

## Research Article

# Teacher-Related Factors as Predictors of Students' Achievement in English Grammar in Gambian Senior Secondary Schools

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Studies have shown that several factors predict students' achievement in any second language classroom. These factors include learner, school, text, and teacher-related variables. The teacher is indispensable in the instructional procedure; therefore, the quality of a teacher in terms of teaching experience, subject mastery, and questioning behaviour can determine ESL students' learning outcomes to a large extent. This study examined the relationship between teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour and students' achievement in English grammar in the Gambia. The research design is a descriptive survey that comprised 300 students and 10 English language teachers from four senior secondary schools in Kanifing Municipal Council. Two research instruments were used and the data were analysed using PPMC and MRA. The result showed that independent variables predicted students' achievement in English grammar. Teachers' subject mastery ( $\beta = 0.476$ ;  $t = 12.132$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) and questioning behaviour ( $\beta = 0.204$ ;  $t = 5.195$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) contributed significantly to students' achievement in English grammar relatively and jointly. Recommendations were made to stakeholders to ensure regular training of in-service and preservice language teachers on the teacher and teaching-related variables in ESL classrooms.

## 1. Introduction

The English language is both a core subject and the language of instruction in the Gambian secondary school system. Although the English language is not indigenous to the Gambians, it has been assigned the status of a prestige language by default because it is the language of mass media and the official language in the country. The importance of the English language in the Gambian educational system is further underlined by the fact that a minimum of a credit pass in the subject in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) is a strong requirement for admissions to the numerous higher institutions of learning in the Gambia [1]. By implication, the English language is taught and learned as a second language in schools with an emphasis on the teaching of the four language skills, punctuations, spellings, grammar, and other literary elements.

Furthermore, English grammar is taught and tested by language teachers in Gambian schools. The West African

Examinations Council (WAEC) tests the knowledge of grammar in (lexis and structure) Paper 2, and the application of the knowledge of grammatical rules is indirectly evaluated in Paper 3 which comprises essay, reading comprehension, and summary writing. Therefore, grammar instruction is an integral aspect of second language teaching because the knowledge of grammar in the target language possessed by ESL learners determines their level of competence in the English language. To Kolawole [2], second language learners must master the grammar of the target language in order to be able to use the language well because success in the target language is closely tied to their knowledge of grammar rules.

Grammar deals with the rules or principles that determine what is right or acceptable as far as the use of a language is concerned. An individual that knows the grammar of a particular language is able to make only error-free sentences in the language. Available statistics on the performance of Gambian students in WASSCE English

language show that up to 93% of the candidates that sat for the examination from 2016 to 2018 did not obtain a credit pass which is the minimum requirement for admission into higher institutions of learning in Gambia [3]. By implication, the number of students that are eligible for admission into the undergraduate courses in the universities and other higher institutions of learning in the Gambia has been on a consistent decline. The WAEC Chief Examiners' Report published in Daily Independent [4] identified poor knowledge of grammar, tenses, and spellings among others as some of the factors responsible for the poor performance of students in the English language.

In spite of the importance of grammar instruction in the ESL classroom, several factors have impeded the effectiveness of language teachers and students' achievement in English grammar in the Gambia. Some of these factors are learner-related while others have been categorized as a teacher- or pedagogical-related. Efforts to improve students' achievement in the English language have largely focused on learner-related variables in ESL classrooms such as language anxiety [5], cognitive style, and gender [6] to mention but a few. The outcomes of these studies, notwithstanding, students' performance in the subject, especially in public examinations, have not improved significantly. However, there are different teacher-related factors such as teaching style, subject mastery, questioning behaviour, teaching qualification, and experience that can predict learning outcomes in ESL classrooms.

Several studies [2, 7–9] reported that an improvement in the quality of classroom instructions through innovative teaching strategies can enhance ESL students' learning outcomes. While emphasizing quality instruction, it is important to examine teacher-related variables such as subject mastery and questioning behaviour. The success of any instructional process depends on the quality and efficiency of the teacher in the classroom. Teachers are trained to stimulate students' interest and sustain their attention during instructional delivery. It is, therefore, important to examine how teacher-related variables such as subject mastery and questioning behaviour can predict ESL students' learning outcomes in English grammar.

The relationship between teacher-related variables and students' learning outcomes has been examined in different subject areas. For example, Omotoyinbo and Olaniyi [10] posit that qualities such as subject mastery and effective communication can distinguish teachers and determine their level of success in the classroom. Subject mastery is the totality of the expertise or knowledge of the subject matter possessed by an individual. Effectiveness in teaching begins with the teacher's depth in the knowledge of the subject matter to be delivered in the process of instruction. To Adediwura and Bada [11], no matter the level of enthusiasm displayed, poor subject mastery makes a teacher to be limited and disadvantaged in the classroom because subject mastery significantly correlates with teachers' efficiency in the processes of demonstration, explanation, and illustration which are critical aspects of instructional procedures. Therefore, it is important for teachers to have a sound mastery of the subject matter that they teach.

In addition, Fakeye and Ayede [8] found that teacher's methodology, subject mastery, and knowledge of his or her pupil have significant effects on the students' academic achievement in the English language. Several research findings have established a positive relationship between teachers' subject mastery and students' achievement. For example, Fakeye [12] found that teachers' subject mastery contributed significantly to students' academic achievement in the English language. However, the relationship between teachers' subject mastery and students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian schools has not received enough research attention. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between teachers' subject mastery and Gambian students' achievement in English grammar.

Apart from subject mastery, another teacher-related factor that can predict students' achievement in English grammar is questioning behaviour. Questioning behaviour refers to the skills and sequence of inquiry adopted in the process of teaching by a teacher. Questioning is an integral aspect of effective teaching. Effective teachers are sensitive enough to adequately pry, probe, or search deep into the learners by engaging learners through inquisitive questions prior, during, and after the process of instruction. Questions help teachers to access vital feedback that forms the basis for their next line of action in the course of classroom interaction and instructional procedures. Questioning is an important tool for engaging, evaluating, and stimulating learners' interest in the process of instruction. When teachers are able to maximize questioning during classroom instruction, students' achievement, evaluation, engagement, motivation, and learning become more inclusive.

Similarly, Fakeye and Ayede [8] reported a strong relationship between teachers' questioning behaviour and students' achievement. However, the relationship between teachers' questioning behaviour and achievement in English grammar has not been investigated in Gambian schools. From the foregoing, it is evident that several studies have examined the role different teacher-related factors play on students' learning outcomes in school subjects like mathematics, literature in English, and reading comprehension, but these studies were conducted neither in the Gambia nor in English grammar. Therefore, this study will examine teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour as predictors of senior secondary school students' achievement in English grammar in the Gambia.

*1.1. Statement of the Problem.* Success in the English language is a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions of learning in the Gambia. Grammar remains an integral aspect of the English language curriculum because the knowledge of grammatical rules determines students' achievement in the subject. However, perennial poor performance in the English language has been traced to the poor knowledge of English grammar and other teacher-related variables in the classroom. Interventions to solve the problem of poor achievement in the English language have prompted researches on the relationship between teacher-related factors and academic success in mathematics,

literature in English, reading comprehension, and so on. Although these studies reported that the variable can positively influence students' learning outcomes in these subject areas, the relationship between teacher-related factors such as subject mastery and questioning behaviour and achievement in English grammar has not enjoyed much research attention in the Gambia. Therefore, the study examined teacher-related variables (subject mastery and questioning behaviour) as predictors of Gambian students' achievement in English grammar.

*1.2. Research Questions.* The following research questions were formulated for this study:

- (1) What relationship exists between teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour and students' achievement in English grammar?
- (2) Which of teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour contributed more to students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian schools?
- (3) What is the composite contribution of teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour to the prediction of students' achievement in English grammar?

*1.3. Theoretical Framework: Personality Trait Theory.* Personality trait theory was propounded by Gordon Allport [13]. Trait theorists believe in the individuality and uniqueness of persons and the measurement of traits is defined as habitual patterns of behaviour, thought, and emotion. Trait theory is focused on differences between individuals and identifying and measuring individual personality characteristics. All the teaching processes in a typical classroom are influenced by the characteristics and attributes that are peculiar to the teacher, and as such, personality traits affect instructional processes. Howard and Howard [14] and Heinstrom [15] presented five psychological bases for personality traits in people:

**Extraversion:** extraverts are adventurous, assertive, frank, sociable, and talkative. Introverts are quiet, reserved, shy, and unsociable

**Agreeableness:** the agreeableness scale is linked to self-sacrifice, selflessness, caring, and emotional support versus hostility, indifference, self-centeredness, and jealousy

**Conscientiousness:** the conscientious is rigid, goal-focused, and career-oriented, while the flexible person is more impulsive and easier to be persuaded from one task to another

**Neuroticism:** the persons with a tendency towards neuroticism are more worried, temperamental, and prone to sadness. People with the alternate extreme are emotionally stable, calm, and relaxed

**Openness:** this factor relates to intellect, openness to new ideas, cultural interests, educational aptitude, and

creativity. These individuals are cultured, aesthetic, intellectual, and open

All the personality traits above are expressed in teachers' disposition often reflected in the pedagogical processes in form of subject mastery and questioning behaviour, which can predict students' learning outcomes.

*1.4. Factors Affecting Instructional Processes in the ESL Classroom.* The teaching and learning of English as a second language in Gambian schools is a little complex because of several factors that exist within the classroom. Instruction in English grammar is an integral aspect of the development of the skills in the target language. In spite of the importance of the English language to students' academic achievement, performance in the subject has been consistently poor [6, 8]. Efforts to solve the problem of mass failure in the English language show that several factors militate against effective instructional delivery in Gambian secondary schools.

Some of the factors exist within the Gambian ESL classroom as subject-related, student-related, school-related, and teacher-related. Subject-related factors in ESL classroom deal with the nature of the language, especially in the aspect of grammar teaching. English grammar is an integral aspect of ESL instruction in Gambian secondary schools. All language users require grammar to communicate effectively and understand one another because there is no language that can function without grammar rules. According to Nordquist [16], the grammar of a language covers the existence of tenses of verbs, articles, and adjectives and their proper order, how questions are phrased, and much more, and without grammar, language would simply make no sense. The teaching of grammar in Gambian schools covers aspects such as parts of speech, phrases, clauses, tense forms, sentence construction, and paragraphing. Instruction in English grammar allows ESL students to learn and apply the rules of the target language in speech and writing within and outside the classroom.

Student-related variables such as verbal ability, age, gender, and vocabulary knowledge have been strongly associated with students' academic success. Poor knowledge or mastery in any of the language skills ultimately contributes to poor academic performance in schools. Abdu-Raheem [17] found that when students are allowed to express themselves and actively participate in class during the course of instruction, they performed better than others who did not actively participate in classroom activities.

Similarly, teacher-related factors have been found to influence students' learning outcomes in ESL classrooms. Teachers' behaviours, according to Mustapha [7], include the use of appropriate eye contact, lesson clarity, effective time management, variety of teaching methods, incorporating students' responses, and the use of appropriate and varied questioning during instruction. In addition, the teacher's subject mastery can determine learning outcomes in ESL classrooms because knowledgeable teachers have been found to be able to effectively manage the classroom by motivating and actively engaging learners. Effective teachers

are known to combine subject mastery, methodology, discipline, and passion in the process of instructional delivery.

Furthermore, Oyetunde [18] considers the selection of the appropriate instructional strategy and teacher's subject mastery as a strong influence on the teacher's effectiveness in the delivery of lessons. Other factors such as teachers' communication styles [19], years of teaching experience, and mastery of the subject matter [8] have been found to contribute significantly to students' learning outcomes. Other factors such as teachers' qualifications and subject mastery have been found to predict achievement in the English language [12]. Elochukwu [20] posits that there is a significant relationship between teachers' ability to communicate effectively and ask germane questions and students' academic achievement in secondary schools.

Fakeye and Ayede [8] reported that teachers' questioning behaviour can predict students' achievement in the English language. However, Wilen [21] found that most teachers lack good questioning skills because questions in the classroom are often limited to the lowest cognitive level and not higher-level thinking. In view of these, the study examined the relationship between teacher-related factors such as subject mastery and questioning behaviour and Gambian students' achievement in English grammar.

## 2. Methods and Research Design

The study adopted the survey research design of correlational type as it determined the relationships between the independent variables (teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour) and dependent variable (students' achievement in English grammar). The population of the study comprised all the senior secondary school (Grade 11) students in Educational Region 1 of Gambia. The study adopted a simple random sampling procedure to select two schools (one government-owned school and the second school was run by government subvention). A total of 300 subjects were randomly selected from the four schools to participate in the study.

*2.1. Research Instruments.* Two research instruments were used in the collection of data for this study and these are the Teachers' Questionnaire on Pedagogical Factors in Teaching (TQPFIIT) and Students' Achievement Test in English Grammar (SATEG). The two instruments are briefly described hereinafter.

*2.1.1. Teachers' Questionnaire on Pedagogical Factors in Teaching (TQPFIIT).* The instrument was designed by the researcher to evaluate teacher-related factors in ESL instruction in senior secondary school. It contained 20 items which covered the two factors investigated in this study: 10 items were assigned to each of subject mastery and questioning behaviour. TQPFIIT was administered to 10 teachers of the English language in the selected schools for this study. The instrument comprised 20 statements on teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour and its effect on quality and effectiveness in instructional delivery. The

instrument was scored using a rating scale range of 4-1 with the items as Frequently (4), Occasionally (3), Rarely (2), and Never (1). The reliability of TQPFIIT was determined using Cronbach Alpha with a coefficient of 0.74.

*2.1.2. Students' Achievement Test in English Grammar (SATEG).* The test was designed by the research and made parallel to questions obtainable in the lexis and structure aspect of the WASSCE English Paper 2. SATEG is 40-item multiple-choice questions on different aspects of English grammar such as parts of speech, tenses, phrases, clauses, and concord. It was administered as a test, supervised by the research assistants, and written under standard test procedures for 35 minutes. For reliability, the instrument was administered to 30 Grade 11 students that were not part of the study. Using test retest, a coefficient of 0.69 was obtained.

*2.2. Procedures for Data Analysis.* Data collected were analysed using descriptive statistics of mean and standard deviation. Also, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) and Linear Multiple Regression Analysis were used to find out the combined and relative contributions of the independent variables on the dependent variables. All the results were interpreted at  $p < 0.5$ .

## 3. Results and Discussion

*3.1. Research Question One.* What relationship exists between teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour and students' achievement in English grammar?

The results from Table 1 show that there was a positive significant relationship between the independent variables (teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour) and students' achievement in English grammar in the Gambia ( $r(300) = 0.573^{**}$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Therefore, this means that teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour significantly contribute to students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian secondary schools. The result corroborates the findings of other studies [8, 10, 19] where teacher-related variables significantly influenced students' achievement in English language. Teachers that have both sound subject mastery and good questioning behaviours can induce students' interest in the subject matter and motivate them to learn. The result also supports the findings of Mustapha [7] who found that teachers with good communication and questioning skills are able to positively influence their students' learning outcomes.

The result supports the findings of Omotoyinbo and Olaniyi [10] who found that the quality of teachers determines students' learning outcomes in ESL classrooms to a very large extent. The quality of a language teacher influences subject-matter delivery, communication skills, questioning behaviour, classroom management, and other classroom-related variables in the process of instruction. Also, the findings of this study support Elochukwu [20] and Fakeye [12] who found that teachers' questioning behaviour contributes significantly to students' participation in the

TABLE 1: The Pearson product-moment correlation showing relationships between teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour and students' achievement in English grammar.

SN	Variables	Students' achievement in English grammar	Teachers' Subject mastery	Teachers' questioning behaviour	N	Mean	SD
1	Students' achievement in English grammar	0.573**			300	27.05	7.32
2	Teachers' subject mastery	0.037	0.573**		10	10.14	2.57
3	Teachers' questioning behaviour	0.054	1.52	0.573**	10	14.07	3.22

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (3-tailed).

TABLE 2: Multiple regressions showing the influence of teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour on students' achievement in English grammar.

Variables	$\beta$	$T$	$p$	$R$	$R^2$	$F$	$p$
Teachers' subject mastery	0.476	0.12.132	<0.05	0.600	0.360	151.147	< 0.05
Teachers' questioning behaviour	0.204	0.5.195	<0.05				

classroom and ultimately their achievement in second language instruction.

**3.2. Research Question Two.** Which of teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour contributed more to students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian schools?

The result in Table 2 reveals that subject mastery and questioning behaviour jointly influenced students' achievement in English grammar significantly ( $F(2, 297) = 151.147, p < 0.05; R^2 = 0.360$ ); this implies that about 36.0% of the variation observable in the student achievement in English grammar can be accounted for by teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour. Also, the relative influences of teachers' subject mastery ( $\beta = .476; t = 12.132; p < 0.05$ ) and teachers' questioning behaviour ( $\beta = .204; t = 5.195; p < 0.05$ ) were significant. The result confirmed that teachers' subject mastery has higher influence on students' achievement in English grammar than questioning behaviour in Gambian senior secondary schools.

This result supports the finding of Adediwura and Bada [11] and Omotoyinbo and Olaniyi [10] who found that teachers' subject mastery plays a significant role in the learning outcomes of students. This is because the teachers' depth of knowledge in the content of the subject matter aids innovation and diversification in lesson planning and delivery. Also, the result supports the findings of Fakeye and Ayede [8] who found that teachers' subject mastery can significantly predict students' learning outcomes in the English language. Teachers with sound subject mastery are able to engage with students better and construct a variety of questions from their knowledge of the content during the instructional procedure, thereby providing the necessary supports that can improve achievement in learning.

**3.3. Research Question Three.** What is the composite contribution of teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour to the prediction of students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian schools?

Furthermore, the result from Table 2 reveals that subject mastery and questioning behaviour significantly predicted students' achievement in English grammar ( $F(2, 297) = 151.147, p < 0.05; R^2 = .360$ ); this implies that about 36.0% of the variation observable in the students' achievement in English grammar was accounted for by teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour. Therefore, the result showed that teachers' subject mastery and questioning behaviour jointly predicted students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian secondary schools significantly.

This result supports the findings of Cotton [22], Adediwura and Bada [11], and Fakeye and Ayede [8] who found that teachers' mastery of the subject matter and questioning technique can predict students' learning outcomes in the English language. However, the result is at variance with the findings of Ogunyemi and Olagbaju [19] who found that the teachers' communication style and other classroom-related factors influence students' learning outcomes. In other words, a teacher with sound subject mastery but poor communication style may not be able to motivate active learning and participation that can engender improvement in students' learning outcomes in a second language classroom.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study examined the relationship between teacher-related classroom variables (subject mastery and questioning behaviour) and students' achievement in English grammar in Gambian secondary schools. Two research instruments were used, and the samples comprised 300 Grade 11 students and 10 English language teachers from four schools in Kanifing Municipal Council of Gambia. The results showed that the independent variables significantly predicted and contributed relatively and jointly to students' achievement in English grammar. Based on the findings of this study, more attention should be given to teacher-related variables in second language classrooms. There is a need for language teachers to have a good grasp of the subject matter and be able to effectively engage with the students through quality

interaction, questioning, and communication skills. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- (1) There should be regular capacity building training on the questioning pattern, styles, or behaviours for in-service teachers in Gambian schools
- (2) Instruction in teacher-related variables such as subject mastery, questioning behaviour, teaching styles, communication styles, discipline, and motivation that can influence students' learning outcomes should be integrated into the preservice teachers' training curriculum in the Gambian College
- (3) There is a need for an upgrade in the teaching qualifications of most of the teachers in the Gambian senior secondary school system
- (4) Government should provide adequate facilities and a conducive environment for teachers and students for effective academic performance in school

### Data Availability

The data have been included in the manuscript.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

### Supplementary Materials

Teachers' questionnaire on pedagogical factors in teaching (tqpfitt). (*Supplementary Materials*)

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