

Speaking Paucity Among Learners of English in Sierra Leone

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Abstract

The study examined sociocultural and linguistic strategies for cultivating English as a second language (ESL) oral proficiency among learners of English in Sierra Leone. It aimed to determine the relationship between learners' bi/multilingual backgrounds and their English adeptness. It also examines the influence of societal and cultural temperateness on language learning. A systematic random sampling technique was employed within a mixed-methods design, and data were collected from 1000 learners using questionnaires, discussions and interviews, with results analysed using SPSS and presented. Findings showed that over 85% of the learners made noticeable pronunciation errors during speaking activities. The study also revealed that traditional teaching methods, such as grammar translation and rote learning, contributed significantly to the decline in fluency and overall language proficiency. Furthermore, learners in urban areas performed better than those in rural settings. Many learners demonstrated weaknesses in spelling, pronunciation, and subject-verb agreement in both spoken and written communication. These outcomes were linked to teacher-centred, traditional teaching methods and exam-orientated approaches that relied heavily on textbooks. The study recommended increased learner participation through interactive strategies such as open discussions, debates, peer learning and public speaking. From the perspective of authenticity theory, the findings

indicated that oral fluency development depended not only on linguistic knowledge but also on meaningful, real-life language use with a focus on society and culture. Learners who engaged in authentic speaking activities showed greater confidence, improved enunciation and enhanced ESL use. In contrast, fluency remained limited where instruction focused mainly on rote memorisation and examination drills, highlighting a gap between academic achievement and communicative competence.

Keywords: English-Speaking Poverty, Oral Aptitude, Knack, Public Discourse and Adeptness

Introduction

Effective communication begins with developing both listening and speaking skills. When we communicate, our ability to understand others and express ourselves clearly determines how successfully we connect with those around us and get our message across. Teaching learners how to speak English fluently and successfully is not the main focus in many nations like Sierra Leone, where the language is seen as foreign (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2025; Peltonen, 2024; Al-Khresheh, 2024; Cahyani et al., 2024).

Stevens, Challay and Thulla. (2023) stated that although English is required in the Sierra Leone educational system as a core subject and language of tuition, verbal discourse fluency is not the main emphasis of the course, despite the fact that it is taught. The majority of learners just take English classes because it is mandated by the curriculum; they are not aware of the benefits of learning the language. Attempts to improve oral English ability in L2 English learners seem to be having little impact. Evidently, unidentified impact flaws, disparate compatibilities and instructional approaches could be some causes of the teaching/learning objectives not being reached. However, thinking about the issue and generating speculative assumptions may never lead to the intended outcomes. The objectives of the current study are to carry out a thoughtful investigation into the alarming speaking poverty situation in the country. By including the interplay of sociocultural and linguistic components, it seeks to improve second language learners' oral English competence in Sierra Leone.

ESL instruction in schools is a growingly significant area of applied linguistics and has long been a contentious issue, particularly in European and Asian nations (Stevens and Sheriff 2025a; Sheriff, Stevens, Challay and Thullay 2025; Crompton et al. 2024; and Christian et al. 2020). Invariably, the aim of the study is to ascertain the best sociocultural and linguistic practices that foster learners' oral knack in the English language. The study objectives are to determine the relationship between learners' bi/multilingual

backgrounds and their English adeptness and to also examine the influence of societal and cultural warmth on language learning.

Enhancing conversational skills in English as a foreign or second language is crucial in many nations, including Sierra Leone. In oral communication, a proficient English speaker must carefully integrate sociolinguistic elements. By helping speakers overcome societal, cultural, and self-anxieties to process and produce speech proficiently, these elements promote the learning processes. In order to do this, it is evident that over the past ten years, there has been a significant rise in the desire of people worldwide to acquire English as a second or foreign language in order to compete in the global market and computer industry/era. For example, Sierra Leone's population of English learners has increased significantly during the past ten years (Stevens and Sheriff 2025b).

Views on fluency

Fluency is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that can be examined across both receptive and productive language skills: namely reading, listening, writing, and speaking. This study, however, focuses specifically on fluency in speaking, that is, oral fluency in second language (L2) use, encompassing both second and foreign language acquisition. Within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), oral fluency has been defined from a wide range of perspectives, each emphasizing different dimensions. Given space limitations, only the most prominent definitions are considered here. A key distinction is often made between a broad and a narrow interpretation of fluency (Kaushika, 2024; Peltonen, 2024; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024; and Fatima et al., 2020). In its broadest sense, fluency is equated with overall oral proficiency (Duan, 2024; Akpabio, 2024; Huda & Rahmawati, 2024; Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2024; and Jacob, 2022), referring to a speaker's general mastery of the language, which is a view commonly held by both learners and non-specialists (Robayo, 2025). In contrast, the narrower perspective treats fluency as one component of oral proficiency, alongside complexity and accuracy, all of which contribute to successful L2 acquisition (Lustenberger, 2024; Jacob, 2022; Kabbell, Omulando, & Barasa, 2022). From this viewpoint, fluency relates primarily to learners' control over temporal and acoustic aspects of language use (Xing & Saeed, 2025; Zeng & Fisher, 2024; and Luo & Han, 2023) and is often associated with features such as speed and smoothness of speech. For instance, Ferunzi (2021) defines fluency as the "flow, continuity, automaticity, or smoothness of speech". The narrower interpretation, on the other hand, is more commonly used in SLA research and applied linguistics (Zhao, Noordin, Ahmad, & Liu, 2024; and Duke, Ward, & Pearson, 2021).

Although the broad interpretation is based on intuitive understanding, Hudson, Koh, Moore, & Binks-Cantrell (2020) have described it as relatively theoretical. Yanwar, Sitthiworachart, & Joy (2022), for instance, approached fluency from the perspective of the listener, defining it as the impression that speech planning and production processes are functioning smoothly and efficiently. Al-Khresheh (2024), and Crompton et al. (2024) stress the speaker's performance, characterising fluency as the capacity to speak for extended periods of time with few pauses; and Xing and Saeed (2025) define fluency as the rapid, smooth, accurate, and efficient expression of thought under real-time processing constraints. Although these definitions share a focus on spoken performance, they differ in emphasis. Robayo (2025) highlighted observable features of speech, whereas Fatima et al. (2024) incorporated underlying cognitive processes involved in speech production. This divergence is also evident in other interpretations of fluency within the literature (e.g., Zeng & Fisher, 2024 and Zhao, Noordin, Ahmad, & Liu, 2024). Robayo (2025) offered a thorough multi-componential model of fluency with three interconnected types: cognitive fluency, utterance fluency and perceived fluency to accommodate these differing viewpoints.

The mental processes that underlie speech production, such as conceptualisation, lexical retrieval, phonological encoding and articulation, are referred to as 'cognitive fluency'. Faster access to linguistic resources results in more speech that is fluent, and it is closely related to automaticity and efficiency in language processing (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025). Conversely, utterance fluency refers to the observable aspects of speech. It encompasses elements like speech pace, pauses, and repair techniques and represents the quantifiable output that comes from cognitive processes. Three primary dimensions can be used to examine utterance fluency, according to Huda & Rahmawati (2024) and Tavakoli (2019): speed (e.g., speech rate and run length), breakdown (e.g., frequency and duration of pauses), and repair (e.g., repeats, reformulations, and false starts). For empirical studies on fluency, this paradigm has been exclusively helpful (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2024). Perceived fluency, the third component, relates to how listeners interpret a speaker's fluency based on their speech performance. It is inherently subjective and often associated with intelligibility and the overall ease or pleasantness of understanding speech (Cahyani, Fadhilawati, & Aini, 2024; Lee et al., 2019).

Speakers naturally aim to maintain listener engagement, and listeners, in turn, appear to have an intuitive sense of what constitutes fluent speech (Freed, 2000). Consequently, speech that is easy to follow is typically judged as more fluent. Although Segalowitz's model provides a comprehensive and systematic framework, fluency is not limited to cognitive and linguistic factors alone. Social, attitudinal and motivational influences may also play a

significant role in shaping fluency (Feruzi, 2021). In summary, fluency remains a complex and multifaceted construct within SLA and applied linguistics. The diversity of definitions reflects the lack of a unified consensus among scholars while simultaneously underscoring the multidimensional nature of fluency (Robayo, 2025; Yihao, 2024; Segalowitz, 2010; and Tavakoli, 2019). As Akpabio (2024) argued, it is not possible to reduce fluency to a single, unified concept. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider multiple dimensions of fluency. From a pedagogical standpoint, this complexity presents challenges, making the development of fluency in L2 classrooms a demanding task.

Fluency in Research

From a language pedagogy perspective, research on fluency and overall oral production has often focused on how different types of tasks influence performance. Evidence consistently shows that several task types are particularly effective in promoting L2 fluency.

Firstly, formulaic sequence tasks have been widely studied. Research (e.g., Akpabio, 2024; Crompton et al., 2024; Hasumi & Chiu, 2024; McGuire & Larson-Hall, 2017) indicated that explicit teaching of formulaic expressions or prefabricated lexical chunks such as collocations, phrasal verbs and lexical bundles can significantly enhance fluency. These expressions help reduce the frequency and length of pauses in learners' speech, thereby increasing the average length of continuous speech.

Secondly, repetition or rehearsal tasks have been shown to support fluency development. Studies suggest that when learners repeat or rehearse tasks, they are better able to sustain speech for longer periods (De Jong & Perfetti, 2011). This improvement is attributed to increased familiarity with the content, as well as opportunities to refine language choices and address earlier disfluencies (Gashan & Almohaisen, 2014; Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011). Repetition also contributes to faster speech rates, smoother articulation, and greater automatisisation (Tavakoli et al., 2016).

Thirdly, pre-planning tasks have received considerable attention in the literature. Numerous studies (e.g., Akpabio, 2024; Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2024; Cahyani et al., 2024; and de Jong, 2023) demonstrated that allowing learners some time to plan before speaking leads to improvements in oral performance, particularly in fluency. Moreover, Duan (2024) argued that the benefits of pre-planning can be maximised when learners are trained to use planning time effectively.

Finally, awareness-raising tasks and fluency strategy training, although less extensively researched, can also contribute positively to fluency development. These approaches do not only enhance learners' speaking performance but also empower them with greater control over their own

learning processes (Huda & Rahmawati, 2024; Tavakoli et al., 2016). Despite these promising findings, a major limitation across many studies is that they have been conducted in controlled laboratory settings rather than in authentic classroom environments with real learners.

Overall, the research reviewed highlights that fluency has become an increasingly important focus within the SLA field. However, relatively little attention has been given to how L2 teachers themselves conceptualise fluency or how they implement classroom practices to foster it (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025a; Tavakoli & Hunter, 2018).

Sheriff et al. (2025), in citing Brown (2011), said that having good English proficiency is a skill that is needed in today's market, social interactions and science and technology. According to many researchers, the use and influence of English appear unbiased to people who do not share the mother tongue; as such, the language operates worldwide irrespective of sociocultural and linguistic diversity. This is because it cannot be over emphasised, as one on the list of advantages enjoyed is the ability to speak English, which provides many benefits to life; thus, the reason why oral English proficiency is needed in the current era (Stevens, 2026 unpublished; Luo, 2023; Christian, McCarty, & Brown, 2020; Putri, Herdi, & Hamuddin, 2018). With all business meetings and conferences currently using English as a means for simple and effective communication regardless of your country of origin, English has a significant impact on the world's political, socioeconomic growth and institutional development. Thus, using English as a second or third language lowers the prevalence of ethnocentrism, linguistic conflict and the occurrence of misunderstandings.

Theoretical Framework

Automaticity Theory formed the theoretical framework of this study. It provides a strong explanatory basis for understanding the development of oral fluency in second language acquisition. It emphasises the gradual shift from controlled, effortful language processing to rapid, effortless performance through repeated exposure and practice. Building on this premise, Stevens and Sheriff (2025) conceptualised fluency as a multidimensional construct, integrating vocabulary, pronunciation, first language (L1) influence, sociocultural context and pedagogical approaches. Their model highlights that automaticity does not occur in isolation but emerges from the interaction of linguistic competence and environmental factors, thereby offering a holistic framework for analysing fluency development.

Similarly, Feruzi (2021) defined automaticity as the learner's ability to recognise and decode words with little or no conscious effort, which depends largely on mastery of alphabetic principles and vocabulary knowledge. This definition underscores the foundational role of linguistic competence in

achieving automatic processing. Tavakoli (2019) extended this perspective by focusing on the cognitive dimension, arguing that increased automaticity reduces the cognitive load on learners, thereby freeing up mental resources for higher-level language functions such as meaning construction and interaction. In other words, when lower-level processes like word recognition and pronunciation become automatic, learners can concentrate more effectively on communication.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that automaticity is both a cognitive and sociolinguistic phenomenon. While Feruzi (2021) emphasised the internalisation of linguistic elements, Tavakoli (2019) highlights the cognitive efficiency gained through practice, and Stevens and Sheriff (2025) situated these processes within a broader sociocultural and pedagogical context. The logical implication is that repeated practice alone is not sufficient; it must be meaningful, contextually grounded, and supported by effective teaching strategies. Therefore, the commonly held notion that “practice makes perfect” can be refined to suggest that structured, purposeful and context-sensitive practice leads to automaticity, which in turn enhances fluency. This integrated view reinforces the importance of designing language instruction that not only builds linguistic knowledge but also promotes consistent and meaningful language use in real-life contexts.

Points of Convergence

All three authors agreed that repeated exposure and practice are essential for developing automaticity. Tavakoli (2019) explicitly linked repetition to reduced cognitive load, while Feruzi (2021) implied that continuous engagement with vocabulary and decoding strengthens effortless processing. Stevens and Sheriff (2025) also embed practice within pedagogical strategies that enhance fluency.

Each definition highlighted the transition from conscious, controlled processing to automatic performance. Feruzi (2021) described this as effortless word recognition, while Tavakoli (2019) framed it as reduced mental effort. Stevens and Sheriff (2025) incorporated this transition into broader fluency development.

All three perspectives linked automaticity to improved language fluency. Whether through faster decoding (Feruzi), reduced cognitive burden (Tavakoli), or a holistic integration of linguistic and contextual factors (Stevens and Sheriff), automaticity is seen as foundational to effective communication.

Points of Divergence

Stevens & Sheriff (2025) offered a holistic model for fluency analysis that includes a comprehensive framework that examined vocabulary,

pronunciation, L1, sociocultural factors, and pedagogy in pinning down the definition of Automaticity Theory, which future researchers can adopt. Feruzi (2021) emphasised phonological and orthographic familiarity as the foundation of automaticity. Tavakoli (2019) highlighted cognitive load reduction through repetition, aligning with psycholinguistic models of fluency.

The scope of analysis indicated that Tavakoli (2019) took a cognitive approach, emphasising mental processing and cognitive load during language use. Feruzi (2021) focused narrowly on lower-level linguistic processes such as word recognition, decoding, and vocabulary knowledge. Stevens and Sheriff (2025) offered a broad, holistic framework that includes linguistic, sociocultural and pedagogical dimensions.

Feruzi (2021) emphasised linguistic competence, particularly alphabetic and vocabulary knowledge. Tavakoli (2019) emphasised cognitive efficiency, highlighting how automaticity frees up mental resources, and Stevens & Sheriff (2025) emphasised contextual and instructional factors, arguing that automaticity develops through interaction between learners and their environment.

On the level of language processing, Feruzi (2021) is concerned with micro-level processes (word recognition and decoding). Tavakoli (2019) bridged micro- and macro-levels of processing, linking automaticity to overall speech production, while Stevens & Sheriff (2025) focused on macro-level fluency, thereby incorporating social context, L1 influence, and teaching methods.

Logically, the convergence of these views suggests that automaticity is a progressive process rooted in practice and leading to fluent communication. However, their divergence reveals that automaticity operates across multiple dimensions: linguistic (Feruzi, 2021), cognitive (Tavakoli, 2019), and sociocultural-pedagogical (Stevens and Sheriff). Together, they provided a layered understanding of automaticity starting from basic word recognition, moving through cognitive efficiency and culminating in a contextually appropriate and fluent language use.

Fluency Efforts

In a bid to combat English reading and speaking poverty among learners, Sierra Leone introduced free and quality education in schools some years ago; achieving quality seems slow (Thulla, Moriba, Adom & Mensah-Gborie, 2021). The Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey Round 6 of Statistics Sierra Leone (2017) also revealed that 84% of children in Sierra Leone could not read nor recite a simple story. This situation is alarming and depicts Sierra Leone's dire need for oral English language.

Even though writing demonstrates a solid grasp of how to use spoken language in regular communicative encounters, most Sierra Leonean instructors do not prioritise English-speaking talents while training students. Research suggests that there is a better association between English aural skills and written form (Sheriff, Stevens, Challay & Thulla, 2025; Stevens & Sheriff, 2025a; Stevens & Sheriff, 2025b; Akpabio, 2024; Alam & Uddin, 2013; Stevens, 2025). The majority of Sierra Leonean mentors don't emphasise English-speaking abilities, even though writing reveals a strong command of how to employ spoken language in typical communicative exchanges.

In this vein, numerous researchers have emphasised the requirement for language learning practices to engulf and scrutinise the learning and teaching of speaking abilities since many researchers have pointed out that a deficiency in good English speaking skills has caused learners to perform worse in both national and international examinations because they lack the skills that will foster their effective and efficient oral communication and expression skills.

Researchers like Rodrigo et al. (2023) and Lustenberger (2024) have recently looked at the considerable impact that societal responsibilities have on spoken English learners' performance (Sheriff and Stevens 2025a; Stevens et al. 2025). In addition to looking for family support, students look for beneficial resources like text/course books, dictionaries, other helpful materials, or any technological support to supply essential information for their growth of second language competence and competency. Bearing in mind this fact Robayo (2025) revealed, "In the context of modern teaching, strategies based on novel and sophisticated software or conceptual strategies are always needed to deal with the day-to-day teaching/learning situations in which the learners face difficulties, and without some strategies they perhaps cannot achieve the target" (Khan, 2011, p.1252).

In reality, the relationship between language and culture has drawn the attention of numerous academics. According to Stevens, Challay and Thulla (2023), "A language is part of a culture, and a culture is part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture." They asserted that language and culture are intertwined and that language reflects culture as shared by many other social scientists. Thus, teaching a language automatically involves implicitly teaching culture.

A learner's access to various cultural goods like the internet, computers, pictures, paintings, books, and dictionaries (cultural capital) and a learner's relationships with teachers, parents, siblings, and peers (social capital) may have a reflective influence on what and how any individual learns a language. For this reason, the impact of a learner's background and environmental context on learning a second language is significant. When it

comes to speaking and conquering fears, shyness, mood, speech accuracy and other issues, parents are the first point of contact as socialisation agents, and their interactions are crucial. Lack of necessary assistance will diminish their speaking abilities, and excessive anxiety makes people less inclined to communicate, both of which have a negative impact on learners' success in oral English learning as a second language in the long term (Wu & Lin, 2014).

Robayo (2025) observed that the value system development is significantly influenced by social class, housing, and resource access, almost as much as by academic success. As opposed to Duan (2024), Fatima et al. (2024) argued that cognitive capacity has a direct impact on educational results, while socioeconomic background has an indirect influence. This is because cognitive ability directly affects language learning, whereas socioeconomic background has an indirect effect. The study arrived at the conclusion that, despite the fight being solely about supremacy, its effects from both points of view cannot be disregarded. The decreasing effects of socioeconomic background and the prominence of cognitive ability corroborate some of the statements made by modernisation theory.

In Sierra Leone, the assessment of oral English proficiency is largely confined to high-stakes external examinations such as the West African Examinations Council's West African Senior School Certificate Examination and international standardized tests like the International English Language Testing System for students seeking opportunities abroad. This exam-oriented educational paradigm fosters a narrow focus on performance outcomes, often at the expense of comprehensive language acquisition. Consequently, learners are less inclined to engage with the foundational aspects of English necessary for holistic communicative competence.

Furthermore, instructional practices tend to marginalise the development of productive and receptive oral skills, namely speaking and listening, since these are not systematically emphasised in formal assessment frameworks. Within such a context, academic progression and perceived success are predominantly contingent upon examination results, reinforcing surface-level learning strategies. From a linguistic perspective, this results in limited language internalisation, as learners rely heavily on rote memorisation rather than meaningful interaction with the language. This deficit becomes particularly evident in authentic communicative settings, where learners frequently exhibit communication apprehension, characterised by low self-efficacy, restricted lexical repertoire and substandard phonological control. These challenges collectively impede the development of fluent and spontaneous oral expression, as corroborated by recent studies (Duan, 2024; Akpabio, 2024; Jacob, 2022; Knapp, 2021; Crystal, 2020; Christian et al., 2020; Fatima et al., 2020).

It is ridiculous to know that the majority of the senior secondary school pupils in Sierra Leone can't communicate in simple and clear English; hence, they prefer the use of lingua franca (Krio) and their native languages over the English language. This tendency is a common oral English language learning disorder characterised by students' lack of English communication skills, self-confidence as they refrain from speaking English, and self-efficacy. There are several reasons why secondary school pupils in Sierra Leone have difficulties in learning how to speak English and do well on tests (Sheriff et al., 2025). The reasons include the failure of modern language instruction methods to foster performance, proficiency and competency and less attention being given to the development of students' English-speaking abilities inside and outside of the classroom. Also, less attention is focused on students' ability and willingness to successfully use the language; thus, the linguistic environment to promote language diversity is limited (multilingualism and its effects). In addition to other language problems, strategies and practices for using textbooks, television, websites and other things in the classroom to use language and other factors.

Knowledge Gap

Existing studies on vocabulary, pronunciation and oral English fluency focused on Asian and Western ESL/EFL contexts with limited empirical research on the interplay of factors (linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural). They insufficiently investigated the impact of code-switching, cultural attitudes towards speech and English media exposure on automaticity and fluency development, while Automaticity Theory was not fully tested in multilingual and multicultural contexts like Sierra Leone.

The relevant literature in this work revealed the knowledge gap that exists in extant literature. However, there are a few automaticity theories on oral English fluency in the country, but these are on the impact of code-switching, such as those of Steoral et al. (2025), Thulla et al. (2021) and Stevens et al. (2023). Developments in oral English fluency practice in the country's academic institutions need to be investigated for effective oral English fluency and proficiency. Thus, the aim of this ESL oral proficiency test for senior secondary school learners is to assess best practices that will help combat these lapses.

This study also addresses a comparative practice gap in understanding the dual impact of lack of English fluency on both academic performance and social integration, particularly in senior school settings. It provides insights into teachers' perspectives, highlights the need for effective support systems, and offers practical implications for imperial proficiency tests in senior secondary school learners with limited English fluency. By offering an

empirical and multifaceted approach, this research contributes valuable new insights to the field of education and language proficiency.

Research Methodology

The study's mixed-method approach yielded accurate data on individuals, circumstances and events as well as correlations between variables. Surveys of the sample population, questionnaires, conversations and class observation were the data collection techniques used. A speaking evaluation method was used to gauge the learners' capacity for unstructured peer communication as well as supervised contact with instructors and researchers. They were also taught the parallels and discrepancies between English and their original tongues. The learners recited short stories, passages of text, or open conversations as exactly and clearly as they could, even though the researchers' main focus was on correct pronunciation to evaluate the learners' oral fluency skills and proficiency. To guarantee that the sample is representative of the target population, Slovin's sample size formula was used to determine the sample size. A purposive random sampling procedure was then employed and arrived at 1000 respondents using 4 as the sample size interval.

Ethical Consideration

Confidentiality was maintained by assuring participants that all information provided would be kept secure and used solely for academic purposes. Data were analysed collectively rather than individually to prevent identification. In line with this, anonymity and privacy were protected by concealing respondents' identities in all research documents, ensuring that neither personal nor institutional information could be traced back to them. Accuracy was another important consideration. The researchers ensured that all reported findings reflected participants' views truthfully and were not taken out of context. Objectivity was also upheld, as the researchers avoided personal bias and ensured that all perspectives were fairly represented.

Integrity guided the researchers' conduct throughout the study. Participants were protected from physical and psychological harm and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was obtained through signed consent forms, which clearly outlined the purpose of the study and participants' rights.

Debriefing was conducted to explain the true nature of the research before and after participation, ensuring that respondents were fully aware and comfortable. Participants' rights were respected at all times, including the freedom to skip questions or decline participation entirely. Data protection measures were implemented to safeguard information from unauthorised access. Furthermore, the researchers ensured that the study was free from

plagiarism by properly acknowledging all sources and avoiding misrepresentation of information. Overall, these ethical practices ensured transparency, trust, and credibility in the research process.

Results

The results were analysed via the study objectives: discerning the relationship between learners' bi/multilingual backgrounds and their English adeptness and, the influence of societal and cultural temperateness on language learning. This is done to determine the research effectiveness in improving the oral fluency gauche.

Objective 1: Determining the relationship between learners' bi or multilingual backgrounds and their English adeptness

Table 1: Speaker's language(s) background and speaker's L2 proficiency level correlation

Districts	Learners	Responses			
		Agree	(%)	Disagree	(%)
Bo	400	385	85	15	5
Bonthe	150	102	68	48	32
Moyamba	250	225	90	25	10
Pujehun	200	160	80	40	20

Table 1 The study investigated the correlation between speakers' L1 backgrounds and their English language proficiencies. Findings indicated that the majority of participants in Bo District acknowledged significant differences between English and their native languages in terms of pronunciation, spelling and sound systems. In Bo District, 85% of respondents agreed that these differences had a considerable impact on spoken English acquisition and vocabulary development. The study suggested that, if not carefully addressed with a strong emphasis on spoken English principles, these differences could lead to persistent pronunciation challenges. This trend was further supported by data from other districts, with 68% of respondents in Bonthe, 90% in Moyamba, and 80% in Pujehun expressing similar views. However, a minority of participants disagreed, arguing that the differences between their native languages and English were not significant and had minimal impact on oral fluency. Bonthe District recorded the highest level of disagreement at 32%, followed by Pujehun with 20% and Moyamba with 10%, while Bo District had the lowest proportion of dissenting responses at 5%.

These findings highlighted varying perceptions across districts regarding the influence of L1 on English language learning. From the table, it is concluded that the differences that exist between these two languages pose a serious problem for learners from multilingual backgrounds. This is in line with the studies of Fatima et al. (2024), Luo & Han (2023), Chan, Ying, Hall and Ashley (2016) and Mahmoudi & Mahmoudi (2015), who stated that

multilingualism poses a problem for ESL learners. They focused on sociolinguistic factors, such as L1 influence and cultural restrictions, which provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by learners in this study.

From the perspective of authenticity theory, the study highlighted that oral fluency development is not solely a product of linguistic knowledge but a reflection of learners' engagement in real-life, meaningful language use. Pupils who frequently participated in authentic speaking contexts such as debates, role-plays and classroom discussions tended to develop higher self-confidence, pronunciation accuracy and lexical flexibility. However, where instructional practices remained limited to rote learning or exam-orientated drills, fluency stagnated, revealing a disconnect between academic progression and communicative competence.

In summary, the results from Table 1 demonstrated a critical gap between educational advancement and oral English proficiency across the study area. This discrepancy suggested that despite formal educational attainment, the pedagogical approaches employed were insufficiently communicative and authenticity-based, thereby constraining learners' oral language development. To bridge this gap, the integration of task-based and authentic communicative strategies supported by consistent oral performance assessment that caters to this distinction between learners' background language and ESL was recommended as essential for aligning learners' educational level with their expected oral English fluency outcomes.

Table 2: Influence of L1 Differences on Learners' Oral English Aptitude

District	Learners	Responses		Ratio	
		Agree	Disagree	(%)	(%)
Bo	400	315	85	70.5	20.5
Bonthe	150	130	20	88	12
Moyamba	250	230	20	92	08
Pujehun	200	140	60	70	30

Table 2 presented respondents who agreed that disparities between their L1 and English affect their fluency, proficiency and overall competence in oral English, alongside those who disagreed and believed such differences had little or no effect. The findings indicated that these disparities generally hinder learners' ability to learn, speak, teach and effectively use English. Differences in sound systems were seen to strongly influence pronunciation, spelling, and vocabulary development. The analysis showed that Moyamba District recorded the highest level of agreement, with 92% of respondents affirming that these differences significantly impacted spoken English fluency, knowledge development and pronunciation. Bonthe District followed with 88%, while Pujehun recorded 70%. Bo District had the lowest proportion of agreement at 70.5%. The data also revealed a slight percentage gap between

Moyamba and Bonthe (4%), indicating relatively similar perceptions between the two districts. Overall, most respondents acknowledged that differences between their native languages and English played a substantial role in shaping their language learning and usage.

Conversely, Table 2 also identified respondents who disagreed, stating that there were minimal or no significant differences between the sound systems of their native languages and English. These respondents believed that such differences had little or no impact on their oral fluency. Pujehun District recorded the highest level of disagreement at 30%, followed by Bo with 20.5%, Bonthe with 12%, and Moyamba with the lowest at 8%. This suggested that, for some learners, perceived similarities between languages reduced the influence of L1 on English language acquisition.

The findings demonstrated that phonological transfer from learners' L1s remained a central challenge in oral English fluency development across all four districts, though the perceived severity varied. The data also highlighted a general awareness among learners that sound system mastery and vocabulary growth are mutually reinforcing components of oral proficiency. Within the theoretical framework of authenticity theory, these results suggest that learners benefit most when pronunciation and vocabulary instruction are embedded in real communicative contexts that simulate authentic English use, allowing for both auditory exposure and practical articulation practice.

In conclusion, this shows the total number of learners from Southern Sierra Leone institutions who, based on the responses analysed, determined that these differences, if they exist, have no bearing on their vocabulary knowledge development, pronunciation, oral fluency, learning of oral English, and general use of English in their natural communication exercises because there are few or no differences but more similarities in the sound systems. This suggests that they are proficient in other linguistic areas of the English language and the development of fundamental abilities, such as pronunciation, and that these do not in any way provide a problem to them as learners. As a result, their goal is to become as proficient in English as a native speaker. This is supported by the studies of Akpabio (2024), Peltonen (2024), Kaushika (2024), Rodrigo et al. (2023), and Asia-Pacific Education Researcher (2021). Overall, the data suggest that achieving oral fluency requires instructional approaches that promote repeated exposure, practice, and meaningful interaction in English. By minimising overreliance on conscious rule application and encouraging communicative use, teachers can help learners move from controlled processing to automatic language use, as emphasised by Automaticity Theory.

Table 3: Learners' Oral English Articulatory and L1 Correlation

District	Learners	Responses		Ratio	
		Agree	Disagree	(%)	(%)
Bo	400	160	240	40	60
Bonthe	150	136	14	93	07
Moyamba	250	226	24	92	08
Pujehun	200	160	40	60	40

Table 3 examined respondents who affirmed a correlation between their L1 competence and English language proficiency. The findings indicated that a large majority of respondents in Bonthe District (93%) reported that their oral English competence was comparable to their native language ability and that they felt confident speaking English. This was closely followed by Moyamba District (92%), while Pujehun (60%) and Bo District (40%) recorded lower levels of agreement.

In contrast, a significant proportion of respondents in Bo District (60%) disagreed, stating that their fluency and proficiency in their L1 did not correspond with their competence in English. This view was also shared by respondents in Pujehun (40%), Moyamba (8%), and Bonthe (7%). The data further revealed minimal variation at the upper tier between Bonthe and Moyamba (a 1% difference), while a wider gap of 20% existed between Bo and Pujehun at the lower tier. These findings have important implications for Automaticity Theory. The strong correlation reported in Bonthe and Moyamba suggests that higher proficiency in L1 may facilitate the transfer of underlying linguistic skills, thereby supporting the development of automaticity in English. Learners in these districts are more likely to process language rapidly and with less conscious effort, leading to greater fluency and confidence.

Conversely, the weaker correlation observed in Bo and Pujehun points to limited transfer and greater L1 interference, which can hinder the progression from controlled to automatic processing. This interplay between L1 competence and L2 development highlights that while L1 can serve as a cognitive foundation, significant structural differences may disrupt automaticity, requiring more targeted, practice-based instruction to achieve fluent and spontaneous English use. This is in line with Duan. (2024) Akpabio, (2024), Hasumi, (2024) Thulla, Moriba, Adom & Mensah-Gborie (2021); Yaseen (2018) and Ying Zheng (2008) who noted that Speaking plays a crucial role in influencing learners' vocabulary knowledge development, pronunciation and oral English learning despite conflicting opinions that there are differences between the sound systems of their mother tongues, as shown by the analysis above.

Although some of these respondents downplayed the impact of phonological differences, they nonetheless acknowledged the importance of deliberate attention to oral English practice. They emphasized that even in the

presence of perceived sound system similarities, effective oral English learning required careful pronunciation training, continuous exposure to authentic spoken English and active vocabulary development. They also recognized that comprehensible input that is, consistent engagement with accurate English speech models was crucial for refining both pronunciation and vocabulary competence.

Together, the findings demonstrated that phonological transfer from learners' L1s remained a central challenge in oral English fluency development across all four districts, though the perceived severity varied. The data also highlighted a general awareness among students that sound system mastery and vocabulary growth are mutually reinforcing components of oral proficiency. Within the theoretical framework of Authenticity Theory, these results suggest that learners benefit most when pronunciation and vocabulary instruction are embedded in real communicative contexts that simulate authentic English use, allowing for both auditory exposure and practical articulation practice.

Objective 2; Influence of societal and cultural temperateness on learning English.

Table 4: Speaking English beyond the Classroom Environment

District	Learners	Responses		Ratio	
		Occasionally	Never	(%)	(%)
Bo	400	280	120	70	30
Bonthe	150	26	124	16	86
Moyamba	250	15	235	08	92
Pujehun	200	30	170	15	85

Table 4 presented respondents who reported that they either never or only occasionally practised oral English outside the classroom due to sociocultural constraints. The data showed that a majority of respondents in Bo District (70%) indicated that they occasionally practised speaking English in informal contexts, such as with friends, family and within their communities. This was followed by Bonthe District (16%), Pujehun District (15%), and Moyamba District (8%).

In contrast, a significant number of respondents reported that they never used English in their everyday interactions. Moyamba District recorded the highest proportion at 92%, followed by Bonthe (86%), Pujehun (85%), and Bo District (30%).

These findings are explained through automaticity theory, which emphasises that fluency develops through frequent, meaningful and repeated use of language. In districts such as Moyamba, Bonthe and Pujehun, where the majority of learners reported little or no open practice, opportunities for repetition and real-life application were limited. This restriction hindered the development of automaticity, as learners remained dependent on conscious

effort rather than achieving spontaneous and fluent speech. Conversely, respondents in Bo District who reported occasional practice experienced more gradual improvement in fluency, as regular exposure and use of English in authentic contexts support the transition from controlled processing to automatic language use. Overall, the data underscored the critical role of sociocultural environment in either facilitating or constraining the development of automaticity in oral English proficiency.

This is in connection with the studies of Stevens & Sheriff (2025); the findings demonstrated that phonological transfer from learners' L1s remained a central challenge in oral English fluency development across all four districts, though the perceived severity varied. The data also highlighted a general awareness among students that sound system mastery and vocabulary growth are mutually reinforcing components of oral proficiency. Within the theoretical framework of authenticity theory, these results suggest that learners benefit most when pronunciation and vocabulary instruction are embedded in real communicative contexts that simulate authentic English use, allowing for both auditory exposure and practical articulation practice. Duan (2024); Akpabio (2024); Kaushika (2024). Luo (2023) and Rodrigo et al. (2023) and Zhang (2022) noted that the lack of motivation by societal and cultural stakeholders in encouraging English as a second language or English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners impedes the growth of oral fluency and competency. They also argued that society and cultural background have a lot to play in the oral fluency achievement of ESL/EFL learners. Since these districts were Muslim-dominated and pledged allegiance to the Arabic language, speaking the English language is seen as a deviation from their cultural and societal norms.

Activities such as creative writing, poetry composition and public readings were identified as instrumental in fostering learners' oral confidence and classroom participation. The data further indicated that consistent engagement in public speaking exercises enhanced students' social interaction, presentation skills, critical thinking and leadership capacity. Learners who frequently participated in such activities demonstrated resilience and composure when facing opposition, thereby validating the assertion that "the empowerment and eagerness for oration are cultivated during early schooling". This finding reinforced the principle that frequent exposure to authentic communicative practices enables learners to internalise linguistic structures and sociocultural norms, ultimately contributing to holistic oral English development.

From the perspective of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this study underscored that the development of oral English fluency among the respondents was a socially mediated process. Learners acquired communicative competence not merely through formal instruction but through

collaborative interactions, peer modelling and teacher scaffolding within authentic speaking environments. Public speaking activities, debates and classroom discussions provided what Vygotsky termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a space in which learners advanced from dependent to independent use of English through guided participation. When teachers and peers offered supportive feedback in these authentic communicative contexts, learners internalised both the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of English use. In this way, oral proficiency evolved as an interactive co-construction of knowledge, rather than a static individual ability. This integration of authenticity theory and sociocultural theory therefore illuminated that genuine, contextually meaningful language use combined with social support served as the most effective pathway for fostering confidence, fluency and native-like oral English competence among senior secondary school learners in Sierra Leone.

Table 5: Simultaneous use of native and English cultural practices

District	Learners	Responses		Ratio	
		Agree	Disagree	(%)	(%)
Bo	400	160	240	40	60
Bonthe	150	143	07	93	07
Moyamba	250	228	22	92	08
Pujehun	200	120	80	60	40

Table 5 presented respondents who agreed that they found it confusing to practise both their native and English cultures simultaneously within their homes and communities. Many participants explained that their societies often encouraged exclusive use of indigenous languages, largely due to the influence of language loyalists and limited exposure to formal English education. The findings showed that a significant proportion of respondents in Bonthe District (93%) reported avoiding the simultaneous use of both cultures because it created confusion for them and for members of their communities. This pattern was closely followed by Moyamba District (92%), Pujehun (60%), and Bo District (40%). The analysis further revealed that most respondents in this category were individuals who had limited interaction with urban environments or lived with relatives who had little or no English education. In some cases, community influences such as strong adherence to indigenous linguistic traditions or religious priorities discouraged the adoption of English cultural practices, reinforcing a preference for native language use. This is supported by the studies of researchers like Kaushika (2024), Peltonen (2024), Huda (2024), Rodrigo et al. (2023), Jacob (2022) and Knapp (2021).

On the other hand, the table also showed a miniscule proportion of respondents in Bo District (60%) who opposed the above view on the simultaneous use of both cultures because it never created confusion for them or other members of their communities. This array was closely followed by

Pujehun District (40%), Moyamba (08%), and Bonthe District (07%). This is in line with the studies of researchers like Yihao (2024) and Cahyani (2024). Crompton (2024) and Crystal (2020) opined that comprehensible input from society (parents, mates, friends, teachers, etc.) goes a long way in enhancing learners' oral abilities and language learning and acquisition.

It was revealed during discussions that this was because of the fear that their native languages and cultures may be forgotten, endangered or abandoned. They confirmed that parents or community members in Islamic-dominated areas did not encourage them to learn/practise English culture before their Islamic (Quran) education. This was said to have greatly hindered their oral English fluency and learning processes.

Thus, they found difficulty in speaking English because the native cultures most times conflicted with the practice of English culture. This wave of not allowing learners to freely practise the English culture was against the Islamic preaching and culture. This was mostly common among the districts that were Islam-dominated, and these Muslims still wanted to continue their grip on such communities. They also revealed that community members discouraged learners from practising the English culture for various reasons ranging from language culture maintenance to language loyalty. The respondents were of the opinion that these differences can be dealt with through regular practice of both cultures, even if moderately, at schools and homes. The result established conformity in the cultural challenges faced by ESL learners in the study area and Africa as a whole. This was similar to other researchers like Alcazaren & Rafanan (2017), who, in their study, emphasise that culture is one of the elements that rapidly depreciates the learning and teaching of ESL in Asian and African countries.

From the perspective of automaticity theory, these findings suggest that limited and inconsistent exposure to English restricts the development of automatic language processing. When learners are unable to integrate English into their daily sociocultural practices, they lack the repeated, meaningful interaction necessary to internalise the language. As a result, their use of English remains effortful and controlled rather than fluent and automatic. The tension between native and English cultural practices, therefore, creates an environment where learners cannot practise English frequently enough to achieve automaticity, ultimately hindering their oral proficiency and communicative confidence.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed a pervasive deficiency in learners' ability to construct grammatically well-formed and pragmatically appropriate English sentences with a high degree of fluency. This limitation was indicative of underdeveloped procedural linguistic competence, where learners exhibit

restricted control over syntactic structuring, lexical retrieval, and real-time language processing. Consequently, this lack of automaticity significantly constrained their oral performance, resulting in consistently poor outcomes in oral English assessments, as well as in broader national and international examinations that required spontaneous language production and communicative competence.

Furthermore, the data demonstrated a marked spatial disparity in fluency levels, with learners in the interior regions of Sierra Leone exhibiting substantially lower oral proficiency compared to their counterparts in district headquarters towns. This disparity can be attributed to differential exposure to English, limited access to quality pedagogical resources, and varying sociolinguistic environments that either constrained or facilitated authentic language use. Learners in more remote settings are often embedded in predominantly L1-dominant communities, thereby reducing opportunities for meaningful interaction in English and inhibiting the development of communicative automaticity.

Importantly, these findings corroborated and extended prior empirical and observational accounts, including WAEC external examiners' reports that have consistently highlighted declining standards in spoken English performance. They are also aligned with contemporary research by Duan (2024), Akpabio (2024), and Kaushika (2024). Peltonen (2024) and Rodrigo et al. (2023) all underscored the interplay between limited communicative practice, ineffective pedagogical approaches and sociocultural constraints as critical determinants of reduced oral fluency. Collectively, this body of evidence reinforces the argument that oral English proficiency is not merely a function of formal instruction but rather an emergent outcome of sustained interaction between cognitive processing capacity, linguistic knowledge and sociocultural context.

In their study, Stevens, Challay and Thulla (2025), drawing on and extending the foundational work of August and Shanahan (2006), reported a significant disparity in academic attainment associated with language background. Their findings indicated that only 10% of pupils identified as first-language English speakers successfully completed secondary education, compared to 31% of non-English language learners. This counterintuitive trend suggested the presence of complex sociolinguistic and educational variables, including differential motivation, instructional quality and language support structures. More critically, the persistence of this disparity across second- and third-generation immigrant cohorts pointed to a deeply entrenched, intergenerational transmission of linguistic and educational disadvantage, likely mediated by structural inequalities and limited access to enriched language learning environments.

Within the West African context, empirical evidence from the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) Chief Examiner's reports (2021–2024) consistently underscored a systemic decline in English language proficiency among candidates. Quantitatively, the English Language Performance Score Range (A1–C6) recorded a decrease from 54.06% in 2021 to 46.79% in 2024, representing a statistically significant decline of 7.27 percentage points. This downward trajectory, further corroborated by longitudinal reports in the Daily Guide (2021–2024 editions), suggested a sustained deterioration in learners' communicative competence, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. Such trends may be interpreted as symptomatic of broader deficiencies in pedagogical practices, assessment alignment and opportunities for authentic language use.

From a theoretical standpoint, Brown (2011) posited that oral production remains one of the most cognitively demanding aspects of second language acquisition, even when learners demonstrate partial mastery of linguistic subcomponents such as phonological clustering, redundancy management, colloquial expressions and prosodic features like intonation. This assertion highlighted the distinction between declarative knowledge of language forms and the procedural ability to deploy them spontaneously in real-time interaction. Brown's argument is particularly salient in the context of Sierra Leone, where learners often exhibit receptive competence and partial structural awareness but lack the fluency and automaticity required for effective oral communication.

Consequently, the convergence of these empirical and theoretical perspectives suggests that the challenges observed in West African Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) performance are not merely attributable to deficits in linguistic knowledge but rather to limitations in the procedural and automatic conversion of that knowledge under communicative conditions. This reinforces the need for pedagogical interventions that prioritise interactive, communicative and fluency-orientated approaches aimed at bridging the gap between language competence and performance in authentic assessment contexts.

Conclusion

The study's findings showed that the majority of the pupils struggled to speak English fluently. This is because there are religious and sociocultural restrictions on most of the learners, especially those in the Muslim-dominated areas, and the late exposure of these learners to the English language is also a contributing factor. One-on-one interviews with instructors and learners in the study area complemented qualitative responses. Across the interview responses, the following patterns emerged: Vocabulary and pronunciation were the two most immediate barriers to fluent speech, while L1 background

determined the extent of phonological and grammatical transfer that affected fluency. Sociocultural factors also shaped learners' confidence, participation and willingness to speak. It was also concluded that teaching methods either supported or hindered oral fluency, depending on whether they provided adequate communicative practice.

In the interviews, the respondents were able to point out most of the lapses in the educators' attitude, teaching methodology and interaction with their pupils. They were also able to proffer some solutions to these ineptitudes. Their society and the multilingual background of the pupils were also revealed to be a negative player to some extent in the learners' acquisition and learning of oral English fluency. These respondents were found to be lagging behind in accessing the web for teaching and learning purposes because of many reasons that were expressed during the interview sessions. This research revealed the knowledge gap that existed. However, a few works and relevant information garnered by respondents on oral English fluency in the country, if properly utilised, are of help in fostering the intended improvements. This work's findings will lend support in closing the existing knowledge gap in oral English fluency tactlessness in the country, as this research assessed the best sociocultural and linguistic practices that will help combat these lapses.

In conclusion, the research demonstrated that unless pronunciation and oral skill development are systematically prioritised, students in the study area are likely to continue to underperform in national and international examinations. Educators must therefore provide structured oral English drills, consistent pronunciation modelling and opportunities for public speaking to foster both accuracy and automaticity in learners' oral production. Such deliberate and sustained interventions are essential for bridging the gap between L1 influence and L2 proficiency, ultimately enabling learners to achieve functional and confident English communication. The study also demonstrated that learners' oral English performance is profoundly shaped by a nexus of teaching-learning procedures, classroom conditions, teacher modelling and sociocultural influences. By implementing sustained, structured and culturally sensitive instructional strategies that integrate public speaking, audio-visual tools and automaticity theory principles, teachers can cultivate learners' oral proficiency, confidence and motivation. Concurrently, reflective teaching practices and active community engagement serve to reinforce these gains, transforming teaching challenges into opportunities for improved learner outcomes and enhanced performance in national and international assessments.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study made several important contributions to existing scholarly knowledge on English oral fluency, especially in the context of senior

secondary school learners in multilingual environments. These contributions were categorised into theoretical, empirical and practical (pedagogical) contributions.

Theoretically, this study contributed by expanding understanding of fluency beyond speed and accuracy. It also showed that vocabulary gaps, pronunciation anxiety and sociocultural discomfort also significantly shaped fluency. The result demonstrated that learning is socially mediated, confidence is culturally conditioned, while community attitudes shape language use. This research broadened the fluency definition by emphasising understudied psycholinguistic and sociocultural factors; enriched theories of L1 transfer by evidencing its linguistic and cultural dimensions; and deepened theoretical debates through real-world examples of culture's impact on language performance.

Empirically, this study provided context-specific evidence from senior secondary schools, filling a gap in SLA literature, and demonstrated the interplay of multiple factors, such as vocabulary gaps leading to hesitation and thus loss of fluency; L1 background leading to mispronunciation, anxiety and reduced output; and sociocultural pressure leading to avoidance, low practice and poor fluency. This holistic view advanced empirical understanding of how fluency was jointly shaped by linguistic, psychological and cultural forces.

Pedagogically, practical contributions made revealed gaps in current teaching practices, such as teacher-centred methods, exam-driven instructions and limited oral activities directly reduced opportunities for speaking. This information can be used to guide curriculum reforms toward communicative and pupil-centred approaches. The study highlighted the importance of vocabulary and pronunciation training with culturally relevant recommendations, since sociocultural norms affect learners' confidence. These findings suggested safe speaking environments, culturally inclusive topics and strategies to reduce peer ridicule.

Methodologically, contributions demonstrated the value of qualitative interviews for fluency research, as most fluency studies relied on recordings and quantitative measures (speed, pauses). The use of interviews revealed that psychological and social factors are not captured by numbers. This encouraged more mixed methods or qualitative approaches in future research. It offered a model for analysing fluency factors holistically, as the study structure examined vocabulary, pronunciation, L1 sociocultural factors, and pedagogy, which offered a comprehensive framework for future researchers.

Overall, this study contributed to knowledge by expanding theoretical understanding of oral fluency to include psychological and cultural dimensions, thereby providing new empirical insights from a unique educational context. It improved pedagogical practice by identifying practical teaching and learning barriers and demonstrating holistic methodology for

fluency research. Together, these contributions enriched both the academic literature and classroom practice in second language oral proficiency.

It was advised that English language teachers offer regular public speaking activities to help students develop their social skills, interactions, presentations and capacity for thought and leadership. This will help students become more proficient oral English learners. Giving children the flexibility to articulate well-reasoned, impassioned ideas, thoughts and impressions that are worth hearing and presenting to others will improve their oral English fluency. As an illustration, having students create and read poetry, stories, or books out loud can make learning entertaining for both students and teachers.

Summary and Recommendations

The study investigated sociocultural and linguistic factors affecting oral English proficiency among learners in Sierra Leone, using a mixed-methods approach that combined questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with 1000 participants. Findings revealed that over 85% of learners experienced significant pronunciation difficulties, largely due to first language (L1) phonological interference, limited exposure to spoken English and insufficient explicit pronunciation instruction. Traditional teaching methods, particularly grammar-translation and rote memorisation, were found to hinder oral fluency by prioritising rule memorisation over meaningful communication and interactive practice. In contrast, learners exposed to more resource-rich, urban environments demonstrated higher proficiency levels, highlighting the importance of environmental input and access to English in media and social contexts.

The study further identified the effectiveness of learner-centred, interactive strategies such as public speaking, debates, peer discussions, and the use of audio-visual materials, which aided in enhancing fluency, confidence and communicative competence. These approaches are supported by repeated, meaningful practice, which promotes the automaticity theory of language skills, enabling learners to process and produce speech more efficiently. However, sociocultural factors, including parental attitudes, religious influences and strong attachment to native languages, often restricted students' use of English outside the classroom, thereby limiting opportunities for practice and creating disparities in proficiency.

The findings emphasised that improving oral English proficiency requires more than curriculum coverage; it demands the creation of authentic communicative environments, encouragement of learner autonomy and the integration of culturally sensitive teaching practices. Overall, the study concluded that a shift from teacher-centred, rote-based instruction to interactive, communicative and contextually responsive pedagogies is essential for enhancing oral proficiency. Such approaches not only improve

linguistic accuracy but also foster critical thinking, confidence and leadership skills, equipping learners for effective participation in academic and professional communication.

Recommendations

Since language, societal and cultural differences contribute to learning difficulties for students, it is recommended that teachers adopt a social, class and cultural perspective when designing lessons and teaching English to learners of English as a second or foreign language. Implementing these strategies can provide new direction to schools and positively influence students' performance in national and international examinations such as WASSCE and the International English Language Testing Skills (IELTS).

The study revealed that respondents faced difficulties with spelling during oral English lessons and encountered challenges in word recognition, which affected their vocabulary development. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers design lessons emphasising phonetic drills, spelling, word identification and recognition exercises. Activities such as dictation, spelling bees, vocabulary drills and oral speech exercises can help reinforce these skills.

Many students reported that differences in sounds between their mother tongues and English, combined with other challenges, negatively affected their willingness to practise speaking English. Some avoided speaking for fear of being ridiculed. It is therefore recommended that teachers design courses that specifically address these challenges and provide supportive opportunities for students to practise oral English confidently.

Sociocultural Exposure: Students should be encouraged to engage with English media, including films, podcasts, books and social media, to improve their listening and speaking skills. Parents, religious leaders, and other community stakeholders should actively support learners in practising oral English both at school and within the community, as this will enhance performance in WASSCE and other public examinations.

The adoption of interactive learning approaches where teachers incorporate role-plays, discussions, debates and storytelling to promote active learner participation and improve oral communication skills. Technology integration was recommended to include the use of language learning applications, online pronunciation tools and multimedia resources, which can provide students with additional exposure to spoken English and support independent learning.

Encouraging English-speaking environments to include schools promoting and organising English-speaking clubs, competitions and interactive activities that motivate learners to use the language outside their classrooms. Incorporation of teacher training and modern teaching methods

where educators are trained in learner-centred approaches that focus on communication-based learning rather than rote memorisation. Rural Area Support by Government and educational institutions to invest in improving language learning resources in rural schools to bridge the urban-rural gap in English proficiency.

It is strongly advised that teachers of English pay careful attention to language and sociocultural differences, recognising their influence on students' oral English proficiency and communicative competence. Such considerations should inform all aspects of instructional practice, including lesson planning, course design, classroom exercises, assignments and practical presentations. By explicitly integrating these factors into teaching, educators can create learning environments that foster students' oral English development, enhance participation and improve overall performance in both classroom and public examination contexts.

The study further indicated that multimedia and audiovisual resources constitute highly effective tools for enhancing oral English learning. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate diverse media, including action, comedy and mystery films; television programmes; online platforms such as YouTube and Vidmate; and other interactive audio-visual content into lesson delivery. Exposure to authentic English usage through these media enables students to internalise correct pronunciation, intonation, vocabulary and grammatical structures, while simultaneously providing cultural context that enhances sociolinguistic competence.

The strategic use of audio-visual aids aligns with principles of automaticity theory, facilitating repeated practice and the gradual development of fluent, accurate and contextually appropriate oral communication.

The research also revealed that a significant proportion of teachers in the study area lacked formal training in English language pedagogy. This gap underscores the need for comprehensive teacher professional development programmes focused on the teaching of English as a second language. Training should encompass the design and implementation of communicative lessons, selection and adaptation of materials that effectively support oral language learning, and the facilitation of interactive activities such as debates, role-plays, public speaking and storytelling. Teachers must also be equipped with strategies to scaffold students' learning, manage classroom dynamics and address challenges arising from L1 interference and sociocultural diversity.

Additionally, teachers should receive targeted training on assessment techniques that accurately measure oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence in realistic, high-stakes contexts such as WASSCE and IELTS. By developing a reflective and evidence-based approach to teaching, educators can cultivate professional credibility, ensure

alignment between instructional goals and student outcomes, and support learners in achieving both academic and communicative success.

Enhancing oral English teaching in institutions requires an integrated approach that combines sociocultural sensitivity, multimedia-facilitated learning, rigorous teacher training and evidence-based pedagogical strategies. Implementing these recommendations can significantly improve students' oral English competencies, foster lifelong language learning skills and position learners for success in national and international assessment contexts.

Learners of English as a second language (ESL) benefit significantly from the use of visual aids, whether created by teachers or students themselves. Self-created visual tools, such as vocabulary cards, graphic organisers, sentence frames and other illustrative devices, facilitate knowledge transfer, reinforce prior learning and help consolidate existing knowledge while promoting the comprehension of new information. It is therefore recommended that oral English teachers encourage students to develop their own visual aids, integrating artistic and creative expressions into lessons. Such practices foster reflective thinking, enhance vocabulary retention and provide students with greater confidence in expressing themselves orally.

Moreover, incorporating ESL learners into interactive activities, including drawing exercises, picture-based spelling, script performances, and theatrical plays, offers additional avenues for knowledge demonstration and language practice. Engaging students in these forms of active learning not only strengthens oral communication skills but also enhances learners' proficiency, fluency and communicative competence. Teachers should systematically incorporate public presentation drills, role-plays and performance-based activities into the curriculum to provide meaningful opportunities for students to practise English in authentic contextualised situations.

The study also highlighted the persistence of traditional teacher-centred instructional approaches, such as the grammar-translation method and rote memorisation, which rely heavily on textbooks and limit active student engagement. To counter this, teachers should adopt learner-centred pedagogical methods that promote participation, interaction and collaborative group work, thereby shifting the classroom dynamic toward student engagement and autonomous learning. Continuous professional development and training are essential to equip teachers with contemporary teaching strategies, instructional innovations and effective classroom management techniques that enhance learner-centred learning.

Learning English as a second or foreign language demands considerable cognitive effort, especially in environments with limited exposure to native speakers. Frequent review, repetition, and practice are critical for reinforcing vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Teachers should therefore motivate and guide students to engage in regular practice,

providing structured opportunities for revision and reinforcement to strengthen memory retention and promote language automaticity, as emphasised in Automaticity Theory.

The research revealed that students whose first language was not Mende, which is the dominant local language, often experienced stereotyping and marginalisation in classrooms where Mende was used alongside English. Such practices contributed to feelings of isolation, acculturative stress and negative attitudes toward both teachers and the English language. Teachers are thus advised to adopt culturally responsive teaching approaches, ensuring that all learners are treated equitably, that linguistic diversity is respected, and that students' cultural identities are acknowledged and valued. Creating an inclusive classroom environment mitigates social and psychological barriers, fostering greater engagement and motivation in oral English learning.

At a systemic level, it is recommended that the government and educational authorities ensure adequate provision and dissemination of instructional resources to support oral English acquisition. Developing oral fluency requires integrated curricula that combine speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Schools should allocate additional time for oral practice, both inside and outside the classroom, to facilitate sustained language use. Furthermore, early interventions at the primary school level are essential to establish a strong language foundation, ensuring students are well-prepared for oral English learning in secondary school. Supplementary lessons, language clubs and extracurricular activities focusing on English communication can reinforce classroom learning and provide additional practice opportunities.

To enhance oral English proficiency among senior secondary learners, a multifaceted approach is recommended. Integrating technology into language instruction, such as language learning applications, online pronunciation tools, podcasts and interactive multimedia, can provide learners with authentic English input and strengthen listening, speaking and pronunciation skills. Peer-assisted learning strategies, including collaborative projects, group discussions and speaking tasks, can foster mutual learning while reducing anxiety associated with oral practice. Teachers should also provide timely and constructive formative feedback on pronunciation, grammar and fluency, reinforcing correct usage and addressing errors in real time.

Community and parental engagement is equally crucial; parents, religious leaders and other stakeholders should actively support students' use of English in social contexts, creating safe and encouraging spaces for practice beyond the classroom. Assessment reforms are also recommended, emphasising continuous performance-based evaluations such as presentations,

debates and oral portfolios, which complement standardised testing and provide a more holistic measure of oral proficiency.

Finally, further studies are recommended to investigate the long-term impact of culturally responsive, technology-supported and interactive oral English interventions on learners' linguistic competence, motivation and academic achievement. Such research could explore how societal and cultural factors, L1 influence and audiovisual learning strategies interact to shape oral English development, providing insights for more effective curriculum design and instructional practices.

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