

ACADEMIC INTERESTS AS PREDICTORS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN ONITSHA EDUCATION ZONE, ANAMBRA STATE

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Abstract

The study examined academic interests as predictors of secondary school students' achievement in English Language in Onitsha Education Zone, Anambra State. One research question and one null hypothesis guided the study. A correlational research design was adopted. The population comprised 6,225 Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students from 22 secondary schools in the zone. A sample of 1,868 SS2 students (1,008 males and 860 females) was selected from four Local Government Areas using appropriate sampling techniques. Data were collected using two instruments: the Academic Interest Scale for Adolescents (AISA) and students' academic records in English Language. The instruments were validated by experts, and internal consistency reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha) ranged from .63 to .81, indicating acceptable reliability. Data collection was carried out through direct administration. Data were analysed using regression analysis. Findings revealed that academic interest had a moderate predictive influence on students' achievement in English Language. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that secondary schools should give greater attention to fostering students' academic interests, as these significantly predict achievement in English Language.

Keywords: academic interest, predictors achievement, students learner engagement, intrinsic motivation language education, academic performance predictors, secondary education, Nigeria educational psychology.

Introduction

Academic achievement among students has remained a source of concern to educators, the

society and researchers, particularly as the academic achievement of secondary school

students is deemed to be declining. In Nigeria, the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State particularly, students exhibit non-chalant attitudes towards their academic activities. These non-chalant attitudes include: persistent lateness to school, loitering, truancy, class notes not being up to date, non-availability of class notes or incomplete notebooks. Violent conducts such as fighting of teachers, especially when they are being corrected, disrespecting of teachers, parents coming to school to disgrace and fight teachers for disciplining their children when they misbehave, cult activities, indecent dressing, yahoo activities to mention but a few, are also commonplace among students. All these are the realities which seem to be contributing to the decline in students' academic achievement. In ideal situations, students are meant to exhibit a desirable behaviour towards their academic activities.

Academic achievement among secondary school students can be seen in their national examinations and termly results. The issue of unruly behaviour as mentioned earlier could be a contributing factor that explains the poor performance of students in national examinations like West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO) among others. As reported by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the following WAEC results in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State reveal that in 2019, a total number of 54,781 students sat the exam, a total of 38,668 passed the English Language exam, producing a total failure in English Language at 29.4%. In 2020, a total number of 55,390 students sat the exam, a total of 39,585 students passed the English Language exam, producing a total failure in English Language at 29.4%. The above results indicate a decline in the achievement of students from the examination records of

previous years, this state of affairs calls for concern.

In the same vein, the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) released its 2025 WASSCE results which showed a significant decline in performance nationwide, including the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. Here are some key findings: poor performance statistics: only 38.32% of candidates obtained credits in five subjects including English and Mathematics, representing a 33.8% decline from 2024 results. A total of 1,969,313 candidates sat for the examination, of whom 754,545 achieved the minimum bench mark. In addition, 192,089 results (9.75%) were withheld due to examination malpractice, including the unauthorized use of mobile phones and organized cheating.

In secondary schools, every classroom plays host to different personality types of learners who come into the classroom differently prepared with uniquely set characteristics that determine their levels of aspirations within the same classroom environment. These personality types could determine their level of academic achievement in any given subject, including the English Language. Accordingly, Adekola, Shoaga, and Lawal (2015) stated that the importance and role of the English Language has not diminished since the attainment of independence; rather, it has taken additional roles. The English Language is an important subject in Nigeria's educational system, more especially because it functions as a medium of instruction in schools. Furthermore, the English Language is the language of science and technology and it is generally accepted as a passport to educational advancement and prestigious employment in the world of work, the language of commerce, trade and

administration, and as a means of national and international communication.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN, 2014) in the National Policy on Education stipulates the importance of the English language as a core subject that will enable students to offer any course in a higher institution of learning. As a core subject, it is naturally expected that the level of attainment of the students in the subject will be evident in their performance in other subject areas. Due to this, failure in English language automatically invalidates grades obtained in other subjects no matter how high the grades are (Adekola et al., 2015). However, the attitude of secondary school students towards the English Language is unpredictable; this has further led to the low academic achievement recorded in this subject among the secondary school students in Nigeria. In the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State, academic achievement in English Language has become a matter of great interest to researchers, and of great concern to parents, teachers, and counsellors.

According to Okafor (2020), academic achievement is an indicator for measuring the degree of success and failure of a learner especially at the end of a learning process. Academic achievement is the outcome of an educational process which serves to measure the extent a student, teacher or institution has achieved a set of objectives or goals commonly measured by continuous assessment or examination. Okafor further stressed that the academic achievement of a student can be graded as high or low (good or poor). It is implied that an academic achievement is said to be poor when the achievement falls below the expected standard. On the other hand, an achievement that is equal to or above the standard expected of a student can be termed high academic achievement. Teachers in

secondary schools measure the academic achievements of students with the aim of achieving desired educational goals and objectives. The realisation of such objectives is the touchstone for any system; hence if the achievement corresponds to the objectives, the system has justified its existence. Buttressing this, Oguzie, Nwokolo, Mokwelu and Ezunu (2019) stressed that students' academic achievement occupied a vital position in the educational system as well in the learning process. Hence, academic achievement is very important for students, teachers, parents, government and other stakeholders. This is why the government, teachers, psychologists, school-counsellors, parents and examination bodies are greatly concerned with and are working very hard to unravel the mystery behind the poor academic achievement among students. The concern of improving academic achievement among secondary school students has increased in recent years. However, the reason for this concern can be attributed to the high percentage of low academic achievement recorded in recent times.

Reacting to the prevailing low academic achievement among secondary school students, Ozuome, Oguzie, Mokwelu and Anyamene (2020) emphasised the concern of every stakeholder about how best to improve the academic achievement of students. This probably is because educational attainment is highly fundamental to the realisation of the scientific, technological, socio-economic, and socio-political development of any nation as well as the total empowerment and transformation of the citizens. Other attributive factors to low academic achievement are not limited but inclusive of: school environment, home background, economic, political, and intellectual capability, social and entry qualification as well as personality traits. In the

opinion of Anyamene, Nwokolo and Akunne (2017), the academic achievement of students can be improved upon if these factors are adequately addressed. In addition, academic achievement is associated with another socio-psychological variable which is very important in learning. This variable is academic interest. It would be better to understand the meaning of interest before going to academic interest.

The past years have witnessed the evolution of research pertaining to interest. Interest is defined as the attention with a sense of concern; lively sympathy or curiosity; and the power to excite or hold such attention (in something). It plays a great role in the field of psychology as some recent research works have found that it is closely related with personality, motivation, cognition, development, emotion, vocations, aesthetics, behaviour, hobbies, reasoning, and information processing. Interest is one of the factors that partly influence reading while text processing as a text, with the features of coherence, vividness, ease of comprehension, and concreteness, tends to arouse the greater interest of the audience than a text without such features. Though there is evidence that the seductive details of interest have detrimental effect as it impairs comprehension; interest promotes comprehension and memory for several reasons; interest increases attention to a text; interest makes people process a text more deeply; and interest promotes good meta-cognitive strategies (Silvia, 2006).

Meanwhile, Adeyemo (2005) posited that the importance of interest in whatever a person does cannot be underestimated. He asserts that when it comes to making choices, interest is of considerable importance. When making a distinction about the structure of interest, Tella and Adeniyi (2011), identified two forms of interest, namely, personal and

situational interest. They explained that a student can approach a learning situation with or without interest. Situational interest on the other hand, refers to an interest that people acquire by participating in an environment or context. In this study therefore, interest is linked to the student in relation to school. Individual interest has been hypothesised to be a relatively enduring predisposition to attend to certain objects and activities, and it associates with positive effect, persistence and learning (Tella et al., 2011). Tella et al. asserted that people working with individual interests are motivated learners, their activity appears purposeful, sustained, and ever deepening; they do not really need to make a choice to learn a subject matter that is of individual interest to them.

According to Tella *et al.* (2011), interest leads to a mastery-goal orientation when learners are motivated by it. Learners are intrinsically motivated when they recognize that, in pursuing an interest, they are driven to master knowledge and skills rather than merely demonstrate them. Following the theoretical framework, interest is considered a person-object relationship characterized by experiences of competence and personal control, feelings of autonomy and self-determination, positive emotional states under – optimal circumstances, and a state of flow in which the person and the object of interest coincide. Overall, the correlation between interest and academic achievement was positive, however, this relationship varied across different schools subjects and indicators of achievement.

In spite of psychologist's praxis that is mainly on determination of why people do what they do, psychologists have characteristically disregarded close examination of interest as an overwhelming construct in the determination of human learning, motivation and emotion

(Silvia, 2006). Recently, psychologists started to investigate interest and the results are impressive. Accordingly, Paul (2014) stated that, in recent years, researchers have begun to build a science of interest, investigating what interest is, how interest develops, what makes things interesting, and how we can cultivate interest in ourselves and in others. There are findings which reveal that interest can help us think more clearly, understand more deeply, and remember more accurately. Interest has the power to transform struggling performers, and lift high achievers to a new plane. In an earlier study, Paul (2014) found that interest cognitively engages students and statistically fosters learning.

Interest simultaneously diversifies and focuses ones' experience, leading one to pay attention to only certain things and not to some other things that tend to stimulate the persons' attention. Interest serves as a drive towards the new, the edgy, and the exotic. Both the urge to approach or engage in certain events and the urge to avoid some events lie in the realm of interest. Interest in an activity, such as learning, could most probably be a very powerful affective psychological trait and a very strong knowledge emotion as well as an overwhelming magnetic positive feeling, a sense of being captivated, enthralled, invigorated and energised to cognitively process information much faster and more accurately in addition to an effective application of psychomotor traits like self-regulatory skills, self-discipline, and working harder and smarter with optimum persistence (Kpolovie, 2010).

Understanding the learning material is crucial to capturing the learners' interest. New and complex things are interesting provided the learner is able to comprehend them and master the challenges they pose (Paul, 2014). Curiosity is the totality of a person's organised active

explorative and manipulative behaviour in response to the occurrence of a novel, unexpected, and unpredicted phenomenon by logically seeking conclusive observable and empirical evidence to resolve all the questions of what, why, how, when and which about the phenomenon (Kpolovie, 2010). The curious individual is (intrinsically) motivated to find the missing information to reduce or eliminate the feeling of deprivation. Once this is done, the individual has learnt both the information that led to the curiosity or knowledge gap as well as the information with which he filled the knowledge gap or resolved the curiosity. So, learning could be facilitated by creating or arousing the learners' interest with catching and holding his attention via presentation of novel, complex and comprehensible information that arouses his curiosity (Kpolovie, 2010). While catching the learners' interest is about seizing his attention by providing highly stimulating information, holding his interest is about finding deeper meaning and purpose in the exercise of interest. Sustaining a person's interest in a piece of information could also be done by promoting the development of his interests by supporting his feelings of competence and self-efficacy, self-direction and autonomy that makes him to sustain the attention and motivation even in the midst of challenging or confusing material. Interests powerfully influence academic and professional choices.

Academic interest most likely could be another variable which could hamper academic achievement among secondary school students. According to Kpolovie, Joe and Okoto in Agwuma, Ochogba and Agwuma (2018), academic interest is the affective reaction triggered by specific or appealing stimuli in the learning environment. Academic interest is enhanced through the manipulation or modification of certain aspects of the learning

environment and contextual factors such as teaching strategies, task presentation and structuring of learning experiences. Similarly, academic interest denotes a positive or negative predisposition towards schooling and every other activity in the school environment which could be cognitive, emotional, or behavioural (Agwuma, et al., 2018). Lack of academic interest in school activities discourages students from staying in class and working hard to achieve optimum grades in their academics, prevents them from being enthusiastic and taking the class seriously. This scenario has its anti-social dimension, loss of academic interest leads students into engaging in unlawful activities such as cultism, kidnapping, robbery and truancy among other vices. Lack of academic interest among school students could be due to daunting self-esteem among students which although has received attention from researchers still seem to affect students' academic interest. Matsum (2018) found that student's interest statistically impacted their economic accomplishment. In the case of big general education classes, Kalaf-Hughes (2019) reported that student's participation with course material may be based on their interest in the subject. Operationally, academic interest is measured as a student's interest in school activities. Academic interest can also be described as a self-determined zeal which is linked with students' achievement with the subject being learned.

In another investigation carried out by Ambe and Udumo (2020), it was revealed that interest is a learned motive, which drives a person to occupy himself with activity when he is free to choose what he will do. Interests are important because they serve as a source of strong motivation to learn. Interest is often thought of as a mental resource that enhances effective learning, leading to better performance

and achievement. Interest is often thought of as a process that contributes to learning and academic achievement. Being interested in a subject is a mental resource that enhances learning. Sanda (2018) in its findings revealed that academic interest leads to better performance and achievement. Therefore, academic interest is the decision to engage or not to engage in school activities, the desire to persist and the degree of effort and time put into school activities are mainly judged by the level of interest shown by students.

Statement of the Problem

The primary objective of formal education is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required for personal and societal development, which are often reflected in their academic achievement. However, recent trends indicate a persistent decline in the academic achievement of secondary school students, particularly in core subjects such as English Language in Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

Evidence from external examinations conducted by bodies such as the West African Examinations Council and the National Examinations Council suggests that a considerable number of students fail to attain credit-level passes in English language. This trend raises serious concerns among educators, parents, and policymakers, given the central role of the English Language in the Nigerian educational system and its importance for further academic advancement.

Several factors have been identified as possible contributors to poor academic achievement, including students' behavioural patterns, learning environment, and psychological variables. Among these, academic interest has been recognised as a critical factor influencing students' engagement, persistence,

and performance in learning tasks. Students who demonstrate higher levels of academic interest are more likely to be actively involved in their studies and achieve better academic outcomes.

Despite increasing attention to academic interest as a predictor of academic achievement, empirical findings remain inconsistent, and limited studies have specifically examined this relationship within the context of secondary schools in Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. This creates a gap in knowledge regarding the extent to which academic interest predicts students' achievement in English Language in the study area.

Therefore, the problem of this study is to determine the extent to which academic interest predicts secondary school students' academic achievement in English Language in Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to determine academic interest as a predictor of secondary school students' academic achievement in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

Research Questions

The following research question guided the study.

1. What is the predictive value of academic interest on the academic achievement of secondary school students in the English Language in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State?

Hypothesis

The following null hypothesis was tested at 0.05 level of significance.

1. There is no significant prediction between academic interest and academic achievement of male and female

secondary school students in English Language in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

Research Method

Correlation survey research design was adopted for this study. The Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State was the area of study. The population of the study comprised 6,225 senior secondary school two (SS2) students from 22 secondary schools situated in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. The sample for this study is made up of 1,868 SS2 secondary school students comprising 1,008 male and 860 female students drawn from the four Local Governments in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State (Onitsha North = 209.4, Onitsha South = 244.5, Idemili South = 937.5, Idemili North = 476.1). This represents 30% of the total population. The proportionate simple random sampling techniques were employed to select the students in each of the secondary schools. The first instrument for data collection was the: Academic Interest Scale for Adolescents (AISA). It was developed by GUO and Zhang (2012). The AISA was adopted for the study. Academic Interest Scale for Adolescent Questionnaire is a tool used to assess the level of interest adolescents have in academic subjects or activities. It typically involves a series of questions or statements that students respond to, or engagement with various academic aspects. The scale can be used to understand students' motivation, engagement, and potential areas of academic strength or weakness. The instrument consisted of 29 items in the inventory. The domain breakdown in the instrument includes Emotion: Items 3, 5, 8, 13, 14, 18, 26 (7 items); Values: Items, 1, 10, 16, 17, 20, 24, 27, 29, (8 items); and Knowledge: Items 4, 7, 9, 12, 15, 22, 23, (7 items), making

a total item score of 29 with each item scored at a 1-5 scoring range where strongly Disagree = 1 and Strongly Agree = 5.

The second instrument used for data collection in the study was Students' Academic Record in English Language. This record served as the instrument for assessing students' academic achievement. Data were collected from official school records for SS2 students in the secondary schools which were used in the study. The use of official records ensures an objective and standardised measure of students' performance in English Language.

The two instruments have all been subjected to internal consistency reliability tests using Cronbach alpha statistics ranging from .63 to .81, indicating acceptable reliability. The scale demonstrates a test – retest reliability over a six – week period with correlation coefficients ranging from .63 to .75. The administration of the instrument was done through a direct

delivery approach. By this method, copies of the questionnaires were distributed personally to the respondents by the researcher with the help of four form teachers to make sure that the questionnaires correspond with the academic achievement of the students. Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher had in depth discussion with the form teachers in each school, during which the researcher briefed the research assistants (i.e. form teachers). Data collected were analysed using regression analysis. For the hypothesis, where the obtained p-value is equal or less than 0.05, the null hypothesis will be rejected, but where the obtained p-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis will not be rejected. SPSS version .25 was used for the data analysis.

Presentation Results

Table 1

Simple Linear Regression Analysis of Academic Interest Predicting Academic Achievement in English Language

Predictor	B	S E	β	R	R ²	Adj. R ²
Academic Interest Score	0.3 52	— 34	0.6 34	0.6 34	0.4 02	0.400

Note. Dependent variable = Academic achievement in English language.

Table 1 presents the results of a simple linear regression analysis examining the predictive value of academic interest on students' academic achievement in English language.

The results indicate a moderate positive relationship between academic interest and academic achievement ($R = .634$). Academic interest accounted for 40.2% of the variance in students' achievement in English language ($R^2 =$

.402, Adjusted $R^2 = .400$), suggesting that it is a significant predictor of academic performance.

Furthermore, the standardised beta coefficient ($\beta = .634$) indicates that academic interest has a strong positive effect on academic achievement. The unstandardised coefficient ($B = 0.352$) implies that a unit increase in academic interest is associated with a corresponding increase in academic achievement scores.

Table 2

*Regression Analysis of Academic Interest
Predicting Academic Achievement by Gender*

Variable	Gender	N	R	R²	Adjusted R Square	B	BETA	%var. added
Academic interest Scores	Male	1008	0.649	0.421	0.417	0.374	0.649	42.
	Female	860	0.617	0.380	0.374	0.325	0.617	38.0

The result presented in Table 2 reveals that both male and female students' academic interest has a moderate predictive value for English language achievement. For male students, there is a positive relationship between academic interest scores and English language achievement ($R = .649$), with Academic interest scores explaining 42.1% of the variance in English language results ($R^2 = .421$). This indicates that male students' academic interest contributes substantially to predicting their academic outcomes in Physics education programmes. Similarly, for female students, academic interest scores show a positive relationship with English language achievement ($R = .617$) and account for 38.0% of the variance in English language results ($R^2 = .380$). This suggests that female students' academic interest also makes a meaningful contribution to predicting their English language achievement. Overall, while the predictive value is slightly higher for male students than for female students, academic interest results remain an important predictor of academic achievement for both groups in English language in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study revealed that academic interest has a moderate but statistically significant predictive influence on students' achievement in English language in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. The corresponding hypothesis further confirmed that academic interest significantly predicts students' performance in English language. This implies that academic interest is a meaningful, though not exclusive, determinant of students' academic outcomes.

The moderate predictive strength suggests that while academic interest plays an important role in enhancing students' engagement and performance, it does not operate in isolation. Other factors such as quality of instruction, availability of learning resources, study habits, and motivation may also significantly influence students' achievement in English language. Thus, academic interest should be viewed as one of several interrelated variables contributing to academic success.

A plausible explanation for this finding is that students with higher academic interest are more likely to demonstrate sustained attention, active engagement, and persistence in learning tasks, which ultimately enhance their academic performance. This finding is consistent with Okafor (2020), who reported a positive relationship between academic interest and academic achievement. It also aligns with the view that interest enhances cognitive engagement and facilitates deeper learning.

However, this finding contradicts Kalaf-Hughes (2019) who reported that academic interest did not significantly influence academic outcomes. The disparity in findings may be attributed to differences in study context, subject focus, or methodological approaches. This highlights the need for further empirical investigation into the role of academic interest across different learning environments.

Furthermore, the study revealed that academic interest significantly predicts English language achievement for both male and female students, with a slightly higher predictive strength observed among male students. This suggests that while academic interest is an important predictor across gender groups, there may be gender-related differences in how interest translates into academic outcomes. Nevertheless, academic interest remains a consistent predictor of achievement regardless of gender.

Conclusion

This study examined academic interest as a predictor of secondary school students' achievement in English language in the Onitsha Education Zone of Anambra State. The findings established that academic interest has a moderate but statistically significant predictive influence on students' academic achievement in English language.

The study also revealed that academic interest significantly predicts achievement for both male and female students, although the predictive strength was slightly higher among male students. This indicates that academic interest is a consistent and important factor in students' academic performance across gender groups.

Overall, the findings suggest that fostering students' academic interest can contribute meaningfully to improving achievement in English language, although it should be complemented with other academic and environmental support strategies.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Enhancement of Academic Interest**
Teachers and school administrators should implement instructional strategies that actively promote students' interest in

the English language, such as interactive teaching methods, contextualised learning, and student-centred approaches.

2. Targeted Academic Support

Schools should provide structured support programmes, including remedial classes, mentoring, and academic counseling, to assist students with low academic interest and improve their learning outcomes.

3. Gender-Sensitive Teaching Approaches

Educators should adopt inclusive teaching strategies that encourage active participation among both male and female students, particularly by supporting confidence-building and engagement among female students.

4. Holistic Intervention Strategies

Policymakers and school authorities should address other contributing factors to academic achievement, such as learning environment, teaching quality, and availability of instructional resources, alongside efforts to enhance academic interest.

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