

EXPLORATIONS IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC STUDY OF SELECTED ESL LEARNERS IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study explored challenges faced by English as Second Language (ESL) learners in Benue State, Nigeria, in acquiring communicative competence, focusing on linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers in multilingual, resource-constrained settings. A qualitative case study design, guided by Dell Hymes' Theory of Communicative Competence, examined how learners navigate linguistic and cultural communication aspects. Data was collected for three months through semi-structured interviews with 36 participants (12 teachers, 24 students). Focus Group Discussions involving six student groups and two teacher groups, classroom observations of 18 sessions, and document analysis of relevant policy and curricular materials. Participants from six urban and rural secondary schools represented diverse linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds. Thematic analysis identified four key findings among which were cultural-linguistic barriers, including native language interference and limited English immersion. The study recommended culturally responsive strategies, such as teacher training in communicative language teaching (CLT), community-driven language immersion programs, and policy reforms to reduce class sizes and ensure equitable resource distribution.

Keywords: Communicative competence, ESL education, multilingualism, qualitative case study, language policy

Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) learning has become a key aspect of contemporary education in a globalized society, driven by historical, social, and linguistic factors that have enhanced the utilization of English language acquisition in non-native environments. The historical roots of ESL learning can be traced to the colonial era, in which the English language was disseminated as a tool of governance and cultural influence (Crystal, 2020). The enduring influence of these historical dynamics has contributed to the widespread adoption of English as a global lingua franca (Kachru, 2022). In post-colonial settings, the legacy of English as a language of power and prestige persists, driving the demand for ESL education as a means of upward social mobility (Pennycook, 2014). The British Empire played a significant role in establishing English as a global lingua franca.

There exists a social context of ESL learning which is characterized by the role of English proficiency in shaping economic opportunities, career progression and social mobility. In many non-English-speaking countries, English proficiency is viewed as a passport to better education and employment prospects (Brutt-Griffler, 2022). This socio-economic significance has led to the establishment of ESL programmes in schools and institutions globally. The linguistic context involves investigating language transfer, interlanguage development, and the impact of linguistic interference on second language acquisition (Selinker, 2012). Recognizing these linguistic considerations is fundamental for educators to tailor instructional approaches to meet the specific linguistic needs of ESL learners.

Truly, the field of ESL education has witnessed the evolution of various pedagogical approaches. Traditional methods, such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods, have given way to more

communicative and learner-centred approaches (Richards and Rodgers, 2021). Communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based language teaching (TBLT), and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) are among the contemporary methodologies that emphasize meaningful communication and real-world language use (Ellis, 2013). Despite the growing recognition of ESL learning, challenges persist. Socioeconomic disparities, limited resources, and inadequate teacher training hinder effective ESL instruction (Cummins, 2018). Additionally, issues related to cultural sensitivity and inclusivity need to be addressed to create a supportive and equitable learning environment for ESL learners (Norton, 2020).

In Benue State, North-Central Nigeria, there is a linguistic diversity, with Tiv, Idoma, Igede, and several other local languages spoken across the State. In Benue State, English serves as the lingua franca, playing an important role in education, administration, and communication. There is a rich tapestry of languages, with Tiv, Idoma, and Igede being the predominant ethnic groups with distinct languages. Additionally, various smaller ethnic groups contribute to the linguistic mosaic of the State, creating a multilingual environment. This linguistic diversity poses challenges and opportunities for ESL learning, as learners often bring diverse linguistic backgrounds to the English language learning context (Akpang, 2015).

The historical foundations of ESL learning in Benue State are rooted in the colonial legacy of the British rule in Nigeria. English was introduced as a medium of instructions and administration during the colonial period, and its continued prominence can be attributed to post-independence educational policies that maintain English as the language of instructions (Bamgbose, 2018). This historical trajectory has shaped the contemporary ESL landscape in Benue State. The sociolinguistic context of ESL learning in Benue State is closely tied to issues of identity and social mobility. While Tiv, Idoma, Igede, and other local languages are integral to cultural identity, English

proficiency is associated with access to higher education, formal employment, and participation in the broader Nigerian and global contexts (Ozo-mekuri Ndimele, 2017). ESL learning thus becomes a strategic tool for individuals seeking socio-economic advancement.

The ESL pedagogy in Benue State must be sensitive to the linguistic diversity present in the State. Teachers need to address language transfer issues, acknowledge the influence of local languages on English pronunciations and syntax, and incorporate culturally relevant contents in their instructional materials (Akinkugbe, 2019). This approach ensures that ESL education aligns with the linguistic and cultural realities of learners in Benue State. While ESL learning offers opportunities for individuals in Benue State, it is not without challenges. Limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and the need for culturally responsive materials present hindrances to providing effective ESL education (Ugborugbo, 2016). However, the linguistic diversity also offers a unique advantage, as learners may leverage their multilingual backgrounds for enhanced language acquisition (Ofulue, 2014). Dell Hymes' notion of Communicative Competence broadens the traditional focus on grammatical competence by introducing four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence (Hymes, 1972).

Grammatical competence involves the knowledge of language rules, while sociolinguistic competence relates to understanding social contexts and appropriateness of language use. Discourse competence encompasses the ability to structure and interpret extended stretches of language, and strategic competence involves using communication strategies to overcome difficulties in expressing oneself.

Sociolinguistic competence is of particular significance as it enables language learners to navigate the social and cultural nuances of communication. Understanding appropriate language use in different contexts, including formal and informal settings, is crucial for effective communication (Canale & Swain, 2020). Sociolinguistic competence

also includes the ability to comprehend and use various registers, dialects, and styles based on the social contexts, contributing to successful interactions in diverse linguistic environments.

Discourse competence plays an important role in language acquisition as it involves the ability to organize and interpret information in extended discourse. This competence enables learners to construct coherent narratives, participate in discussions, and convey ideas logically (Celce-Murcia et al., 2015). Effective communication in academic, professional, and social settings often relies on the application of discourse competence to convey complex thoughts and engage in meaningful exchanges.

Strategic competence, the ability to compensate for breakdowns in communication, is a valuable aspect of communicative competence. Language learners frequently encounter difficulties in expressing themselves, and the ability to employ communication strategies such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, and clarification contributes to successful interactions (Canale and Swain, 2020). This strategic dimension of communicative competence enhances learners' adaptability and acceptability in communicative situations.

Studies have consistently shown that a focus on communicative competence positively impacts language acquisition. For instance, Savignon (2022) and Canale and Swain (2020) demonstrate that learners who engage in communicative language activities, where the emphasis is on meaningful communication rather than rote memorization of grammar rules, show greater language proficiency and confidence in using the foreign language.

Purpose of the Study:

Specifically, the objective of this study is to examine the impact of learning environment, instructional methods and classroom dynamics on ESL learners' communicative competence in Benue State; evaluate the existing language policies at the institutional and state

levels and their influence on ESL instruction in Benue State; explore the role of technology tools in facilitating or hindering ESL learners' language development in Benue State.

Scope of the Study:

This study focuses on ESL learners in secondary schools and ESL teachers with experience in teaching English to secondary school students within the geographical boundaries of Benue State, North Central Nigeria. The scope encompasses both urban and rural areas, ensuring a diverse representation of ESL learners. The study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of the contextual factors influencing communicative competence. The timeframe included phases of literature review, data collection, data analysis, and the formulation of recommendations.

Literature Review

Communicative competence is a multifaceted construct that extends beyond mere grammatical accuracy to encompass the ability to use language effectively in real-life communicative situations. It was first introduced by Dell Hymes (1972). Communicative Competence provides a holistic framework for understanding language proficiency. This literature review explores the theoretical underpinnings and key components of communicative competence, highlighting its importance in language acquisition and communication.

Hymes' Model of Communicative Competence expanded seminar work on the concept of Linguistic Competence proposed by Noam Chomsky. Hymes argued that linguistic competence alone is insufficient for effective communication, thereby introducing the concept of communicative competence, which comprises four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

Grammatical Competence involves knowledge of the rules and structures of a language, encompassing syntax, morphology, and phonology. It forms the foundation for effective communication, but it is only one component of overall competence (Hymes, 1972). Relatedly, sociolinguistics competence focuses on understanding the social context of communication. This includes knowledge of appropriate language use based on cultural norms, social roles, and the specific context of the interaction (Canale & Swain, 1980). The discourse competence encompasses the ability to understand and produce extended stretches of connected discourse. It involves the organization and coherence of language beyond sentence-level structures, contributing to effective communication in various contexts (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995). Strategic competence refers to the ability to overcome communication breakdowns and enhance effectiveness using communication strategies. Learners with high strategic competence can employ various tactics, such as paraphrasing or clarification, to navigate challenging situations (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Grammatical Competence: Grammatical competence is foundational to language proficiency, encompassing syntactic, morphological, and phonological aspects (Chomsky, 1965). Learners with strong grammatical competence can construct grammatically correct sentences, allowing for clear expression of ideas.

Sociolinguistic Competence: Sociolinguistic competence involves understanding and appropriately using language in different social contexts. This includes considerations of register, politeness, and variations in language based on factors such as age, status, and familiarity (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Discourse Competence: Discourse competence is crucial for coherent communication beyond individual sentences. It involves the ability to organize ideas, maintain coherence, and comprehend and produce extended discourse, whether in spoken or written form (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

Strategic Competence: Strategic competence enables learners to navigate communication challenges effectively. Learners with strong strategic competence can employ various communication strategies, such as circumlocution or clarification, to convey their intended meaning (Canale & Swain, 1980). Communicative competence is central to language acquisition and proficiency. Language learners who develop communicative competence are better equipped to engage in authentic communication, bridging the gap between language learning in educational settings and its application in real-life situations (Savignon, 2002).

Socio-cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping communicative competence, particularly in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning contexts. This literature review explores the influence of local languages, cultural diversity, socio-economic factors, and attitudes toward English language learning in Benue State, Nigeria.

Local languages often form the foundation for ESL learning, influencing language acquisition and communicative competence. The work of Cummins (2000) emphasizes the importance of the "Common Underlying Proficiency" in language development, suggesting that skills developed in local languages can transfer to a second language. In Benue State, with its diverse linguistic landscape, the coexistence of numerous languages introduces both challenges and opportunities for ESL learners (Ochagavía, 2017). Understanding the influence of local languages on communicative competence is crucial for effective language education strategies.

Socio-economic factors such as family background, parents educational background, economic status and access to educational resources can significantly impact language learning outcomes and can affect opportunities for ESL learners. The work of Baker and Wright (2017) underscores the role of socio-economic status in language development, with implications for communicative competence. In Benue State, where socio-economic disparities exist, exploring these

factors becomes imperative for developing inclusive language education policies.

In the context of Benue State, where English is often a second language, understanding the attitudes of learners, parents, and educators toward English language learning is crucial (Adekunle, 2015). Positive attitudes can foster motivation and, consequently, enhance communicative competence.

Pedagogical Challenges in ESL Instruction:

An effective ESL instruction requires addressing various pedagogical challenges, encompassing teaching methods, curriculum designs, teacher qualifications, professional development, availability of instructional resources, classroom dynamics, and student participation. This literature review examines existing research to shed light on these challenges and propose considerations for enhancing ESL education.

Teaching methods significantly impact ESL instruction. Research by Nunan (2003) emphasizes the importance of communicative language teaching (CLT) in ESL classrooms, encouraging interactive and context-based language learning. However, challenges persist in implementing CLT due to factors such as large class sizes and limited resources (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Curriculum design must balance linguistic proficiency goals with the need for cultural relevance and practical language skills, particularly in diverse contexts like ESL settings.

Teacher qualifications play a crucial role in the effectiveness of ESL instruction. Numerous studies stress the importance of teachers possessing both content knowledge and pedagogical skills (Inbar-Lourie, 2005). Professional development is essential for addressing evolving pedagogical approaches and fostering continuous improvement among ESL educators (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). Challenges often arise in providing ongoing, context-specific

professional development opportunities, especially in resource-constrained environments.

The availability and adequacy of instructional resources significantly impact ESL instruction. Cummins (2007) highlights the importance of providing materials that bridge students' first languages with English to enhance understanding. Challenges arise in resource allocation, including the availability of textbooks, technology, and supplementary materials. Addressing these challenges is crucial for creating a supportive learning environment.

Classroom dynamics and student participation are integral to ESL instruction. Effective strategies, such as cooperative learning and interactive activities, can foster engagement and language development (Oxford, 1990). However, challenges may arise due to diverse student backgrounds, varying language proficiency levels, and potential cultural differences affecting communication styles (Birjandi & Alavi, 2011). Understanding and managing these dynamics are essential for creating inclusive and effective ESL learning environments.

Technology Integration in ESL Learning:

The integration of technology in ESL instruction has become a focal point for enhancing language learning experiences. This section explores the state of technology integration in ESL learning, particularly in Benue State, Nigeria. It examines the access to digital resources and online language learning platforms, while also investigating the impacts and challenges associated with technology in the development of communicative competence.

In recent years, technology has gained prominence as a tool for ESL instruction globally. In Benue State, where traditional native language instruction faces challenges due to linguistic diversity, Ochagavía (2017) explored the potential of technology to supplement and enhance learning. The adoption of digital resources and online platforms can provide access to a broader range of materials and

learning opportunities, catering to the diverse linguistic needs of students in the region. The availability and accessibility of digital resources play a crucial role in the success of technology integration in ESL learning. Research by Warschauer and Meskill (2000) emphasizes the importance of equitable access to technology for all students, irrespective of their socio-economic background. In the context of Benue State, where there are disparities in access to technology, understanding the extent of digital resource availability and the utilization of online language learning platforms is crucial for effective integration. Technology integration in ESL instruction has demonstrated positive impacts on communicative competence development. Stockwell (2007) indicated that technology facilitates authentic language use, enhances engagement, and provides opportunities for interactive communication. While technology presents opportunities, challenges exist in its integration into ESL instruction such as technical infrastructure limitations, teacher training needs, and potential disparities in access to successful implementation (Chen & Lin, 2009). In Benue State, where socio-economic factors influence technology access, addressing these challenges is vital for ensuring the benefits of technology reach all learners.

The pursuit of communicative competence in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning is a dynamic process involving diverse strategies. Effective ESL instruction involves dynamic strategies to foster communicative competence. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches, as advocated by Richards and Rodgers (2001), emphasize interactive and context-based language learning. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), as discussed by Willis and Willis (2007), integrates language use into meaningful tasks, providing authentic communication opportunities. Additionally, technology integration, as highlighted by Stockwell (2007), offers avenues for engaging, interactive, and multimedia-rich language learning experiences.

Professional development is critical for ESL educators to navigate evolving pedagogical approaches. Freeman and Johnson (1998) underscore the need for continuous learning, emphasizing a balance between content knowledge and effective pedagogical skills. Razfar and Rumenapp (2014) advocate for incorporating cultural competency training into professional development programmes, enabling educators to better understand and respond to the diverse cultural backgrounds of ESL learners.

The involvement of communities is pivotal in creating a supportive ESL learning environment. Cummins (2007) stresses the importance of collaboration between schools, families, and communities to reinforce language development. Brown and Larson-Hall (2012) highlight the significance of partnerships with community organizations, providing additional resources and support networks for ESL learners, thus contributing to their overall communicative competence.

Language policies significantly shape ESL learning outcomes. Adekunle (2015) emphasizes the importance of policies that address multilingualism and socio-linguistic contexts. Canagarajah (2013) advocates for inclusive language policies that consider linguistic diversity, cultural contexts, and equitable access to educational resources for ESL learners. Advocacy efforts at the institutional and governmental levels are crucial for creating an environment that supports communicative competence development.

Methodology

The Research Design: This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the factors influencing the acquisition of communicative competence among ESL learners in Benue State. A case study approach allowed for a comprehensive investigation of the specific challenges faced by ESL learners in the region, providing detailed and contextually relevant insights into the subject matter.

Population and Sampling: The study focused on ESL learners from six secondary schools selected from both urban and rural areas of Benue State. The sample schools were chosen purposively to ensure a balance between urban and rural settings, as well as diversity in linguistic backgrounds (Tiv, Idoma, Igede) and socio-economic statuses. A total of 36 participants were involved, comprising 12 ESL teachers and 24 students. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide rich information on the topic of communicative competence. Both teachers and students were purposively sampled to represent a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

Data Collection Methods: Semi-Structured Interviews: Interviews were conducted with 12 ESL teachers and 24 ESL students. These interviews focused on exploring participants' perceptions of communicative competence, the challenges they encountered in the learning process, and their views on potential solutions. The sample size was determined through data saturation, ensuring that the interviews continued until no new insights were emerging.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Separate focus group discussions were organized for ESL learners and teachers. Six student FGDs, each consisting of four students, and two teacher FGDs, each consisting of six teachers, were held. These discussions facilitated group interactions, enabling participants to share their experiences, views, and insights regarding ESL instruction and communicative competence.

Classroom Observations: A total of 18 classroom sessions across the selected schools were observed. These observations focused on teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and the interactions between teachers and students. The aim was to gather firsthand insights into the classroom environment and instructional practices that influence communicative competence.

Document Analysis: Relevant educational documents, including curricular materials and policy documents related to ESL instruction in Benue State, were analyzed. This analysis provided

context and highlighted existing frameworks and policies that affect the development of communicative competence among ESL learners.

Data Analysis: Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data from the interviews, FGDs, classroom observations, and document analysis. Data was coded and categorized to identify key themes and patterns, particularly those affecting the development of communicative competence in ESL learners. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of the issues and challenges faced by both learners and teachers in ESL education.

Ethical Considerations: The study adhered to ethical principles, ensuring the voluntary participation, confidentiality, and well-being of all participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval was sought and granted by the relevant institutions. Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. To maintain anonymity, participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Limitations: This study was limited in terms of generalizability, as it focused specifically on ESL learners in selected schools in Benue State, Nigeria. The findings are therefore context-specific and may not be directly applicable to other regions or educational settings. Additionally, the study's scope was constrained by the number of schools and participants involved, which may not fully capture the breadth of challenges faced by ESL learners across the entire state. Caution was taken when concluding applicable to other contexts outside the study area.

Case Study Analysis: Benue State

Overview of the ESL landscape in Benue State

Benue State, situated in North Central Nigeria, boasts a rich linguistic and cultural tapestry characterized by diverse indigenous languages. Within this linguistic diversity, English as a Second Language (ESL) education faces unique challenges that significantly

impact learners' acquisition of communicative competence. Benue State is renowned for its linguistic diversity, with over 20 indigenous languages spoken (Adagu, 2016). This diversity poses a distinct challenge for ESL learners as they navigate the transition from their native languages to English. The coexistence of numerous languages may influence language transfer effects, affecting the development of communicative competence (Odisho, 2017).

The State's educational infrastructure plays a crucial role in ESL education. Challenges such as limited resources, inadequate facilities, and varying levels of technology integration persist (Audu, 2019). These factors can impact the quality of ESL instruction and hinder the development of communicative competence among learners. Socioeconomic disparities are evident in Benue State and can significantly influence ESL learners. Economic challenges may impede access to learning resources, impacting engagement with English both inside and outside the classroom (Akaateba, 2018). Socioeconomic factors are vital considerations in understanding communicative competence development among ESL learners.

The ESL curriculum in Benue State aligns with national goals on English language proficiency. However, the effectiveness of the curriculum in fostering practical language use, especially in real-world contexts, requires further exploration (Adedeji, 2014). The curriculum's alignment with communicative competence goals is critical for successful ESL education. The preparedness of ESL educators in Benue State is central to the language learning experience. Adequate professional development, training in modern pedagogical approaches, and cultural sensitivity are essential for addressing the unique needs of ESL learners (Aja, 2015). Teacher preparedness is a crucial factor influencing the development of communicative competence.

Language policies at the state and national levels contribute to the ESL landscape. The alignment of policies with communicative

competence goals, multilingual education strategies, and the recognition of indigenous languages all impact ESL learners (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Effective language policies are essential for creating an environment conducive to communicative competence development. The role of the community in ESL learning is significant. Cultural attitudes toward English, family support, and community involvement in education shape learners' language experiences (Orpin, 2019). Understanding and leveraging these influences are vital for enhancing communicative competence among ESL learners in Benue State.

The ESL landscape in Benue State is a dynamic interplay of linguistic diversity, educational infrastructure, socioeconomic factors, curricular considerations, teacher preparedness, language policies, and community influences. Examining these elements through the lens of communicative competence provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by ESL learners in the region. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive and context-specific approach to ensure that ESL education in Benue State facilitates effective communication in English.

The linguistic diversity in Benue State, with over 20 indigenous languages, poses challenges for ESL learners as they navigate the transition to English (Adagu, 2016). Akaateba (2018), states that socioeconomic disparities are among factors that contribute to varying levels of access to educational resources, impacting ESL learners' engagement with English. Audu (2019) asserts that limited resources, inadequate facilities, and insufficient technology integration in educational institutions affect the quality of ESL instruction.

While on the other, the lack of culturally sensitive and relevant materials may hinder ESL learners' engagement with English language content (Orpin, 2019). Insufficient teacher preparedness, including a lack of professional development and cultural sensitivity training, can also impede effective ESL instruction (Aja, 2015). Odisho (2017),

argues that the diverse linguistic backgrounds of ESL learners may result in language transfer effects, impacting the acquisition of communicative competence in English.

Implications and Recommendations

The implications of the study for ESL educators, policymakers, and researchers were drawn from the various aspects that were studied. On cultural and linguistic sensitivity, the identified challenges related to cultural and linguistic differences highlighted the need for a culturally sensitive approach in ESL instruction. Therefore, developing culturally relevant teaching materials, integrating local languages into language learning, and providing training for educators on fostering cultural sensitivity in the classroom is recommended.

The exposure to English outside the classroom responses revealed that limited exposure to English outside the classroom affects language practice and proficiency. It is recommended that extracurricular activities, language clubs, and community initiatives that create opportunities for ESL learners to use English in real-life contexts should be encouraged. Similarly, on teacher competence and methodology should be addressed. To address this challenge, the implementation of professional development programmes for ESL educators, focusing on modern teaching methods, language proficiency enhancement, and cultural competence can be very helpful.

Advocacy is required for reduced class sizes, implementing innovative teaching strategies for large classes, and provision of resources that facilitate individualized learning and opportunities for language practice. In curbing this, the establishment of language practice laboratories, promotion of language exchange programmes, and integration of technology to create diverse and interactive language practice opportunities will be useful.

Socio-economic factors have also exacted an impact on access to quality education, learning resources, teacher quality, and parental

involvement. In this regard, advocacy for policies addressing educational disparities, provision of financial support to schools in poor areas, and implementation of community engagement programmes to enhance parental involvement is recommended. Conducting a comprehensive review of the ESL curriculum in Benue State, considering the cultural context and communicative competence goals, and ensuring alignment with modern language teaching methodologies are leeway into overcoming these challenges.

Establishing ongoing professional development programmes for ESL educators; covering language proficiency, modern teaching methods, and strategies for addressing cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom, also, an investment in technology infrastructure, providing access to digital resources, and integrating technology into ESL instruction to enhance language practice and engagement are some of the available options.

The collaboration with local communities through meaningful community engagement to raise awareness about the importance of ESL education, involving parents in language learning initiatives, and promoting a supportive community environment for ESL learners was recommended as a panacea. Advocating for policy changes at the state level to address challenges related to class sizes, access to quality education, and resource allocation for ESL programmes is a very useful recommendation. Conducting ongoing research to monitor the effectiveness of implemented strategies, gathering feedback from educators and learners, and adjusting interventions based on emerging needs is another recommendation.

These recommendations aim to address the identified challenges and enhance the communicative competence acquisition of ESL learners in Benue State, North Central Nigeria. Implementing a holistic approach that considers curriculum, teacher development, technology, community involvement, and policy advocacy is essential for sustainable improvements in ESL education.

Conclusion

In the study of issues affecting the acquisition of communicative competence by ESL learners in Benue State, North Central Nigeria, it was evident that the challenges are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with the state's linguistic, cultural, and educational landscape. The findings of this study shed light on several key factors that significantly impact the communicative competence development of ESL learners in Benue State. The influence of cultural and linguistic differences emerged as a substantial barrier, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive teaching methodologies that acknowledge and celebrate the linguistic diversity present in Benue State. The limited exposure to English outside the classroom further underscores the importance of creating immersive language environments, both within and beyond the educational setting, to enhance practical language use and proficiency.

The competence of ESL educators and the methodologies employed in classrooms are identified as critical components affecting communicative competence. This points to the necessity of continuous professional development programmes for ESL teachers, equipping them with the skills and knowledge needed to overcome the challenges posed by diverse language backgrounds among learners. The issue of large class sizes also emerged as a structural impediment to effective ESL learning, necessitating policy considerations for class size reduction to enable personalized attention and active student participation. Inadequate opportunities for language practice highlight the importance of extracurricular activities, language laboratories, and community engagement to provide platforms for practical language application. Socio-economic factors, such as income disparities and access to resources, are revealed as influential determinants of ESL learners' experiences. Efforts to address these challenges should encompass initiatives aimed at improving access to quality education,

ensuring the availability of learning resources, and promoting parental involvement in the language learning process.

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