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Mother Tongue Interference and Its Effect on English Writing Skills in Nigerian Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

English is the official medium of instruction and the language of external examinations in Nigeria, Yet, Nigerian secondary school students' writing continues to fall short of the system's declared standards. This conceptual and critically-oriented paper considers first mother-tongue interference as one of the main causes of that deficit. The paper applies Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage theory paradigms, and contextualises these with known Nigerian classroom evidence, examination outcomes and language policy to map the first language features - phonological, morphosyntactic, lexical and discourse - that consistently transfer to English writing, resulting in error patterns that cut across cohorts of learners, schools and geo-political zones. Data were sourced from West African Examination Council (WAEC) examination reports, Nigerian classroom error-analysis studies (2019-2024) and the features of the three major Nigerian first languages. The paper contends that the current institutional response, generic corrective feedback, focuses on surface form and not structure, and that contrastive awareness pedagogy and error-informed instruction, in conjunction with specific information about learners' first languages, is preferred. Actionable recommendations are offered for curriculum reform, teacher training, diagnostic error markers and examination reform.

Keywords: mother tongue interference, language transfer, English writing skills, Nigerian classrooms, contrastive analysis, interlanguage, error analysis, WAEC

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2022, the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) pass rate across five subjects including English Language and Mathematics was 76.36 per cent, down from over five percentage points on 81.7 per cent in 2021 (West African Examinations Council, 2022). By 2024, that figure had dropped further to 72.12 per cent (WAEC, 2024). Each Chief Examiners' Report shows a consistent pattern in error analysis of English Language compositions: sentences are not arranged structurally or logically, tenses are left unresolved, vocabulary is inappropriate, and the text reads like it has been translated from a non-English first language, without modifying for English grammar conventions. Filade et al. (2019), in a study of senior secondary school students in Ogun State where Yoruba is the first language, observed similar results: students in both public and private schools showed

a degree of mother tongue interference in their English language compositions (the latter with a greater incidence). This is not isolated, individual blemishes. They display a distinctive and robust pattern.

The problem in explaining such a profile with conventional theories is that these learners are not non-English speakers. It saturates the mass media, the church, advertising and urban interactions. It is not a matter of exposure. What the learner encounters, without recognition or support in the pedagogy, is the cognitive tax of composing written English whose grammatical, morphological, and discourse structures differ, sometimes critically, from the first language. When these first language structures intrude on English prose, they are what applied linguists term negative language transfer and what are counted as errors by the WAEC examiners.

Our analysis of this phenomenon builds on a long tradition of applied linguistics research. Weinreich (1953) characterised the structural source of interference in bilingual contact; Lado (1957) explored its classroom consequences; Corder (1967) re-conceived the learner's error as a sign of developing competence; and Selinker (1972) theorised the learner's system as an interlanguage with its own rule structure. Odlin (1989) applied the concept of transfer to all levels of structure, including discourse. What Nigerian researchers have started to document in classroom-specific terms, via error-analysis studies in Ogun, Niger, Enugu and other states, is the particular manifestation of these quite general mechanisms in the contact between Nigerian mother-tongues and English writing.

The present paper builds on that documentation. It argues that mother tongue interference in Nigerian classrooms is structural rather than individual, systematic rather than random and grounded in specific differences between first language grammars and the requirements of written English; that current practices of corrective feedback address symptoms, but not the causes of mother-tongue interference; that contrastive awareness instruction and error-informed curriculum design, based on knowledge of the particular first languages spoken in the English classroom environment, are more effective.

Methodological Note

This is a theoretical and critical review article based on applied linguistics theory and research on Nigerian classrooms. Sources were chosen on three grounds: theoretical applicability to the process of language transfer and second-language writing acquisition; empirical evidence from, and in, Nigerian classrooms, including error-analysis studies, policy documents and WAEC performance data; and currency, with preference given to studies published between 2019 and 2024, while retaining foundational theoretical works that cannot be replaced. The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014), the Senior Secondary School Curriculum for English Language (Federal Ministry of Education, 2012) and WAEC performance data from publicly available sources are among the policy documents and data reported. The paper progresses from theory to language to empirical error patterns to educational and institutional implications.

Theoretical Review

Contrastive Analysis and Its Limits

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) championed by Lado (1957) on the basis of Weinreich's (1953) work on linguistic interference states that the greater the structural differences between the learner's first language and the target language, the greater the likelihood of negative transfers. Similar features aid learning; distinct features are trouble spots. Its strong form, which claimed to predict all the errors a learner might make, was discredited. Dulay and Burt (1974) demonstrated that many second-language acquisition errors were development and not first-language dependent. A weaker form of the CAH, which considered structural contrast as one of a number of factors in addition to development and teaching, has some analytical currency, especially in a situation like Nigeria's, where the structural differences between major first languages and English are, in some ways, not insignificant.

Error Analysis

Corder's (1967) view of learner error as an indicator of language-acquiring competence redirected attention from error prediction to error analysis. The errors reflect the structure of the learner's interlanguage. Error Analysis sorts errors based on their likely origin (such as interlingual transfer, intralingual overgeneralisation, or instructionally induced), which diagnostic data are unavailable from

corrective feedback. James (1998) built on this approach to distinguish lapses (performance errors on the part of competent speakers), errors (systematic competence gaps), and mistakes (isolated slips the learner can self-correct). This distinction has pedagogical implications: errors resulting from interference are different from developmental overgeneralisations. Classroom-based studies using Error Analysis in Nigeria have consistently found that most morphosyntactic and lexical errors in student writing are due to interlingual interference, a finding echoed by recent studies in Enugu (Onwumere, 2022), Ogun State (Filade et al., 2019) and Niger State (Filade et al., 2020).

Interlanguage Theory

Selinker's (1972) interlanguage theory portrays the system of the second-language learner as structured and rule-governed, and shaped by simultaneous processes of first-language transfer, second-language development common to learners in general and second-language instruction. The concept of fossilisation, also proposed by Selinker, is pertinent to the Nigerian situation: some non-target features are fixed in the learner's system and are not affected by further instruction. Fossilisation is not marginal. It is evidenced in adult Nigerian professionals who have studied in English medium for ten to 15 years. Bello (2023) suggested that fossilisation in the English of Nigerian learners is related to first-language (L1) dominance and that any curriculum change which does not attend to this source leaves fossilised patterns in place. Tense errors, article omissions, and some of the first-language transfer effects in syntax are observable in compositions written by secondary school students and by university-educated professionals, where they go uncorrected by the teacher.

Language Transfer: Scope and Direction

Odlin's (1989) account demonstrated that transfer effects affect phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic levels of language, and also discourse structure and rhetorical structures of extended discourse. The scope of transfer means that assessment tools which emphasise primarily the sentence-level grammar, as the WAEC composition rubrics do, will fail to capture much of the interference at the discourse level. Ellis (1994, 2008) set transfer within a model of second-language acquisition, pointing out that transfer is most likely and most resistant when the first-language element in question has no equivalent in the target language and where instruction has not explicitly taught and practised the target feature. Both of these are the case for using articles and marking tense-aspect distinctions among the major first-language groups in Nigeria, which is why these remain so hardy in the face of correction-only instruction.

The Nigerian Linguistic Ecology

Over five hundred languages (Ethnologue, 2023) are spoken in the country, across an area of about 923,000 square kilometres and a population of almost 220 million. Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo enjoy demographic and political prominence in the north, south-west and south-east of the country, while other languages such as Fulfulde, Kanuri, Efik, Tiv, Ibibio, Nupe and the hundreds of other languages serve millions of speakers. Nigerian Pidgin English is a lingua franca that spans ethnic divides and geographical regions and it exerts its own influence on learners' written English, especially in cities.

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014) advocates a tri-lingual approach in which the mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction from Primary One to Three, then a switch to English in Primary Four. This shift is poorly planned and executed in practice. Adepoju (2022) observed that many primary schools (especially the urban private sector) in Nigeria transition to English-only instruction far sooner than the policy timetable, while some continue to use first language (or Pidgin-dominant) methods beyond Primary Three. This means a cohort of secondary school students with differing English dexterity levels, and first language interference patterns that have had differing time to crystallise into the learners' interlanguage systems.

Onah and Marcellus (2023) highlighted the quality assurance problem in Nigerian language-in-education as schools recognise the medium of instruction as English, without the opportunities for the scaffolds needed for a smooth transition to the new language. The first language, rather than being leveraged in a controlled way for contrastive learning, is simply ignored in formal teaching, while influencing the structure of the learner's English. Bamgbose (1976) noted the clash between the policy ideal of English-medium instruction and the linguistic diversity in West African school classrooms as a major challenge to

language-in-education policy in the region. Adegbija (1994) noted that the preference for English-medium instruction by parents and learners, motivated by a symbolic connection between English and social advancement, adds to the dilemma: schools experience a social imperative to use the first language sparingly, even when it would be more effective to do otherwise. The mix of policy discontinuity, parental demand and teacher mis-preparedness is a recipe for interference patterns.

Forms of Mother Tongue Interference in Nigerian Learners' Writing

Phonological Transfer

Phonological interference is most obviously observed in spelling, but it has repercussions for the prosodic features that influence learners' interpretations of speech when transcribing it. Adepoju (2022) detailed the grapheme-phoneme correspondence difficulties of Yoruba speakers of English, and showed that phonological difference between Yoruba and English manifests in regular substitution patterns in speech and writing. Yoruba phonology does not match the phonology of British English, which has a 12- or more-vowel system, and learners whose phonological mapping has been tuned by Yoruba phonology consistently merge vowel distinctions critical to English orthography. Words like "live" and "leave" are homophonised and the homophony extends to orthographic inconsistency that practice drilling cannot address, since the problem is perceptual.

Different pressures are introduced by Hausa phonology. It has a phonemic contrast between short and long consonants that is not found in English, and no dental fricatives, which are notated as /t/ and /d/ or /s/ and /z/. Hausa secondary school compositions regularly present "dey" for "they," "tink" for "think" and "tree" for "three". Opara (2019) examined departures in Nigerian English syntax, and found phonological interference a particularly prominent variable among the most consistent predictors of non-standard written forms among learners from different first language backgrounds, not just in individual phoneme substitutions, but also in the structure and patterning of consonant clusters and vowel sequences.

Morphosyntactic Transfer

Morphosyntactic interference is the most significant for large scale writing coherence. English tense-aspect morphology marks simple past, present perfect, past perfect and progressive tenses which track both temporal location and aspect; most Nigerian first languages do not mark all of these distinctions in the verb morphology. Igbo has aspectual distinctions in verbal tone and the use of auxiliaries, which distinguish completed and progressive actions, as in English, but lack the temporal freezing of tense. Yoruba makes use of preverbal auxiliaries and verbal tone marking, but verb inflection for person, number, and tense is absent. Hausa has a sophisticated aspect-focus system which is spread across the subject agreement prefixes and has no direct English equivalent.

In a recent study of Igbo learners of English in Nigerian secondary schools, Anene (2021) found that tense and aspect errors were the most common type of morphosyntactic error in students' writing (38 per cent of all errors in the corpus). The diagnostic forms were those predicted by interlanguage theory: uninflected simple pasts ("yesterday he come"), progressive aspect for habitual states ("she is always coming late") and simple past for present perfect ("I have seen him yesterday"). These are the forms we expect from students transferring their aspectual first language to a tense-marking language. These are marked as errors without explanation of the structural logic that produced them.

Article use is another issue. The English articles mark definiteness, specificity, and referentiality in ways not found in the articleless languages Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa. Article omission and misuse is the second-most common error type Filade et al. (2019) reported in their Ogun State study, found in most compositions. Failure to use any article ("he went to market"), use of definite articles with generic nouns ("the water is essential for life"), and confusion of definite and indefinite articles are all recurrent errors in student writing at levels that cannot be reduced by teaching English article rules because the problem is the rule is encoding an aspect of English grammar not marked in the first language.

Inflection of subject-verb agreement in third-person singular present tense, morphologically marked in English with the inflection -s, but not in Nigerian first languages, is similarly consistent. Onwumere (2022) analysed the written English of Igbo-English bilinguals in the city of Enugu, and found errors in subject-verb agreement to be the third-most-frequent error type, even in the writing of university

graduates. In the cognitive processing demands of longer writing, where the writer's attention is on the content rather than the form, this inflection is the first to be omitted.

Lexical Transfer

Lexical transfer takes several levels to which we need to draw attention, as they call for different teaching strategies. The most conspicuous is direct lexical interference, with items from Nigerian Pidgin English or from the first language intruding on what is supposed to be standard written English. Compositions produced by secondary school students in Lagos and Port Harcourt schools consistently include "chop" for "eat", the copula "na" for "is" or "it is" and "born" for "give birth to". These are not lexical errors. They are the effects of production slip where lexical search yields the more accessible Pidgin or first-language form.

Semantic transfer is a more persistent form. English words are used in a way that is parallel to the semantics of its first-language counterpart. Igbo writers commonly use "reach" where "arrive" is required ("when I reached the school, the teacher had gone"), extending the semantic coverage of the Igbo equivalent onto the English verb. Yoruba writers use "collect" instead of "receive" or "take", transferring the broader range of the Yoruba verb "gba". Onah and Marcellus (2023) pointed out that this type of semantic interference is one of the most difficult interference issues to resolve with traditional vocabulary teaching, as the learner already knows the English word; the mistake is in the meaning they assign to it.

The third, most unique form is literal idiom transfer, in which idiomatic meanings are transferred directly from the first language into English. This results in grammatically incorrect but semantically opaque expressions such as "his head is correct" (he is sensible, from Yoruba "ori re pe") or "he has swallowed his pride into his stomach" (a literal rendering of an Igbo idiom for feeling extremely humiliated), or "I am not hearing you" used not to mean the listener cannot perceive sound but to express that they are refusing to listen or comply (from a Nigerian Pidgin idiom). These examples can be found in secondary school essays from every part of Nigeria and are not signs of deficient English but of the transfer of rhetorical conventions of the first language into a medium that fails to recognise them.

A fourth form is overuse of the progressive aspect, which Igbo writers in particular use at much higher rates than native English speakers. Igbo aspect-marking is more insistent on ongoingness than is English's, so writers produce "I am going to church every Sunday" to express a habitual action, "she is always cooking in the evenings" for a stative-habitual statement, or progressive tense forms in formal declarative sentences that English would require the simple present tense. Filade et al. (2020) in a study of students in Niger State observed this progressive overuse across groups of learners with various first-language backgrounds, noting it was most prominent among those with self-reported high first-language dominance.

Pragmatic and Discourse Transfer

Discourse interference is least commonly targeted in the Nigerian classroom. While Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric hypothesis, that discourse in written order is culturally and linguistically specific, has been modified by later studies, the original observation, that how paragraphs are organised, how arguments are developed, and how cohesive linking is achieved, are not universal, has been supported in various settings. At secondary level, Nigerian learner writing exhibits recurrence of discourse characteristics not expected in argumentatively organised academic English examination writing. When writing extended prose, writers tend to accumulate and restate claims with variation, often repeating the same point across several paragraphs with change of wording, and juxtaposing ideas through coordination ("and", "but", "so") rather than subordination and embedding. This is a pattern of composition that mirrors conventions of oral narrative from several Nigerian cultures in which development of a central theme is important. In examination essays, this technique reads as non-development.

Use of cohesive devices in Nigerian students' writing is inconsistent. There are instances of pronoun use without referents; conjunctions that signal additive not contrastive or causal connectivity between clauses; there is under-use of lexical substitution as a cohesive strategy compared to repetition. Onah and Marcellus (2023) observed these discourse-related phenomena in secondary school composition writing from south-eastern Nigeria, and proposed that the inconsistent use of cohesive devices is symptomatic of

imperfect mapping of discourse management strategies used in the students' mother tongues onto English discourse conventions, rather than a lack of familiarity with them.

Effects on English Writing Performance

The effects of interference at these four levels are remarkably consistent in West African Examination Council (WAEC) Chief Examiners' Reports. In the 2022 report, the five-percentage-point drop in overall pass rates was blamed in part on persistent errors in English Language composition, with usage of tense, subject-verb agreement, improper vocabulary and incoherent organisation of the essay identified as areas of difficulty (WAEC, 2022). These are, remarkably, the same types of errors found to be associated with transfer from first-language structures in classroom error corpora in Nigeria.

At the sentence level, Anene's (2021) study of Igbo learners found that tense and aspect errors constituted roughly 38 per cent of the total number of morphosyntactic errors, with a significant number of errors in article use and subject-verb agreement. Onwumere (2022) found the same in Enugu where the most frequent error categories in the written English produced by bilinguals were subject-verb agreement, omission of articles, and overuse of progressive aspect. The Ogun State study by Filade et al. (2019) revealed that public school students, who professed more first-language use at home, have higher interference than private school students, a result that accords with the interlanguage hypothesis that the more dominant the first language is in everyday life, the greater the interference in the second language.

The evidence is not as precise when it comes to discourse interference in Nigerian classroom studies, but is apparent in WAEC examiner reports. Writing that exhibits good sentence-level grammatical competence, but not cumulative development of argument or sustained cohesive links, scores less highly in organisation and expression. This means that teaching that focuses solely on interference errors at the sentence level does not address much of the problem with writing performance. A learner who removes article omissions but still organises sentences according to the rhetorical patterns of her first language has dealt with one source of interference, not both.

Pedagogical Implications

The Limits of Generic Error Correction

Corrective feedback as currently practised in Nigeria's secondary schools marks the error, but not the reason. This is critical in the case of interference errors. An -s inflection on a third-person singular verb marks the learner's form as a mistake but not as reflecting the different grammatical structure of her first language. The learner fixes the marked instance and makes the error in the next extended writing task because the rule she has for the grammatical mapping remains unchanged. James (1998) noted that corrective feedback is most effective when it is explicit, targeted and tied to the learner's knowledge of the rule. The rule needed to resolve interference-induced errors is not just the English rule but the difference between the English rule and the first-language rule.

Contrastive Awareness Pedagogy

Contrastive awareness pedagogy is classroom teaching of structural differences between the learner's first language and English. For the Yoruba users, this might involve direct comparison of English encoding of definiteness via articles to Yoruba encoding via demonstratives and context, using learners' own writing as a baseline. For Igbo-speaking learners, a contrastive account of the English tense-aspect system against Igbo aspect-marking, using examples from learners' compositions, highlight the differences that generate tense errors. Anene (2021) suggested that Igbo learner English tense errors are not easily remedied by marking; they need explicit metalinguistic explanation of why English encodes time differently from Igbo, not just of why Igbo learners' encoding is incorrect.

This teaching requires teachers who know the English structures they teach and the first language structures learners bring to English. Lightbown and Spada (2013) in their review of experimental research on form-focused instruction, found that explicit instruction, especially for features of language that are not prominent in meaning-focused input, results in greater learning gains than mere exposure. English articles and tense-aspect are such features. Filade et al. (2020) suggested that English Language teachers in multilingual secondary school classrooms should be given an overview of the dominant first-language

grammars in their school, as a means of anticipating the negative interference patterns likely to be produced by their students.

Error-Informed Instruction

Error-informed instruction bases pedagogic design on learner writing data. In the case of Nigeria, this would involve collecting and classifying student writing errors at the classroom, school or regional level, using these data to target the most frequent and most impactful interference patterns in a learner population, and designing instruction sequences to address these patterns. It's not a resource-intensive approach. It merely requires an error classification rubric that works in the Nigerian linguistic context, to identify interference-induced errors as opposed to developmental and instruction-induced errors, and teachers who understand the linguistics of the situation.

As part of a quality assurance scheme for language communication in Nigerian schools, Onah and Marcellus (2023) suggested school-level diagnostic error mapping. They distinguish three types of errors needing different instructional treatments: transfer errors, developmental errors, and fossilised errors. Transfer errors must be addressed by contrastive teaching; developmental errors must be addressed by practice with feedback; fossilised errors must be addressed by intensive metalinguistic teaching that makes the structural source of the pattern explicit. Otherwise, instructional time is allocated equally across all error types - that is, haphazardly.

Curriculum, Assessment, and Teacher Preparation

The Senior Secondary School Curriculum for English Language (Federal Ministry of Education, 2012) has an organisation by writing genre for English writing and a grammar sequence which is more reflective of British secondary grammar syllabuses than of the difficulties faced by Nigerian multilingual students. There is no systematic contrastive linguistic component, no provision for error analysis as an instructional approach, and no variation in teaching emphasis that correlates to first languages. This curriculum fails to recognise that a Yoruba student in Ibadan and a Hausa student in Kano, learning under the same curriculum, have structurally different difficulties in learning to write English.

The WAEC English Language composition marking rubric has four criteria: content, organisation, expression and mechanical accuracy. Expression and mechanical accuracy account for vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation and together count for a considerable number of marks. The rubric tells examiners to mark down for persistent errors of grammar, but makes no distinctions between types of errors or structural causes. Candidates with many article omissions due to transfer from first language to second are judged in exactly the same way as candidates who make errors due to guessing strategies, even though the pedagogical implications are different. This blanket treatment of error in the assessment instrument feeds into the blanket treatment in the classroom.

The National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014) sets in place the three-language formula, which promises a phased shift from mother-tongue to English medium instruction. This shift between Primary Three and Primary Four is a critical pedagogic moment in the Nigerian learner's education, and is not supported by an appropriate curriculum. The National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), which regulates the Nigeria Certificate in Education (NCE) programme, does not mandate that applied linguistics, contrastive linguistics and error analysis be taught in the English Language Education curriculum. The Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) programmes in Nigerian universities also generally fail to cover these topics. Teachers enter the classroom with a lack of linguistic knowledge necessary to identify and correct the interference patterns they see daily. Filade et al. (2020) found in Niger State teachers did not recognise mother tongue interference as structural, and most attributed their students' writing errors to laziness or lack of proper revision.

CONCLUSION

The challenges of secondary school writing in Nigeria are not inexplicable or stopgaps. They follow the structural pattern of first-language transfer and have been documented consistently in Ogun State (Filade et al., 2019), Niger State (Filade et al., 2020), in Enugu (Onwumere, 2022) and in south-eastern Nigeria (Onah & Marcellus, 2023) to represent a pattern with structural causes. The system's reaction, to identify

and mark errors and return scripts, treats the symptom. They recur for cohorts of learners and for cohorts of schools because the mechanism that produced them remains in place.

The following would address this evidence. First, the Senior Secondary School English Language Curriculum should have a component of contrastive awareness, sequenced by the dominant first-language groups of learners in the geo-political zone, informing them (teachers and students) about the structural differences that are most relevant for English writing. Second, applied linguistics, error analysis and contrastive pedagogy should be mandatory components of the NCE and PGDE English Language curricula. Third, diagnostic error-analysis rubrics, designed for the Nigerian linguistic environment to differentiate between transfer, developmental and fossilised errors, should be developed and used as professional resources. Fourth, the WAEC English Language composition marking rubric should be updated to include a criterion that explicitly considers the sources of composition errors, so that error is not assessed across the board, but different types of error are graded differently. Finally, the Primary Four shift from mother-tongue to English medium learning should be facilitated by bridging resources that explicitly attend to the transfer patterns likely to occur from each major language grouping.

None of this will call for resources or policy frameworks that Nigeria lacks. Rather it needs a recognition that the linguistic realities of the Nigerian school system, the first languages, the structural distances between the first languages and English, and the pedagogical implications of those distances, should be the first consideration in designing a curriculum rather than something to be circumvented. The evidence for this approach is there. The evidence of its classroom need is building. The institutional response remains inadequate.

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