

## Dialectal Variation as a Factor Affecting Spoken English Proficiency Among Secondary School Students in Kwara State, Nigeria

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### Abstract

Nigeria's multilingual environment significantly shapes the acquisition of spoken English proficiency. This study examined dialectal variation as a factor affecting spoken English proficiency among secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey design was employed, with 100 respondents, teachers and students native to Kwara who had completed primary education locally, selected through snowball sampling. Data were gathered via structured questionnaires, classroom observations, and recordings of students' spoken English, and analysed using descriptive statistics, frequency counts, and percentages. Results indicated that, phonological features of indigenous dialects interfere with students' spoken English, constraining communicative competence and academic achievement. The study further identified teaching and learning strategies currently employed to mitigate dialectal interference. It concludes that, dialectal variation poses a significant barrier to spoken English proficiency and recommends that, education stakeholders prioritise the deployment of qualified English language specialists across Nigerian secondary schools to strengthen communicative competence and improve academic outcomes.

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## **Background to the Study**

The acquisition of spoken English proficiency in Nigeria is deeply influenced by the multilingual nature of the society, where indigenous languages coexist with English as the official language of education and governance. In Kwara State, secondary school students often experience phonological interference from their mother tongues, which manifests in deviations from Standard British English. These deviations include substitution of sounds, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters, all of which compromise clarity and intelligibility in communication. Scholars such as Akande (2024) have observed that such interference is not accidental but systematic, reflecting the phonological structures of local dialects that are transferred into English usage. This situation underscores the importance of examining dialectal variation as a factor affecting spoken English proficiency in schools.

Dialectal variation plays a dual role in language learning. On one hand, it serves as a marker of cultural identity, allowing speakers to retain features of their indigenous languages in English communication. On the other hand, it creates barriers to achieving proficiency in English, particularly in formal educational contexts where mastery of standard pronunciation is expected. In Kwara State, the Yoruba accent of English illustrates how indigenous sound systems shape pronunciation patterns, often leading to non-standard realisations of English phonemes. Recent comparative studies of Nigerian English varieties highlight the persistence of dialectal features across contexts, reinforcing the argument that dialectal variation functions both as a sociolinguistic resource and as a constraint in the acquisition of spoken English (Diriyai & Gladday, 2023). Spoken English proficiency is indispensable for academic success and social mobility in Nigeria. As the language of instruction and evaluation, English proficiency determines students' ability to participate meaningfully in classroom discourse and to succeed in examinations. However, dialectal interference often undermines these expectations, reducing intelligibility and limiting communicative competence. Attitudinal studies reveal that while Nigerians recognise the prestige of Standard British and American English, solidarity and identity are frequently expressed through Nigerian English varieties, complicating the pursuit of uniform spoken proficiency (Olatoye, 2023). This tension between global linguistic norms and local identity highlights the urgency of addressing phonological interference in educational contexts.

Secondary school education provides the institutional framework within which these challenges are most pronounced. At this stage, learners are expected to consolidate linguistic skills that will prepare them for higher education and professional life. Yet, persistent dialectal influence suggests systemic shortcomings in English language teaching. Teacher-centered methods, inadequate instructional materials and limited exposure to standard pronunciation exacerbate the problem, leaving students ill-equipped to overcome phonological interference. By situating the research within secondary schools in Kwara State, the study underscores the need for pedagogical reforms that integrate phonological instruction, innovative teaching approaches and consistent exposure to Standard English models. Linguistic interference, particularly at the phonological level, ties together the study's focus on dialectal variation and

spoken English proficiency. When features of a first language intrude upon the acquisition of a second language, non-standard usage inevitably emerges. In Kwara State, interference is most evident in pronunciation, where indigenous sound systems shape English phonology. This phenomenon underscores the complexity of language learning in multilingual contexts, where students must negotiate between local dialects and global linguistic expectations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The teaching and learning of English in Nigeria, particularly in Kwara State, is persistently challenged by dialectal variation. Secondary school students frequently transfer phonological features from their indigenous dialects into English, resulting in deviations from Standard British English. These deviations, such as substitution of sounds, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters, undermine clarity and intelligibility in spoken communication. Since English functions as the language of instruction and evaluation across all levels of education in Nigeria, such interference poses a serious barrier to students' academic achievement and communicative competence. The problem is further compounded by systemic shortcomings in pedagogy, including teacher-centered instructional methods, inadequate phonological training and limited exposure to standard pronunciation models. Consequently, learners struggle to attain the level of spoken English proficiency required for effective classroom participation, examination success and broader social mobility.

Despite the growing body of research on Nigerian English, two critical gaps remain. First, most existing studies have examined Nigerian English phonology broadly, often focusing on Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba influences at the national level, with limited attention to the specific phonological interference patterns among secondary school students in Kwara State. Hence a localised perspective is essential, as dialectal features vary significantly across regions and communities. While previous scholarship has documented the existence of phonological deviations, few studies have systematically investigated their direct impact on spoken English proficiency in educational contexts, particularly in relation to students' academic performance and communicative competence. This study therefore seeks to investigate dialectal variation as a factor affecting spoken English proficiency among secondary school students in Kwara State, while also proposing pedagogical strategies to mitigate its impact, aiming to fill these gaps by providing a focused analysis of how Kwara State dialects influence students' spoken English and by linking these phonological deviations to measurable outcomes in proficiency.

### **Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study aims to examine the dialectal variation as a factor affecting spoken English proficiency among secondary school students in Kwara State, Nigeria. In specific term, the study's objectives are to:

- a. Examine the specific phonological features of indigenous dialects that interfere with students' spoken English proficiency such as substitution, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters; and to analyse how

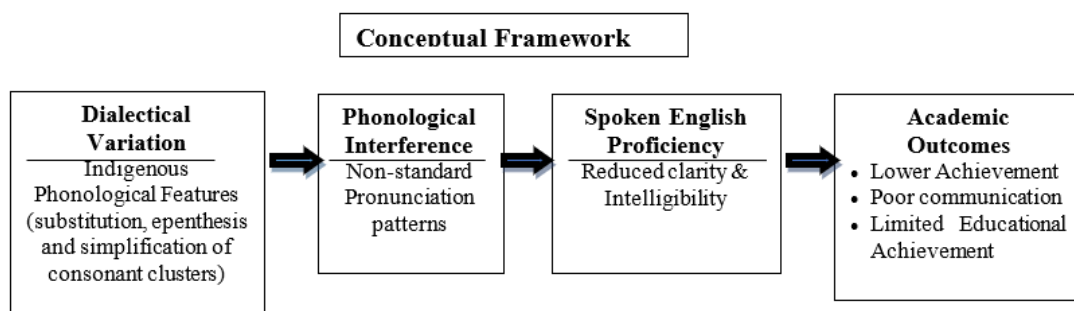
- these features deviate from Standard British English.
- Investigate the extent to which dialectal variation affects students' communicative competence and academic performance in secondary schools, thereby establishing a direct link between phonological interference and measurable educational outcomes.
  - Assess the effectiveness of current pedagogical practices in mitigating dialectal interference and to propose targeted strategies such as phonological instruction, teacher retraining and curriculum reform.
  - Find out teachers and students' attitude towards the course effect of teaching English language in secondary schools.
  - Examine the effect of regular refresher courses for teachers teaching English in secondary schools.

### Research Questions

The following research questions are raised to guide the study:

- What specific phonological features indigenous dialects such as substitution, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters interfere with secondary school students' spoken English proficiency, and how do these features deviate from Standard British English?
- To what extent does dialectal variation affect students' communicative competence and academic performance in secondary schools?
- How effective are current pedagogical practices in mitigating dialectal interference, and what targeted strategies such as phonological instruction, teacher retraining, and curriculum reform?
- Does attitude of teachers and students influence the course effect of teaching English language in secondary schools?
- What is the effect of regular refresher courses for teachers teaching English in secondary schools?

### Conceptual Framework



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Framework on Dialectal Variation

This schematic illustration in Figure 1 represents how dialectal variation influences phonological interference, which in turn affects spoken English proficiency and ultimately

impacts students' academic outcomes. It illustrates the logical flow of how dialectal variation influences indigenous phonological features such as substitution, epenthesis and simplification of consonant clusters. Phonological interference on the other hand has effect on transfer of mother tongue sound patterns into English, producing non-standard pronunciation. At the same time, spoken English proficiency influences the reduced clarity, accuracy and intelligibility in oral communication, while academic outcomes result in lower achievement, poor communicative competence and limited educational advancement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Concept of Teaching English Language in Nigeria**

Teaching English in Nigeria has been widely conceptualized as both a linguistic and socio-political necessity, given its role as the official language and the medium of instruction across all levels of education. English occupies an indispensable position within Nigeria's educational system, functioning not only as the language of classroom instruction but also as the primary medium through which evaluation and certification are conducted (Jowitt, 1991). This dual role underscores its centrality in shaping academic achievement, as proficiency in English directly determines students' ability to access curriculum content, demonstrate learning outcomes, and progress through the educational hierarchy. However, the multilingual nature of Nigeria complicates English acquisition, as indigenous languages exert strong influence on learners' spoken proficiency, often resulting in interference patterns that affect oral competence (Akande, 2024). While English is compulsory in schools, many students continue to struggle with pronunciation and fluency due to limited exposure to standard models and the dominance of mother tongue phonology. Proficiency in English therefore, directly impacts students' ability to succeed academically and socially, positioning it as a critical determinant of educational outcomes.

Recent scholarship has also emphasised systemic challenges that hinder effective English language teaching in Nigeria. Abubakar, Shehu, and Abdulmajid (2024) found that, early childhood exposure to English is crucial for building strong linguistic foundations, yet many learners enter secondary school with weak oral and phonological skills. In contrast, Aava et al. (2024) argued that curriculum implementation often neglects phonological competence, leaving students ill-prepared for higher education and professional communication. These findings align with earlier observations in Kwara State, where teacher-centered methods, inadequate instructional materials, and insufficient training exacerbate dialectal interference and limit students' communicative development. Taken together, the literature suggests that, teaching English in Nigeria must be reconceptualised beyond its traditional grammar- and writing-focused orientation. Effective pedagogy should integrate phonological training, innovative teaching strategies, and consistent exposure to standard pronunciation models. Moreover, systemic reforms in curriculum design, teacher education, and resource provision are necessary to address structural deficiencies that perpetuate poor oral competence.

### **Problems of Teaching English Language for Skill Acquisition**

Research has consistently highlighted persistent obstacles in teaching English in Nigerian secondary schools, including an inadequate supply of qualified teachers, poor supervision, and limited instructional resources. Njoku, Ereke, and Agwu (2025) observed that, phonological impediments are further compounded by structural deficiencies in teacher training, leaving many educators ill-equipped to address dialectal variation effectively in classroom contexts. These limitations contribute to a cycle in which teachers lack the necessary expertise to identify and correct interference patterns, thereby reinforcing students' reliance on mother tongue phonology. In Kwara State, this challenge is particularly evident, as students frequently exhibit features such as substitution, epenthesis, and simplification of consonant clusters, all of which compromise clarity and intelligibility in spoken English. Such deviations not only hinder the acquisition of communicative skills but also undermine students' confidence and participation in academic discourse. Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the problem of dialectal variation is not merely linguistic but also structural, requiring reforms in teacher preparation, resource allocation, and supervisory practices. Addressing these systemic gaps is therefore essential for fostering communicative competence and ensuring that students acquire the oral proficiency necessary for academic success and broader social integration.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasised the role of government and institutional support in addressing challenges posed by dialectal variation in spoken English proficiency. Oloko and Yusuff (2025) contended that, contrastive phonology should be systematically integrated into teacher education programs, thereby equipping instructors with the skills to anticipate and correct interference patterns among learners. This perspective underscores the importance of embedding linguistic awareness into professional training as a means of enhancing classroom effectiveness. Similarly, Ayodele and Ayodele (2024) highlighted the potential of technology to bridge resource gaps, particularly in under-resourced schools, but they also raised critical questions about whether digital tools alone can substitute for broader systemic reforms. Their work suggests that while technological innovations may provide immediate support, they cannot replace the need for structural interventions such as curriculum reform, policy alignment, and sustained investment in teacher development. These studies point to a dual requirement: pedagogical innovation at the classroom level and structural support at the institutional and governmental levels. In regions where, spoken proficiency is most affected by dialectal variation, this combined approach appears essential for fostering equitable learning environments, reducing linguistic stigmatisation and promoting long-term academic success.

### **Approaches in Teaching Spoken English in Secondary Schools**

Recent scholarship has renewed interest in the factors that shape effective spoken communication, both in first languages (Vilà & Castellà, 2014, 2015; Diop, 2016) and in second or foreign languages (Hughes, 2010; Goh & Burns, 2012; Quan, 2018; Iñesta & Iglesias, 2021), with growing recognition that traditional teacher-centered methods often fail to engage learners meaningfully. Innovative approaches such as the “life approach” emphasise

contextual learning by linking instruction to students' lived experiences (Ndarwa, 2007), thereby situating language acquisition within authentic social and cultural contexts that foster deeper comprehension and communicative competence. Nevertheless, teaching spoken language remains complex (Thornbury, 2012; García-Sampedro, 2019), as affective factors like motivation, confidence, and anxiety significantly influence learners' willingness to participate in oral tasks (Goh & Burns, 2012; García-Sampedro, 2020). Students who experience high levels of anxiety may avoid speaking opportunities, limiting exposure to corrective feedback and peer interaction, while motivated learners are more likely to engage actively, accelerating fluency development and enhancing adaptability across communicative situations. Collectively, these insights underscore the need for pedagogical models that balance structural accuracy with communicative adaptability, integrating contextual approaches with attention to affective dimensions to create environments that build linguistic competence and empower learners to use spoken language confidently in both academic and social domains.

Within first-language pedagogy, oral practices such as presentations, debates, and narrations have increasingly been incorporated into classroom instruction (Del Río & Gracia, 1996). Despite this progress, registers and styles of speaking remain underrepresented, as grammar and writing continue to dominate curricular priorities (Vilà & Castellà, 2014, 2015). This imbalance has prompted scholars to argue for a more deliberate inclusion of oral and auditory dimensions in language education. Hughes (2010), Goh and Burns (2012), Quan (2018), and Iñesta and Iglesias (2021) emphasise that auditory culture is not merely supplementary but foundational to language development. It serves as a primary instrument for knowledge acquisition, cognitive growth, and social interaction, reinforcing the idea that spoken language is central to communicative competence (Rodero, 2008). Foregrounding auditory practices, educators can cultivate learners' ability to navigate diverse registers and communicative contexts, thereby bridging the gap between linguistic theory and lived language use. This perspective underscores the need to balance written and oral modalities in pedagogy, ensuring that students develop holistic proficiency that reflects both structural accuracy and communicative adaptability. Since Akande (2024) emphasised that specific training in sound systems is required to remediate departures from Standard British English, phonological-focused pedagogy is especially successful. In a similar vein, Jamiu and Aderemi (2025) contended that, contrastive analysis provides learners with tools to overcome interference by highlighting the distinctions between indigenous phonology and English. Although, these methods show potential, the absence of systematic integration into curricula is a significant flaw in present practice. This begs the question of how to improve spoken proficiency by including phonological training into instructional strategies.

### **Effects of Students' Dialect on Educational Career**

The impact of dialectal variation on students' educational trajectories has been widely examined in recent scholarship (Akande, 2024; Otuyemi & Akinmusayo, 2025; Jamiu & Aderemi, 2025; Olatoye, 2023). Findings consistently suggest that, students who rely heavily on their mother tongue often struggle to comprehend English instruction, which in turn

hampers cognitive development and diminishes academic achievement. Within Kwara State, students are sometimes stigmatized for incorrect pronunciation, leading to ridicule and reduced motivation to participate actively in classroom activities. Such experiences highlight the complex relationship between academic success, identity, and language pride, particularly in multilingual educational contexts. In contrast, attitudinal studies confirm that dialectal variation also functions as a sociolinguistic resource. Olatoye (2023) found that, while Nigerians recognise the prestige of Standard British and American English, solidarity and identity are often expressed through Nigerian English varieties. Similarly, Akande (2024) and Otuyemi and Akinmusayo (2025) documented how indigenous phonological features persist even among educated speakers. These findings demonstrate a pattern of tension between global linguistic norms and local identity, underscoring the complexity of language learning in Nigeria's multilingual environment.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Research Design**

A descriptive survey design Adoption to systematically describe, analyse, and interpret existing conditions regarding dialectal variation and spoken English proficiency.

### **Population and Sampling**

**Population:** Teachers and students in selected secondary schools in Kwara State.

**Student criteria:** Natives of Kwara who had primary education within the state (to ensure authentic dialectal influence).

### **Sampling Techniques:**

- i. *Snowball sampling* for students (speech samples recorded for phonological analysis).
- ii. *Simple random sampling* for teachers (balanced perspectives on pedagogy).
- iii. *Sample size:* 100 respondents across five schools, ensuring gender representation among teachers.

### **Data Collection Methods**

*Structured questionnaires* administered to teachers.

*Direct classroom observation* of teaching practices.

*Speech recordings* of students' spoken English for phonological analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

*Triangulation* of data sources: questionnaires, observations, and speech recordings.

Ensured consistency and credibility of findings.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

Application of *descriptive statistics* (frequency and percentage).

Quantified prevalence of phonological deviations.

Evaluated perceptions of teachers and students regarding dialectal variation as a barrier to English proficiency.

## Data Presentation and Results

**Table 1:** Responses from Basis of Gender

Gender	Frequency	Percentage %
<b>Male</b>	45	45.0
<b>Female</b>	55	55.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 show that, majority (55%) were females, while minority (45%) were males. This implies that, female students were more than their male counterparts.

**Table 2:** Responses on the Basis of the Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage %
<b>16-19</b>	18	18.0
<b>20-24</b>	30	30.0
<b>25-29</b>	30	30.0
<b>30 years and above</b>	22	22.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2 shows that, the majority of the respondents (60%) were between the ages of 20 and 29 years, while the relatively young respondents are from the majority. This implies that, the respondents below years formed that majority, while the relatively young adult and very late youth respondents constitute the minority group.

## Data Analysis

**Research Question One:** What specific phonological features indigenous dialects such as substitution, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters interfere with secondary school students' spoken English proficiency, and how do these features deviate from Standard British English?

**Table 3:** Percentage Analysis of Phonological Features Indigenous Dialects and Secondary School Students' Spoken English Proficiency as They Deviate from Standard British English

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
<b>Agree</b>	57	57.0
<b>Disagree</b>	43	43.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3 shows that, majority of the respondents (57%) agreed while (43%) disagreed. This means that, specific phonological features have effects on the indigenous dialects, such as substitution, epenthesis, under-differentiation and simplification of consonant clusters, thereby interfere with secondary school students' spoken English proficiency.

**Research Question Two:** To what extent does dialectal variation affect students' communicative competence and academic performance in secondary schools?

**Table 4:** Percentage Analysis on the Extent to Which dialectal Variation Affects Students' Communicative Competence and Academic Performance in Secondary Schools

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
<b>Agree</b>	36	36.0
<b>Disagree</b>	64	64.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4 shows that, the majority of the respondents (36%) agreed, while (64%) disagreed. This means that, dialectal variation affects students' communicative competence and academic performance in secondary schools.

**Research Question Three:** How effective are current pedagogical practices in mitigating dialectal interference, and what targeted strategies such as phonological instruction, teacher retraining, and curriculum reform?

**Table 5:** Percentage Analysis on Current Pedagogical Practices in Mitigating Dialectal Interference and Targeted Strategies: Phonological Instruction, Teacher Retraining and Curriculum Reform

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
<b>Agree</b>	66	66.0
<b>Disagree</b>	34	34.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5 shows that, the majority of the respondents (66%) agreed, while (34%) disagree. This means that, there are current pedagogical practices in mitigating dialectal interference, and the targeted strategies such as phonological instruction, teacher retraining, and curriculum reforms are effective.

**Research Question Four:** Does attitude of teachers and students influence the course effect of teaching English language in secondary schools?

**Table 6:** Percentage Analysis on the Attitude of Teachers and Students towards Course Effect of Teaching English Language

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Agree	13	13.0
Disagree	87	87.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 6 shows that, the majority of the respondents (13%) agree to the attitude of teacher's students towards course effect of teaching English language in secondary schools, while (87%) disagreed. This means that, there is a poor attitude of teachers and students towards the course effect of teaching English language in secondary schools.

**Research Question Five:** What is the effect of regular refresher courses for teachers teaching English in secondary schools?

**Table 7:** Percentage Analysis on the Effect of Regular Refresher Courses for Teachers Teaching English in Secondary Schools

Response	Frequency	Percentage %
Agree	36	36.0
Disagree	64	64.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 7 reveals that, the majority of the respondents (34%) agreed to the effect of regular refresher courses for teachers teaching English in secondary schools, while (64%) disagreed. This means that lack of regular refresher courses is a significant problem facing the teaching and learning of English Language in Kwara State.

### Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the persistent influence of dialectal variation on spoken English proficiency among secondary school students in Kwara State. The descriptive survey revealed that a majority of respondents acknowledged insufficient qualified English language specialists as a challenge, with 57% agreeing that this factor undermines effective teaching. This result resonates with earlier studies by Eniola (2004) and Ajisafe (2008) who emphasised the critical role of teacher's expertise in shaping language acquisition

outcomes. Similarly, Akande (2024) observed reliance on teacher-centered methods and inadequate phonological training reflects systemic shortcomings that have been consistently documented in Nigerian educational contexts. Taken together, these findings suggest that, the quality of teacher preparation and ongoing professional development remains central to addressing phonological interference in classrooms.

The study also highlighted the role of instructional resources and government support in shaping language learning outcomes. While 36% of respondents agreed that, insufficient textbooks and materials posed a challenge, a larger proportion (64%) disagreed, suggesting that, resource scarcity may not be the most pressing issue compared to other structural factors. However, 66% of respondents strongly agreed that lack of encouragement from government significantly affects the teaching and learning of English, underscoring the importance of institutional support in sustaining language education. This finding aligns with Oloko and Yusuff (2025), who argue that, government-led initiatives such as teacher retraining and curriculum reform are essential for mitigating dialectal interference. Furthermore, the relatively low percentage of respondents (13%) who attributed poor student attitudes to the problem suggests that, learners' motivation is less of a barrier than the systemic issues of pedagogy and policy. These results collectively point to a broader pattern in which dialectal variation is reinforced not only by phonological transfer from indigenous languages but also by structural weaknesses in teacher training, government support, and pedagogical innovation.

The study shows that, dialectal variety serves as both a sociolinguistic resource and a barrier to spoken English ability, placing these findings within the larger corpus of literature. The persistence of indigenous phonological features reported by Akande (2024) and Otuyemi & Akinmusayo (2025) confirms that, local identity continues to influence language use in educational contexts, even though attitudinal studies like Olatoye (2023) highlight the prestige associated with Standard English varieties. Therefore, the evidence from Kwara State supports the claim that, spoken English ability and Nigerian society's multilingual reality are inextricably linked. Rather, it needs to be viewed as the result of intricate relationships between institutional support, teaching methods, and linguistic interference.

## **Conclusion**

The impact of dialectal variation on spoken English competency among secondary school pupils in Kwara State, Nigeria, has been investigated in this study, with a focus on phonological interference and its consequences for instruction. The results show that, while respondents did not consider problems like inadequate funding, a lack of refresher courses, or a lack of textbooks to be the most important obstacles, the lack of qualified English language specialists and insufficient government support were identified as major obstacles. These findings demonstrate that spoken English proficiency is not only a linguistic problem, but also one that is intricately entwined with educational institutions and policies, underscoring the significance of teacher expertise and institutional support in influencing language outcomes.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings, the following recommendations are proposed as the most critical measures

1. Enhancing teacher expertise and professional development, that is, the state ministry of education should prioritise the deployment of qualified English language specialists to all secondary schools.
2. Government should ensure continuous professional development through workshops, refresher courses, and retraining programmes.
3. Emphasis should be placed on phonological instruction and innovative teaching methods that directly address dialectal interference, thereby equipping teachers with the skills necessary to improve students' spoken English proficiency.
4. Institutional and Policy Support: school administrators must provide sustained encouragement and resources for English language teaching such as adequate instructional materials, consistent supervision, and recognition of English as a compulsory subject at all levels of education.
5. More so, government should allocate sufficient funding and institutional backing which can reinforce the role of English as both an academic requirement and a tool for national development, while ensuring that students are exposed to standard pronunciation models essential for communicative competence.

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