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Multilingual Practices and their Pedagogical Implications for ESL Instruction at Njala University and Eastern Technical University in Sierra Leone

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of multilingualism on English language learners cognitive processes and language development at both Njala University and Eastern Technical University in Sierra Leone. The study mainly examines the impact of varying degrees of English language competencies and proficiencies in multilingual environments on cognitive functions such as memory, attention, and problem-solving, as well as the overall linguistic growth of university learners. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 1,000 respondents through questionnaires, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations to collect data from students. The findings revealed that multilingualism significantly influences English language proficiency, with both positive and negative effects. The study highlighted the role of multilingualism in enhancing cognitive skills and language acquisition, while also identifying challenges such as language interference and limited exposure to English. Recommendations for educational policies and teaching strategies were provided to mitigate the challenges and leverage the benefits of multilingualism in enhancing English language learning and acquisition.

Keywords*: Multilingualism, English Proficiency and Second Language.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Humans require a structured means of communication within any social environment, commonly known as language. Although providing a precise definition of language is challenging due to its social intricacies, linguistic experts generally agree that it is a system of symbols created for communication. This system consists of interconnected elements arranged to function cohesively toward a specific purpose (Okal, 2014). Language, as a tool for human communication, is characterized by several features: it follows specific rules, functions systematically, and serves purposes such as sharing information, conveying emotions, building relationships, asserting authority, and establishing identity (King, 2007). Given that people often use more than one language, terms like bilingualism, trilingualism, and multilingualism emerge.

The central concept of this discussion, multilingualism, comes from the Latin roots “multi,” meaning many, and “lingua,” meaning language (Chriswick and Miller, 2007). It is typically defined as the ability of an individual to communicate fluently and with native like competence in multiple languages (Chriswick and Miller, 2007). Nonetheless, in real life verbal and written communication, one language often becomes more dominant than the others in multilingual contexts. Multilingualism may also refer to the presence of multiple languages within a single society (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2023: Okal, 2014). These languages can be categorized in different ways: they may be official or unofficial, native or foreign, or even national and international.

At times, multilingualism is used synonymously with bilingualism (Okal, 2014) which specifically denotes the fluent use of two languages. In this article, multilingualism is viewed as an umbrella term that includes bilingualism (fluency in two languages), trilingualism (fluency in three languages), and even the ability to speak more than three languages. Since the prefix “multi” indicates more than one,

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both bilingualism and trilingualism fall under the broader category of multilingualism. Hence, using multiple languages makes one multilingual.

Sierra Leone is a multilingual country with over 16 local languages spoken alongside English, as the only official language for over decades (Stevens, Challay and Thulla 2025). At Njala University and Eastern Technical University, students often navigate multiple languages on a daily basis.

Due to its growing significance in multilingual societies, especially in post-colonial African countries like Sierra Leone, multilingualism has emerged as a major topic in discussions about education worldwide (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025). Multilingualism is the rule rather than the exception in many regions of the world, including Sub-Saharan Africa (Bamgbose, 2011). For students navigating academic settings, the coexistence of regional languages with colonial languages like English offers both opportunities and difficulties (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025). There are more than 16 indigenous languages in Sierra Leone, with Creole, Mende, Temne, and Limba being the most commonly spoken (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025: Sengova, 1987). Since English is the official language of teaching and government in these multilingual situations, learning and mastering it presents particular sociolinguistic and pedagogical difficulties.

Students at universities like Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone and Njala University usually speak one or more native languages growing up and learn English later in school. Students' interactions with English in both academic and social contexts are influenced by this multi layered language exposure. According to some research, multilingual people might have improved memory retention, metalinguistic awareness, and cognitive flexibility, all of which could have a favorable impact on learning English (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2025: Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000). According to Bialystok (2001) enabling learners to switch between linguistic frames, multilingualism improves cognitive development and may help students develop the analytical and abstract thinking abilities necessary for learning other languages.

However, multilingualism also brings with it complications like code switching, linguistic interference, and structural transfer, which can make it more difficult to be proficient in English, particularly when it comes to formal oral communication and academic writing (Sheriff et al., 2025: Pishghadam, 2011; Fatiloro, 2015). For example, students may inadvertently import syntactic and lexical rules into English when they primarily rely on their first language or languages for conceptual framing, which can result in mistakes and inconsistencies. Students in Sierra Leone frequently move between English and Krio, a commonly spoken creole, which causes mixed codes and decreased grammatical accuracy in academic contexts. These difficulties are especially severe there (Sengova, 1987).

Despite the wealth of literature on language acquisition and multilingualism globally, there is a noticeable gap in empirical research focusing specifically on how multilingualism affects English language learning in Sierra Leone's higher education system. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining the experiences of 1,000 students at Njala University and Eastern Technical University. Using a mixed-methods approach, it explores how multilingualism influences learners' proficiency, confidence, and performance in English, while also identifying specific areas where language interference or linguistic advantages are most evident.

By focusing on two major institutions in Sierra Leone, this research not only contributes to the local academic discourse but also offers insights into how multilingualism can be leveraged to improve English language instruction and policy in similar multilingual contexts.

In examining the influence of multilingualism on university students` cognitive processes, interactions, language development and their glide between multiple languages, this study also aims to explore how multilingualism affects English language learning at these institutions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The practice of multilingualism often leads to the emergence of hybrid or mixed languages, largely resulting from sustained and intense language contact. In such environments, speakers frequently incorporate elements from multiple languages within a single conversation. This interaction can also give rise to the development of slang, typically influenced by factors such as urbanization, labor migration, and industrialization. A notable example is the emergence of Sheng in Kenya, which evolved as a linguistic response to these socio-economic dynamics (Okal, 2014). Furthermore, multilingual settings foster the development of cross linguistic communication strategies, notably code-switching and code-mixing. Code-switching occurs when individuals alternate between languages depending on context for instance, using one language at home and another in public or formal spaces. This phenomenon is prevalent in multilingual nations such as India, where speakers regularly switch between English, Hindi/Urdu, Bengali, and Tamil (Okal, 2014). Such linguistic practices are also observed in countries like Belgium, Switzerland, and China, where bilingual or multilingual individuals alternate between languages fluidly in daily communication (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2023).

Multilingualism also gives rise to diglossia, a sociolinguistic situation where two languages coexist within a community, but one assumes a dominant, high-status role, while the other is relegated to a subordinate position. This functional inequality is evident across Africa, where colonial languages such as English, French, and Portuguese serve as high (H) varieties in formal domains, while indigenous languages are classified as low (L) varieties (Okal, 2014: Stevens and Sheriff, 2025: King 2007). For

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example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, French is the dominant language used in formal settings, whereas local languages such as Ciluba, Lingala, Kiswahili, and Kikongo function in informal or community-based contexts. Similarly, English serves as the high variety in Anglophone countries like Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and Tanzania, while Portuguese fulfills a comparable role in Lusophone nations such as Angola and Mozambique (King. 2007: Chiswick and Miller, 2007).

In addition to its linguistic implications, multilingualism enhances cross-cultural communication competencies. Individuals in multilingual settings often acquire proficiency in the speaking, reading, and writing of multiple languages, thereby developing both communicative and discourse competencies necessary for effective intercultural interaction (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025). Beyond language, multilingualism also carries political implications, closely tied to a society's economic and political structures (Stevens, Calaay and Thulla, 2025). Over time, this dynamic fosters the emergence of dominant (majority) and subordinate (minority) languages, with certain languages gaining socio-political and economic power, thereby reinforcing existing hierarchies within multilingual communities.

Multilingualism is a widespread phenomenon observable both across Africa and globally (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025). In various countries and communities, it exists in two primary forms: official and unofficial. Official multilingualism is typically embedded in a nation's constitution and is actively implemented in key societal functions, notably in the education sector and in formal national and international affairs. In education, this includes the use of multiple languages as mediums of instruction at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. In the realm of formal engagements, multilingualism is evident in parliamentary debates, judicial proceedings, and both local and international conferences (Okal, 2014).

Conversely, unofficial multilingualism is not formally codified in legal or constitutional frameworks, yet it is a common and practical reality, particularly among neighboring or closely interacting ethnic communities (Okal, 2014). This informal linguistic exchange occurs in daily social and economic interactions such as trade, sports, and religious practices. A pertinent example can be found among the Luo and Luhyia communities in western Kenya. Due to their geographic proximity and regular interaction, members of the Luo community residing near Lake Victoria often speak the Luhyia language, and vice versa. This linguistic fluidity is facilitated by engagements in communal activities such as commerce, sporting events, political gatherings, and religious ceremonies (Okal, 2014).

The ability of a person or a group to communicate in more than two languages is known as multilingualism (Makhmoor, & Dr Aqsa 2024: Fatiloro, 2015: Pande, 2013). Since students frequently learn a second or third language through formal instruction while simultaneously using one or more of their native tongues informally, multilingualism becomes even more complicated in educational settings. According to Cummins (2000), the intersection of these languages affects not only linguistic proficiency but also identity formation, academic success, and cognitive development. Indigenous languages, a national lingua franca (Creole), and English as the official language of instruction are all common components of multilingualism in Africa, particularly in post-colonial countries like Sierra Leone. The way that students learn and utilize English in academic settings is greatly influenced by this multi-layered linguistic environment.

Pishghdam, (2011) echoed by Makhmoor, & Dr Aqsa. (2024) state that previous research indicates that multilingualism can have both positive and negative impacts on language learning. Studies have shown that multilingual individuals often exhibit enhanced cognitive abilities, including improved memory, attention, and problem-solving skills. However, challenges such as language interference and limited exposure to the target language can hinder language acquisition

Several studies affirm the cognitive advantages associated with multilingualism. According to Bialystok (2001), multilingual individuals often demonstrate superior executive control functions such as task switching, attention management, and working memory. These skills are crucial in the process of learning new languages, including English. Multilingual learners are also reported to possess higher levels of metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to reflect on and manipulate linguistic forms, which facilitates more effective second language acquisition (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025: Pande, 2013). Moreover, studies by Cummins (2000) emphasize the role of common underlying proficiency-a theory that suggests knowledge of one language can support and reinforce the learning of another. This is particularly relevant in multilingual societies where students may transfer literacy and cognitive skills from their mother tongue or second language to English.

Despite these benefits, multilingualism can pose significant challenges in English language learning. Language interference, also referred to as cross-linguistic influence, occurs when structural features from a learner's first language affect their performance in the second language (Fatiloro, 2015). For instance, students who speak Mende or Creole may carry over syntactic patterns or pronunciation habits into their English usage, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies and fossilization of errors (Stevens and Sheriff, 2025: Fatiloro, 2015). Code-switching, the practice of alternating between languages within a conversation or sentence, is also prevalent among people with multilingualism in Sierra Leone. While often seen as a communicative resource in informal contexts, code-switching can hinder academic writing and oral presentations in English, where standard forms are expected (Makhmoor, & Dr. Aqsa. 2024). This is particularly evident in Sierra Leone's tertiary institutions, where Creole is frequently used as a bridge language but may dilute academic English competency if not managed carefully (Sengova, 1987).

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The Sociolinguistic Landscape in Sierra Leone and the Sierra Leone's language policy designates English as the official language, yet the majority of its citizens are multilingual, often speaking Creole as a lingua franca alongside one or more indigenous languages (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2025). Research by Makhmoor, & Dr. Aqsa. (2024) suggests that while students enter university with basic competence in English, their frequent reliance on Creole and local languages may limit their mastery of academic English, especially in writing and formal speech. This complex sociolinguistic environment requires adaptive teaching strategies that recognize multilingualism as a resource rather than a hindrance. The lack of adequate training for teachers to address linguistic diversity in the classroom continues to be a barrier in higher education institutions in Sierra Leone (Stevens, Challay and Thulla, 2025: Fatiloro, 2015).

➢ *Theoretical Frameworks*

This study draws on Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2000), which posits that literacy related skills acquired in one language can transfer to another, provided both languages are sufficiently developed. Additionally, the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002) emphasizes the fluid and adaptive nature of language systems in multilingual individuals, suggesting that language learning is influenced by emotional, cognitive, and sociocultural variables. These theoretical frameworks inform our understanding of how multilingual students in Sierra Leone navigate between languages, and how this dynamic process affects their proficiency in English.

III. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was utilized, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. A total of 1,000 respondents from Njala University and Eastern Technical University participated in the study. The survey instrument included questions on language proficiency, language use, and attitudes towards English. Interviews provided deeper insights into personal experiences and challenges faced by multilingual learners. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) used is an internationally recognized standard used to describe language proficiency levels. It breaks down a learner's ability in a foreign language into six levels, from beginner to mastery as labeled in table 1 below:

Table 1 Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR levels A1-C2)

Level	Name	Description
A1	Beginner	Can understand and use basic phrases. Can introduce themselves and ask simple questions.
A2	Elementary	Can understand simple sentences and communicate in routine tasks.
B1	Intermediate	Can handle everyday situations. describe experiences, opinions, and plans
B2	Upper Intermediate	Can understand complex texts and interact with some fluency
C1	Advanced	Can use English effectively for academic, professional, and social purposes.
C2	Proficient	Near-native level. Can understand virtually everything and express themselves spontaneously and precisely.

In this study: A student with B1 level English can write basic essays and hold conversations, but might still make grammar mistakes. A C1 student could write academic papers and engage in debates with ease. This framework helps universities, employers, and educators evaluate and compare language skills fairly and consistently.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

➢ *Demographics of Respondents*

A total number of 1000 respondents participated in this study, 500 from Njala University and 500 from the Eastern Technical University of sierra Leone were selected. Table 2 gives the distribution of respondents by gender, Age Group and Primary Language.

Table 2 Demographic breakdown

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	520	52
Female	480	48
Total	**1000**	**100**
Age Group		
18–22	430	43
23–27	370	37
28–35	200	20
Total	**1000**	**100**
Primary Language		
Temne	200	20
Krio	250	25
Mende	300	30
Limba	100	10

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Others (Loko, Kono)	150	15
Total	**1000**	**100**

➢ *Language Proficiency*

The survey results indicated varying levels of English proficiency among multilingual students. Table 3 presents the distribution of English proficiency levels across different language groups.

Table 3 English Proficiency Levels by Language Group

Language Group	Proficiency Level %
Mende Speakers	72
Temne	60
Creole	65
Others Groups	55

These findings suggest that students whose first language is Mende tend to have higher English proficiency compared to those whose first language is Creole or Temne.

➢ *English Proficiency Level and Multilingual Background*

Participants rated their English proficiency using a standardized self-assessment scale (aligned with CEFR: A1–C2 levels). The data showed a clear correlation between number of languages spoken and proficiency levels in English.

Table 4 Proficiency level and Language Background

No. of Languages Spoken	Avg. Proficiency Level (CEFR)	Observation
Monolingual	B1	Basic fluency with limitations
Bilingua	B2	Moderate fluency, some errors
Trilingual or more	C1	High proficiency, fluent

Trilingual students showed greater confidence in speaking, comprehension, and writing tasks, suggesting that multilingualism positively impacts linguistic agility and adaptability.

➢ *Language Interference and Code-Switching*

A significant number of students (especially those who spoke Creole and Mende) reported code-switching and lexical interference in English speech and writing.

Table 5 L1 Interference and Code-Mixing/ Switching

Interference Type	Frequency (%)	Sample Example
Lexical Borrowing	62%	"I de go class" instead of "I am going to class"
Syntax Transfer	48%	"gi bukui jembe gɔ" "He book is big" (direct Mende structure) instead of "His book is big"
Phonological Interference	55%	Pronunciation of /th/ as /d/ or /t/

- *Interpretation:*

While code-switching is a functional tool in daily communication, it negatively affects grammatical accuracy in academic writing and oral presentations.

➢ *Cognitive and Academic Benefits*

From qualitative interviews (N=100), students expressed a variety of **cognitive advantages** related to being multilingual as shown in table 6 below.

Table 6 Cognitive and Academic display

Theme	Student Quote	Analysis
Enhanced memory and recall	"I find it easier to remember new vocabulary because I can connect them to my other languages."	Multilingualism enhances metalinguistic awareness, helping students form cross-linguistic connections.
Faster learning	"When we learn new grammar, I compare it with what I know in Creole and Mende."	This reflects cognitive flexibility and faster adaptation to English rules.
Cultural competence	"Understanding different languages makes me relate better to others and understand English idioms too."	Cultural exposure promotes pragmatic competence in English usage.

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➢ *Differences between the Two Universities*

This section investigates the English proficiencies of learners in the two universities as shown below

Table 7 Level of English Proficiency in the Two Universities

Metric	Njala University	Eastern Technical University
Avg. English Proficiency (CEFR)	B2	B1+
Frequency of Interference	45%	60%
Exposure to English-Medium Instruction	High	Moderate
Use of Creole in Lectures	Moderate	High

- *Analysis:*

Students from Njala University showed higher proficiency and less interference, likely due to greater exposure to English-medium content and a more diverse linguistic environment than those in the eastern Technical university of Sierra Leone.

➢ *Perceptions toward English Learning*

This investigates the perceptions learners hold towards English language learning especially when it is compulsory as shown in the table below.

Table 8 English Language Learning Perception Among Learners

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Multilingualism helps me learn English better.	55%	30%	10%	3%	2%	**100**
My first language sometimes interferes with my English.	40%	45%	8%	5%	2%	**100**
I feel confident speaking English in class.	42%	38%	10%	6%	4%	**100**
I prefer learning in English than in my mother tongue.	35%	40%	10%	10%	5%	**100**

- *Interpretation:*

The majority of respondents recognized the supportive role of multilingualism, though a notable portion of them also acknowledges L1 interference, calque and reduced confidence.

Table 9 Attitudes of L1 Loyalists Toward English

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I prefer using my L1 daily	60%	25%	10%	3%	2%
English should be limited to formal use	45%	30%	15%	7%	3%
English threatens my L1	35%	33%	20%	7%	5%
My L1 is more expressive	50%	30%	10%	6%	4%

➢ *Sociolinguistic Implications of Multilingualism and Trilingualism*

Table 10 Sociolinguistic Impacts on Language use and Identity

Category	Bilingual Students	Trilingual+ Students
Identity Conflicts	35%	45%
Peer Switching (Language-Based)	60%	75%
Use of L1 in Assignments	50%	40%
Confidence in Public Speaking	Moderate	High
English as Social Capital	55%	70%

➢ *Cognitive Skills*

Interviews revealed that multilingual students often demonstrate enhanced cognitive skills. One respondent noted, "Speaking multiple languages helps me think faster and understand English better." This aligns with studies of Fatiloro, (2015) and Makhmoor, & Dr. Aqsa. (2024) who suggested that multilingualism can improve cognitive functions

➢ *Language Interference*

Despite cognitive benefits, language interference was a common challenge. Many students reported mixing local languages with English, leading to errors in grammar and pronunciation. A respondent mentioned, "I sometimes mix Creole with English, and it confuses me." This highlights the need for targeted language support to address interference issues.

➢ *Brief Summary of Key Findings*

This summarized the research findings into key thematic areas as listed in table 9 for a better and easy understanding

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Table 11 Concise Summary of Findings

Key Theme	Positive Impact	Negative Impact
Multilingualism	Better cognitive skills, adaptability	Interference in syntax, pronunciation
Cultural exposure	Improved pragmatic use of English	Confusion in idiomatic expressions
Institutional support	Better at Njala University	Needs improvement at ETU
Code-switching	Aids in comprehension	Hinders formal academic language development

V. DISCUSSION

This study provides comprehensive insights into the cognitive, linguistic, and educational impacts of multilingualism among university students in Sierra Leone, drawing on data collected from Njala University and Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone. The findings are broadly consistent with existing literature on the benefits and challenges of multilingualism, while also highlighting some unique contextual dynamics.

- *Demographic and Language Proficiency Patterns*

The demographic data reflect a balanced gender representation and a diverse age range, which supports the generalizability of the findings across typical university cohorts. A key observation from the analysis of English language proficiency (Table 3 and Table 4) is the positive correlation between the number of languages spoken and higher self-assessed English proficiency. Trilingual and multilingual students outperformed their bilingual and monolingual peers, achieving average CEFR levels of C1, compared to B2 and B1, respectively.

This supports the cognitive advantage hypothesis observed in studies by Bialystok (2009) and Cummins (2000), both of whom highlight that multilingual individuals typically possess stronger metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and problem-solving abilities. The ability to draw parallels across linguistic systems appears to enable these learners to internalize English grammar and vocabulary with greater ease.

- *Language Interference and Code-Switching*

Despite these advantages, language interference remains a prominent challenge, especially among speakers of Creole and Mende (Table 5). Over 62% of students reported lexical borrowing, and 55% phonological interference particularly in the pronunciation of English consonants such as /th/. This aligns with findings from Okal (2014) and Stevens and Sheriff (2025), who describe how first language (L1) structures can transfer into second language (L2) use, leading to fossilized errors, especially in syntax and phonology.

Students also frequently reported code-switching as a coping mechanism in communication. While this can facilitate meaning-making in informal discourse, its continued use in academic contexts can hinder the acquisition of standard English registers. As Myers-Scotton (1993) argues, code-switching serves both a functional and identity-marking purpose in multilingual societies, but unchecked use in formal education settings can blur grammatical boundaries and reduce linguistic precision.

- *Institutional Differences and Linguistic Environment*

Comparative data between Njala University and ETU-SL (Table 7) reveal significant institutional disparities. Students at Njala displayed higher English proficiency (CEFR B2) and reported lower interference (45%) compared to those at ETU-SL (B1+ proficiency and 60% interference). This suggests that greater exposure to English-medium instruction and reduced reliance on local languages in lectures contribute to improved English outcomes.

These findings reflect Bamgbose's (1991) theory on the role of institutional support in language acquisition. Universities that embed English in daily academic functions offer students more opportunities for immersive learning, reinforcing formal language structures. Njala's more linguistically diverse environment may also promote cross-linguistic interaction, which Grosjean (2010) posits as critical in strengthening multilingual learners' adaptability.

- *Cognitive and Academic Benefits of Multilingualism*

The qualitative data (Table 6) reinforces the cognitive benefits attributed to multilingualism. Students reported enhanced memory, faster learning, and improved cultural competence a hallmark of what Bialystok et al. (2005) describe as "executive control advantages" in multilingual speakers. These skills translate into academic gains, as students are better able to comprehend complex grammatical rules and understand contextual nuances in English.

The reported ability to draw comparisons across languages supports Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (2000), which posits that skills acquired in one language can be transferred to others. By leveraging their L1 and L2 knowledge, students construct a more integrated linguistic framework, which aids in the acquisition of a third or fourth language.

- *Student Perceptions and Affective Factors*

Students' perceptions of English learning (Table 8) further illuminate the nuanced relationship between multilingualism and language learning. A majority agreed that multilingualism enhanced their English learning experience, yet many also acknowledged that their L1 interfered with accuracy and fluency. Notably, only 42% reported feeling confident speaking English in class, suggesting that linguistic competence does not always translate into communicative confidence**.**

This observation resonates with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) in Stevens et al., (2023), which argues that emotional factors such as anxiety or lack of confidence can inhibit language acquisition, even in linguistically capable learners. It also reflects Stevens and Sheriff (2025), who found that multilingual individuals

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often navigate complex identity and performance dynamics in academic contexts, influencing their willingness to participate in English language settings**.**

- *Cultural Exposure and Pragmatic Competence*

The role of cultural exposure in improving students' pragmatic use of English, as noted in Table 6 and Table 9, is particularly important. Students expressed an enhanced ability to understand English idioms and cultural references due to their multilingual and multicultural backgrounds. This finding is in line with Saville-Troike (2003) in King (2007), who emphasizes that pragmatic competence. That is, knowing how to use language appropriately in social contexts is often higher among those with broader linguistic and cultural experiences.

However, some students also reported confusion with idiomatic expressions, indicating that while multilingualism promotes intercultural sensitivity, it does not automatically ensure complete pragmatic mastery. This suggests a need for explicit instruction in idiomatic and cultural forms of English to complement students' intuitive learning.

VI. SYNTHESIS AND IMPLICATIONS

The cross analysis of these findings with established literature paints a comprehensive picture: multilingualism enhances cognitive and academic capabilities, but also introduces linguistic interference, affective challenges, and pragmatic ambiguities. Students who navigate multiple language systems exhibit greater metalinguistic awareness, yet they require structured support to transition effectively into the formal registers of English needed in academia.

- *Institutional Context and Role Demonstrated by Njala and ETU-SL*

The comparison, exposure to English medium instructions, curriculum design, and lecturer strategies significantly influence learners' outcomes. Educational institutions must thus move beyond a one-size-fits-all model and recognize multilingualism as both an asset and a pedagogical challenge.

These findings underscore the importance of adopting inclusive language policies; teacher training that addresses multilingual dynamics, and curricula that reflect students' linguistic realities. Such measures would not only help mitigate interference and boost confidence but also validate the rich linguistic resources that multilingual students bring to the academic space.

- *Multilingualism, Language Proficiency, and Academic Outcomes*

The relationship between multilingualism and English proficiency emerged as a consistent trend across all data sets. Students who spoke two or more languages particularly the trilinguals demonstrated higher CEFR self-ratings and greater confidence in language tasks. This aligns with Bialystok's (2009) cognitive control theory, which posits that multilingual individuals develop superior mental flexibility and problem-solving skills, enhancing their capacity to acquire and manipulate additional languages.

The fact that trilingual students reached C1 proficiency on average, compared to B1 for monolinguals, echoes Cummins' (2000) Interdependence Hypothesis: skills in a first language (L1) can transfer and scaffold the acquisition of a second or third language. Furthermore, the higher metalinguistic awareness reported by these students (Table 6) supports studies by Jessner (2006), who asserts that multilinguals can access a broader linguistic repertoire to decode new grammatical structures.

- *Language Interference and Code-Switching: A Double-Edged Sword*

Despite these cognitive advantages, language interference remains a significant issue particularly among bilingual and L1-dominant speakers. Tables 5 and 8 revealed consistent challenges with lexical borrowing, syntactic transfer, and phonological errors. Creole and Mende speakers were especially prone to producing hybrid structures in English writing and oral presentations, such as *"He book is big"*, which is a direct calque from Mende syntax.

This corroborates findings by Stevens and Sheriff (2025), who emphasizes that interference, is common where strong L1 structures are deeply internalized. However, these influences are not purely negative. As Myers-Scotton (1993) explains, code-switching often serves pragmatic and social functions especially in multilingual communities. In this context, code-switching helps learners' bridge meaning gaps and maintain group solidarity, but when not managed carefully, it impedes the mastery of formal academic English.

- *Institutional Disparities in English Learning Environment*

The comparative analysis of Njala and ETU-SL (Table 7) suggests that English proficiency is influenced not just by individual aptitude, but by the learning environment itself. Echoing Sheriff, Stevens, Challay and Thulla (2025) who stated that learning environment has a greater influence on language learning process. Njala's more rigorous English-medium instruction and greater linguistic diversity yielded better learner outcomes than ETU-SL, where local language use was more prevalent during lectures.

This supports Stevens, Sheriff and Sandy Jr., (2025) assertion that language policy implementation in education systems significantly affects learners' language outcomes. It also affirms the role of contextual exposure where learners immersed in English both inside and outside the classroom are more likely to attain higher fluency and functional competence.

- *L1 Loyalty and Resistance to Linguistic Hierarchies*

A significant subset of learners identified as L1 loyalists, expressing strong preferences for using their indigenous languages even in academic settings (Table 10). Many viewed English as an imposed medium, associated

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more with external status than with internal cultural expression. This tension illustrates Fishman's (1991) theory of language loyalty, where linguistic identity is closely tied to heritage, community, and cultural authenticity.

Interestingly, while English was recognized as essential for formal education and employment, L1 loyalists feared its encroachment on native linguistic and cultural spaces. This supports studies from African contexts (e.g., Kamwangamalu, 2004; Adegbija, 1994), which highlight how post-colonial education systems inadvertently promote linguistic inequality by marginalizing local languages in favor of ex-colonial languages.

- *Sociolinguistic Implications: Identity, Capital, and Peer Networks*

The study also revealed important sociolinguistic dynamics among multilingual and trilingual learners. As shown in Table 11:

- Trilinguals reported higher peer switching and identity fluidity, consistent with Grosjean's (2010) theory of the "complementarity principle," where language use varies by context and purpose.
- Students often aligned socially along linguistic lines, with limited cross-group collaboration, a pattern seen in other multilingual societies (Canagarajah, 2005).
- Majority perceived English as a status symbol, echoing Stevens, et al. (2025) and Stevens and Sheriff (2025) concept of linguistic capital, wherein mastery of high-status languages provides access to economic, educational, and social opportunity.

However, this symbolic capital also comes at a sociocultural cost. Learners often face internal conflicts, balancing the pragmatic value of English with the emotional and cultural resonance of their native languages. Norton (1997) calls this tension "identity investment" the degree to which learners see themselves as legitimate English speakers within broader sociopolitical hierarchies.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study explored the implications of multilingualism for English language acquisition among university students in Sierra Leone, focusing on Njala University and Eastern Technical University of Sierra Leone (ETU-SL). The findings revealed a multifaceted relationship between multilingualism and English language learning, characterized by both substantial benefits and notable challenges. One of the key findings was that multilingualism significantly enhances cognitive abilities, including increased mental agility, faster processing speed, and improved comprehension skills. Participants reported that their multilingual background helped them to think more clearly and understand English more effectively. This aligns with existing research asserting that multilingual individuals often develop superior metalinguistic awareness and executive functioning skills.

Additionally, the study identified that code switching and code mixing are frequently employed by students as strategies to enhance communication and comprehension. While these practices support informal understanding and interaction, they may hinder the development of formal academic English, particularly when not guided by structured pedagogical interventions. Another critical insight is the issue of language interference, which was reported as a common challenge. Students frequently mixed their first languages, such as Krio or local dialects, with English, resulting in errors in grammar, pronunciation, and idiomatic usage. This suggests that while multilingualism can be cognitively enriching, it also introduces linguistic complexities that require targeted instructional strategies.

The findings further showed that institutional support plays a vital role in how multilingualism is experienced by students. Njala University was found to provide relatively better support structures, whereas ETU-SL was identified as needing improvement in terms of English language support services. Cultural exposure was also a double edged sword; while it improved pragmatic language use, it sometimes led to confusion in understanding and applying idiomatic English expressions correctly. The analysis of diglossia in Sierra Leone revealed a hierarchical linguistic landscape where colonial languages such as English often dominate in formal domains, while indigenous languages are relegated to informal settings. This functional imbalance reinforces the importance of designing educational policies that promote equity among languages while supporting English proficiency for academic success.

In summary, multilingualism in Sierra Leone's higher education context presents a dynamic interplay of opportunities and obstacles. It fosters cognitive development, encourages cross-cultural communication, and enhances pragmatic language use. At the same time, it brings about challenges such as interference, diglossic inequalities, and inconsistent institutional support. To optimize the benefits and address the limitations, educational institutions must adopt balanced policies that recognize the value of linguistic diversity while reinforcing the formal academic use of English.

Thus, this study concludes that multilingualism, when properly supported, can be a powerful asset in English language learning. However, without intentional pedagogical and institutional strategies, it may also hinder linguistic accuracy and academic communication. Effective language policies, informed teacher training, contextualized curriculum design, and structured peer learning initiatives are essential for maximizing the potential of multilingual students and ensuring equitable access to quality education in linguistically diverse settings

RECOMMENDATION

In light of the study's findings, several recommendations are proposed to address the policy and pedagogical implications of multilingualism in higher education institutions in Sierra Leone.

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First, with regard to language policy, universities should consider implementing English-only zones in selected formal academic settings such as lecture halls and examination rooms to promote the development of academic English proficiency. However, this should not diminish the importance of students' first languages (L1). Instead, L1 should be acknowledged as a cognitive and cultural resource that can support learning in informal and collaborative spaces. Balancing these approaches can help cultivate a multilingual-friendly environment while maintaining high standards in academic English.

Second, teacher training must be prioritized to ensure educators are equipped with the necessary skills to manage linguistic diversity in the classroom. Training programs should emphasize strategies for addressing language interference without penalizing students for their multilingual practices. Rather than viewing code-switching and interference as deficiencies, teachers should be encouraged to see them as natural aspects of second-language acquisition, and use them as pedagogical entry points to improve formal English usage.

Third, there is a need to revisit and redesign the curriculum to better reflect the linguistic realities of the learners. Contextualized English learning materials that incorporate local languages and real-life cultural references should be developed. Such materials would help bridge linguistic and conceptual gaps, making learning more relatable and effective for students from diverse language backgrounds. The integration of indigenous knowledge systems and familiar discourse patterns into English instruction can improve both comprehension and learner engagement. Finally, universities should invest in peer-learning programs that leverage the strengths of multilingual students. Establishing mentorship structures where proficient students assist their peers can enhance both academic support and linguistic development. These programs encourage collaborative learning, promote inclusivity, and foster a sense of community among students from various linguistic backgrounds. By drawing on the social dimension of language learning, peer led initiatives can complement formal instruction and create more supportive learning environments.

In summary, these recommendations aim to create a balanced and inclusive language policy, foster teacher readiness, enhance curriculum relevance, and leverage peer networks. Together, they can help higher education institutions in Sierra Leone optimize the benefits of multilingualism while mitigating its challenges, thereby improving English language acquisition and academic outcomes among students.

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