



**DIFFICULT TOPICS AND ACHIEVEMENT IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE:  
THE PERCEPTION OF SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS  
AND TEACHERS IN MAKURDI TOWNSHIP,  
BENUE STATE, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract:**

This study determined which topics in the English language curriculum for senior secondary school are perceived by students and teachers as difficult. It also examined difficult topics vis-à-vis English language achievement. Seven research questions were answered using descriptive statistics and two hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance using t-test statistics. The study involving twelve English language teachers and one hundred and eighty seven students was carried out in Makurdi Township, Benue State, Nigeria during the second term of 2015/16 academic session. A self-developed questionnaire with closed-ended items was used to elicit data. Since the researcher relied on the opinion of the respondents for data collection, survey design was chosen as method of research. The results of the analysis showed that out of the 35 topics selected from the SSCE syllabus and prescribed textbooks for English at that level, teachers perceived 14 as difficult topics, while students perceived 22 as difficult topics. The reasons why they were experiencing difficulty with the topics were poor reading and study skills, absence of motivation, hatred for English language, poor experience with the subject, and poor teaching methods. The study recommended remedial teaching of difficult topics, the use of ICT; retraining of teachers, peer teaching, and professionalization of teachers as steps to improve English language teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** difficult topics, achievement, English as a second language (ESL), senior secondary school

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## 1. Introduction

English language plays three prominent roles in formal education in Nigeria: (i) It is a subject of instruction, (ii) medium of instruction, and (iii) medium of examination. Outside of matters on education, English also wields overwhelming influence. It is the language of trade, social meetings and religious fraternity involving people of different ethnic groups. So proficiency in English is a basic requirement for one to fit into the scenario described above. In other words, whether it is learnt as a school requirement or not, English is needed by the Nigerian school child as a social requirement to facilitate everyday communication and particularly maintain social relationships. One can dare say that English in Nigeria is a salvage language that bridges the communication gaps between and among the over four hundred language groups. Dada, Owoeye, and Ojo (2015, p.38) share this viewpoint saying “*English in Nigeria today is used in practically all domains.*”

A student that is well grounded in English enjoys many benefits. First, he/she secures the passport for learning other school subjects. As a passport language, English is an end in itself and a means to an end. What this means is that the learner who attains proficiency in English secures the passport for learning the contents of other school subjects and also taking examination via English. The point has to be quickly made at this juncture that at the secondary school level, the kind of education that is offered is general in nature and the student has to offer many subjects, the minimum being eight subjects or maximum nine subjects. Out of these numbers, the compulsory (core) subjects regardless of students’ discipline are Mathematics, English, Civic Education and Entrepreneurial Studies (The West African Examinations Council, WAEC, 2014). Second, he/she qualifies for tertiary education and other opportunities. English is compulsory, and by law a pass in English is a benchmark for obtaining admission into tertiary education. Third, he/she earns social prestige. Fourth, he/she fulfils the social conditions of interacting with people of other ethnic backgrounds without hindrance.

It is assumed that students are aware of the benefits associated with the learning of English language and are similarly motivated to learn the subject. But it is similarly noticed that the senior secondary school student finds English difficult to learn and this often culminates into the poor performances consistently reported in the literature. Studies by Mohammed (1995) and Ukeje (2000) have provided disturbing findings about students’ poor performance in English especially at the secondary school level. This is further confirmed by WAEC Chief Examiners’ Report for Nigeria, which for nearly ten years (WAEC, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007) has described secondary school students’ performance in English in the West African Senior

School Examination (WASSCE) as poor. In one report detailing an analysis of students' three-year performance (2004-2006), WAEC (2006, p.5) summarily took the position that "the generally poor performance of candidates over the three-year period is indicative of poor (and perhaps, declining) quality of education at the senior secondary school level. The reports have highlighted staggering incidences of poor understanding and usage of English language, illegible handwriting and rampant spelling mistakes, wrong use of tenses, wrong use of concord, use of words as direct translations from vernaculars etc. This ugly trend if not checked at this level, spills to the tertiary level of education. But Akere (1995) had cautioned that when students have much difficulty with their basic communicative skills in English at the primary and secondary school levels, such students find it difficult to function effectively in their academic use of English at the tertiary level.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

This review focuses on two main areas: students' achievement in English language and difficult topics in English. The problem of poor achievement in English language is associated with difficult topics. It is a problem that is pervasive, multidimensional and not limited to Nigeria alone. The review below shows astounding evidence that in countries where English is a second language, the problem of poor achievement is a common feature. In one study, involving secondary school students, English language teachers, principals, guardians, and community leaders, Golam (2012) identified factors affecting students' English achievement at the secondary level in Narayanganj and in Bhola of Bangladesh to include inadequate teaching-learning materials and aids, large classes and inadequate trained teachers. Other factors also identified by the same study were low social status of teachers, inadequate standard salary culminating to poor motivation. Golam recommended that a more reasonable teacher-student ratio of 1:35 and enhanced salaries should be considered. In Tanzania, a study by Mosha (2014) blames poor achievement in English language among students of the same educational level on the presence of untrained and under-qualified teachers who were in the habit of skipping difficult topics in the syllabus. Study findings also indicated that students' infrequent use of English language at school and home, large class size, teachers' responsibilities, poor conducive teaching and learning environment in the classrooms are largely responsible for students' poor achievement. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagarathnam's study (2011) though largely aimed at finding out whether there were significant differences in teachers' perceptions of difficulties in relation to their gender, qualification, teaching experience, and the level they teach in school, made significant

contribution to the discourse. Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam (2011) confirmed the presence of difficult topics in the area of grammar among a cross section of EFL teachers and students in Oman but failed to specify the topics.

Recently, El-Omari (2016) investigated the effect that some factors have on the achievement of Jordanian secondary students learning English as a second language. The study identified attitudinal, social, socioeconomic, and extracurricular factors as major correlates of achievement in English language studies. Another concern with the high failure rate in English at the secondary school level necessitated an investigation by Shahzada, Ghazi and Khan (2012) who involved 100 English language teachers in Bannu District, Pakistan in search of the causes of poor achievement in the subject. Analyzed results of that study showed that majority of the respondents approved that teachers of English are not qualified and well trained, teachers of English do not teach English in a proper manner, and audio-visual aids are not used in English class. Major recommendations following these findings were that qualified and well trained teachers be appointed for English and such teachers should always use modern teaching methods instead of traditional methods. A study by Peng (2014) investigated the perceived difficulty rank of five English skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating. The purpose was to establish the relationships among these skills. The study found that Chinese students perceive translating and speaking the most difficult skills to command, whereas reading is perceived the least difficult one out of the five.

In Nigeria, Atanda and Jaiyeoba (2011) investigated the influence of school-based quality factors on secondary school students' achievement in English Language in South-Western and North-Central Nigeria. The view of 1,014 English Language teachers and principals were obtained and analysed. Findings indicated that three independent variables namely instructional materials, quality of instruction and supervision are contributing significantly to students' achievement in English Language. Atanda and Jaiyeoba therefore, came to the conclusion that there is great deal of relationship between students' academic achievement in English and supervision, instructional materials and quality of instruction. Sa'ad and Usman (2014) attribute poor achievement in English as second language (ESL) to. the dominance of mother tongue, inadequate qualified teachers, negative attitudes of students toward English language, improper use of method in teaching English language, inadequate instructional media and facilities, lack of language laboratory for teaching English language.

The studies reviewed tend to emphasize the need to acquire adequate facilities for instruction and that of hiring quality and highly trained language teachers as

measures of improving English language instruction in secondary schools. If the goals of teaching English as a second language are to be achieved, government and school proprietors must prioritize recruitment of quality teachers as teachers are the chief cornerstones in effective English language instruction at all levels of education. Oyetunde (2006, p.18) has maintained that “...whatever students will benefit from English language instruction is a function of who the teacher is academically and professionally...” Poorly trained teachers do not deliver quality instruction. Their poor training and skill in language teaching will make them to skip teaching difficult topics in the curriculum (Mosha, 2014). This is often the scenario observed in schools. Unfortunately, difficult topics as a likely cause for poor achievement in English language has not received much attention as in other areas like the sciences. Difficult topics could cause students to underachieve (Samba & Eriba, 2012) and to have negative attitude towards the subject. Difficult topics in a subject can make students to develop negative attitude towards that subject and the result will be poor achievement. Negative attitude towards English ultimately affects other subjects too, since English is used in learning other subjects.

Different studies (Ogunkola & Samuel, 2011; Cimer, 2012; Olubukola, 2015) have affirmed that difficult topics are one major cause of students’ poor achievement in the various subject areas. Their findings provide the motivation for the present study to investigate difficult topics in English. We review similar studies beginning with Kaçani and Mangelli’s (2013) study which was about Albanian teachers’ and students’ perceptions concerning the difficulties faced by teachers and learners in the teaching and learning of English grammar. Their study failed to point out specific topics in the component of grammar that students and teachers face. The study was more interested in approaches to teaching grammar; hence, it merely concluded that teachers and students face difficulties regarding English grammar instruction. Maposa (1992) investigated teachers’ perception of the levels of difficulty of aspects of English language as well as their perception of the use of literature in English to teach language and found that students have difficulty in all aspects of English language but the greatest difficulty was found with composition and summary writing including written and spoken grammar. An area perceived as least difficult, such as reading was also noticed to be very difficult.

Obtaining information about difficult topics is useful in curriculum decisions and especially for diagnostic and remedial purposes. Teachers, textbook writers, planners and even parents need to know areas that students have the greatest difficulty in order to take corrective measures. Kaçani and Mangelli (2013) argue that awareness of problem areas helps teachers in choosing the right teaching option that would pose fewer difficulties but enhance learning. Also, such information when obtained could

guide the choice of textbooks and other instructional materials, and in deciding the calibre of personnel to hire to give students help; and the choice or recommendation of instructional approaches and methods. Identification of difficult topics therefore, becomes the first major systematic step in tackling the lingering problem of poor achievement in English. Our review has shown that difficult topics and poor achievement in English has been sparingly investigated. This study therefore, became desirable and necessary. The focus of this study remains to determine topics which both teachers and students consider difficult in the English language syllabus. The secondary school level is an important phase in the academic life of the students. It is at this level that students are groomed to transit to tertiary school and to begin careers that would help them for the rest of their lives. Failure in earning a credit pass in English at this level reduces their chances of achieving their career choices and moving further in the educational and social ladder.

### **3. Problem of the Study**

There are scores of reasons behind students' poor achievement in English language. Much research has identified causes of poor achievement in English language at the secondary school level to include large classes, inadequate practice at home and school, and poorly trained teachers (Shahzada, Ghazi & Khan, 2012; Golam, 2012; Mosha, 2014). In particular, Sa'ad and Usman (2014) blame underachievement in English language on poor methods of teaching, negative attitude to ESL, and the dominance of the mother tongue. But the worry of the present study is that English is itself a problem as a subject. The phonological, syntactic, and morphological structures of English are at variance with the structures of the first languages of the school learners. The teaching and learning of the various components of English therefore, is not an easy process.

Classroom evidence shows that many learners experience a lot of difficulty with many of the aspects of English language. It is presumed that even teachers themselves face difficulty teaching certain aspects of English language. When teachers meet topics in English that are difficult, they either teach them carelessly or skip them. And when difficult topics become so many and no attempts are made in 'treating' them, the learner is denied cognitive knowledge of the richness of the content of the subject in question. The result is not just poor achievement in English language but the school may be turning out products that do not fit into the workplace. Unfortunately, this important area has not received substantial research attention especially in Nigeria. This gap was identified in the review. It is therefore, helpful to carry out an empirical investigation to determine which topics in the senior secondary school syllabus are perceived as

difficult both by teachers and students. An understanding arising from such an investigation will be useful in planning instructional intervention to overcome difficult areas.

#### **4. Research Questions**

This study attempted to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Which topic(s) in oral English do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?
2. Which topic(s) in grammar do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?
3. Which topic(s) in reading comprehension do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?
4. Which topic(s) in writing composition do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?
5. Which topic(s) in literature in English do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?
6. Is there any difference in opinion between male and female students with regards to topics perceived as difficult?
7. What possible reasons can be advanced to explain why students find certain topics difficult?

#### **5. Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant difference between the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English language.
2. There is no significant difference between the mean response of male and female students in their perception of difficult topics in English language.

#### **6. Research Method and Procedure**

The researcher adopted the descriptive survey design. This was so because the aim of the study was to obtain information from a representative selection of the population and from the sample present the findings as being representative of the population as a whole (Bell, 2010). The study took place during the second term of 2015/2016–2010 academic session and involved 12 English language teachers and 187 SS 1 students from Government Model College, Makurdi, Tilley Gyado College, Makurdi, and Benue State University Science and Technical College, Makurdi. These three schools were selected using convenient sampling technique. Data were obtained through a structured

questionnaire developed by the researcher. The questionnaire used a 5-Point Likert scale that required respondents to choose from five options to indicate the degree of their perception. Responses were graded from 1 to 5 using the abbreviation VE = which stands for very easy (1 points), QE= quite easy (2 points), A= average (3 points), QD= quite difficult (4 points), and VD= very difficult(5 points). The questionnaire was presented in three major sections. Section 'A' elicited demographic data of the respondents while section 'B' contained 35 items in all. Items 1-8 were topics on oral English, items 9-16 were topics on grammar, items 17-21 were topics on reading, items 22-28 were topics on writing, and items 29-35 were items on aspects of literature in English. Topics in literature in English were selected because; literature plays a significant complimentary role in language learning. Topics in literature in English are connected to reading, writing and vocabulary development. Section C contained reasons why the respondents may consider certain topics difficult. Ten reasons covering teaching method, reading and study skills, motivation, attitude, teacher training, and educational resources were presented on a 5-point Likert scale of strongly agree (5), agree (4), uncertain (3), disagree (2) and strongly disagree (1). The respondents were asked to indicate how much they agreed with the statements. The validation of the questionnaire was done by experts in measurement and evaluation and English education. The responses of ten students who were not part of the main study were used in determining the reliability coefficient using the Cronbach alpha. The value of 0.81 was obtained and according to Pallant's (1981) standard, it was considered appropriate. In all, 199 copies of questionnaire were returned for analysis.

In determining difficult topics, the researcher studied the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) syllabus for English language and other prescribed textbooks (namely *Intensive English* by Benson O. Oluikpe, et al and *New Concept English* by J. Eyisi, T. Adepoju, Q. Adam, A. Adekunle, F. Ademola-Adeoye, & J. Eto (2014) to ensure that the topics were examinable and covered the major components namely: oral English, grammar, reading comprehension, composition (writing) and literature.

## 7. Data Analysis and Results

Analyzed data from 187 SS 1 students and 12 English language teachers on perceived difficult topics in English language are presented in tables 1-6 in line with the research questions. A benchmark was set for determining the level of difficulty of each topic by the values of the following means. Items with a mean of 3.0 and above were considered difficult while items with means less than 3.0 were considered easy.



**RQ 1:** "Which topic(s) in oral English do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?"

**Table 1:** Topics in oral English that students and teachers perceive as difficult

	Oral English	Students				Teachers			
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
1	Vowel Sounds	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.23	Difficult	12	<b>2.9</b>	1.24	Easy
2	Consonant Sounds	187	<b>2.6</b>	1.35	Easy	12	<b>2.8</b>	1.38	Easy
3	Diphthongs	187	<b>3.3</b>	1.28	Difficult	12	<b>2.8</b>	1.19	Easy
4	Consonant Clusters	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.24	Easy	12	<b>2.7</b>	1.23	Easy
5	Primary Stress	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.21	Easy	12	<b>2.9</b>	1.31	Easy
6	Contrastive Stress	187	<b>3.1</b>	1.26	Difficult	12	<b>3.5</b>	1.09	Difficult
7	Intonation	187	<b>3.2</b>	1.30	Difficult	12	<b>3.8</b>	0.87	Difficult
8	Transcription	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.23	Difficult	12	<b>3.3</b>	1.14	Difficult
Grand mean			<b>3.0</b>		Difficult		<b>3.1</b>		Difficult

Table 1 gives an item by item analysis of topics in oral English that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive as difficult. This result is used in answering research question one. On the strength of our benchmark mean of 3.0, topics perceived as difficult by students as detailed in Table 1 are *vowel sounds*, *diphthongs*, *contrastive stress*, *intonation* and *transcription* while topics in oral English perceived as difficult by teachers are *contrastive stress*, *intonation*, and *transcription*.

**RQ 2:** "Which topic(s) in grammar do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?"

**Table 2:** Topics in Grammar that students and teachers perceive as difficult

	Grammar	Students				Teachers			
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
9	Verb Tenses	187	<b>2.8</b>	1.25	Easy	12	<b>2.7</b>	1.06	Easy
10	Subject-Verb Agreement	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.32	Easy	12	<b>2.6</b>	1.65	Easy
	Pronoun-Antecedent	187	<b>3.1</b>	1.45	Difficult	12	<b>3.5</b>	1.45	Difficult
11	Agreement								
12	Active/Passive Voice	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.38	Difficult	12	<b>3.0</b>	1.65	Difficult
	Distinction Among Phrases,	187	<b>2.8</b>	1.24	Easy	12	<b>2.7</b>	1.06	Easy
13	Clusters And Sentences								
14	Stative Verbs	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.31	Difficult	12	<b>3.5</b>	1.17	Difficult
15	Colloquialisms/Idioms	187	<b>3.2</b>	1.37	Difficult	12	<b>3.4</b>	1.31	Difficult
16	Affixation	187	<b>3.1</b>	1.24	Difficult	12	<b>3.4</b>	1.16	Difficult
Grand mean			<b>3.0</b>		Difficult		<b>3.1</b>		Difficult

Table 2 gives an item by item analysis of topics in grammar that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive as difficult. This result is used in answering research question two. The results in Table 2 show that teachers and students share a common view on difficult topics in grammar. Both teachers and students identified *pronoun-antecedent agreement*, *active and passive voice*, *stative verbs*, *colloquialism*, and *affixation* as difficult topics.

**RQ 3:** “Which topic(s) in reading comprehension do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?”

**Table 3:** Topics in Reading that students and teachers perceive as difficult

Reading	N	Students			Decision	N	Teachers		
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision			Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
17 Identification of figures of speech	187	<b>2.8</b>	1.27	Easy	12	<b>2.67</b>	1.073	Easy	
18 Identification of main ideas and topic sentences	187	<b>3.2</b>	1.32	Difficult	12	<b>2.58</b>	1.240	Easy	
19 Explaining words as used in context	187	<b>3.4</b>	1.27	Difficult	12	<b>3.83</b>	1.193	Difficult	
20 Explaining grammatical function	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.18	Difficult	12	<b>3.25</b>	.965	Difficult	
21 Summary writing	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.10	Difficult	12	<b>2.83</b>	.835	Easy	
Grand mean		<b>3.1</b>		Difficult		<b>3.00</b>		Difficult	

Table 3 details an item by item analysis of topics in reading comprehension that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive as difficult. This result is used in answering research question three. From the results, students perceived four topics as difficult. These are *identification of main ideas and topic sentences*, *explaining words in context*, *explaining grammatical function*, and *summary writing*. Teachers opined that they have more difficulty with *explaining words in context* and with *summary writing*.

**RQ 4:** “Which topic(s) in writing composition do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?”

**Table 4:** Topics in Writing that students and teachers perceive as difficult

Writing	Students				Teachers			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
22 Letter writing	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.30	Easy	12	<b>2.5</b>	1.03	Easy
23 Descriptive writing	187	<b>2.6</b>	1.30	Easy	12	<b>2.6</b>	1.36	Easy
24 Expository writing	187	<b>2.6</b>	1.27	Easy	12	<b>2.9</b>	1.31	Easy
25 Argumentative writing	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.11	Easy	12	<b>2.4</b>	1.08	Easy
26 Punctuation	187	<b>3.2</b>	1.28	Difficult	12	<b>2.7</b>	1.53	Easy
27 Spelling	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.27	Easy	12	<b>3.6</b>	1.38	Difficult
28 Paragraphing	187	<b>3.3</b>	1.26	Difficult	12	<b>3.7</b>	1.15	Difficult
Grand mean		<b>2.9</b>		Easy		<b>2.9</b>		Easy

Table 4 gives an item by item analysis of topics in writing that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive as difficult. This result is used in answering research question four. In Table 4, topics perceived as difficult by students are *punctuation* and *paragraphing* while teachers perceived *spelling* and *paragraphing* as the only difficult topics in the component on writing.

**RQ 5:** “Which topic(s) in literature in English do SS 1 teachers and students perceive as difficult?”

**Table 5:** Topics in Literature in English that students and teachers perceive as difficult

Literature	Students				Teachers			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision
29 Appreciating a poem	187	<b>3.4</b>	1.37	Difficult	12	<b>2.8</b>	1.42	Easy
30 Identifying themes/subject matter	187	<b>3.1</b>	1.20	Difficult	12	<b>2.5</b>	1.09	Easy
31 Explaining point of view	187	<b>3.4</b>	1.34	Difficult	12	<b>3.8</b>	1.22	Difficult
32 Explaining the role of characters	187	<b>3.0</b>	1.31	Difficult	12	<b>2.9</b>	1.24	Easy
33 Explaining the setting of a work	187	<b>3.4</b>	1.22	Difficult	12	<b>3.7</b>	1.37	Difficult
34 Explaining the socio-cultural relevance of a work	187	<b>2.9</b>	1.41	Easy	12	<b>2.9</b>	1.56	Easy
35 Differentiating the genres of literature	187	<b>3.3</b>	1.15	Difficult	12	<b>2.8</b>	1.31	Easy
		<b>3.2</b>		Difficult		<b>3.0</b>		Difficult

Table 5 gives an item by item analysis of topics in the English language curriculum that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive as difficult. This result is used in answering research question five. Results in Table 5 above show that all seven topics except *explaining the socio-cultural relevance of a literary work* were perceived as difficult by students. To teachers, three topics namely *explaining point of view*, and *setting of literary work* were the two difficult topics.

**RQ 7:** “What possible reasons can be advanced to explain why students find certain topics difficult?”

**Table 6:** Reasons why Students and Teacher consider some topics in English Language as most difficult

Reasons	N	Students			Teachers			Decision
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Decision	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	
1 My teacher taught it carelessly	187	2.4	1.27	Not accepted	12	3.1	1.38	Accepted
2 I have not read about it enough myself	187	3.1	1.29	Accepted	12	3.0	1.41	Accepted
3 I have read about it but need someone to explain it to me	187	3.1	1.09	Accepted	12	3.6	1.08	Accepted
4 Time required to cover it was not adequate	187	2.6	1.17	Not accepted	12	2.7	1.37	Not accepted
5 I learnt it but did not understand it	187	3.0	1.19	Accepted	12	3.2	1.27	Accepted
6 I don't have interest in the topic	187	3.1	1.30	Accepted	12	3.7	1.23	Accepted
7 My employer/teacher has not motivated me enough	187	3.1	1.27	Accepted	12	2.9	0.90	Not accepted
8 I hate this subject	187	3.0	1.12	Accepted	12	3.2	0.83	Accepted
9 I don't have the recommended textbook	187	2.9	1.17	Not accepted	12	2.4	1.22	Not accepted
10 I did not major in English	187	3.0	1.32	Accepted	12	3.2	1.59	Accepted

Table 6 contains analyzed data detailing reasons why students and teachers see the topics identified in tables 1-5 as difficult. Students and teachers cited various reasons why they see topics as difficult. In Table 6, items with a mean value of up to 3.00 and

above are accepted as reasons for difficulty. The result shows that students were of the view that *poor reading and study skills, absence of motivation, not studying English as a major and hatred for the subjects*. To teachers, students were facing difficulty with the identified topics as a result of *poor teaching methods, poor experience of teachers, poor reading and study skills, lack of interest, hatred of the subject and not studying English as a major*.

### Hypothesis 1

There is no significant mean difference in the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language.

**Table 7:** t-test for significant difference in the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language

Status	N	Mean	t	df	p
Student	187	3.0535	1.552	197	0.122
Teachers	12	3.2357			

Table 7 is a t-test table for the significant difference in the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language. Table 7 gives  $t = 1.552$ ,  $df = 197$  and  $p = 0.122$ . Since  $p > 0.05$ , the null hypothesis is accepted. Meaning that, there is no significant difference in the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language.

**RQ 6:** "Is there any difference in opinion between male and female students with regards to topics perceived as difficult?"

### Hypothesis 1:

There is no significant mean difference in the mean response of male and female students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language.

**Table 8:** t-test for significant difference in the mean response of male and female students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language

Sex	N	Mean	t	df	p
Male	145	3.0104	2.813	185	.005
Female	42	3.2020			

Table 8 is a t-test table for the significant difference in the mean response of teachers and students in their perception of difficult topics in English Language. Table 8 gives  $t = 2.813$ ,  $df = 185$  and  $p = 0.005$ . Since  $p < 0.05$ , the null hypothesis is rejected. Meaning that, there is a significant difference in the mean response of male and female students in

their perception of difficult topics in English Language. This result also answers research question six which states, “*Is there any difference in opinion between male and female students with regards to topics perceived as difficult?*”

## **7. Discussion of Findings**

Results in tables 1-6 confirm that SS 1 students and their teachers perceive a wide range of topics in the senior secondary school English language curriculum difficult. This can be substantiated with the grand mean which is above our benchmark value of 3.0 for oral English, grammar, reading comprehension, writing and literature. On the whole, the study result is indicative that both teachers and students perceive writing as a relatively less difficult component looking at the grand mean value of 2.9 (students) and (2.9 teachers). But a critical look at the individual topics on writing confirms that *punctuation, spelling and paragraphing* are perceived as difficult topics.

### **A. Difficult topics in oral English**

Oral English is one of the most essential aspects of English language. It tests the segments such as vowels, diphthong, and consonants and supra-segmental features such as intonation, stress and rhyme. A good knowledge of these is required to speak fluently. Language begins with listening and speaking and there is the need for language teachers to emphasize oral proficiency. The result in table 1 indicates that out of 8 topics on oral English, 5 namely *vowels sounds, diphthongs, contrastive stress, intonation* and *transcription* are perceived as difficult. This result is expected because, many students are not practising the art of speaking enough to become proficient in oral communication. This problem is also common because, many learners of English carry the speech habits of their mother tongues into the learning of the sounds of English language, unaware that there’s a divergence between how English words sounds and how they are spelled. “The relationship, in English, between spelling and sounds is not one-to-one” (Kuiper & Allan, 1996, p.20). when students learning English cannot pronounce English words correctly, it makes them to be misunderstood. Vowel sounds are particularly similar and can be clearly distinguished through correct pronunciation. The art of good speech begins with discrete pronunciation of words. Peng (2014) did not set out to investigate difficult topics in oral English but his findings demonstrate that speaking is a difficult aspect, similar to the result of the present study. Subjects in Peng’s (2014) perceived translating and speaking the most difficult of the aspects of English language, attributable to insufficient practice with the sounds of

English, poor expertise on the part of teachers, and absence of good speech models around the school learner.

### **B. Difficult topics in grammar**

The results of this study indicate that 5 out of 8 grammar topics namely *pronoun-antecedent agreement, active and passive voice, stative verbs, colloquialism* and *affixation* are perceived both by teachers and students as difficult. This is worrisome, because, grammar is the heartbeat of language. When the learner performs poorly in grammar, it affects negatively other aspects. The passive and active voice as difficult topics and recurring problem has been reported in Elturki's study (2014), with similar outcomes. Udu (2012, 2014) had already demonstrably shown how the active and passive voice could be effectively taught with good results. Elturki (2014) also found that *reported speech* and *unreal conditions* are difficult areas in grammar. But these were not listed among the topics covered by the present study.

### **C. Difficult topics in reading, writing and literature**

Reading, writing and literature are higher order literacy skills. Oral language has to be solidly developed before higher order skills. The results in Tables 3, 4, and 5 confirm that students and teachers perceive topics such as *identification of main ideas, explaining words in contexts, explaining grammatical function, paragraphing, punctuation, summary writing, point of view, appreciating a poem, identifying themes, differentiating the genres of literature*, etc as difficult. This result is consistent with Maposa's (1992) findings. Maposa had while investigating teachers' perceptions of the levels of difficulty of aspects of English language and literature for O-level students in Zimbabwe found that students face difficulty with all aspects of English language although the greatest difficulty was noticed with composition and summary writing, and with written and spoken grammar. Maposa (1992) also found that teachers were not certain about The WAEC Chief Examiners report (2006) has indicated that students have challenges with reading and writing, especially summary writing.

Modern view of language teaching emphasizes the need to teach the components of language integratively so that the knowledge of one aspect complements the other. While oral language proficiency is the focus of initial instruction in English language, literacy skills build on oral proficiency and the knowledge of grammar is believed to enhance reading comprehension, writing, and summary. Similarly, vocabulary skills acquired through listening and reading tasks should aid oral or written expression. This cycle has to be complete. The situation where students find all aspects of English difficult to learn, is a pointer to the reality that the purpose of teaching English as a

second language has not been achieved. The findings of this study call for (i) reflection on the nature of training that students get at the primary school, which is the foundation; (ii) reflection on teachers' teaching methodologies; (iii) adequate teacher preparation before each language lesson; (iv) stresses for a plan of action for the revitalization of English language teaching and learning aimed at improving students' outcomes at the secondary school level.

#### **D. Reasons Why Students are Facing Difficulty with Certain aspects of English**

In the present study, prominent among the reasons advanced to buttress why students see certain topics as difficult are *poor reading and study skills, absence of motivation, hatred for English language, poor experience with the subject, and poor teaching methods*. These findings are consistent with similar studies that have investigated causes of poor achievement in English. Shahzada, Ghazi and Khan (2012), Mosha (2014) have separately listed poor study skills, lack of home practice of language skills, poor teaching methods, and preponderance of unskilled teachers, etc. as causative factors.

### **9. Recommendations**

The following recommendations have been suggested in line with the findings of the study

1. Intensive remedial teaching in secondary schools. It is hereby recommended intensive that remedial teaching of aspects of English language identified as problem areas should be put in place forthwith, and focus should be on the following key areas: the sounds of English, grammar, reading, writing, and literature in English, which has been identified in this study as difficult areas.
2. Retraining of teachers teaching English in secondary school. The task of retraining teachers rests with the State and Federal Ministries of Education, Teaching Service Boards and proprietors of schools. These bodies are not just stakeholders but are employers of the teachers currently teaching in their schools. It is recommended that they should organize workshops and seminars for language teachers to improve the teaching of the key areas identified in (1) above.
3. Encouraging extracurricular and literary activities on a competitive basis. Students are merely learning English for the sake of passing examinations. This ought not to be. Teachers, parents and proprietors should help students learn and practise using English as a lifelong requirement. This can be done by organizing competitions such as writing, quiz, debates, and reading competitions



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through, which students will develop the culture of using English in practical situations, which is also called communicative competence.

4. Teachers should incorporate relevant Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools in the teaching of English. Teachers can acquire relevant softwares, videos, and you-tube applications to support the teaching of speech sounds and listening skills. The use of ICT will not only give students interest, it will also improve teaching and learning outcomes.
5. Peer teaching of English language should be encouraged so that when one teacher does not handle a topic well, the other can.
6. English as a second language teachers should take practical steps at improving their teaching skills and being abreast of trends in their subject area by constantly reading research findings published in journals in English language studies.
7. English language teachers should professionalize by become active members bodies in their field thereby getting the chance to participate in meetings, conferences and workshops. They can enhance their research and teaching experience through these.

## 10. Conclusion

Difficult topics is a major cause of students poor achievement as our study has shown. Weak and ineffective teachers skip difficult topics when they come across them. Students become dispirited when difficult topics are not properly handled and their interest in English language wanes fast as a result. There is therefore, the urgent need to revisit the curriculum and apply remedial measures to address those problem areas identified by this research. The West African Examinations Council (2006) has consistently declared that “... *there can be no better remedy for the candidates’ weaknesses than a serious study of the rudiments of the English Language.*”

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