

INFLUENCE OF SPECIFIC LEARNING DISABILITIES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT AMONG SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ENUGU STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of specific learning disabilities namely, dyslexia and dysgraphia, on English language achievement among senior secondary school students in Enugu State, Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design, which utilized a correlational approach was employed for the study. Four research questions and four hypotheses guided the study. The target population consisted of senior secondary school students diagnosed with learning disabilities. Using a purposive sampling technique, a total of 350 students identified with dyslexia and dysgraphia were selected for the study. Three instruments were utilized for data collection: the Teacher Identification Form on Learning Disability (TIF_LD), the Learning Disability Checklist (LDC), and the English Language Achievement Test (ELAT). Data collected were analyzed using Pearson Moment correlation and independent samples t-tests at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that dyslexia (reading disability) had a significant negative influence on students' English language achievement. Similarly, dysgraphia (writing disability) was also found to significantly hinder English language performance. In addition, the study showed significant gender differences in the manifestation of both dyslexia and dysgraphia, with noticeable disparities in English language achievement among male and female students. The study concludes that dyslexia and dysgraphia are critical forms of specific learning disabilities that adversely affect English language achievement among both male and female students in Enugu State. It is recommended that seminars and workshops be organized for teachers to enhance their capacity to use guided inquiry teaching strategies in supporting students with learning disabilities.

Keywords: Disability, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, English Language Achievement

Introduction

As stated in the National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013), the philosophy and goals of education in Nigeria include: the inculcation of the right values and attitudes necessary for individual and societal survival; the training of the mind to understand the world; and the acquisition of relevant skills, along with the development of mental and physical abilities, to enable individuals to contribute meaningfully to national development. Similarly, the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2015)** emphasizes that education equips learners with cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioural skills essential for becoming responsible and productive members of society. Thus, the core aim of education is to initiate transformative change across all sectors to fulfill its developmental objectives. Indeed, the extent of national development is largely determined by the quality of education provided. One fundamental way to assess and improve educational quality is by evaluating students' academic achievement. Academic achievement reflects a student's success in acquiring knowledge and skills in various school subjects and serves as a critical measure of educational effectiveness.

Academic achievement remains a fundamental goal of education, as it reflects the extent to which students have acquired knowledge and developed skills throughout their academic journey. It is typically assessed by educators and school authorities using either teacher-made assessments or standardized tests. According to Okotie and Adeyemi (2019), academic achievement represents the amount of knowledge a learner has gained through the educational process. It also serves as a critical benchmark for student selection, promotion, and recognition across various spheres of life. Ngussa and Gundula (2019) further explain that academic achievement encompasses the degree to which students realize their educational objectives, as demonstrated through the practical application of acquired knowledge and competencies. However, in recent years, student performance in English Language has shown a declining trend, particularly in major national examinations such as WAEC, NECO, NABTEB, and JAMB. This consistent underperformance has raised serious concerns among education stakeholders in Enugu State regarding the overall academic standing of students in the subject.

Specific Learning Disabilities (SLDs) refer to a heterogeneous group of neurological conditions that impair an individual's ability to process language—spoken or written—which may manifest as difficulty in reading, writing, speaking, spelling, or performing mathematical calculations. These conditions include, but are not limited to, dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, perceptual disabilities, and developmental aphasia (Cadieux & Syeda, 2021). According to the American Psychiatric Association (2018), an SLD involves one or more basic psychological processes related to language use and comprehension, which interfere with learning despite adequate instruction and normal intelligence.

This study focuses on two specific forms of learning disabilities, dyslexia and dysgraphia, as they relate to English language achievement. Reading and writing are foundational to educational success, and when disrupted, they can significantly hinder academic development. Dyslexia, derived from the Greek roots “dys” (difficulty) and “lexia” (words or reading), is a language-based learning disability that affects reading accuracy, fluency, spelling, and decoding skills. The International Dyslexia Association (IDA, 2017) describes dyslexia as a specific learning disability that is neurological in origin and commonly characterized by phonological processing deficits that are unexpected relative to the individual's cognitive abilities and learning environment. It often results in persistent difficulties with reading despite effective classroom instruction.

Dysgraphia, on the other hand, is a disorder associated with written expression. The term comes from the Greek words “dys” (impaired) and “graphia” (writing), and it refers to difficulties with handwriting, spelling, and organizing written thoughts. Dysgraphia is often identified in early schooling when children struggle to form letters, write legibly, or maintain consistent spacing. It is a neurological condition that affects fine motor skills and written composition, making tasks such as spelling, spacing, and structuring sentences particularly challenging (Willcutt et al., 2019). It may occur independently or in conjunction with dyslexia, compounding the academic difficulties students face.

In spite of the increasing prevalence of learning disabilities among school-aged children, awareness and intervention efforts remain limited in many Nigerian schools. Students who struggle with dyslexia or dysgraphia are often misjudged as lazy or unserious, rather than being properly assessed and supported. The culture of academic elitism in some schools further marginalizes such learners, as educators focus primarily on producing high-achieving students while neglecting those who require additional support. Learning disabilities like dyslexia and dysgraphia not only impede academic achievement but also negatively affect students' emotional, social, and psychological well-being. In many cases, these students face stigma or even drop out due to a lack of understanding and accommodation in the school system. Environmental factors such as traditional beliefs, poor awareness of inclusive education practices, and lack of teacher training contribute to the continued neglect of learners with SLDs.

Although poor academic performance in English Language has been a recurring issue, especially in public examinations like WAEC, NECO, and JAMB, limited empirical studies in Nigeria have explored the direct impact of specific learning disabilities such as dyslexia and dysgraphia. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the extent to which dyslexia and dysgraphia influence English language achievement among secondary school students in Enugu State, Nigeria, with a view to improving inclusive practices and learner outcomes.

Purpose of the Study

The thrust of this study is to determine the influence of specific learning disabilities on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state, Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. examine the influence of Dyslexia (reading) disability on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state.
2. examine the influence of Dysgraphia (writing) disability on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state.
3. determine whether dyslexia affect male and female students' English language achievement differently;
4. examine possible gender differences of dysgraphia on students' English language performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study.

1. What is the influence of dyslexia (reading disability) on the English language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu State?
2. What is the influence of dysgraphia (writing disability) on the English language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu State?
3. Is there any significant difference of dyslexia (reading disability) on the English language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu State?
4. Is there any significant difference of dysgraphia (writing disability) on the English language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu State?

Hypotheses

The research questions were hypothesized and tested at the 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant influence of dyslexia (reading disability) on the English language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu State.
2. There is no significant influence of dysgraphia (writing disability) on the English language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu State.
3. There is no significant difference of dyslexia (reading disability) on the English language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu State.
4. There is no significant difference of dysgraphia (writing disability) on the English language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu State.

Methodology

Research Design: This study adopted a descriptive survey research design to investigate the influence of specific learning disabilities, dyslexia and dysgraphia, on English language achievement among senior secondary school students in Enugu State, Nigeria.

Participants: The target population consisted of 58,650 Senior Secondary Two (SS2) students and 1,250 English Language teachers in public senior secondary schools in Enugu State. A sample of 350 students and 10 teachers was drawn using the Research Advisors' (2006) sampling table at a 95% confidence interval and 2.5% margin of error. A multistage sampling technique was employed: Stage One: Simple random sampling was used to select two senatorial districts from the three in Enugu State. Stage Two: From each selected senatorial district, two Local Government Areas (LGAs) were randomly selected. Stage Three: Two public senior secondary schools were selected from each LGA using proportionate-to-size and simple random sampling. Stage Four: Purposive sampling was used to select two English Language teachers from each selected school (totaling 8 teachers). Students with symptoms of dyslexia and dysgraphia were identified using checklists, following briefing sessions with teachers, parents, and school management.

Instruments: Three research instruments were used for data collection: (1) Teacher Identification Form on Learning Disability (TIF_LD). It is a 13-item instrument used by the English teachers to identify students showing symptoms of dyslexia or dysgraphia. Students who consistently exhibited 3 – 5 symptoms were flagged for the study. (2) Learning Disability Checklist (LDC): Adapted from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD), this 20-item checklist assessed signs of dyslexia and dysgraphia. It used a 4-point Likert scale: Most of the Time (4), Sometimes (3), Occasionally (2), Never (1). (3) English Language Achievement Test (ELAT): Developed by the researcher based on the SS2 English Language scheme of work, the ELAT comprised 30 multiple-choice questions with four options each (A–D). Students answered the test under examination conditions. One (1) mark was awarded for each correct response; zero (0) for incorrect responses. The instruments were validated by experts in Measurement and Evaluation, and necessary adjustments were made. The instruments yielded the following logical validity indices: TIF_LD: 0.79, LDC: 0.82, and ELAT: 0.79. The instruments were pilot tested on 25 students outside the study sample: TIF_LD and LDC were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha: LDC = 0.865, TIF_LD = 0.705, and ELAT was analyzed using Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20): ELAT = 0.865.

Data Collection Procedures: The researcher visited the sampled schools to administer the instruments personally. At each school, the researcher introduced the study to principals, teachers, and students, highlighting its academic significance. Instruments were administered using a "wait-and-take" method, meaning they were collected immediately after completion. The ELAT was administered with the assistance of the English Language teachers under examination conditions.

Data Analysis: Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 25. Both descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency counts) and inferential statistics (Pearson Moment correlation and independent samples t-test) were used for data analysis. All hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance. An average mean of 2.50 was used as the benchmark for interpreting Likert scale items: Mean \geq 2.50 = Agreement with the item. Mean $<$ 2.50 = Disagreement with the item.

Results

Hypothesis One: There is no significant influence of Dyslexia (reading) disability on English Language achievement of students in Enugu state.

Table 1: Pearson Correlation between Dyslexia Scores and English Language Achievement (ELAT)

Variables	Dyslexia	ELAT
Dyslexia	1.00	-.42**
ELAT	-.42**	1.00

Note. N = 350. **p** < .01.

The Pearson correlation analysis in Table 1 shows a statistically significant negative correlation between dyslexia scores and English Language Achievement Test (ELAT) scores, $r(348) = -.42$, $p < .01$. This indicates that as dyslexia severity increases, English language achievement tends to decrease.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significance influence of Dysgraphia (writing) disability on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state.

Table 2: Pearson Correlation between Dysgraphia Scores and English Language Achievement (ELAT)

Variables	Dysgraphia	ELAT
Dysgraphia	1.00	-.38**
ELAT	-.38**	1.00

Note. N = 350. **p** < .01.

The Pearson correlation analysis in Table 2 shows a statistically significant negative correlation between dysgraphia scores and English Language Achievement Test (ELAT) scores, $r(348) = -.38$, $p < .01$. This suggests that as dysgraphia severity increases, English language achievement tends to decrease.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant difference of Dyslexia (reading) disability on English Language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu state.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test of Dyslexia by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)	Result
Male	163	16.45	2.82	348	0.29	.773	Retained
Female	187	16.35	3.14				

Table 3 shows the independent samples t-test conducted to examine whether there is a significant difference in dyslexia scores between male and female secondary school students. Males ($M = 16.45$, $SD = 2.82$) and females ($M = 16.35$, $SD = 3.14$) had very similar mean scores. The t-test result was not statistically significant, $t(348) = 0.29$, $p = .773$, indicating that gender does not have a significant effect on dyslexia scores.

Hypothesis Four: There is no significant difference of Dysgraphia (writing) disability on English Language achievement of male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu state.

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test of Dysgraphia by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	df	t	Sig (2-tailed)	Result
Male	163	16.44	2.82	348	0.21	.836	Retained
Female	187	16.35	5.35				

Table 4 shows the independent samples t-test conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in dysgraphia scores between male and female secondary school students. Males ($M = 16.44$, $SD = 2.82$) and females ($M = 16.35$, $SD = 5.14$) had very similar mean scores. The t-test result was not statistically significant, $t(248) = 0.21$, $p = .836$, suggesting no significant gender difference in dysgraphia scores.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of specific learning disabilities on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state, Nigeria. The findings of the study on hypothesis one revealed that there is a significant influence of dyslexia (reading) disability on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state. This is in line with the finding of Christopher and Umar (2023) whose study shows that education, environment and occupation are determinant factors that influence awareness of dyslexia among parents and teachers in Ilorin metropolis. This is also supported by the results of Onwukwe (2021) whose study showed a significant influence of dyslexia (reading) disability on the academic achievement of senior secondary school students in FCT, Abuja. The result of this study is further supported by Najla, Alia, Atheer, et. al., (2017) whose study found the presence of some sort of learning difficulty. The most common of all types were dyslexia and dysgraphia showed to have the most influence on academic achievements. The result of the study on hypothesis two shows that there is a significant influence of Dysgraphia (writing) disability on the academic achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state. This is in line with Mulanya, et al., (2020) whose findings indicated that a majority of the respondents believe that learners with disability can develop good handwriting, over 80% had a perception that handwriting difficulties impacted on the learning behaviours of learners with learning disabilities. This is further supported by the findings of Onwukwe (2021) which revealed a significant influence of dysgraphia (writing) disability on the academic achievement of senior secondary school students in FCT, Abuja. This is further corroborated by Mulanya, Awori and Nzoka (2020) findings which indicated that a majority of the respondents believe that learners with LD can develop good handwriting, over 80% had a perception that handwriting difficulties impacted on the learning behaviours of learners with learning disabilities.

For hypotheses 3 and 4, the findings from the independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant differences in dyslexia and dysgraphia scores between male and female students. Specifically, male and female students had nearly identical mean scores for both dyslexia and dysgraphia. These results suggest that gender does not significantly affect the presence or severity of these learning disabilities in the sampled population. The finding of the study is at variance with that of Morsanyi, Bers, McCormack and McGourty (2019) who investigated the prevalence of specific learning disorder revealed the prevalence rate of SLD, and found gender differences among children with SLDM profile.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study investigates the influence of specific learning disabilities on English Language achievement of senior secondary school students in Enugu state, Nigeria. Specific learning disability as a neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by significant difficulties in learning and using academic skills and typically begins during school-age years. The study concludes that specific learning disability such as dyslexia and dysgraphia are two forms of SLD that negatively influences both male and female senior secondary school students in Enugu state, Nigeria.

Based on the findings and conclusion, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should be encouraged to closely observe and assess their students in order to identify those exhibiting signs of dyslexia and other learning disabilities. School authorities should also ensure the provision of specialized support facilities and inclusive structures tailored to the needs of students with learning difficulties. Such provisions will not only enhance reading proficiency but also foster a sense of belonging among affected students. Early identification will enable educators to adopt appropriate instructional strategies, methods, and teaching styles that address the specific needs of these learners.
2. Both teachers and parents should consistently monitor the handwriting development of their students or wards and respond promptly when signs of difficulty are observed. Timely intervention in cases of writing challenges will enable teachers to implement instructional approaches that reflect the learner's abilities and accommodate their unique learning profiles.
3. It is equally important for teachers to institutionalize regular handwriting instruction, integrate motivational activities such as handwriting incentives and writing competitions, and utilize relevant instructional materials. These efforts will help strengthen students' writing skills and foster greater interest and competence in written expression.

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