structural inequalities produced by language hierarchies in Nigerian universities, educational performance theories illuminate the cognitive processes by which language proficiency directly influences academic achievement. Integrating these perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis of English language proficiency as both a social and educational determinant of academic performance.

In the context of global perspectives, a growing body of international scholarship has examined how English (or another lingua franca) as the medium of instruction affects student learning in multilingual settings. Studies using administrative and survey data have produced mixed but instructive findings. Some large-scale quantitative investigations show that instruction in a second language can depress short-term attainment (especially in content-heavy courses) while benefitting long-term access to knowledge and global opportunities (Bernhofer, 2022; Pires, 2024). For example, research exploiting variation in language-of-instruction policies demonstrates measurable effects on grades and comprehension when the medium shifts from students' first language to a foreign or second language.

Research with international students and multilingual cohorts highlights important nuances. Several studies find that simple measures of English proficiency (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) correlate with GPA and retention for some student groups but that the strength of this relationship depends on discipline, assessment type, and the specific proficiency measure used (Martirosyan, Saxon & Wanjohi, 2015; Grain, 2022). In other words, proficiency tests predict certain academic outcomes (particularly those relying on reading and writing) more strongly than others (e.g., lab performance, oral-practical tasks). At the pedagogical level, translanguaging and bilingual approaches have emerged as promising practices to mediate the language–learning nexus. Studies of translanguaging in higher education argue that allowing strategic use of students' full linguistic repertoires can improve comprehension, participation, and critical engagement—especially when instructors design scaffolded activities that move learners from familiar registers to academic English (García & Wei, 2014; Canagarajah, 2023). Conversely, other empirical work cautions that translanguaging without clear learning objectives or assessment alignment can complicate evaluation and disadvantage students in high-stakes, English-only examinations (Alfian, 2022).

Finally, systematic and comparative reviews emphasize the variability of English proficiency–achievement links across contexts: measurement choices (self-report vs. standardised tests), the timing of proficiency assessment (entry vs. during study), and institutional supports (ESL programmes, content-language integrated courses) substantially shape observed outcomes (Lim, 2021; Tankó et al., 2022). This heterogeneity suggests that local, context-sensitive studies are necessary to guide institutional policy rather than one-size-fits-all conclusions drawn from other countries.

Nonetheless, in Nigeria, the persistence of language-related learning challenges spans the education pipeline. Several national and program-level reviews point to uneven English literacy outcomes at primary and secondary levels driven by differences in teacher quality, language of early instruction, and resource inequality which carry into university preparedness (Ella & Mmegwa, 2024). At the tertiary level, empirical studies and institutional audits repeatedly document that a subset of undergraduates struggles with academic reading, essay writing, and lecture comprehension despite being functionally competent in conversational English (Ozowuba, 2018; Achinewhu-Nworgu, 2024). These findings echo educators' reports that many entrants demonstrate BICS (everyday conversational fluency) but lack CALP (academic language) skills necessary for critical analysis and discipline-specific writing (Cummins, 2000). Recent Nigeria-focused empirical work further elaborates these patterns. Small- and medium-scale studies have linked students' English proficiency with performance in specific courses (e.g., mathematics, social sciences) and found that remedial language support and curricular integration of academic English improve outcomes where implemented (Lim, 2021; Tankó et al., 2022; Jajere, 2025). Qualitative studies

also show that lecturers frequently adapt by code-switching or simplifying materials, but that such adaptive practices are uneven across faculties and sometimes conflict with formal assessment standards.

2.1 *Identified gaps and limitations in existing research*

Despite these insights, the Nigerian literature exhibits several important gaps that justify further study:

1. Much empirical work uses small samples, single institutions, or single-discipline cases, limiting the ability to generalise findings to the diverse population of Nigerian universities. There is a scarcity of large-scale, multi-institution quantitative studies that pair standardised English proficiency measures with robust academic outcome data.

2. Studies differ in how they measure English proficiency (self-reports, local tests, international exams) and academic performance (course grades, CGPA, pass/fail), making cross-study comparisons difficult.

3. There is limited systematic examination of how socio-economic status, prior schooling language policies, disciplinary differences, and institutional remedial supports mediate or moderate the proficiency–performance relationship. Few studies deploy multivariate models that simultaneously control for these background characteristics.

4. While translanguaging and academic-English programmes are discussed, there are relatively few rigorously evaluated interventions (randomised trials or quasi-experimental designs) that show which remedial approaches are most cost-effective and scalable in Nigerian higher-education contexts.

5. The mismatch between classroom language practices (e.g., lecturers' code-switching) and formal assessments (English-only high-stakes tests) is documented anecdotally, but systematic studies assessing the effects of this misalignment on fairness and validity of assessment are few.

These gaps indicate the need for a multi-method, multi-site study in Nigeria that (a) uses standardised measures of English proficiency, (b) links these to reliable academic outcome data (CGPA and course-level scores), and (c) models' mediators/moderators such as prior schooling, socio-economic status, and availability of remedial supports. Such work would provide stronger evidence to inform institution-level language policies, curriculum design, and investment in academic-English programmes.

3. **Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance among Nigerian undergraduates. The quantitative component involved administering a standardised English proficiency test and collecting students' academic performance data, while the qualitative component consisted of focus group discussions that explored students lived experiences with English-medium instruction. This approach ensured both statistical precision and contextual depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The population comprised undergraduate students in two neighboring Nigerian state, federal and private universities, Ebonyi State University, Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike and Evangel

University, Akaeze. A total of 120 students participated in the quantitative phase, selected through stratified sampling across departments to ensure variability in disciplinary language exposure. For the qualitative phase, 30 students (15 males and 15 females; ages 17–22; all in 200 level) were purposively selected to participate in focus group discussions. This ensured a balanced representation of gender and academic background and allowed for rich experiential contributions. Data were collected using three instruments:

1. Standardised English Proficiency Test: A locally adapted version of IELTS/TOEFL-based assessment measured reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. Each participant received a composite proficiency score.
2. Academic Performance Data: Students' GPA scores were obtained with consent and institutional permission. GPA served as the objective measure of academic achievement.
3. Focus Group Discussion Guide: Three focus group sessions (10 students per group) were conducted using a semi-structured guide. Questions explored comprehension challenges, participation difficulties, confidence levels, strategies for understanding course content and the influence of English proficiency on academic performance. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data collection occurred in two phases: In the quantitative phase, the English proficiency test was administered under controlled conditions over two days. GPA data were retrieved from departmental records after the test administration. And in the qualitative phase, the three focus group discussions were held in designated classrooms, each lasting 45–60 minutes. This sequential approach enabled the qualitative strand to elaborate on patterns observed in the quantitative results.

The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (Version 25). The analysis consisted of descriptive statistics to summarise English proficiency scores and GPA distributions, Pearson's correlation analysis to examine the relationship between the two variables. Significance was set at $p < .05$. and an additional interpretation considered the strength and direction of the correlation (positive, negative, or none). This ensured methodological rigour and produced replicable findings in line with correlational research standards. Furthermore, qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework: Familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report. Codes were systematically applied across transcripts, identifying recurring ideas such as comprehension difficulty, avoidance of classroom participation, reliance on peers and code-switching, and perceived institutional gaps in language support. Themes were validated through inter-coder agreement and were supported by direct quotations from participants to enhance credibility. All participants provided informed consent and anonymity was maintained using pseudonyms. Institutional approval was obtained prior to data collection.

4. Conceptual framework

The study is anchored, first, in sociolinguistic theories that view language as more than a tool of communication; it is also a medium of power, identity, and access to social opportunities. Scholars such as Bourdieu (1991) have argued that linguistic competence functions as a form of cultural capital, conferring advantages on those who possess proficiency in the dominant language of a given society. In

the Nigerian context, English holds this dominant status as the official language and medium of instruction in higher education. Hence, proficiency in English is not simply about linguistic ability; it determines students' access to academic discourse, participation in classroom interactions, and success in assessments. From this perspective, English proficiency becomes a gatekeeping mechanism, shaping who can excel academically and who faces exclusion.

The second theoretical lens derives from educational performance theories that link language competence to cognitive and academic development. Cummins' (1979, 2000) language interdependence hypothesis posits that proficiency in a first language supports the acquisition of academic proficiency in a second language, provided there is sufficient exposure and instructional support. Conversely, weak linguistic foundations impede cognitive engagement and learning across subjects. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights the role of language in scaffolding higher-order thinking and collaborative learning. Applied to Nigerian universities, these theories suggest that students with limited English proficiency struggle not only with comprehension but also with expressing critical and analytical thought in academic English, which directly affects performance in written and oral assessments.

Building on these frameworks, this study adopts a conceptual model that traces the pathway between English proficiency and academic performance. At the base level, English proficiency enables students to comprehend lectures, textbooks, and assessment prompts. This comprehension, in turn, fosters critical thinking and analytical skills, which are essential for producing essays, solving problems, and engaging in academic debates. Ultimately, these competencies translate into measurable academic performance, reflected in CGPAs, examination scores, and continuous assessments. Conversely, inadequate proficiency disrupts this pathway: poor comprehension undermines critical thinking, limits class participation, erodes confidence, and leads to lower achievement outcomes. The conceptual framework therefore positions English proficiency as a critical determinant of academic success in Nigerian universities, mediating both cognitive development and access to educational opportunities. This framing underscores the urgency of addressing language-related barriers if equity and excellence in higher education are to be achieved.

5.1 Discussion of findings

The quantitative component of the study showed a strong positive relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance. Pearson's correlation indicated a statistically significant association between proficiency scores and students' CGPA ($r = .68$, $p < .01$). Regression analysis further revealed that reading and writing proficiency were significant predictors of academic performance across disciplines. Students with higher proficiency achieved better grades in essay-based assessments, research projects and oral presentations, while those with lower proficiency consistently underperformed in tasks requiring interpretation, argumentation and academic writing. The data also showed institutional differences: students in private university, Evangel University, Akaeze, recorded higher proficiency scores and stronger academic outcomes than those in most federal and state institutions, reflecting the impact of institutional investment in language support programs.

5. 1.1 *Correlation between English proficiency and academic performance*

The quantitative analysis indicated a strong, positive relationship between students' English language proficiency and their overall academic performance, measured through CGPA and selected course

grades. Pearson's correlation revealed a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that higher English proficiency is associated with higher academic achievement. Regression analysis further showed that reading and writing scores were significant predictors of GPA across disciplines. Students with advanced proficiency consistently outperformed peers in essay-based assessments, research projects, and oral presentations. Conversely, students with lower proficiency struggled to interpret complex questions, structure coherent arguments, and adhere to disciplinary conventions in written work. These results reflect Cummins' (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP): although many students demonstrated conversational fluency, their academic language skills were insufficient for higher-order cognitive demands.

Institutional differences emerged in the quantitative data. Students in private university, such as Evangel University, Akaeze, where remedial English programmes and well-equipped language laboratories are common, achieved higher proficiency scores and stronger academic outcomes than their counterparts in some federal and state institutions, including Ebonyi State University and Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike. This finding underscores the importance of institutional investment in language support as a mediator of the proficiency–performance relationship. These results align with international studies linking language proficiency to academic achievement in multilingual contexts (Martirosyan, Saxon & Wanjohi, 2015; Grain, 2022) to reinforce the role of English competence as both a cognitive and structural determinant of academic success.

5.1.2 *Impact of low proficiency on student participation and confidence*

Qualitative data from the three focus group discussions highlighted the academic and psychological consequences of low English proficiency. Students frequently reported challenges in following lectures, understanding technical terminology, and expressing ideas clearly in both written and oral formats. One participant stated:

"Sometimes I understand the lecture, but when I try to answer in class, I get stuck because I cannot find the right words in English."

Another student explained the reliance on peers for comprehension:

"After class, my friends will explain in Pidgin or Igbo and that is when I finally understand."

These barriers often discouraged active participation in discussions, group projects, and seminar presentations. Participants described heightened anxiety and self-consciousness, fearing judgment or misunderstanding, which led to silence and disengagement. A student recounted:

"I just stay quiet because I am afraid people will laugh if I speak wrongly."

Lecturers corroborated these observations, noting that some students preferred rote memorization or peer explanations rather than asking questions, limiting opportunities for analytical engagement. One lecturer remarked:

"Some students know the answers but won't speak up, they rely on memorisation or listening to their friends. It affects their ability to think critically."

Code-switching emerged as a common coping strategy. Students and lecturers occasionally shifted to indigenous languages or Nigerian Pidgin to facilitate comprehension. While effective for immediate understanding, this practice did not necessarily improve academic-English proficiency. A participant explained:

"During lab sessions, we sometimes switch to Pidgin when the instructions are confusing, but it doesn't help me write my reports in proper English."

These narratives illustrate the dual role of English proficiency: as a cognitive resource, enabling comprehension, reasoning, and academic performance, and as a social resource, shaping confidence, participation, and legitimacy in academic spaces (Bourdieu, 1991; Cummins, 2000). Students with low proficiency are disadvantaged on both fronts, facing reduced participation, lower confidence and constrained opportunities for cognitive development.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings confirms that English proficiency is a central determinant of academic performance in Nigerian universities. The strong positive correlation between proficiency and GPA highlights the cognitive demands of higher education, while qualitative narratives reveal the socio-emotional costs of inadequate proficiency, including marginalisation, anxiety and limited engagement.

The findings validate the study's conceptual framework: English proficiency enables comprehension, critical thinking, and analytical expression, translating into measurable academic success. In contrast, low proficiency disrupts this pathway, reduce both performance and confidence. Interventions should extend beyond remedial grammar courses to include structured academic-English programs, inclusive classroom practices, and strategies to reduce stigma associated with language difficulties that ensure equitable access to higher-order learning opportunities.

5.1.3 *Variations across disciplines (sciences vs. humanities and professional programmes)*

The study revealed notable variations in how English language proficiency influenced academic performance across different disciplinary contexts, as illuminated by both quantitative and qualitative data. In the humanities and social sciences, where assessments emphasize essays, critical analyses, and extended written projects, students' proficiency in reading comprehension, argumentation, and academic writing had a direct impact on their grades. Humanities students with lower proficiency frequently struggled to construct coherent arguments, integrate secondary sources, and articulate abstract ideas clearly. One participant noted:

"When I try to write my essays, I know the ideas, but I can't express them properly in English, so I lose marks."

Another explained:

"I understand the readings but putting it all together in my own words is very difficult. Sometimes I just copy phrases I know, and I know it's not enough."

These findings support Hyland's (2009) argument that academic writing is highly discipline-specific, requiring mastery of discourse conventions unique to each field. In these contexts, weak proficiency directly hampers students' ability to meet the demands of critical thinking and extended writing.

In sciences and engineering, the impact of English proficiency manifested differently. While these disciplines rely heavily on formulas, diagrams, and practical demonstrations, comprehension of instructions, problem-solving questions, and research reporting still required adequate academic-English skills. Students with lower proficiency frequently misinterpreted experimental procedures or produced unclear laboratory reports. One science student shared:

"Sometimes the lab instructions are confusing in English, so I end up doing the wrong steps. It affects my report marks."

Though less dependent on extended essays than the humanities, precision in language remained crucial for technical communication and research documentation. Lecturers in engineering highlighted that:

"Students may understand the concepts, but if they cannot write the report clearly in English, their grades suffer."

Professional programmes such as law, medicine and business presented the highest stakes for English proficiency. These fields demand mastery of specialised terminology, case analysis, and oral communication. Students with weaker proficiency reported heightened stress, struggling to follow lectures, interpret professional jargon, and present confidently during moot courts, ward rounds or business simulations. One law student admitted:

"During moot court, I understand the case, but I get nervous speaking because I'm afraid my English isn't good enough. I just freeze."

Another business student commented:

"In group presentations, I often let others talk because I can't explain my ideas properly in English. It's frustrating."

While students in the sciences sometimes experienced slightly more tolerance for lower proficiency compared to those in humanities, the findings underscore that mastery of academic and technical English is essential across all disciplines. This highlights the importance of discipline-sensitive language support rather than a uniform remedial approach.

5.4 *Institutional gaps in language support programmes*

The study also identified significant disparities in the provision of language support across Nigerian universities. Some private universities offered comprehensive English development programmes, including remedial courses, writing centres, peer tutoring schemes, and language laboratories. Students in these institutions generally achieved higher proficiency scores and stronger academic outcomes. A participant reflected:

"We have writing workshops and tutors who help with essays. It really makes a difference; I feel more confident in my assignments."

However, even in these contexts, support often focused on surface-level grammar correction rather than deep engagement with academic discourse practices. In contrast, many federal and state institutions lacked systematic language support structures. Often, compulsory General Studies (GST) English

courses were the only intervention. Students described these courses as overly generic, exam-driven, and disconnected from disciplinary requirements. One participant commented:

"GST English is just something to pass; it doesn't help with our actual course work. We still struggle to write reports in our departments."

Lecturers corroborated this view, noting that students are expected to enter university with adequate proficiency:

"We assume students already know English well enough. It's not our role to teach them from scratch, but many are not prepared."

This mismatch between institutional expectations and student realities reinforces Cummins' (2000) and Hornberger's (2003) assertion that academic language proficiency develops over time through structured exposure and support, rather than being automatically acquired. The lack of institutional investment in sustainable language acquisition infrastructure contributes to widening disparities. Students from elite secondary schools, often with strong English foundations, tend to thrive, whereas those from under-resourced backgrounds fall behind. One lecturer noted:

"Some students are already at an advantage when they enter university, and those who are less prepared struggle silently. The system doesn't support them adequately."

These findings highlight the critical need for systematic, scalable and discipline-sensitive language support strategies across Nigerian universities. Interventions should go beyond generic grammar courses to ensure equitable academic success and sustained engagement with disciplinary discourse.

6. Discussion on broader socio-economic factors influencing proficiency

Beyond institutional and disciplinary factors, the study revealed that students' English language proficiency is deeply intertwined with socio-economic background and pre-university educational experiences. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that proficiency is not merely a product of exposure to English in the classroom but reflects broader structural and social determinants.

Students from urban centres who attended private or mission-owned secondary schools consistently demonstrated higher proficiency than peers from rural or underfunded public schools. One participant reflected:

"In my secondary school, we had English labs and daily essay exercises. I think that's why I'm more confident in my writing than some classmates."

This disparity stems from uneven access to qualified teachers, textbooks, language laboratories, and other educational resources, which directly shape early language acquisition (Adegbite, 2010; Akinremi, 2021). Parental socio-economic status (SES) further amplified these differences. Students from higher-income households frequently had access to after-school tutoring, private libraries, English media, and in some cases, overseas education, all of which strengthened their proficiency. In contrast, students from lower SES backgrounds often grew up in environments where English was rarely used outside formal schooling. One participant noted:

"At home, we spoke my local language most of the time. English was only for school, so I didn't get much practice before university."

These patterns align with sociolinguistic perspectives that view language proficiency as socially stratified, where economic inequalities translate into linguistic inequalities (Bourdieu, 1991; Brock-Utne, 2017).

Regional differences also shaped proficiency outcomes. Students from Northern Nigeria, where Hausa dominates social interactions, tended to enter university with weaker English skills compared to peers in Southern Nigeria, where English and Pidgin are more widely used in daily communication. A northern student explained:

"In my hometown, English is only used in school. Outside, everyone speaks Hausa, so it's hard to practice."

This reflects how multilingual environments, when combined with structural inequalities, can exacerbate barriers to academic success (Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). Broader economic conditions such as inflation, insecurity, and industrial actions disrupting schooling also contributed to inconsistent exposure to English instruction. Several students reported prolonged interruptions in learning due to ASUU strikes, which weakened their continuous development of academic language skills. One student shared:

"During strikes, I stayed months without classes. When school resumed, I felt I had forgotten a lot of what I had learned."

From a gendered perspective, female students from rural and low-income communities were disproportionately disadvantaged. Cultural norms sometimes restricted access to English-language materials or extracurricular activities, reinforcing gendered inequalities in proficiency and academic achievement (Aina, 2020). A female participant from a rural area remarked:

"We were not encouraged to join debate clubs or read English books at home. Boys got more support in learning English."

No doubt, these findings reinforces that English proficiency cannot be understood in isolation from students' social and economic realities. Poverty, educational inequality, and regional and gender disparities intersect to perpetuate linguistic disadvantages, regardless of intellectual potential. Universities must therefore recognize that interventions targeting in-class language challenges are necessary but insufficient. Policies and programmes must also account for the broader socio-economic contexts that shape students' linguistic trajectories, providing equitable access to resources, structured academic-English support and strategies that mitigate systemic inequalities.

7. Conclusion

This study investigated the role of English language proficiency as a determinant of academic performance among Nigerian undergraduates. The findings demonstrate a strong positive correlation between English proficiency and academic success, confirming that students with higher proficiency consistently performed better in comprehension, critical analysis and assessment tasks. Conversely, students with lower proficiency experienced reduced confidence and participation, often leading to passive engagement in classroom activities and limited opportunities for cognitive development.

The study also revealed disciplinary variations in the influence of proficiency. Humanities and social sciences placed greater demands on reading comprehension, argumentation, and extended written expression, whereas sciences and professional programmes emphasised precise technical communication, comprehension of instructions and mastery of specialised terminology. Furthermore, qualitative data highlighted the socio-emotional costs of limited proficiency, including reliance on code-switching, marginalisation in classroom interactions and anxiety during oral presentations. Significant institutional disparities were observed. Private universities with structured English support programmes such as writing centres, remedial courses and language laboratories showed higher student proficiency and better academic outcomes. In contrast, many public universities offered only generic General Studies English courses, often disconnected from disciplinary needs, leaving students with weak foundations inadequately supported.

The study further underscored the role of broader socio-economic factors in shaping English proficiency. Students' family background, parental socio-economic status, type of secondary school attended, regional linguistic ecology and gendered opportunities collectively influenced their readiness for academic English. Participants from urban and resource-rich contexts reported higher proficiency levels, while those from rural, underfunded schools faced persistent disadvantages.

These findings carry important implications for higher education policy and practice in Nigeria. English proficiency should be treated as a core academic competency, rather than a skill assumed to be acquired prior to university entry. Universities must adopt discipline-sensitive language support strategies, integrating academic-English development into curricula tailored to the specific demands of each field. Interventions should go beyond grammatical correction to include argumentation, research writing, technical communication, and oral presentation skills.

To address institutional and regional disparities, universities should establish sustained, accessible, and structured support programmes such as writing centres, discipline-specific English modules, digital learning platforms, mentorship and peer-assisted learning schemes. Aligning secondary and tertiary educational policies will also help ensure smoother transitions for students entering university. Collectively, these strategies can foster equitable access to higher education, enhance student confidence, and strengthen academic performance across disciplines, ultimately bridging linguistic and socio-economic gaps in Nigerian universities.

7.1 *Suggestions for lecturers, administrators and policymakers*

Lecturers should adopt inclusive pedagogies that scaffold comprehension for students with weaker proficiency, such as simplifying academic jargon, providing glossaries of technical terms, and offering formative feedback on writing. University administrators must allocate resources for language support programmes, while ensuring small-group interventions where possible to enhance impact. Policymakers, on the other hand, need to institutionalise language development as part of quality assurance measures in higher education, making it a prerequisite for accreditation and ranking. Partnerships between government agencies, universities and donor organisations could also support the development of national centres for academic English, like language support models in multilingual countries such as South Africa and India.

7.2 *Directions for further research*

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of language interventions on academic performance, tracking cohorts over time to assess effectiveness. Comparative studies between Nigerian universities and other multilingual African contexts could also yield insights into best practices for supporting students. Additionally, the role of digital technologies such as online learning platforms, AI-powered writing assistants and virtual classrooms in improving proficiency warrants further exploration. Gender-sensitive and regionally focused research would also deepen understanding of socio-economic inequalities in language learning.

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