Lexical Transfer from Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ in English Proficiency: A Comparative Lexico-Semantic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study is a comparative analysis of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ interference in pupils' second language (L2) learning in ten selected Senior Secondary Schools, five located in Bo City (Southern Sierra Leone) and five in Makeni (Northern Sierra Leone). The objectives of the study include identifying the different areas of phonological interference, as well as examining the primary causes and impacts of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ interference on the teaching and learning of English. The study further explores whether or not the mother tongue actually interferes with English language acquisition in the selected regions.
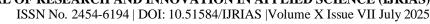
The literature reviewed includes several theoretical perspectives. The behaviorist theory posits that all learning, including language acquisition, occurs through imitation, practice, reinforcement, and habit formation. In contrast, the cognitive theory asserts that learning is not merely a series of conditioned responses to stimuli, but rather involves the active acquisition and storage of knowledge. Additionally, Krashen's Input Hypothesis was reviewed, which comprises five interrelated hypotheses: the acquisition-learning hypothesis, the monitor hypothesis, the natural order hypothesis, the input hypothesis, and the affective filter hypothesis. Krashen emphasizes that exposure to comprehensible input is both necessary and sufficient for second language acquisition to occur. Through a random sampling, data were collected using questionnaires, interviews and discussions from 800 respondents (400 native Kàthemnɛ and 400 native Mɛnde learners of English) from SSS I and SSS II comprising 80 per school and 40 per class respectively. Due to the number of English Language Teachers per regions, 25 teachers were selected from Makeni in the Tonkolili District and 40 from Bo City in the Bo District using the same random sampling technique.

The study revealed that first language (L1) interference significantly contributes to students' poor performance in English. Learners tend to transfer elements of their native language such as semantics, syntax, and phonology into English, which hampers their proficiency. Notably, students whose mother tongue is Kàthemnɛ experience greater phonological interference than those whose first language is Mɛnde. Key recommendations include the use of articulation charts, pictures, and demonstrations of articulators when teaching English vowel and consonant sounds. Language structures should be taught concurrently, with an emphasis on regular speaking practice to help students internalize English phonemes and sentence patterns. In cases where L1 interference is widespread and persistent, remedial instruction is advised. The study underscores the collective responsibility of teachers, pupils, school administrators, the Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education, and parents in improving English language learning. It also notes that the research is not exhaustive, and recommends further studies in other parts of Sierra Leone to broaden the understanding of L1 interference on English acquisition.

Key Words: L1 interference, poor performance and Lexico-semantic Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Sierra Leone, like most West African countries (except Cape Verde), is a multilingual nation with 18 indigenous languages, each tied to specific ethnic and cultural groups. Four of these languages Mɛnde, Limba, Krio, and Kàthemnɛ are currently integrated into the educational system as either languages of instruction in primary

schools or subjects of study in secondary and tertiary institutions, depending on their regional dominance. Krio, in particular, functions as a lingua franca across ethnic lines and is widely spoken in the Western Area (Stevens & Sheriff 2025: Stevens, Challay & Thulla, 2023).

In contrast to native English speakers, who acquire the language naturally in environments where English is the primary means of communication (e.g., the UK, USA, Canada), Sierra Leoneans typically learn English as a second language (ESL) in formal educational settings and through limited exposure outside the classroom. English is also used as a medium of communication in education, politics, commerce, and the media, making it a vital language in the country. However, its learning is often hindered by first language (L1) interference, as learners tend to transfer structures from their mother tongues such as phonology, syntax, and semantics into English.

The educational underachievement in subjects like English, Math, and Science is a concern in Sierra Leone, largely attributed to weak foundational skills in English acquired at the primary level. Research supports the view that language inefficiency contributes to poor academic performance. Furthermore, global studies (e.g., in Cameroon and Colombia) suggest that children taught in their mother tongue perform better academically in early grades than those taught in a foreign or second language. Despite English being an official and core subject in Sierra Leone's curriculum introduced during colonial rule and maintained post-independence continues to face challenges in effective teaching and learning. These include negative societal attitudes toward English learning, lack of proper instructional materials, and widespread L1 interference. For example, students may substitute sounds not present in their native language (e.g., pronouncing "river" as "liver" or "ship" as "sheep").

The solution, according to the text, lies in better teacher preparation, materials tailored to local language backgrounds, and a more positive national outlook on the value of English beyond academic success. Teaching English should not aim to imitate native accents but rather to improve articulation and intelligibility. Ultimately, while English is a legacy of colonialism, it has become indispensable for personal development, communication, and access to opportunities in Sierra Leone.

The Importance of English Language

The importance of English language in Sierra Leone cannot be overemphasized considering the fact that English language assumes the position of Sierra Leone's second language or official language. Sierra Leone is a country with diverse ethnic groups, religion and languages considering the land mass and the population of people living in Sierra Leone into the various language varieties. English language has become an important means of communication among the different ethnic or speech communities and linguistic barriers which have made it an international language in Sierra Leone (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025: Stevens, Challay & Thulla, 2023).

The importance of English language is most noticeable in the field of education where any person seeking admission into any tertiary institution must at least have a credit in the subject before given admission into any Sierra Leonean University, Polytechnic or College of Education (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025: Stevens, Challay & Thulla, 2023: Stevens et al. 2025). Suzan (2005) stated the importance of English that six grades of credit pass, is acceptance for admission into any University and a requirement for employment as well. By implication, this means that a candidate must have at least a credit pass in English language or literature as equivalent before he or she can be given admission into all colleges around the globe.

According to Quick (2006), he said that language is like religion which is clearly powerful and unifying force. This implies that English language in use in Sierra Leone today is a powerful unifying instrument to both the students and society at large. So from this it can be seen that a study of this nature is very important so as to unravel the factors inhibiting the performance of students in English language.

English Language in the Classrooms

The teaching and learning process is a collaborative effort between teachers and students. Effective language learning depends not only on the teacher but also on the learner's active participation and responsibility (Quist, 2000). Research by Vuzo (2010) and Cummings (as cited in Wang et al., 1994) emphasizes the importance of interactive learning, which promotes deeper understanding compared to passive methods like the dominant

lecture approach found in many secondary schools. Teachers play a central role in shaping classroom experiences. Their subject knowledge, communicative competence, and ability to make informed decisions about what and how to teach significantly affect student outcomes (Allen & Valetta, 1997; Harmer, 2003; Quist, 2000). Poor teaching quality has been linked to students' underperformance, and failure to establish a strong foundation in early years negatively impacts long-term learning potential (Stevens et al. 2025: Mosha, 2004; Quist, 2000).

In addition, teaching and learning materials are essential to making lessons engaging and meaningful. They help bridge abstract concepts with real-world experiences, encourage creativity, and support active learning (Nyamubi, 2003; Kapolei, 2001: Stevens & Sheriff 2025). Authentic materials tailored to learners' interests can enhance understanding and motivation. Despite their importance, many countries, including Sierra Leone, face challenges such as inadequate teaching materials, poor infrastructure, and overcrowded classrooms (UNESCO, 2000; World Education Report, 1998). The study therefore focuses on examining the roles of teachers and learners, as well as the availability and use of materials, as key factors influencing students' performance in English

Teachers and Learners Roles

Recent educational research emphasizes the importance of student-centred approaches in language teaching. According to Lochana & Deb (2006), this method helps learners use the target language meaningfully in real-life situations, both inside and outside the classroom. Collaborative learning, as described by Richards (2001), involves pair or group work that encourages students to express opinions, share experiences, and engage in discussion and debate. Jacobs and Hall (2002) argue that in such settings, teacher talk should be minimized while student talk is maximized, promoting negotiation of meaning and comprehensible input, within a relaxed and motivating classroom environment.

Teachers play multiple roles in collaborative settings. Brown (2007b) outlines that teachers should provide clear instructions, choose suitable group techniques, plan and monitor group activities, and assist with reflection after tasks. Littlewood (1981) and Breen & Candlin (1980) further emphasize that teachers should act as facilitators and observers, guiding students only when necessary, while learners take on active roles negotiating meaning with peers and contributing equally to the learning process. Learner autonomy, motivation, and positive attitudes are crucial for the success of collaborative learning (Liu & Zhang, 2007). Although traditional secondary schools often position teachers as controllers and students as passive recipients, this is changing. Some students now prefer interactive, cooperative tasks over teacher-centred instruction (Mai & Iwashita, 2012; Nyuyen, 2002: Stevens et al. 2025)), showing interest in expressing themselves and sharing experiences through pair work, group work, and class discussions (Tomlinson & Dat, 2004).

Language Teaching Materials

Teaching materials play an important role in promoting communicative language use (Stevens & Sandy Jr., 2025). There are three kinds of teaching materials: text-based, task-based, and realia. These can be textbooks, games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities designed to support communicative language teaching. Different kinds of authentic objects can be used in a communicative language teaching class to support communicative activities, from language-based realia such as signs, magazines, and newspapers to graphic and visual sources such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts (Richards, 2001). The use of teaching materials has a major impact on the activity of language teaching. Abebe and Davidson (2012) point out that, students are eager to learn vocabulary with the assistance of visual materials, and that the use of visual materials enhances the students' ability and opportunity to use language to express their ideas and feelings. However, Abebe and Davidson (2012) also found that teachers rarely use visual materials such as cards, charts, and real objects in teaching, despite the majority of teachers and students admitting that Visual materials help students learn language effectively.

Mattew and Wand Alidha (2013) that teacher's use of audio-visual aids helps students to understand lessons more and improves their English language skills, such as pronunciation skills or conversational skills through listening to native speakers. In addition, the use of audio-visual materials also helps to make classroom activities

more interesting and helps the students to remember the lessons longer. A study conducted by Aduwa-Ogiegbaen and Iyamu (2006) found that textbooks, workbooks, dictionaries, chalkboards, and posters are dominant in English classrooms, whereas modern media such as audio and video, programmed texts, language laboratories, flashcards, computers, magazines, and newspapers are rarely used. In brief, Stevens et al 2023 stated that considerable research relating to English teaching has been conducted in a number of countries. The results of this study provide evidence that teachers can use to adjust their teaching activities and university leaders can develop appropriate strategies to make English teaching and learning more effective thereby enhancing students' performance. But on the whole the materials are to be tailored with the accurate teaching methodology. Therefore, the methods used in the teaching become a useful instrument as the study also looked at the various teaching styles.

Statement of Problem

Learning a second language, particularly English, poses significant challenges for native Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ speakers in Sierra Leone. These learners face difficulties due to negative transfer from their first language (L1) into English (L2), which prevents them from achieving native-level proficiency, regardless of the time and effort devoted to learning. The major issues include incorrect stress, rhythm, and intonation in English, inconsistent English spelling, and grammatical and lexical interference from Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ.

Such inter-lingual interference where the phonology, grammar, and vocabulary of the mother tongue influence the target language is common and manifests in various language aspects like phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. For example, Mɛnde and Krio speakers often produce direct translations from their native languages into English, resulting in non-standard expressions such as "my stomach is sweet" (meaning "I am happy"). It is recognized that interference patterns differ across language groups Mɛnde, Kàthemnɛ, and Limba each present unique challenges. The root of mother tongue interference lies in the learner's biological capacity for language acquisition combined with environmental factors. As learners rely on their L1 as a foundation, they often transfer its features into English, leading to persistent language errors.

The main concern of this study was to give a Comparative Lexico-Semantic Analysis of Lexical Transfer from Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ in English Writing and Learning among Pupils in Senior Secondary Schools in Sierra Leone

Aim and Objectives

This research ultimately aimed at investigating the cause of problems emanating from the learning of English as a second language by native Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ speakers and how these problems can be moderated for the intelligibility of the learner. Objectives include identify the different areas of phonological interference and the main causes and impact of interference of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ in teaching and learning of English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Second Language Acquisition (L2) can be acquired either formal or informal. Schools and language courses are the formal ways to acquire L2 and through walking on the streets and the community is where to acquire the informal way of L2 (Baker, 2011). People are acquiring or learning more different languages and cultures every day because the world is now globalized. Acquiring a second or third language is important because it increases the opportunities in employment (Baker, 2011). In view of this, it is therefore very essential to be aware of bilingualism and its contribution to people's educational development in general.

Mother Tongue Interference

Mother tongue interference is recognized as a major factor affecting English learning, particularly in phonology, lexis, and grammar (Stevens et al. 2025). Errors often arise when the native language's grammar differs significantly from English. According to Stevens & Sheriff (2025) scholars highlight the dual impact of mother tongue: some view it as a barrier, while others see it as supportive, depending on the context and level of interference. L1 interference as the influence of a native language on a second or foreign language, especially in

bilinguals, researchers have also stated that a student's language learning is shaped by multiple factors, including motivation, age, learning goals, and teaching approaches. Ultimately, this study seeks to help lecturers and students identify specific pronunciation difficulties and work toward more accurate English pronunciation, contributing to improved communication skills and language learning outcomes.

Interference

Interference refers to language errors that occur when elements from a learner's mother tongue (L1) are transferred into a second language (L2). According to Lott and Ellis (2006) echod by Stevens et al, (2025), this interference arises from linguistic transfer the influence of L1 on the acquisition of L2 based on what learners perceive as transferable or familiar. Since L1 is acquired first and used more frequently, especially in early life, it can dominate L2 learning, particularly in areas like phonology, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. The extent of interference depends on how similar or different the two languages are. Greater similarity may lead to positive transfer, while significant structural differences may result in negative transfer or interference. When learners are unaware of these differences, they may apply L1 rules to L2, leading to errors. Experts in second language acquisition widely acknowledge that L1 plays a powerful role sometimes seen as a hindrance or "bully" in shaping how students learn and use a second language. The more dissimilar the two languages are, the more challenging it is for learners to acquire L2 effectively (Stevens & Sheriff, 2025: Stevens, Challay & Thulla, 2023: Stevens et al 2025).

Language is a signal of communication and expression among humans incorporated with different techniques (Blakeley, 2021). Since English is known as the lingua franca; dominating other languages; it has a significant influence in various aspects in terms of objective, duration of the language, age and inspiration of acquiring. Knowing that English strongly influences the mother tongue, it is difficult to have a standardized language. The component which is quite visible when there is mother tongue interference is grammar. Improper proficiency in language causes the entire language to be distorted (Noviyenty et al., 2020). This is apparent in reading, speaking and writing. A direct translation can also be one of the contributing factors. According to past studies like Aifuwa (2013) and Thulla et al (2023), an individual learns the parent language from birth. It is difficult to get rid of the influence of the mother tongue. Students also feel inferior because of their mother tongue influence. Non-native speakers are not capable of communicating efficiently and effectively. Second language learners tend to transfer everything from their mother tongue to the second language. The learners translate the target language into their mother tongue and speak only in the parent language.

An Overview of the Mɛnde people and their Language

The Mɛnde only began arriving in Sierra Leone in the early 18th century. They claim that their ancestors crossed the Moa River from the east in small bands and established groups of settlements based on hunting and subsistence agriculture initially, the village headman, or head of the dominant family was probably the ultimate authority. Over time, some warlords became absolute rulers because of their capability to conquer weaker villages as well as their ability to offer protection for such villages in the 19 century the Mɛnde began to increasingly use warfare to extend their influence and territory and this phenomenon concluded with the arrival of a sub-group of the Mɛnde-the Kpaa Mɛnde. They dislodged the Banta (an' offshoot of the Kàthemnɛ) in what is today Kori Chiefdom (Moyamba District) and pushed them southwards toward the coast. The Banta or "Bandablaa" subsequently settled in their present homelands in the lower and upper Banta Chiefdoms and part of Bumpeh Ngawo Chiefdom Taninahun It is. However not clear whether the displaced Banta themselves pushed other inhabitants and occupied their areas.

Banta traditions maintain that they occupied an uninhabited territory The Banta dialect which is spoken by some of the older people in the chiefdoms is a variant of Kàthemnɛ and some of the cultural practices of the Banta are closely patterned along those of their Kàthemnɛ ancestors. For example, the rituals that are performed in the Poro (male secret) society resemble those of the Kàthemnɛ. Moreover, the Banta people are loath to electing women to supreme political positions, like that of Paramount Chief Again this is a strong Kàthemnɛ tradition. In the last two hundred years a Mɛndenization process has taken place in much of Southern Sierra Leone and as a result, most non- Mɛnde communities like the Sherbro Bum, Krim and Banta, have become culturally influenced by the Mɛnde. Thus, the Mɛnde language is spoken over a wide area in the region as well as in the Eastern region

which native speakers of languages like Kono and Kissy now seem to popularly accept Mɛndenization by adopting Mɛnde either their First or Second Language

Linguistics Classification of the Mɛnde Language

From a hypothetical proto African language, four language groups are believed to have descended. Those are the Nilo-Saharan group, the Niger-Kordofanian group and the Khoisian group. Mɛnde like most languages of sub-Saharan Africa belong to the Niger-Kordofanían group which is splits into seven sub-language families. Among these language groups only two are directly relevant to Sierra Leone; these are the Mande group and the West Atlantic group. Mɛnde has twenty-six (26) letters (including vowels and consonants). Mɛnde has thirty-one (31) writing symbols. It can be divided into two broad topics namely – Vowels (Kololoheisia) and consonants (Kɔlolohiniisia). There are seven (7) vowels which are A,E,I,O,U,æ. The ɔ and ɛ sounds are absent in the English vowels. For the consonant there are two main groups namely; single and consonant blends. The single consonant total seventeen (17) and are b, d, f, g, h, j, km, n, ŋ, p, s, t, v, w, and y. The agreed number of consonant blends is seven although some people add an eight which is "KL" as klakl clerk.

Taking a close look at the consonants above, we can see that there are certain consonants present in Mɛnde, but absent in English. For single letters we have only "ŋ" and for consonant blends or diagraphs all of the above i.e- Kp, Gb, Mb, Nd, etc. On the other hand, English alphabets like c, q, r, x, z are absent in the Mɛnde sound system and are being replaced by Mɛnde letters

Example:

C as in come   -   "   =   KOM(C=K)

Q as in Queen   -   "   =   Kwin(Q+K)

R as in Rat   -   "   =   Lat (R-L)

X as in Tax   -   "   =   Tas (X-S)

Z as in Zero   -   "   =   Jilo (Z-J)

Table 1: Single Consonants

B as in Befei	D as in Demia	F as in Fama	G as in gilo	H as in Hapii	I as in Jimi
K as in Kali	L as in Li	M as in Maada	N as in niki	P as in npani	S as in Sami
T as in Tajei	V as in vanjei	W as in Walei	Y as in yabasi		

An Overview of the Kàthemnɛ Language

The term Kàthemnɛ is commonly used in Sierra Leone to refer both to a language and its people, although technically, Kàthemnɛ refers to the language and *Anthemnɛ* to the people. This dual usage originated from European references and has since become widespread in local practice.

Origin and Migration: The Kàthemnɛ people are believed to be descendants of the Futa Jallon region in present-day Guinea. They migrated to Sierra Leone in the 18th century as traders and religious figures, forming early settlements based on economic opportunities. Their trading and religious influence enabled them to establish larger political settlements, and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were among the dominant groups in Sierra Leone's Northern Province.

Linguistic Classification: Kàthemnɛ belongs to the Khoisan language group, one of four major African language families outlined by Welmers (1973), alongside Afro-Asiatic, Nilo-Saharan, and Niger-Kordofanian. In Sierra Leone, only the West Atlantic and Kàthemnɛ subgroups of the Khoisan family are relevant. There are

notable lexical variations, especially in consonant usage, across Kàthemnɛ dialects. The Sanda Kàthemnɛ, found mainly in Bombali and parts of Port Loko District, are distinguished by their unique dialect and martial cultural practices, including the Poro society a traditional warrior training institution. Meanwhile, another group of Sanda inhabits Makeni and other parts of Port Loko, predominantly Muslim, whose dialect also exhibits significant lexical differences. In sum, Kàthemnɛ is a linguistically and culturally distinct group with deep historical roots in the region

Table 2: Examples of such distinct

Word	Sanda Kàthemnɛ	Other Dialets/Ycni
Eye	RefƆr	RefƆr
Saliva	Manthas	Manthas
Orange	Alemre	Alemre

The Sanda Kàthemnɛ and Their Sociolinguistic Profile

The Sanda Kàthemnɛ speakers are those who inhabit the regions along the border areas and the neighboring region of Gbombali. In contrast to the Yoni Kàthemnɛ, the Kova Kàthemnɛ is considered to be less militarily inclined, although they are still known to have warrior kings in their lineage. The Kàthemnɛ primarily reside in Bombali District, which also serves as a major trading hub. This group is particularly recognized for their eloquence and distinctive speech, often resembling that of the Sanda Kàthemnɛ. Most of them are Muslims, and they are notable for their dedication to preaching and promoting the values and teachings of Islam.

Sound Systems of Kàthemnɛ

Speech in Kàthemnɛ as in all languages comprises a continuous flow of sounds. These sounds form distinct categories and follow specific patterns. The types of sounds that occur in a language and the way they are organized make up the sound system of that language. In Kàthemnɛ, these sounds are broadly divided into vowels and consonants.

The Consonant Phonemes of Kàthemnɛ

According to Conteh (1990), the consonant phonemes in Kàthemnɛ are divided into two categories: single consonants and combined consonants (consonant clusters). These phonemes occur in various positions within words, typically at the initial and medial positions. Below is an overview of these consonants along with example words to illustrate their distribution:

Table 3: Single Kàthemnɛ Consonant Phonemes

Phoneme	Initial Position	Medial Position
/p/	pala ("farm") / tƆfƆt /'ten'	kapa ("climb") / tim /'fight'
/b/	baŋ ("goat")	kabi ("stone")
/t/	ta ("take")	motu ("head")
/d/	de ("come")	sadi ("man")
/k/	ka ("eat")	laka ("bring")
/g/	go ("look")	saga ("song")

/m/	mu ("give")	lami ("child")
/n/	na ("I")	bana ("woman")
/ŋ/	ŋa ("we")	taɲa ("tree")
/s/	si ("say")	kasi ("laugh")
/l/	la ("go")	pala ("farm")
/r/	ru ("drink")	sari ("stick")
/w/	wu ("you")	kawa ("money")
/y/	ye ("he/she")	baya ("dance")

Table 4: Kàthemnɛ Combined Consonants (Consonant Clusters)

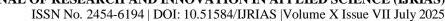| Cluster	Position	Example
/kp/	Initial	kpata ("hoe")
/gb/	Initial	gba ("throw")
/mb/	Initial	mba ("mother")
/nd/	Initial	nda ("father")
/ŋg/	Initial	ŋga ("meat")

These consonant phonemes, both single and combined, are essential to the phonological structure of the Kàthemnɛ language. Their distribution patterns can significantly affect word meanings, grammatical structure, and even speaker identity within the community.

The English Language: English is a West Germanic language from the Indo-European family, closely related to Dutch, Frisian, and Low German dialects. It evolved from three Low German dialects spoken by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who migrated from modern-day northern Germany and Denmark to Britain around AD 449, according to Bede (1997). Initially invited by the Celtic leader Vortigern to fend off invasions, the Germanic tribes eventually settled in Britain, displacing the Celts.

Old English (c. 449–1100 AD): This was derived from the languages of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. It initially featured a variety of dialects, later dominated by Late West Saxon (e.g., *Beowulf*). The vocabulary was almost entirely Germanic, with limited Latin and Celtic influence. It was a synthetic (inflected) language, with complex grammar involving case, number, and gender. The invasions by Vikings introduced Scandinavian influences and further enriched the lexicon.

Middle English (1100–1500 AD): During this period, the language was marked by the Norman invasion in 1066, after which Norman French became the language of the ruling elite. English lost its dominance but survived among the lower classes with significant grammatical changes, especially loss of inflections. Thus the emergence of new dialect divisions: Northern (e.g., Mercian) and Southern (e.g., Kentish, West Saxon). By 1300, most English people again spoke English; Parliament declared English the language of the courts in 1362 and the Black Death (1348) elevated the social and linguistic status of the English-speaking lower classes.

Modern English (1500–Present): This was initiated by the Great Vowel Shift (15th–16th centuries), which radically altered pronunciation. English absorbed more French and Latin vocabulary, becoming more analytic (less inflectional). Language of Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and British colonial expansion helped English become a global lingua franca, especially during the British Empire. Modern English is the key feature in the phonological transition from late middle to modern English is the so- called Great Vowel Shift, which

took place in the fifteenth/sixteenth centuries. Briefly, five of the long vowels were raised by one degree: the remaining two were diphthongized; a:>>e>: >0: >u: 1:>ay; u:>aw (Campbell, 1997).

English evolved from a highly inflected Germanic language (Old English), to a grammatically simplified, French-influenced form (Middle English), to a modern, globally dominant language with minimal inflections and vast vocabulary. Today, English is second only to Mandarin in number of native speakers but holds unmatched international significance, with around 350 million native speakers, primarily in the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand

The English Sound System

Phonemes: The English consonants are P h a, t, k, g, m, n, w, T, V, 0, c, S, Z, h, t, d, j, n.

Plosives

1. /p/-Voiceless bi-labial plosive

2. /b/ -Voiced bi – labial plosive

3. /d/ -Voiced alveolar plosive

4. /t/-Voiceless Velar plosive

5. /g/-Voiced Velar plosive

6. /k/-Voiceless Velar plosive

Nasals

/m/ - Voiced bi-labial nasal

/n/ - Voiced alveolar nasal

In/ - Voiced velar nasal

Fricatives

/f/-Voiceless labio – dental fricative

/v/ -Voiced labiodentals fricative

/Ө/ -Voiceless dental fricative

/ờ/ -Voiced dental fricative

/s/ -Voiceless alveolar fricative

/Z/ -Voiced alveolar fricative

/s/ -Voiced post alveolar fricative

/ʒ/-Voiced post alveolar fricative

/h/ -Voiceless glottal fricative

Affricates

/t z/-Voiced post alveolar affricate

/d z/-Voiceless Post alveolar affricate

Lateral

/I/-Voiced alveolar lateral

Rolled

/r/ -Voiced alveolar roll

Semi Vowel

/w/ -Voiced bi-labial semi- vowel

/j/ -Voiceless palatal semi- vowel

The consonants above are described or named according to their place and manner of articulation.

METHODOLOGY

Since the study is a comparative analysis focusing on the impact of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ mother tongues on the acquisition or learning of English as a second language, a descriptive research design was employed. This design was suitable for determining the extent to which these native languages interfere with English language learning. The study involved ten selected Senior Secondary Schools, five from Bo City (for native Mɛnde learners) and five from Makeni (for native Kàthemnɛ learners). A simple random sampling technique was used to select a total of 800 students, comprising 400 Mɛnde-speaking and 400 Kàthemnɛ-speaking English learners from SSS I and SSS II, with 80 students from each school (40 from SSS I and 40 from SSS II). In addition, due to the teacher distribution in each region, 40 English Language teachers were selected from Bo City in Bo District, and 25 teachers from Makeni in Tonkolili District.

Questionnaires were used as the primary data collection tool. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to Mɛnde-speaking students and 40 to their teachers in Bo, while another 400 questionnaires were given to Kàthemnɛ-speaking students and 25 to their teachers in Makeni. This brought the total number of respondents to 800 students and 65 teachers across all ten schools. Prior to administering the instruments, the consent of both students and teachers were obtained, and data collection was scheduled at a time that was convenient for participants. The researcher also collected the completed questionnaires immediately to ensure a high response rate.

RESULTS

Native Mɛnde (Bo) and Kàthemnɛ (Makeni) Learners of English Questionnaires Analysis

Table 5: Personal Information

Bo			Makeni	
	Frequency	**Percentage %**	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Sex				
Male	298	71.3	277	67.8
Female	102	28.7	123	32.2
Total	400	100	400	100

According to the table above, out of the 400 participants who were involved in filling the questionnaire in Bo, 71.3% were male while 28.7% were female, and 400 participants who were also involved in filling the questionnaire in Makeni, 67.8% were male and 32.2% were female. Therefore, both genders represented. It was important to find out the gender of the participants for further analysis of the responses; for example, finding the number of boys or girls who felt that the use of mother tongue influences the performance of English Language Learners. Besides, the schools' samples were all mixed schools, so it was essential to consider fair distribution of the students' gender.

According to the table above, out of the 400 participants who completed the questionnaire in Bo, 71.3% were male while 28.7% were female; similarly, in Makeni, 67.8% were male and 32.2% were female. Although both genders were represented, there is a noticeable gender imbalance, particularly in Bo, where male respondents were more than double the female respondents. This imbalance could potentially impact the findings, as it may skew results toward the experiences and perceptions of male students, possibly underrepresenting female perspectives on key issues such as mother tongue interference and English language performance. Gender differences can influence language learning attitudes, motivation, and challenges, so a predominantly male sample may limit the generalizability of the results across all students. Moreover, since all sampled schools are mixed gender, a more balanced gender distribution would have provided a fuller, more equitable understanding of how mother tongue interference affects learners of different genders. Future studies should aim to address this imbalance, either through stratified sampling or targeted recruitment, to ensure that both male and female voices are equally reflected, allowing for more nuanced gender-based analysis and recommendations.

Prevalence of the Use of Mother Tongue

Table 6: Most spoken indigenous language and engaged activity by children and Teachers in school

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Which is the most indigenous language spoken by children in school?				
Krio	12	3.8	20	3.1
Mɛnde	274	70.0	6	1.9
Kàthemnɛ	-	-	274	63.8
English	102	25.6	98	30.6
Other(Neither Yes/No)	2	0.6	2	0.6
Total	400	100	400	100
Which is the most common language used by teachers in school?				
Krio	66	14.4	74	13.8
Mɛnde	2	0.6	-	-
Kàthemnɛ	-	-	43	10.2
English	322	85.0	293	76.0
Total	400	100	400	100

Which English language activity(s) do you participate actively in?				
Story telling	108	27.5	106	26.9
Dialogue	74	20	72	19.4
Debate	210	50	216	51.9
Other (Neither Yes/No)	8	2.5	6	1.8
Total	400	100	400	100

The study examines the linguistic landscape and its impact on English language learning in selected secondary schools in Bo and Makeni, Sierra Leone. Findings reveal a high prevalence of mother tongue use among students, with 70% in Bo reporting Mɛnde as the most commonly spoken indigenous language, followed by English (25.6%) and Krio (3.8%). Similarly, in Makeni, 63.8% of students identified Kàthemnɛ as the primary indigenous language spoken, followed by English (30.6%), Krio (3.1%), and Mɛnde (1.9%). Across both locations, less than 35% of students reported not using their mother tongue, indicating that over 60% frequently use indigenous languages in school, highlighting the significant role of mother tongue in students' linguistic environment.

Teacher language use contrasts with student patterns. In Bo, 85% of teachers predominantly use English, with 14.4% using Krio and 0.6% using Mɛnde. In Makeni, 76% of teachers use English, 13.8% use Krio, and 10.2% use Kàthemnɛ. These findings suggest a gap between the language of instruction and the linguistic background of students, which may influence English language acquisition and performance. Participation in English language activities was comparable across both regions. In Bo, students engaged most in Debate (50%), followed by Storytelling (27.5%) and Dialogue (20%). Makeni showed a similar trend with Debate (51.9%), Storytelling (26.9%), and Dialogue (19.4%).

The findings underscore the need for language-in-education policies that balance the use of indigenous languages and English, as the dominance of mother tongue among students may have both supportive and obstructive effects on English language proficiency.

Table 7: Prevalence of use of English Language

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**	**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Do you avoid the use of English Language despite the fact that the subject is core?				
Yes	70	15.6	110	28.1
No	308	80.6	160	65.6
Other (Neither Yes/No)	22	3.8	30	6.3
Total	400	100	400	100
Do you consider English Language a difficult subject to understand?				
Yes	178	40	210	53.1
No	198	55.6	184	45

Other(Neither Yes/No)	24	4.4	6	1.9
Total	400	100	400	100

The data shows that in Bo, 80.6% of students do not avoid using the English Language, and 55.6% do not consider it a difficult subject, while in Makeni, only 65.6% do not avoid English, and 45% do not see it as difficult indicating a more positive attitude toward English in Bo. Interpreting these findings through the lens of Behaviourist theory, the higher engagement in Bo may stem from consistent positive reinforcement such as praise, success, and encouragement reinforcing English use as a rewarding behaviour, while in Makeni, a lack of such reinforcement or negative experiences may have conditioned avoidance and negative attitudes. From a Cognitive perspective, students in Bo may possess stronger intrinsic motivation, better developed metacognitive strategies, and more effective cognitive scaffolding in their learning environments, helping them perceive English as manageable. Conversely, students in Makeni may experience cognitive overload or lack sufficient instructional support, leading to lower self-efficacy and a belief that English is difficult. Together, these theories suggest that enhancing both external reinforcement and internal learning strategies especially in Makeni could reduce avoidance behaviours and improve students' perceptions of English as a learnable subject.

Table 8: English Language anxiety

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Do you interact in English with your parents at home?				
Yes	178	43.1	122	31.9
No	204	53.8	260	65.6
Other (Neither Yes/No)	10	3.1	18	2.5
Total	400	100	400	100
Do you feel comfortable in the midst of friends who speak English Language fluently?				
Yes	300	81.3	304	82.5
No	90	15.6	92	16.3
Other (Neither Yes/No)	10	3.1	4	1.3
Total	400	100	400	100

The data reveals that in Bo, 53.8% of students do not interact in English with their parents at home, while 43.1% do; in Makeni, a higher percentage (65.6%) reported not using English at home with parents, and only 31.9% said they do. Interpreting this through Behaviourist theory, which emphasizes learning through reinforcement and environmental stimuli, the limited use of English at home especially in Makeni may indicate fewer opportunities for reinforcement of English outside school, weakening language acquisition due to lack of consistent practice and positive feedback in familiar contexts. Meanwhile, Cognitive theory, which highlights internal processes such as language exposure, memory, and transfer of learning, suggests that students who engage with English at home likely have greater opportunities to consolidate language knowledge, facilitating better long term retention and fluency. The significantly lower home interaction in Makeni implies that students there may not be receiving sufficient cognitive reinforcement to internalize English structures and vocabulary through daily use. On the other hand, both Bo (81.3%) and Makeni (82.5%) show high levels of comfort among students when interacting with friends who speak English fluently. From a Behaviourist viewpoint, this comfort

could be a result of positive social reinforcement. Students may associate English with social belonging and peer approval, which encourages their willingness to engage with the language in informal peer settings. From a Cognitive perspective, comfort in peer interactions likely supports language confidence and motivation, which are key cognitive drivers of second-language acquisition. These findings suggest that while home environments may limit formal language exposure especially in Makeni where peer interactions offer a valuable avenue for reinforcing English use, both behaviourally and cognitively.

Table 9: Mother Tongue and use of English Language Textbook

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Do you speak Mɛnde/Kàthemnɛ fluently?				
Yes	300	78	344	88.7
No	82	19.5	50	9.4
Other(Neither Yes/No)	18	2.5	6	1.9
Total	400	100	400	100
Do you use English text book?				
Yes	342	85	324	82.5
No	52	13.1	70	15.6
Other(Neither Yes/No)	6	1.9	6	1.9
Total	400	100	400	100

The data shows that in Bo, 78% of students reported speaking Mɛnde fluently, while 19.5% do not; similarly, in Makeni, a higher 88.7% of students reported speaking Kàthemnɛ fluently, with only 9.4% indicating they do not. Interpreted through Behaviourist theory, the high fluency in local languages in both regions suggests that these languages are reinforced frequently within students' immediate environments such as home, community, and peer groups where repeated use and positive feedback condition fluency. The Cognitive theory further explains this by emphasizing that the constant and meaningful exposure to Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ in daily life allows students to build strong language schemas and automaticity, making native language use cognitively less demanding than English. Meanwhile, regarding the use of English textbooks, 85% of students in Bo and 82.5% in Makeni indicated that they use them, while only 13.1% and 15.6%, respectively, said they do not. From a Behaviourist perspective, consistent textbook use suggests that the learning environment (likely through teacher expectations or school norms) reinforces the use of English materials, which can encourage familiarity and reduce resistance to the language. From a Cognitive viewpoint, regular interaction with English textbooks promotes cognitive engagement, helping students process vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension strategies in context. It also indicates access to instructional resources that aid in the development of academic language proficiency. Therefore, while students show strong proficiency in local languages due to environmental exposure and reinforcement, the regular use of English textbooks in both regions highlights a structured attempt—both behaviourally and cognitively to bridge the gap between local language dominance and English language literacy

Table 10: Mother Tongue sound system differences

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %

Can you distinguish between Mɛnde/Kàthemnɛ sounds and English sounds?				
Yes	292	72.5	298	71.3
No	102	25.6	100	28.1
Other (Neither Yes/No)	6	1.9	2	0.6
Total	400	100	400	100
Will you be convenient to discussion in English without using Mɛnde/Kàthemnɛ in Substitution?				
Yes	290	75	270	65.6
No	94	23.1	126	33.1
Other (Neither Yes/No)	16	1.8	4	1.3
Total	400	100	400	100

The data shows that in Bo, 72.5% of students reported being able to distinguish between Mɛnde and English sounds, while 25.6% cannot; in Makeni, 71.3% can distinguish between Kàthemnɛ and English sounds, while 28.1% cannot. From a Cognitive theory perspective, this ability reflects developing phonological awareness a crucial cognitive skill in second language acquisition that supports pronunciation, listening comprehension, and decoding. Students capable of distinguishing between sounds are likely engaging in higher level auditory discrimination processes, which aid in managing language interference and improving fluency. According to Behaviourist theory, consistent exposure to both languages, with feedback from teachers or peers correcting mispronunciations or reinforcing accurate distinctions, can condition the learners to recognize and reproduce distinct language sounds correctly. Additionally, in Bo, 75% of students stated they feel comfortable engaging in a discussion in English without substituting Mɛnde, while 23.1% do not; in Makeni, 65.6% feel comfortable discussing in English without using Kàthemnɛ, while 33.1% do not. From a Behaviourist viewpoint, the higher comfort level in Bo may result from more frequent reinforcement of English-only communication in academic or social settings, which conditions students to maintain language separation. In Makeni, where fewer students express this comfort, the likelihood of code-switching may be higher due to less consistent reinforcement or reliance on Kàthemnɛ for complex expression. From a Cognitive standpoint, students in Bo may possess greater linguistic flexibility and stronger working memory for English vocabulary and structures, allowing them to sustain communication without reverting to their mother tongue. In contrast, students in Makeni may face more cognitive strain when communicating solely in English, prompting them to fall back on their native language to fill linguistic gaps. Overall, these findings suggest that both behaviourally and cognitively, Bo students may be slightly more advanced in managing dual-language demands, possibly due to more effective exposure, reinforcement, or instructional practices.

Table 11: Interference of Mother Tongue on Performance of English Learners

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Teachers' use of mother tongue affects students' performance in English.				
Strongly disagree	4	1.3	9	2.8
Disagree	41	9.7	55	10.9
Neutral	27	5.3	16	5
Agree	270	71.8	257	67.8

Strongly agree	52	10	59	12.2
Other (Neither Yes/No)	6	1.9	4	1.3
Total	400	100	400	100
Teachers who use English in conversation with students influence their performance in English.				
Strongly disagree	2	0.6	1	0.3
Disagree	45	10.9	31	9.7
Neutral	41	9.7	43	10.3
Agree	280	67.8	276	67.5
Strongly agree	28	8.8	45	10.9
Other (Neither Yes/No)	4	1.3	4	1.3
Total	400	100	400	100

The data reveals that in Bo, 71.8% of respondents agree that teachers' use of the mother tongue affects students' performance in English, with 10% strongly agreeing, 9.7% disagreeing, and 5.3% remaining neutral; similarly, in Makeni, 67.8% agree, 12.2% strongly agree, 10.9% disagree, and 5% are neutral. Interpreted through Behaviourist theory, this suggests that when teachers frequently use the mother tongue in instruction, students may receive less reinforcement for English use, weakening habit formation in English and reinforcing reliance on the native language. The cognitive implications align with interference theory, where simultaneous exposure to two languages without clear boundaries may cause cognitive confusion and inhibit the internalization of English structures. Conversely, the table also shows that 67.8% in Bo and 67.5% in Makeni agree that teachers who consistently use English in conversations positively influence students' English performance, with smaller percentages strongly agreeing (8.8% in Bo and 10.9% in Makeni), and low levels of disagreement. From a Behaviorist standpoint, consistent teacher use of English acts as modeling and positive reinforcement, conditioning students to adopt English as the expected and rewarded mode of communication. From a Cognitive theory perspective, consistent English use by teachers strengthens language input quality, enhances working memory load adaptation, and supports language acquisition through social interaction (as emphasized by Vygotsky). The data suggests that teacher language practices whether in the mother tongue or English play a significant role both in shaping student behavior through reinforcement (Behaviourist) and in developing or hindering internal language processing (Cognitive). Therefore, promoting English use among teachers in classroom discourse may enhance students' English proficiency by reinforcing desirable language behavior and supporting cognitive development in the target language.

Table 12: Teachers Method of Teaching

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Do you agree that teachers` teaching method influence learners` ability to comprehend English				
Yes	330	84.4	356	89.4
No	56	11.2	38	8.7
Other (Neither Yes/No)	14	4.4	6	1.9

Total	400	100	400	100
Would you like English lessons to be translated into your mother tongue?				
Yes	296	70.6	286	65.5
No	90	25	102	28.7
Other (Neither Yes/No)	14	4.4	12	3.8
Total	400	100	400	100

The data shows that in Bo, 84.4% of students agree that the teacher's method of teaching influences their ability to comprehend English, while 11.2% believe it does not; in Makeni, an even higher 89.4% agree, with only 8.7% disagreeing. From a Cognitive theory perspective, this highlights the central role of instructional strategies in shaping how students process and internalize language input. Effective teaching methods such as scaffolding, modelling, and use of prior knowledge help students develop mental frameworks (schemas) that support comprehension. In contrast, ineffective methods may overload working memory and hinder language processing. From a Behaviorist viewpoint, teaching methods that consistently reinforce correct language use and provide immediate feedback contribute to habit formation and improved performance, reinforcing the perception that method matters. Additionally, in Bo, 70.6% of students expressed a desire for English lessons to be translated into their mother tongue for easier understanding, with 25% admitting the same; in Makeni, 65.5% supported translation into the mother tongue, with 28.7% in agreement. Through a Cognitive lens, this suggests that many students still rely heavily on L1 (first language) transfer to access meaning, indicating that their English proficiency may not yet be fully developed for abstract or academic content. Translating into the mother tongue may serve as a cognitive bridge, reducing processing load and facilitating comprehension. However, from a Behaviourist perspective, frequent translation might limit direct reinforcement of English structures, slowing down the formation of automatic English responses and reinforcing dependence on the mother tongue. Together, the data emphasizes the importance of effective, English-centred instructional strategies that support comprehension without fostering over-reliance on translation, balancing both cognitive processing needs and reinforcement principles for optimal English language learning.

Table 13: Teachers Method of Teaching

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
How many English periods do you have in a week?				
Two	102	28.7	120	28.1
Three	68	18.2	64	16.9
Four	150	34.4	122	28.8
Five	50	12.5	66	17.5
Six	28	5.6	18	5.6
Other (Neither Yes/No)	2	0.6	10	3.2
Total	400	100	400	100

How often are you present during English Language lessons?				
Every Time	316	80	306	76.9
Sometimes	76	17.5	84	20
Never	4	1.3	4	1.3
Other (Neither Yes/No)	4	1.3	6	1.8
Total	400	100	400	100

The data indicates that in Bo, students reported varying frequencies of English periods per week: 28.7% have two periods, 18.2% three, 34.4% four, 12.5% five, and 5.6% six; similarly, in Makeni, 28.1% have two periods, 16.9% three, 28.8% four, 17.5% five, and 5.6% six. From a Behaviourist perspective, the number of English periods represents opportunities for repeated practice and reinforcement, which are critical for habit formation and language acquisition. More frequent exposure to English classes can strengthen stimulus-response associations, improving proficiency over time. The slightly higher percentages of students having four or more periods in Bo could contribute to greater reinforcement and thus better language outcomes. Additionally, regarding attendance, 80% of respondents in Bo often attend English lessons, with 17.5% sometimes attending and 1.3% never attending; in Makeni, 76.9% often attend, 20% sometimes attend, and 1.3% never attend. From a Cognitive theory viewpoint, regular attendance ensures consistent input and cognitive engagement with the language, facilitating the development of language processing skills such as vocabulary acquisition and syntactic comprehension. Irregular attendance, as indicated by some students, may disrupt the consolidation of linguistic schemas and increase cognitive load when catching up. Thus, both the frequency of English periods and consistent lesson attendance play crucial roles behaviourally, by reinforcing language use, and cognitively, by providing the sustained input needed for effective language acquisition.

Table 14: Teachers Mother Tongue Engagement

Bo			Makeni	
Responses	Frequency	Percentage %	Frequency	Percentage %
Does your teacher(s) speak Mɛnde/Kàthemnɛ in the teaching of English?				
Yes	54	10.6	84	19.4
No	342	88.1	318	80.6
Other (Neither Yes/No)	4	1.3	-	-
Total	400	100	400	100
Do you agree that English Language can be improved with good method of teaching?				
Yes	378	96.3	372	94.4
No	2	0.6	26	5
Other (Neither Yes/No)	20	3.1	2	0.6
Total	400	100	400	100
Do your teachers correct you when you make mistakes in speaking, reading or writing English?				

Yes	388	96.3	356	92.5
No	4	1.3	20	3.1
Other (Neither Yes/No)	8	2.5	24	4.4
Total	400	100	400	100

The data shows that in Bo, only 10.6% of respondents indicated that their teachers use Mɛnde in teaching English, while a large majority of 88.1% said their teachers do not; in Makeni, 19.4% reported that their teachers use Kàthemnɛ in teaching English, with 80.6% indicating they do not. From a Behaviourist perspective, the limited use of mother tongue in English teaching suggests that reinforcement is primarily delivered through English exposure, which can strengthen stimulus-response patterns in the target language. However, the slightly higher mother tongue use in Makeni might reflect attempts to scaffold learning or address comprehension gaps. Furthermore, in Bo, 96.3% of respondents agree that English language skills can be improved with good teaching methods, while only 0.6% disagrees; in Makeni, 94.4% agree and 5% disagree. This aligns with Cognitive theory, which emphasizes that effective instructional strategy such as clear explanations, scaffolding, and feedback support cognitive processing and language acquisition by helping students build mental models of English. Additionally, in Bo, 96.3% of respondents agree that teachers correct their mistakes in speaking, reading, or writing English, while 1.3% said teachers do not; in Makeni, 92.5% agree with correction, and 3.1% disagree. According to Behaviourist theory, such corrective feedback serves as crucial reinforcement that shapes correct language habits and reduces errors over time. Cognitively, correction also aids metalinguistic awareness, helping learners notice gaps and adjust their internal language representations. Overall, the data suggests that minimal mother tongue use combined with good teaching methods and corrective feedback contributes positively to students' English learning both behaviourally, through reinforcement, and cognitively, through enhanced language processing and error monitoring.

Mɛnde Phonology Compared with that of English

Comparison of Mɛnde and English Vowels

ENGLISH   MƐNDE

I /sip/ -- i

I /si:p/ --   -

e/bed/ --   e

a /rat/ --   a

a /pa: k/ --   -

ɔ /pɔt/ --   ɔ

u /buk/ --- u

u: /pu:l/ --   -

Λ /kΛt/   --- -

Ə /ƏbΛV/ --   -

Ə/bƏ:d/ --   -

Real Instances of Interference of Mɛnde in English Phonological Interference

After gathering date from pupils on pronunciation I was able to conclude that they unconsciously carried over sounds form their mother tongue, to English

By merely listening to speaker of both Mɛnde and English, it would be noticed that some of the sounds of the two languages are different. However, there are some sounds which are common to the e two languages,

Consonants common to both MƐNDE and English

/p. b, d, t, g, k, s, d, z, f, v, m, n, j, w, h/

English consonants not present in Mɛnde

/r/ /Ө/ /8/ /ʃ/ /ʒ/ /z/

Since the above are present in Mɛnde, the Mɛnde learner of English will find it difficult to pronounce words in which these sounds occur. As a result of this the Mɛnde learner is forced to produce sounds in his LI that seem to him closest or similar.
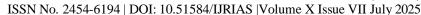
The following explain the above assertion.

ENGLISH	MƐNDE	ENGLISH	MƐNDE
/r/ becomes	/L/	ruler	/lula/
/Ө/ becomes	/t/	thanks	/tanks/
/ə/ becomes	/d/	then	/den/
//becomes	/s/	shop	/sɔp/
/ʒ/ becomes	/dʒ/	measure	/mɛdʒɔ/
/z/ becomes	/dZ/	Zip	/dʒip)
/t/) becomes	/s/	church	/SɔS/

Common Vowels in both English and Mɛnde

/i, e, ą. ɔ, and u/. These vowels are present in Mɛnde and when they occur in English they do not pose any problem to the learners. However, there are Mɛnde vowels that are not present in English. For example, where the English has the diphthong /ei/ Mɛnde has a pure vowel /ɛ/ similar to cardinal vowel number two. Also, where the English has diphthong /Өu/ Mɛnde has /O/ which is similar to cardinal vowel number seven. Coming to the pure vowel sounds in English which are not common in Mɛnde. These are /| i/ a:/ /ɔ:/ /u:/ /Λ Ə / and /Ə:/ In Mɛnde there are no central vowels /Λ Ə/ and /Ə:/. These differences pose a lot of problems for the Mɛnde learners of English

As shown in the following examples:

ENGLISH	MƐNDE	ENGLISH	MƐNDE
/Λ/ becomes	/ɔ/ bud	/bΛd/ becomes	/bɔd/
//Ə/ becomes	/Ə/ better	/beta/ becomes	/beta/
/Ə:/ becomes	/Ə/ earth	/Ə:Ө/ becomes	/ą/

From the observation made during the pupils' oral drill (pronunciation). The researcher was able to deduce that the learners unconsciously carried over sounds from their mother tongue to English. The researcher realized also that pronunciation difficulties are due to the fact that pupil will hear at an early stage of learning English a lot of poor English around him. He will hear this in the playground, in the market place at home and elsewhere. If he hears English at all, the best English he is going to hear will almost certainly be from his teacher. Carrying out first language usual habits into second language is always manifested by every second language learner. As in the case of English which is considerably rich in vowel distinction (20 vowels) so many learners have considerable difficulty in discriminating key contrasts.

For example, Some learners of English from Africa (including Sierra Leone) can rather hear nor make a distinction between words: "but /bɪt/ heart /ha:t/ and hurt /hɔ:t/". Also all the teachers contacted made it clear that pupils found it difficult to segment phonemes.

Example:

a) You can eat five cups of rice

b) You can't eat five cups of rice

There is hardly a distinction between 'can' in sentence (a) and 'can' t in sentence (b) because can' and 'can't' are followed by a word beginning with 't'. so the distinction is recognized in the different vowels /æ/ and /a:/. The /t/ is unimportant in indicating meaning.

Structural Interference

In Mende sentences like in English, there are declarative, interrogative, imperative and exclamatory sentences. In both languages also there are simple compound and complex sentences. A careful arrangement of the sentence components would bring out the cause of interference.

Normal English simple sentence follows a pattern of subject and predicate.

Examples:

1. Subject	+ verb	+ object
Mary	+ hit	+ the box
S	+ V	+ O
2. Subject	+ verb	+ complement
The birds	+ fly	+ away
S	+ V	+ O
3. Subject	+ verb	+ complement
The boys	+ are	+ sad
S	+ V	+ O

In Mende also there are some simple sentence structures that comply with the pattern of English sentence structures as above

1. Subject	+ verb	+ complement
Joe	+ |ɔjiama	+ kami

S	+ V	+ O
2. Subject	+ verb	+ adjunct
Nuuga	+ Lɔjiama	+ kaka
People walking	+ are	+ hurriedly
Subject	+ verb	+ adjunct
3. Subject	+ verb	+ complement
ŋagahu	+ i	+ gbia
My body	+ is not	+ well
Noun phrase	+ verb	+ complement

The above similarities help the Mɛnde Learners of English. However there are some structures in Mɛnde that are not in English as stated in the following.

1. Subject	+ object	+ verb
Kpanni	+ nikii	+ gbua
Kpanni	+ groundnut	+ harvest
2. Object	+ subject	+ verb
Mbei	+ mu	+ meilo
Rice	+ we	+ eat
3. Subject	V+ object	verb
Saffa	Iɔ jei	gboima

(Saffa is drinking water)

It is explicitly correct that the above structures do not exist in English. It is therefore possible for the learner to transpose these structures into English. This can be one of their main causes of interference made by Mɛnde learners.

The English verb forms create problems for Mɛnde learners of English. In Mɛnde the way to express tenses is Very flexible. To express tenses in Mende we either add adverbial phrases or adverbs of time to the verb or verbs in context. This is not so in English. It is the type of transfer or interference that makes the Mende learners makes errors of the nature below:

Simple present

Mɛnde: Ngai or ngali

English: To go

Mɛnde" Ta li

English: He/she/it goes

Mɛnde: ba li/ali

English: You go / both singular

Mɛnde: ma li or muai

English: We go

Present continuous

Mɛnde:	Nya lima or nya naa lima
English:	I am gong
Mɛnde:	Ta lina or Ta naa lima
English:	He/she/ it is going
Mɛnde:	Bia lima or bia naa lima (singular) Tia lima or Tia naa lima (plural)
English:	You are going (singular) They are going (plural)

Past tense

Mɛnde	: Ngi li lɔ gbeingi
English	: I went yesterday
Mɛnde	: Ngi mui lɔ gɛ
English	: I took my bath last

Future tense

There is similarity between the formation of the future tense in Mende and English, the Mende language makes Use of temporal adverbs as in English.

Mɛnde	: Nga li lɔ sina or nya lima sina
English	: I shall / will go tomorrow
Mɛnde	: Ba fɔ lɔ nya ma fuinahu
English	: You will visit me next year
Mɛnde	: Ma yenge lɔ sina
English	: We shall work tomorrow

Kàthemnɛ: Phonology Compared with that of English

Posology deals with tee study of how speech sounds and structured and function in Languages Lodge 2009. As Trubetzkoy (1971) puts in. the role of phonology is to study which differences in sound are related to differences in meaning in a given language in which Way, the discriminative elements-are elated to each other and the rules according to which they may he combined to words and sentences. (p.2)

The above assertion indicates that phonology shows how speech sounds are used to convey meaning in Languages. Kàthemnɛ phonology, according to Dalby (1964), comprises of nine (9) vowels, six (6) diphthongs, fifteen (15) consonants and four (4) diagraphs, Kàthemnɛ phonology is phonemic in a sense that every sound is represented by a symbol and the name of the symbol is also the pronunciation.

The Kàthemnɛ vowel Hyman 1975:10

Hyman proposed the following to be familiar sounds in Kàthemnɛ

/o/ as in /for/ ("to gossip") /bot/ (to put)

/ɔ/ as in: /nɔt/ ("to put") /rɔk/ ("to harvest")

/ə/ as in: /ə/ ("to hear") /səli/ ("to unitie")

/ä/ as in: /käp/ (to scratch") /päy/ ("to jump")

We must note that, in Kăthemne, the vowels (ə) and (â) are pronounced with the lips open but not as rounded as the back vowels. The central mid-half -closed vowel (2) sounds almost like the schwa in the English words - above (abàv) and people (Pi:l). The vowel (ä) sounds like the vowel in English word; 'cut (kat) and 'sun (sAn)

In terms of vowel quality the central vowels (ä) and (a) differ in that the former is a half-open vowel whereas the latter is an open vowel. Acoustically, the central mid-half-opened vowel (å) resembles the central low-open vowel but with duller timber. However, the central low-open vowel (å) is very open forward; it is near the cardinal position.

The English Orthography

The English orthography like the Themnɛ is made up of vowels and consonants. The vowels are sub-categorized into Monothongs, Diphthongs and Tripthongs.

The Monophthongs/Pure Vowels

According to English Dictionary (2006) monophthongs or pure vowel is a single uncompounded vowel sound. The English pure vowels or monophthongs are:

/i/ front unrounded high half close vowel as in: peak /pi:k/, beat /bi:/

/I/ front unrounded high close vowels as in: big /bIg, sing /SIŋ/

/e/ front unrounded mid half open vowel as in: bed/ bed, peg/ peg/

/æ/ front unrounded low open vowel as in: Bat /bæt/; pan/ pæn/

/ʒ/ centrał unrounded half chose vowel as in: girl /gʒ:l/, bird/bʒ:d/

/ə/ mid-central vowel as in: doctor /dɔktə/, pastor pastəl/

/A/ central unrounded half open bowel as in: blood/blAd/, cup/kAp

/a:/ back unrounded central open vowel as in: /bark/ba:k/palm/pa:m

/u:/ back rounded half close vowel as in: pool/pu:l, book/ bu:l/

/v/ back rounded half close vowel as in: book/bvk/, good/ gvd/

/ɔ/ back rounded half open vowel as in: court/kv:t, sport/spɔ:t

/d/ is a back open vowel as in: dot /Dot/, pot/pot

Kàthemnɛ Consonant Phonemes Compared with English

A consonant is described according to Weiss (2007) as the speech sound in whose production there is a considerable obstruction in the vowel tract. Kàthemnɛ sounds whose articulation necessitates a closure or narrowing or the articulatory manner of articulation as indicated below organs according to (Weiss. 2007), known as consonants. Dalby indicates that there are nineteen (19) consonants in Kàthemnɛ and they are either voiced or voiceless.

The Kàthemnɛ consonant phonemes represented in the chart showing their place and manner of articulation as indication below.

	PLACE OF ARTICULATION								
Manner of Articulation	BILABIAL	LABIO-	APICO	AVELOAR	LABIO	PALATA	VELAR	PLATO-	GLOTTAL
Plosive	b.p		(6)th	(2)d,t	(7)Gb		K		
Africates								(9)ch	
Fricatives		F		S				(8)sh	(3)h
Nasals	M			N			(9)0		
Liquids				L(1)r					
Approximants					(4)w	(5)Y			

Figure 4: Kàthemnɛ Consonant Phonemes chart (source: www. Verbling.co 2007).

The Kàthemnɛ and the English Consonants

Dalby (1965) states that consonants can be simply described as a speech sounds in whose production there is a considerable obstruction in the vocal track. He revels that English has twenty-four (24) consonants. The orthography of Kàthemnɛ, however in addition to the vowels and diphthongs, consists of 19 consonants. These include the following:

Table 15: Stops comparison in English and Kàthemnɛ

English	**Kàthemnɛ**
/p/ voiceless bilabial stop as in:	/p/ voiceless bilabial stop as in:
Plus /plas/, pod/pod	Pzla (rice). panɛ(to forget)
/b/ voiced bilabial stops as in:	/b/ voiced bilabial stops as in:
bat /bæt, big /blg/	baf (to brush). ba (to have)
/t/ voiceless alveolar stop as in:	/t/ voiceless alveolar stop as in:
Tame/telm, time /talm/	/ɔ/ (to rear), tɔn(t0 chew)
/d/ voiced alveolar stop as in:	/d/ voiced alveolar stop as in:
day /dei/, dark /da:k/	der (to come), dir(greedy)

k voiceless velar stop as in: cat /kæt/. Chasm/kæzam/ /g/ voiced velar stop as in: Got/gbt, gong/gbŋ/ (Dalby 1965)	/k/ voiceless velar stop as in: kom(to give birh). kɔth (to walk)

Table 2: Fricatives comparison in English and Kàthemnɛ

English	Kàthemnɛ
/f/ voiceless labio denta! fricative as in: fat /fazt. farne /felm/	/f/ voiceless labio dental fricative as in: fät {to near), funear)
/v/ voiced labio dentai iricaive as in: vague /veig/, van /væn/	/sh/ voiced alveolar sheth(io build), shek (to tie)
/s/ voiced alveo -palatal fricative as in: sharp /sa:p, sheep/ si:p/	/s/ voiceless alveolar fricative as in: sel (to laugh), sanɛ (to bend down)
/ʒ/ voicelss alveo-palatal iricative as i: leisure /ezər/, pleasure/ pleʒə/	/h/ voicless giotal fricative as in: hali(no)_halaki{useless)
/s/ Voiceless alveolar fricative as in: say /isei/, sum/ sAml/	th/ voiceless dental fricative thɔmɔ (to dance). thầm{ to taste)
/z/ voiceless alveolar fricative as in: zink /Ziŋk/, zing/ zlŋ/	
/ɵ/ voiceless dental fricative as in: thesis /ɵi:sis/,thick /ɵlk/ (Dalby 1965)	

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that mother tongue interference poses significant challenges for Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ-speaking learners of English in secondary schools in Bo and Makeni, Sierra Leone. From a Cognitive theory perspective, phonological differences between native languages and English increase cognitive load, leading to sound substitutions that hinder accurate pronunciation and fluency. Behaviourist theory explains that these errors become habitual through repeated reinforcement in the learner's environment. The persistent difficulty in achieving native-like competence reflects the combined impact of cognitive and behavioural factors. The study emphasizes the need for English teachers to understand learners' linguistic backgrounds, enabling them to identify error sources and tailor instruction accordingly. Teachers should apply reinforcement strategies (Behaviourist) and promote cognitive restructuring using effective pedagogies. It recommends continuous technical training, particularly in spoken English, alongside vigilant error correction and the teaching of Received Pronunciation to counteract ingrained L1 patterns. Access to in-service training, such as British Council programs, supports the integration of cognitive strategies for enhanced language processing. Making Oral English compulsory and promoting active participation help condition correct usage and deepen cognitive

engagement. Enforcing English-only communication in schools provides consistent behavioural stimuli and cognitive input, essential for minimizing L1 interference and boosting overall English proficiency among learners.

Summary

This study examines the impact of mother tongue interference from Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ on English language acquisition among senior secondary school pupils in Bo City (Southern Sierra Leone) and Makeni (North-East Sierra Leone). The findings reveal that first language (L1) influence significantly hampers learners' mastery of English grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure. All participants are native speakers of Mɛnde or Kàthemnɛ, and their L1 habits strongly affect their English proficiency. The study aimed to compare the extent of L1 interference between the two language groups, drawing on data collected through questionnaires, interviews, and sampling techniques across ten schools—five in each city.

Learners struggle with English partly due to minimal exposure, as it is rarely spoken in their home or community environments. Many avoid the subject, viewing it as difficult and necessary only for academic advancement. Semantic interference, such as literal translation from L1 to English, was commonly observed. Despite a preference for learning English over Kàthemnɛ, students' motivation is low, affected by overcrowded classrooms, ineffective teaching methods, and limited parental support. From a Cognitive theory perspective, the study highlights the cognitive load caused by interference from L1 phonological and syntactic systems, which hinders fluency. Behaviourist theory explains that inadequate reinforcement and limited English practice prevent the formation of correct language habits. Peer interaction with fluent English speakers, however, positively influences acquisition through behavioural modeling. The study concludes that addressing L1 interference requires integrating cognitive-based strategies to restructure language processing and behaviourist techniques to reinforce accurate English use through targeted teaching and immersive language environments.

Summary of findings by objectives

To identify different area of phonological interference of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ Languages in the teaching and learning of English

Real instances of Phonological interference of Mɛnde in English

By merely listening to speakers of both Mɛnde and English, it would be noticed that some of the sounds of the two languages are different. However, there are some sounds which are common to the two languages. After gathering data from pupils on pronunciation the researchers were able to conclude that they unconsciously carried over sounds form their mother tongue to English.

Consonants common to both MɛndƐ and English are /p. b, d, t, g, k, s, d, z, f, v, m, n, j, w, h/ English consonants not present in Mɛnde are /r/ /Ө/ /ᵭ/ /ʃ/ /ʒ/ /z/

Since the above are present in Mɛnde, the Mɛnde, learner of English will find it difficult to pronounce words in which these sounds occur. As a result the Mɛnde learner is forced to produce sounds in his LI that seem closest or similar. The following explain the above assertion.

ENGLISH	MƐNDE	ENGLISH	MƐNDE
/r/ becomes	/L/	ruler	/lula/
/Ө/ becomes	/t/	thanks	/tanks/
/ə/ becomes	/d/	then	/den/
//becomes	/s/	shop	/sɔp/

/ʒ/ becomes	/dʒ/	measure	/mɛdʒɔ/
/z/ becomes	/dZ/	Zip	/dʒip)
/t/) becomes	/s/	church	/SɔS/

Common vowels in English and Mɛnde /i, e, a̧. ɔ, and u/. These vowels are present in Mɛnde and when they occur in English they do not pose any problem to the learners. However, there are Mɛnde vowels that are not present in English. For example, where the English has the diphthong /ei/ Mɛnde has a pure vowel /ɛ/ similar to cardinal vowel number two. Also, where the English has diphthong /Əu/ Mɛnde has /O/ which is similar to cardinal vowel number seven. Coming to the pure vowel sound in English which are not common in Mɛnde are /| i/ a:/ /ɔ:/ /u:/ /Λ Ə / and /Ə:/ In Mɛnde there are no central vowels /Λ Ə/ and /Ə:/. These differences pose a lot of problems for the Mɛnde learners of English

Real instances of Phonological interference of Kàthemnɛ in English

Table 15: Kàthemnɛ sounds often substituted into the learning of English

NO	ENGLISH ARTICULATION	THEMNE ARTICULATION
1	Voice	Boyis
2	Victor	biktɔ
3	Victory	Bikɘtri
4	Victoria	Biktoriya
5	Vote	Bot

Table 16: sound /z/ substituted to /s/

NO	ENGLISH ARTICULATION	THEMNE ARTICULATION
1	Zero	Siro
2	Zip	Sip
3	Zainab	Saynab
4	Zebra	Sibra
5	Zinc	Sik

Table 17: sound /j/ substituted to /y/

NO	ENGLISH ARTICULATION	THEMNE ARTICULATION
1	Jet	Yɜt
2	Jump	Yɔmp
3	Junction	Yɔkashan

| 4 | James | Yemas |
| 5 | Just | Yɔs |

Table 18: sound /g/ substituted to k/

NO	ENGLISH ARTICULATION	THEMNE ARTICULATION
1	Go	Ko
2	Give	Kif
3	Goat	Kot
4	Grass	Kras
5	Glass	Klas

Areas of interference of Kàthemnɛ into the learning of English

Examples of areas:

1. yɔn for John, ánkɔn for gun, yɔkəshɔn for Junction.

2. **Phonetic substitution:**

/ch/ sounds for /t/ for words such as chela-tela, cher-ter, ect.

From the list of words above, it is clearly evident that the sounds /v id y and /g/ are missing in the Themnɛ sounds. Therefore, a Thennɛ La leaner who may attempts to sound the above words, tend to replace them with /b/, Isl, Iyl and k/ respectively. In a summary therefore, the impact of interference of Kàthemnɛ in the teaching and learning of English may cause both positive and negative impact. In the positive impact, the Themnɛ speaker learning English may feel comfortable in sounding the substituted words when communicating. Whereas, on the other hand the negative impact is that the English speaker articulating this sounds may feel funny in the pronunciation of words in the teaching and learning process.

Identification of the main causes of interference of Mende and Kàthemnɛ in the teaching and learning of English

From the result obtained, it is evident that there are main causes of interference of Mɛnde and Kàthemnɛ in the learning and teaching of English respectively. The substituted words indicated the inability for pupils to use the current form of English words created a break of Communication. This is because the substituted words might not indicate the intended meaning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends effective strategies for teaching English pronunciation and grammar to second language learners affected by mother tongue interference. It emphasizes using visual aids, such as articulatory charts and drawings, to teach vowel and consonant sounds, alongside grammar instruction for a holistic approach. Teachers should encourage consistent English practice beyond the classroom to support internalization. Recognizing and addressing L1 to L2 differences is essential, and recurring errors should be managed through targeted remedial lessons. The use of contrastive analysis is advised to identify potential learning challenges from negative language transfer, allowing teachers to adapt syllabi and focus on problematic areas to enhance learner proficiency and confidence.

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