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STANDARD ENGLISH, LIBERIAN ENGLISH, AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: RETHINKING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN LIBERIA

SUNDAY OLAOLUWAGBAMILA DAWODU
Department of Language and Literature
College of Arts and Sciences
William V. S. Tubman University, Harper. Liberia
dwdinfiniti@gmail.com
+2348023299989

Abstract
In postcolonial African higher education, standard language ideology regulates academic access through rigid hierarchies that marginalise local linguistic realities. This study examined the tension between Standard English (SE) and Liberian English (LE) at William V. S. Tubman University, where students navigate a persistent linguistic duality. While LE serves as the primary medium for reasoning and interaction, institutional norms continue to frame it through a deficit lens rather than as a pedagogical resource. Using a qualitatively driven mixed-methods approach, the research triangulates lived classroom experiences with institutional data. Evidence was generated through semi-structured interviews with lecturers (n=6), focus group discussions with undergraduates (n=18), nine classroom observations, and an analysis of pass rates in foundational English modules. Findings reveal a significant policy-practice gap: although SE is the mandated medium of instruction, LE dominates classroom discourse through routine code-mixing and limited instructor modelling of academic SE. Students display a dual linguistic consciousness, affirming LE as central to identity while conflating it with SE for academic purposes. This misalignment, termed the 'equivalence trap', contributes to persistently low pass rates below 40 per cent, highlighting a structural mismatch between monolithic assessment and multilingual repertoires. The study argues that underperformance reflects post-conflict disruptions to SE exposure rather than inherent linguistic deficiency. It calls for a shift toward a scaffolded, justice-oriented pedagogy that treats translanguaging as a strategic bridge in post-conflict higher education.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Liberian English, Standard English, Linguistic Justice, Post-Conflict Higher Education

Introduction

Institutional assessment data from William V. S. Tubman University indicate that pass rates in foundational English courses have remained below 40 per cent across several academic years. In a system where English is the sole medium of instruction, assessment, and scholarly communication, such performance signals a structural crisis rather than isolated student weakness. Academic English proficiency is central to progression, graduation, and employability. When students repeatedly fail English, they are effectively excluded from the social mobility that higher education is intended to enable (Altbach et al., 2019). This situation must be examined within a broader sociolinguistic frame. Standard English functions as the sanctioned academic norm, while Liberian English serves as the dominant language of everyday interaction and identity. The unequal valuation of these varieties reflects what Lippi-Green (2012) terms standard language ideology, whereby one variety is naturalised as legitimate and others are rendered deficient. Under such conditions, linguistic difference becomes educational disadvantage.

Research on the ‘extinction of experience’ suggests that sustained exposure to formal language varieties is decreasing in many contexts (Soga et al., 2021). Although Standard English is the official medium

of instruction in Liberia, its functional use in classroom discourse remains sporadic. Consequently, students often encounter formal English only in high-stakes environments, such as examinations, official documents, and corrective feedback, while informal varieties dominate daily interactions. This limited exposure causes the standard variety to be associated with judgement rather than communication, fostering a sense of linguistic alienation. In this dynamic, academic English is perceived as a distant, inaccessible tool relevant only to assessment (Bourdieu, 1991; Canagarajah, 2012). Yet Liberian English is not an incomplete approximation of a standard form. Studies in World Englishes demonstrate that localised varieties are systematic and historically grounded linguistic systems (Kachru, 1992; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2010). However, educational institutions frequently frame such varieties through a deficit lens. In post-conflict Liberia, where educational infrastructures were severely disrupted, these tensions are intensified by uneven teacher preparation and limited material resources (UNESCO, 2023).

Across West Africa, the coexistence of local Englishes and institutional standards presents ongoing pedagogical challenges (Bamgbose, 2018). Liberia's linguistic history is distinctive, shaped primarily by American English norms. Despite this legacy, sustained exposure to formal academic registers remains limited for many students. The gap between inherited standards and lived linguistic realities places considerable pressure on universities. Empirical research on English language learning in Liberian higher education remains sparse. Much regional scholarship focuses on basic and secondary education (Adegbija, 1996; Ouane & Glanz, 2010). Yet university-level failure has direct implications for credential attainment and national human capital development (Marginson, 2016). Moreover, deficit-oriented explanations often locate responsibility within students rather than interrogating institutional expectations (Valencia, 2010). Preliminary observations suggest that some students perceive Liberian English and Standard English as functionally equivalent for academic purposes. Persistent failure may therefore reflect limited perceived necessity rather than limited ability.

This study examines the relationship between language attitudes, pedagogical practices, and academic performance within the English programme at William V. S. Tubman University. It argues that low achievement in Standard English reflects a structural misalignment between institutional norms and students' linguistic repertoires. The inquiry is guided by three specific research questions, addressed sequentially to explore the intersection of linguistic perception and academic outcomes:

1. Linguistic Attitudes**:** To what extent do students' attitudes toward Standard English and Liberian English influence their engagement with formal academic discourse?
2. Pedagogical Support**:** In what ways do current teaching practices and instructional resources facilitate or hinder the acquisition of the standard variety within higher education?
3. Linguistic Performance**:** What is the relationship between students' observed patterns of language use, specifically the frequency of formal versus informal varieties, and their overall academic performance?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

World Englishes and Standard Language Ideology

Contemporary scholarship situates English within the paradigm of World Englishes, which rejects the notion of a single homogeneous standard and recognises English as pluricentric, shaped by local histories and institutions (Kachru, 1992; Schneider, 2014). Within Kachru's (1992) Three Circles model, Liberia is often placed in the Outer Circle. Yet its settler-colonial history and alignment with American norms complicate this classification (Singler, 1997). English in Liberia emerged both as a settler language and as a marker of elite authority, producing a layered sociolinguistic ecology. Schneider's (2014) Dynamic Model suggests that postcolonial Englishes evolve through stages of nativisation and stabilisation. In Liberia, local norms dominate everyday communication, while exonormative American standards continue to govern education and assessment. This unresolved tension reflects the persistence of standard language ideology, the belief that one variety is inherently superior and academically legitimate (Lippi-Green, 2012). Within higher education, such ideology

operates as a gatekeeping mechanism, shaping curricula, examinations, and professional access (Tollefson, 2018).

Decolonial scholarship frames this hierarchy as a form of epistemic injustice, whereby speakers' knowledge is devalued because of their linguistic identity (Fricker, 2007; Flores & Rosa, 2015). Although World Englishes research affirms linguistic plurality, universities often retain deficit models, particularly under global benchmarking pressures (Bamgbose, 2011). The Liberian context exposes this unresolved contradiction between recognition and regulation.

Liberian English and Linguistic Identity

Liberian English comprises multiple varieties shaped by settler histories, indigenous languages, and global contact. Singler (1997) identifies Settler English, Standard Liberian English, and Vernacular Liberian English along a continuum. These varieties index identity, education, and social status, creating competing perceptions of legitimacy within academic settings. Debate persists regarding decreolisation. Some argue that Vernacular Liberian English is converging towards Standard English through increased exposure (Singler, 2006). Others contend that it is stabilising as an autonomous system (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2010). Evidence from West Africa suggests that linguistic practice is fluid rather than linear, with speakers shifting registers strategically (Adegbite, 2010). However, university assessment frequently demands strict adherence to Standard English, leaving limited space for such flexibility.

Prestige dynamics further complicate learning. Students often value Liberian English as an identity marker while recognising Standard English as a requirement for advancement (Parmegiani & Wildsmith-Cromarty, 2022). This dual orientation may generate linguistic insecurity and reduced participation, factors associated with underperformance in writing-intensive courses (Norton, 2013). Any account of English learning in Liberia must therefore address ideological and affective dimensions, not merely structural features.

Post-Conflict Disruption and Educational Infrastructure

Liberia's civil conflict severely disrupted educational systems, dismantled libraries, displaced educators, and weakened print culture (UNESCO, 2023). Such rupture interrupted the transmission of academic language practices across generations. Brain drain compounded these losses, leaving institutions to uphold international standards with limited material and scholarly support (Sherman, 2022). Research on post-conflict education demonstrates that language policy cannot be separated from institutional fragility (Heugh, 2021). Across Africa, proficiency in the medium of instruction strongly predicts disciplinary success, yet universities often lack writing centres, bridging programmes, and sustained language support (Brock-Utne, 2012; Banda, 2022). In Liberia, students are assessed against norms that neither they nor their lecturers have been adequately resourced to maintain. The issue is therefore structural rather than individual.

Pedagogical Responses

Translanguaging has emerged as a framework that legitimises students' full linguistic repertoires (García & Wei, 2017). Studies in African higher education indicate that it can enhance comprehension and participation (Makalela, 2017). For Liberian students, translanguaging positions Liberian English as a cognitive resource rather than a liability.

Yet translanguaging alone does not resolve the demand for Standard English in global academic and labour markets. Critics caution that identity affirmation without access to dominant norms may entrench inequality (Berlant, 2011; Tollefson & Pérez-Milans, 2018). Contrastive pedagogy offers a complementary strategy by explicitly teaching structural differences between varieties. Evidence from Ghana and Nigeria suggests that systematic contrastive instruction improves grammatical accuracy and writing confidence (Owu-Ewie & Eshun, 2019). However, reliance on imported textbooks and limited locally grounded materials constrain both approaches (Milligan et al., 2016).

Synthesis and Research Gap

Four themes converge: the persistence of standard language ideology, the legitimacy and complexity of Liberian English, the structural effects of post-conflict disruption, and the contested promise of pedagogical reform. Existing studies tend to address these issues separately. Few integrate ideology, classroom practice, institutional history, and assessment in a single framework focused on Liberian higher education.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three interconnected traditions: critical language ideology, translanguaging theory, and sociolinguistic assessment.

Critical language ideology interrogates the naturalisation of Standard English as neutral and meritocratic, revealing its entanglement with power (Lippi-Green, 2012; Milroy, 2020). In Liberia, deviations from standard norms are frequently interpreted as cognitive deficit rather than linguistic difference, shaping lecturer expectations and student self-perception (McLelland, 2021).

Translanguaging theory reconceptualises language as dynamic practice rather than bounded systems (García & Wei, 2014). It provides a scaffold for participation while strategically building access to academic registers. Here, translanguaging is treated not as an end but as a bridge.

Assessment theory foregrounds consequential validity. Messick (1989) argues that assessment is invalid if its consequences systematically disadvantage particular groups. Inoue (2015) further contends that language assessment often measures conformity to dominant norms rather than disciplinary understanding. In Liberia, academic performance may therefore reflect acculturation to Standard English as much as subject mastery.

Together, these frameworks illuminate a central paradox. Ideology marginalises students' primary linguistic resources. Pedagogy seeks inclusion. Assessment ultimately arbitrates success through standardised norms. By integrating these perspectives, the study examines how beliefs, practices, and evaluation regimes interact to shape academic outcomes in Liberian higher education.

Methods

This study employs a qualitatively driven mixed-methods design with quantitative triangulation (QUAL + quan). It is informed by a pragmatist epistemological orientation, which prioritizes problem-focused inquiry and methodological pluralism over allegiance to a single theoretical tradition (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Morgan, 2014). English language learning is therefore approached as both a socially constructed experience and an empirically observable outcome. Qualitative methods provide interpretive depth on language ideology, identity, and pedagogy, while quantitative analysis supports pattern identification and explanatory robustness.

The study was conducted at William V. S. Tubman University in Harper, Maryland County, Liberia. The research focused on ENG 101 and ENG 102, compulsory first-year courses that function as gateways to academic literacy and are associated with persistently high failure rates. Purposive sampling was used across two to four consecutive semesters. The quantitative sample comprised approximately 200 to 400 first-year students. The qualitative sample included 25 to 35 participants, including students, English lecturers, and academic administrators.

The lead researcher has taught at Tubman University for over a decade. This insider position enabled sustained engagement and contextual understanding, recognized markers of qualitative rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To mitigate potential bias, reflexive memos were maintained, observations were minimally intrusive, and peer debriefing with external scholars was used to interrogate interpretations.

Multiple instruments were employed to support triangulation. A structured student questionnaire measured language attitudes and proficiency. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups explored classroom experiences, while classroom observations documented instructional language. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS through descriptive statistics and multiple regression. Qualitative data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Integration was achieved through joint display tables to align qualitative themes with quantitative patterns (Fetters et al., 2013).

Results and Discussion

This section presents integrated findings from quantitative and qualitative data collected in ENG 101 and ENG 102 at William V. S. Tubman University. Consistent with the convergent mixed-methods design, each thematic discussion begins with quantitative patterns followed by qualitative evidence to contextualise those data. Joint display analysis was employed to examine convergence and divergence across datasets (Fetters et al., 2013).

Student Attitudes toward Standard and Liberian English

The first research question examined how students perceive the two primary language varieties within the university environment. Survey data indicate that 71 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement, 'I already speak good English'. While this appears to signal high linguistic confidence, triangulated evidence suggests a perceived equivalence between Liberian English and Standard English that complicates academic acquisition. Although 68 per cent of students reported frequent use of Standard English in academic contexts, an analysis of their writing samples revealed high densities of non-standard morphosyntactic features.

Joint displays reveal that students with the highest self-rated Standard English competence often produced scripts containing consistent tense irregularities and copula omission. Qualitative interviews clarified this discrepancy; as one student remarked, 'English is English. It's the same thing'. This suggests that students operate within a linguistic continuum but remain unaware that specific features of Liberian English are negatively evaluated in formal assessment.

This divergence reflects what Lippi-Green (2012) describes as standard language ideology. The resulting 'equivalence trap' obscures the boundary between socially legitimate speech and institutionally sanctioned writing. While students feel an affective attachment to Liberian English—which correlates positively with oral participation ($r = .37$, $p < .05$), this same attachment can inadvertently mask the specific requirements of the acrolectal variety required for graduation.

Teaching Practices and Resource Support for Acquisition

The second research question addressed the extent to which the institutional ecology supports the acquisition of the standard variety. Classroom observations indicate that teacher-centred instruction predominated in seven of ten sessions. A recurrent 'code-switching loop' emerged: lecturers typically began lessons in Standard English but shifted into Liberian English when student comprehension appeared to falter. Rarely did these instructors return to sustained Standard English modelling once the conceptual point was made.

Lecturers described this practice pragmatically, noting that if they maintain a strict formal register, the students cannot follow the curriculum. While this pedagogical accommodation facilitates immediate participation, it reduces students' exposure to extended academic registers. This lack of sustained input restricts the development of formal writing skills, a finding consistent with research on the necessity of extended language modelling (García-Matcus & Palmer, 2017).

Furthermore, resource scarcity significantly hinders acquisition. Sixty-two per cent of students did not own prescribed textbooks, relying instead on shared copies or incomplete photographs of notes. Statistical analysis confirms that minimal access to print resources significantly correlated with lower summative writing scores ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). The materiality of literacy thus intersects directly with

pedagogical success; without contemporary academic prose to reference, students lack the immersion necessary to bridge the gap between spoken fluency and written literacy.

Language Use Patterns and Academic Performance

The final research question explored the relationship between linguistic patterns and measurable outcomes. Institutional records show mean pass rates between 38 and 42 per cent. However, a disaggregated analysis reveals a marked internal contrast. Students performed well in formative components such as oral participation (65 to 75 per cent) but struggled significantly in summative writing assignments (18 to 28 per cent).

Regression analysis confirms this disparity. Formative scores were weak predictors of final outcomes ($\beta = .18$, $p > .05$), whereas summative writing performance strongly predicted pass or fail status ($\beta = .62$, $p < .001$). These data indicate a pronounced 'fluency–literacy gap'. Qualitative accounts illuminate this divide, with students reporting that they feel confident speaking in class but experience cognitive blocks during written examinations.

This dynamic reveals a 'Bottleneck Effect'. Students demonstrate disciplinary competence in subjects such as nursing or engineering but find their progression halted at the point where Standard English becomes the decisive criterion. The linguistic continuum described in Liberian scholarship collapses into a single acrolectal benchmark during evaluation. Consequently, academic performance becomes a proxy for conformity to Standard English norms rather than a pure measure of subject mastery. This reflects a relational misalignment between student repertoires and institutional expectations, where English functions as a gatekeeping mechanism (Tollefson, 2018).

Conclusion

The evidence suggests that while translanguaging practices effectively affirm linguistic identity (García & Wei, 2017), a profound divergence remains between inclusive classroom discourse and exclusive formal assessment. This disconnect creates a condition of 'cruel optimism', wherein students are encouraged to participate linguistically but are ultimately penalised by the metrics of their evaluation (Berlant, 2011). In the context of post-conflict Liberia, the treatment of Standard English as a neutral, objective tool overlooks the specific historical and material conditions of the current student cohort (UNESCO, 2016). Without institutional scaffolding that acknowledges the linguistic labour performed by these students, the educational system risks reinforcing systemic inequality through rigid technical assessment.

Recommendations

The persistent failure rates at Tubman University indicate that the current pedagogical model does not merely fail to instruct; it systematically mismeasures student aptitude. To transcend the 'equivalence trap' and the 'bottleneck effect', the institution must transition from an assimilationist model to a pluricentric linguistic framework through the following actions:

Decolonizing Assessment Criteria: Translanguaging should evolve from a classroom convenience into an assessed competence. Rather than penalising Liberian English morphosyntax in all summative writing, rubrics should reward communicative clarity and disciplinary reasoning. A 'layered assessment' strategy should be implemented, where technical documents require Standard English, but reflective essays and internal reports are evaluated on conceptual depth regardless of the linguistic variety used. This shift directly addresses the epistemic injustice identified by Fricker (2007) and Flores and Rosa (2015).

Contrastive Pedagogy: The English programme should adopt a contrastive pedagogy that recognises Liberian English as a legitimate linguistic system. Curriculum modules should involve the explicit mapping of structural correspondences between Liberian and Standard English. By treating students as

'incipient bilinguals' rather than 'deficient monolinguals', the university can foster the metalinguistic awareness necessary for students to navigate different registers strategically.

Institutionalising the 'Third Space': The university should establish a 'Linguistic Innovation Centre' to replace the traditional remedial writing model. This space would allow students to draft in their primary linguistic repertoires before engaging in a collaborative process to shift registers for final submissions. Such an initiative legitimises the linguistic labour students already perform and ensures that the university functions as a mechanism for mobility rather than a regime of exclusion.

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