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## ARCHITECTURE & PLANNING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Evidence-based learning of students' performance in English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in the Sekyere South District of Ghana

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**Abstract:** Access to quality education largely depends on the extent of English language usage. Despite the use of English language as the medium of instruction in Ghana, the performance of students in the West African Senior High School Examination is still worrying. The study is designed to examine the influence of mother tongue on Students' performance in English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School. The study investigated if mother tongue is exclusively the cause of the students' abysmal performance in English Language in Senior High School Certificate Examination and to explore if there are other intervening factors. Fifteen (15) respondents (constituting five males and five females) with a focus group involving five students who are graduates of the West African Senior High School Certificate from Adu Gyamfi Senior High in School in Ghana were used. All the respondents had low grades in the certificate examination. The study employed exploratory case study using thematic analysis with semi-structured open-ended questionnaires. The results revealed that even though mother tongue interference is

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

There is a worldwide recognition on the use of English language as the medium of communication in most spheres of life. It is then needful to improve and strengthen the ways English as a language is acquired and used. The study is focused on the performance of Ghanaian students in the West African Senior High School Examinations. The researchers used qualitative analytical tool to analyse obtained data from the field. Precisely, inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data sets that were generated from respondents. The results revealed that even though mother tongue interference is the core factor of the students' poor performance in English language in the West African Senior High School Certificate examination, there are other factors contributing to students' poor performance in English language. These factors include poor teaching methods, lack of textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers. Suggested measures that could enhance students' achievement in English language are given.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Quality education is the bedrock of all-contemporary societies but largely depends on the extent of English language usage; since English use is globally recognised. Despite the use of English language as the medium of instruction in Ghana, the performance of students in the West African Senior High School Examination is still worrying. The study found out that the problem is mostly due to the influence of mother tongue. The results, however, revealed other factors that account for students' poor performance in English language in the West African Senior High School Certificate examination which include poor teaching methods, lack of textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers. Suggested measures that could enhance students' achievement in English language are given.

the core factor of the students' poor performance in English language in the West African Senior High School Certificate examination, there are other factors contributing to students' poor performance in English language. These factors include poor teaching methods, lack of textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers. Suggested measures that could enhance students' achievement in English language are given.

**Subjects:** Qualitative Methods; Evidence-based Mental Health; Antenatal Care

**Keywords:** mother tongue; English language; thematic analysis; Sekyere South; Jamasi

### 1. Background

English language plays an important role and facilitates overall learning in schools. The knowledge of English language is important both for educational, economical and national development of a country (Awoniyi, 1978; Hall, 2017; Hyon et al., 2018). The importance of English language as a school subject derives mainly from its utilitarian value to the larger Ghanaian society. English is the official language for administration and commerce in Ghana. English plays an important role in teaching science in schools. Thus, the importance of the use of English language in improving communication among the various ethnic groups in developing countries cannot be overemphasized (Pennycook, 2017). In their study on students' perceptions on using different listening assessment methods, Sulaiman, Muhammad, Ganapathy, Khairuddin, and Othman (2017) stress on the need to adopt varied methods including audio-visuals to teaching young children since they yield high recall rates. It is therefore necessary to highlight the need to improve the quality of spoken and written English among school children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Strong language development is a major component for the development of all societies (Piaget, 1997; Jersild, 1998; Temple, Ogle, Crawford, & Freppon, 2018; Verplaetse and Migliacci (2017)). There is a growing concern to reduce barriers to language acquisition imbalances internationally, nationally and locally with special emphasis on vulnerable groups (Fantini, 2018; Su et al., 2017). It has been estimated that, in the entire world, fourteen (14) local languages are lost to foreign ones each year which has a negative impact on the sustenance of rural societies. In Ghana, the senior high school level is a very decisive stage. This is because from this stage successful students' progress to the tertiary institutions. At this stage too, English language, apart from being the medium of instruction, has its importance as one of the "core" subjects. The implication is that if students are not much proficient in this language, they would not be able to do well in other subjects.

Complaints about poor English results of students at the senior high schools have been heard from the teachers in schools all over Ghana at Ghana Association of Teachers of English (GATE) conferences. As Mensah (2014) found, the general belief is that many Ghanaian students have difficulties with English language. He also observed that this underachievement could be attributed to a number of causes. Notable among them were the differences in the orthographic system between the first language and English, and first language (L1) interference (Piaget, 1997).

Major concern is the current state of educational system, which has led to poor performance of students in public examinations (Kavuma, Cunningham, Bogere, & Sebyggala, 2017; Kolawole, 1998; Kolawole & Dele, 2002; Richards, 2015). This problem of underachievement among school children has persisted in many subject areas such as Mathematics, English and Science (Bishop & Leonard, 2014). This poor level of achievement in many subject areas may be due to poor foundation in English language at the primary school level. There are also several research reports, which support the view that language inefficiency invariably leads to poor academic performance (Owens Jr, 2016; Nunan, 2003; Quirk, 2010). These scholars have also emphasised the importance

of the use of English language in improving communication among the various ethnic groups in Ghana. They further highlighted the need for improving the quality of spoken and written English language among school children in the educational arena.

The implication is that it is necessary to investigate students' underachievement in English and find, if possible, the remedial procedures that can elevate their level and/or lessen errors that they make (Short, 2017). The purpose of this study will therefore be to examine the factors that influence the impact of Mother tongue on students' performance in English language and its related subjects in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in the Sekyere South District of Ghana.

## 2. Methods

By means of exploratory case study design, the researchers qualitatively sought to explore the influence of mother tongue on the performance of students in English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in the Sekyere South District of Ghana. The researchers intended to carry out the study with Senior High School students considered as units inquiry for explanations as to "how and why" students perform poorly in English and its related subjects in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination and also the research questions were more focused on contemporary issues than being historical (McArthur, Lam-McArthur, & Fontaine, 2018; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009).

### 2.1. Study setting

The study was piloted in the Sekyere South District of Ghana. The District is located in the north eastern part of the Ashanti Region. Agona, which is the administrative capital, is located 37 km from Kumasi, along the Kumasi-Mampong trunk road. The District shares common borders with Ejura Sekyedumasi to the north, Mampong Municipal and Sekyere East to the east, Kwabre East to the south and Offinso Municipal to the west. The District has a total land area of 416.8 square Km representing about 1.7 percent of the total land size of the Region of 24,389 square Km. The District has a density of 226 persons per square Km. The District lies between latitude 6° 50'N and 70 10'N and longitude 10 40'W and 10 25' W (SSDA, 2017). Sekyere South District Assembly (2017). General Background and Analysis of Current Situation. Ghana: Sekyere South District Profile, 2016. Please add it to the reference as I could not do that.

Over the years successive governments have implemented a number of reforms in a bid to increase enrolment and improve quality of education. Ghana's national policy to reduce poverty and increase democratic participation in governance is ultimate dependent on an educational system that provides children with basic skills for active participation in economic, social and political activities. The District has been divided into seven circuits with 92 pre-schools, 85 primary schools, 75 junior high schools and 8 secondary/vocational schools. The District map is shown below Ghana in Figure 1.

### 2.2. Study procedures

The study purposively acknowledged fifteen (15) past students of Adu Gyamfi Senior High School as the study population as they were considered as sources of "information rich" (Patton, 1990; Bowling, 2014) and to obtain insights into the influence of mother tongue on performance of students in English language in their Alma Mata. Qualitative data through interview guide were collected from respondents from 29 January to 24 February, 2017. In addition to the interview involving ten (10) respondents, a focus group which comprised five (5) respondents was organised to supplement the interview data. Though field data were all produced in English, for clarity of evidence, Twi was used to supplement English to elucidate all needed information from respondents. Raw data were then shared among researchers for independent transcription and were later exchanged among respondents for counter clarity of purpose and for thorough discussion which helped in the smooth analyses of the study.

**Figure 1. Map of the District area showing the selected study communities.**

Source: Sekyere South District Assembly, 2017.



To discover if predominant use of Mother tongue contributed to the underachievement of students in English language, respondents were asked to do a self-assessment of their English speaking proficiency using a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being the lowest score and 5 the highest score in the aspects of reading, writing and speaking. Again, respondents were asked to recount how they felt if they committed errors in their usage of English language and also if their mother tongue affected their English language composition in their academic work.

Furthermore, to ascertain the social dynamics and analyse if socio-economic factors act as complementary factors in the poor performance of English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School, during the interview schedule, respondents were asked to give their views if they preferred listening to the radio and watching television programmes, and also using the social media in English language to Twi language.

Finally, through the focus group, respondents were asked to give their views on the remedial paths when adopted can strengthen English Language performance in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School. Respondents were asked to mention ways they think English language could be improved through better teaching methods and the practical steps they took to broaden their proficiency and interest in English language during their school days.

### 2.3. Limitation

The use of Twi, the most popular language in Ghana was used to ensure clarity of expression and to supplement English during the interview schedule. Again, due to the short period of the research, only fifteen people were used as study participants.

### 2.4. Analysis

The researchers used qualitative analytical tool to analyse obtained data from the field. Precisely, inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data sets that were generated from respondents. The educational authorities of Adu Gyamfi Senior High School, Sekyere South education directorate, Ashanti regional education directorate and the national education directorate shall be advised to incorporate and mainstream the outcome and results of the study.

The researchers used thematic analysis other than any of the qualitative analytical tools on the datasets since the views, opinions and feelings of respondents were the focus of the study. Qualitatively, thematic analysis is the technique which helps to identify, interpret and report patterns or themes found in one's dataset which portrays the experiences, beliefs, and observations of respondents in relation to the epistemological position of one's research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Carter & Little, 2007). Thematic analysis is able to offer the systematic element of a research data of one's study and permits the researcher to combine analysis by generating codes with meaning in context. Thus, adding the advantages of the refinement and complexity of a truly qualitative analysis (Braun, Clarke, & Terry, 2014). Through the emerged patterns of interrelated codes, basic themes and organising themes, the researchers supported the thematic analysis with network analysis which eventually helped in arriving at a global theme.

The researchers used inductive theme embedded in thematic analysis of the constructivism tradition by using the "exact" words used by participants on data gathered from the field. Again, the researchers employed manifest coding in the transcription of field data. This technique emphasises the organisation and rich description of the dataset, since in qualitative inquiry quotations speak for themselves; which aims to identify themes, stay flexible and stay open-minded, (Davies, 2007). Hence, thematic analysis is a way of getting closer to one's datasets and developing some deeper appreciation of the contents through "thick description" (ibid).

Datasets from the interview guide were independently transcribed to determine the associated factors of mother tongue which either facilitated or hindered students' performance on English language. After transcription was done independently, the researchers further checked on the consistency and interpretation of datasets. Hence, transcripts on the interview guide were carefully examined for review and comparison. Finally, codes and analysis of transcripts were serialised to ensure consistency (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After all focus groups transcripts had been coded, meaningful codes that emerged from the codes were however grouped into basic themes. Basic themes were also discussed and organised into organising themes. However, overarching themes were discussed and unanimously agreed upon into a global theme by the researchers.

The whole analytical processes were in four (4) phases. Firstly, there were 26 codes that emerged from the transcribed data after a series of engrossment upon familiarisation with them. Hence, these codes all came from the raw data received from the respondents. These codes were further grouped into smaller units in order to answer the research questions to get the basic themes. Thus, 11 basic themes became known which also helped the researchers arrive at the organising themes for the study. The third phase of the analysis was obtaining the organising themes and after grouping the organising themes, four (4) organising themes became evident. Finally, the four organising themes were objectively and critically scrutinised independently to arrive at one (1) global theme. Thematic analysis from the interview set followed similar steps outlined above and were all put together which are outlined following the principles of Minichiello, Aroni, and Hays (2008).

### 3. Findings

The table below outlines the details of the study findings.

#### Global Theme: Pathways to Evidence-Based English Language Learning

Codes	Basic themes	Organising themes
School always uses English	Improved acquisition skills	English is medium of instruction
Students are checked on English use	English is taught every day	
Friendship is built on English		
English is not used in the house	Always learning English	
English is used in social media		
English is all over		
English speaking is special	English rules are complex	English is always dynamic
English writing is standardised		
English grammar is difficult	English is international	
Pressure in using English		
Confidence and trust		
Relief when used well		
Easy expressions in mother tongue	Mother tongue is well expressed	Difficulty in English with mother tongue
Mother tongue is simple		
Mother tongue is always used home		
Parents are illiterate	English is very high	
More rules in English		
English is special	English pronunciation is difficult	
Few reading books	Better teaching methodologies	Evidence is crucial
Available books are always locked		
Evidence-based planning	Evidence is integrated	
Teaching aids should be used		
Teachers should be motivated	Better conditions of service	
Routine monitoring		
Boredom in class		
Check teachers' performance		

Source: Authors' construct (2017)

### 4. Discussion

This study sought to explore the factors that influence the impact of Mother tongue on Students' performance in English language and its related subjects in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in the Sekyere South District of Ghana. The discussion, therefore, involved fifteen (15) past students of Adu Gyamfi Senior High School who were used as study participants. The names of these participants were purposively obtained from the database of the school and used for the study. For fluidity of analysis and discussion based on intended objectives, the researchers drew themes on three pathways. These pathways were influences of mother tongue on students' performance, socio-cultural determinants with English dynamism and modes of improving English language use. These themes were further integrated with the objectives of the study to ensure fluidity in analysis.

#### **4.1. The influence of mother tongue on students' performance in English language**

From the analysis of the study, seven (7) out of ten (10) respondents interviewed and the four (4) participants of the focus groups, confirmed that most of their experiences and way of life were shaped by the mother tongue which has had negative impacts on their English language use. Thus, the level of infiltration of mother tongue into the respondents' English is very high. Attention of the researcher was drawn to a student who was trying to construct a sentence such as *"since childhood in my village, we do everything in the mother tongue at home but my teachers don't explain things to me in the local language which I find it difficult to and my father and to don't go to school"* which revealed in the analysis above in table. Hence, all these semantic mistakes were owing to mother tongue interference.

Another respondent revealed his incompetence level through his own utterances during interview *"me anytime I speak English wrong, people laugh me so I don't want to speak it koraa, else they will get me so I don't get friends in school but I can understand the English when I watch film and TV"*. This situation confirms the study of Iroegbu (2006) and Liman et al., (2017) on effects of Modelling and Picture-based instructional strategies that the mother tongue therefore, is a part of the Ghanaian culture and that of Africa as a whole; it conveys and transmits culture and it is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs. In their study on the influence of mother tongue on communication skills of media practitioners in Kano State, Nigeria, Liman et al., (2017) confirm that the mother tongue has a much stronger influence of the L2 of the child in learning such languages.

Again, it was observed that English is used as the medium of instruction at all stages of education in Ghana but the efforts of most respondents at school is not strengthened upon by parents at home. This makes most students lag behind in their English language use. This finding is, however, in support of the study of Oluwole (2008) that the mother tongue has a great influence in the learning of second language by children (Collier, 1995; Cummins (2001)).

#### **4.2. Socio-economic factors that affect students' poor performance in English language**

It was the objective of the study to explore if there are other complementary reasons for the poor performance of students in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School in English language, being an examinable subject. The field data and analysis of the study reveal that socio-economic factors greatly contribute to the academic performance of students. Out of fifteen (15) respondents sampled for the study, it was revealed that four (4) of them came from average socio-economic background where modern facilities like computers, home-made library, smart phones are easily available. Hence, those four (4) could make better expressions than their counterparts from poor socio-economic background since English language is used as the medium of communication both in the house and in school. Therefore, the study was in agreement with the findings of Bandura and Walters (1963) and Block (2016) that children with higher social status are pronounced to perform better in their learning stages as such children are able to develop fast and better speech organs compared to their counterparts with poor socio-economic background.

#### **4.3. Pathways to better English language performance**

The third objective of the study was to explore the means of strengthening English language performance in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School. Hence, respondents were asked to list the ways they think their English language level could be improved to broaden their English proficiency. Gathered data from the field indicated that all ten respondents needed improvement in their English language use. One respondent retorted *"yes, yes eehhh...always we don't understand some of the things they teach us. Ehh...so if they can bring in physical things to demonstrate to us, we can sometimes understand our teachers"*. Here, the researchers' attentions were drawn to the fact that the respondents had problem on the unavailability of teaching aids of which he answered in the affirmative.

Again, majority of respondents believe that most educative programmes like schools' debate, current affairs, nutrition reports, health talk and soap operas are broadcast in English language, and these will widen their horizon. Hence, they are relieved of boredom and much confidence is built in them when teaching aids are used. The table on the results above buttresses the facts stated by respondents. Hence, this research is in consistent with the work of Soni and Nasir (2016), Sulaiman et al. (2017) and Temple et al. (2018) that the use of audio-visual aids in teaching helps to ensure relational leaning where students are motivated to recall facts learnt.

## 5. Conclusion

The results reveal that mother tongue highly influences students' abysmal performance in English language in the West Africa Senior High School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and that are other complementary factors contributing to students' poor performance in English language. These other factors are poor method of teaching, insufficient textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers. Overall, the performance of students in English language is poor and if the discovered factors are not tackled on time, it will continue to cause a drastic decline in standard of education in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School and Ghana as a whole.

To improve and strengthen English language learning among students in the West Africa Senior High School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) in Ghana and Adu Gyamfi Senior High School to be precise, it is suggested the above recommendations be taken and scaled up. Discovering that the use of mother tongue in school contributes or influence students' performance in English, English language should be used as a medium of communication within and outside the classroom.

To improve students' learning of English language, Teachers need to do more than teaching theories in class by adopting relational learning strategies and other student-centred approaches that ensure effective learning. School authorities should also organise routine seminars, workshops and in-service trainings for teachers to broaden the horizon of Teachers. This goes a long way in influencing teaching and learning process of English language.

Provision of well-equipped library should be made in the school and community. Textbooks that are useful in English language should be of great amount in the library to supplement students' efforts. Majority of the students used in the study lack relevant textbook because of their poor socio-economic background. It is recommended that Teachers must continually update their knowledge within their discipline. They must keep information about new methods and materials that will make their teaching more effective.

In the nutshell, if all these recommendations are strictly adhered to, there will be great improvement on students' performance in English language in Adu Gyamfi Senior High School as far as the West Africa Senior High School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is concerned.

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### Correction

This article was originally published with error. This version has been corrected/amended as follows: The email address of S Patnaik has been changed to [suchitra@efluniversity.ac.in](mailto:suchitra@efluniversity.ac.in)

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