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English Language Barriers and Information Access Inequality: Perspectives from Marginalised Rural Communities in Southeastern Nigeria

Basilia Igbokwe[1], Nkechi Priscilla Nwanekezie[2*]

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between English language proficiency and access to information among marginalised rural communities in the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, and identified the information domains most affected and the factors associated with proficiency. A cross-sectional survey was conducted in rural communities of six local government areas in Imo, Abia and Anambra States. Data were collected from 387 adults with a structured questionnaire and an English Language Proficiency Assessment adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, and were analyzed with descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, multiple regression, the t-test, and analysis of variance. About two thirds of the respondents (65.9%) had only basic or elementary proficiency. Proficiency was strongly correlated with information access ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.01$) and was the strongest predictor in a model that explained 46.8% of the variance in access. The association was strongest for digital information ($r = 0.721$) and weakest for information obtained through community meetings and word of mouth ($r = 0.412$), and 54.8% of the respondents avoided sources they found linguistically difficult. Educational attainment was the strongest predictor of proficiency. The study concludes that limited English proficiency is a major correlate of information inequality in the rural South East, and recommends Igbo versions of digital public services and essential information, adult literacy programmes that combine functional English with information literacy, and the training of librarians and other workers as language intermediaries.

INTRODUCTION

The information age has revolutionised how people access, digest and gain from information to aid their personal growth and socioeconomic progress. This change has not occurred uniformly across communities, and linguistic ability has become a significant factor in whether access to technology translates into meaningful use of information (Warschauer, 2003). In multilingual societies like Nigeria, where English is the official language and the main medium of formal information, differences in English proficiency translate into differences in access to information (Bamgbose, 2000). This linguistic aspect of the digital divide has been somewhat overlooked in the literature, especially in rural areas where the lack of language skills and weak infrastructure further add to the challenge of information equity.

Statement of the Problem

This problem is highlighted in the South East geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising the five Igbo speaking states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. Although literacy and educational attainment in the zone are among the highest in the country, national survey data indicate persistent disparities between urban and rural populations (National Population Commission [NPC] & ICF, 2019). Rural residents of the zone are mostly subsistence farmers and petty traders; their formal education is limited, and hence their English proficiency is also limited. This means that they lack the freedom to use information that is issued predominantly in English, such as government policies, health information, agricultural innovations and economic opportunities.

Significance of the Study

The importance of the study derives from the fact that information access is one of the prime factors that facilitate development, empowerment and the expansion of human capabilities (Sen, 1999). Excluding segments of the population from information through language is more than a passing inconvenience; it has the potential to perpetuate inequity and limit socioeconomic mobility. As the World Bank (2016) demonstrates, the gains of digital technologies have been unevenly distributed, and as connectivity grows, poorer and rural populations who do not possess the skills to use these technologies are left behind. The study is also relevant to education and technology policy, because the language skills that determine access are acquired mainly through schooling and adult education, and because public information is increasingly delivered through digital platforms whose design assumes command of English.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were:

1. to assess the extent of English language barriers experienced by rural residents of the South East in accessing information;
2. to explore the relationship between English language

[1] Department of Humanities, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria
[2] University Library, Kingsley Ozumba Mbadiwe University, Ideato, Imo State, Nigeria
[*] Corresponding author's e-mail: nkechi.nwanekezie@komu.edu.ng

proficiency and level of information access;

3. to determine the information domains most affected by limited English proficiency; and

4. to identify the sociodemographic factors related to English language proficiency among rural residents.

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H01: English language proficiency has no significant relationship with information access among rural residents of the South East.

H02: English language proficiency does not significantly predict information access when educational attainment, age and gender are taken into account.

H03: Educational attainment, age, gender and occupation are not significantly related to English language proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Two complementary theories anchor the study: van Dijk's resources and appropriation theory of the digital divide and Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism. Van Dijk's (2005, 2006) position is that access to information and communication technologies is not just a question of physical infrastructure but passes through four successive stages of access: motivational, material, skills and usage. Personal and positional resources, such as education, age and occupation, are unequally distributed, resulting in unequal access at every stage. Van Dijk's definition of skills access includes operational, informational and strategic skills. This study takes that dimension further by treating proficiency in the dominant language of information content as a precondition for those skills, since a person who cannot read an interface or a leaflet cannot exercise them.

Phillipson (1992) explains why English competence has become a prerequisite for information access in postcolonial societies. He maintains that structural inequalities persist because colonial languages continue to dominate official and formal domains, to the disadvantage of speakers of indigenous languages. In Nigeria, the position of English as the language of government, education, commerce and, increasingly, digital information places English proficiency in the role of a gatekeeper to opportunities and resources (Bamgbose, 2000). The theory has, however, been disputed. Bisong (1995), taking a Nigerian view, argues that Nigerians learn English pragmatically, as an addition to their own languages, rather than as passive victims of cultural domination. In the present study, English is not seen as imposed on unwilling rural residents. The study draws on Phillipson only for the more limited argument that institutional reliance on English excludes those who lack proficiency in it, an argument that holds whatever the reasons for learning English. Together, the two theories provide the conceptual framework of the study. Educational attainment, age, gender and occupation are treated as personal and positional resources (van Dijk, 2005); English language proficiency and the experience of language barriers represent the skills stage of access; and information access across the health, agricultural, civic, economic and digital domains represents usage access. Linguistic imperialism helps to explain why, in Nigeria, success at the skills stage depends on proficiency in English rather than in Igbo.

Conceptual Review: Language and Meaningful Access

Warschauer (2003) maintains that access to technology becomes meaningful only when physical, digital, human and social resources are present together, and he identifies language and literacy as key human resources. A device or a connection is of little value to a person who does not understand the language in which content is offered. The present study rests on this conception of access as social inclusion rather than as possession of equipment. Building on this view, Igbokwe and Nwanekezie (2026c) proposed a conceptual framework in which limited English proficiency acts as a gatekeeper that turns the availability of information into unequal access for rural Nigerians; the present study examines that relationship empirically.

English Language Status in Nigeria and Information Access

English holds a special position in Nigeria as both an official language and a lingua franca among the country's many ethnic groups (Adegbija, 2004). The national education policy prescribes the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment for the first few years of primary school and English thereafter, so that English becomes the medium of instruction for most of formal schooling (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). English is also the language of government business, the law, commerce and documented knowledge (Adekunle, 1995; Bamgbose, 2000), which makes competence in it virtually indispensable for participation in formal institutions.

English competence, however, is not equally distributed. There is significant inequity between rural and urban residents in literacy and educational attainment (NPC & ICF, 2019). Globally, UNESCO (2016) reports that a large proportion of learners are taught in a language they do not speak or understand well, which harms learning outcomes and is particularly detrimental to poor and rural groups. In rural Nigeria, limited access to good schools, the scarcity of English learning materials and the predominance of indigenous languages in everyday life combine to restrict the learning and retention of English.

Information Access Challenges in Rural Nigerian Communities

Language is just one of many challenges to information access in rural Nigerian communities. In an early study,

Uhegbu (2001) pointed to rural people's scepticism towards information, poor rural roads, the indifference of government officials and rivalry within communities as the biggest obstacles to community information services, and suggested traditional institutions and town development associations as vehicles for disseminating information. Recent research confirms that formal channels still reach rural people poorly. Etebu (2020) found that most dissemination mechanisms in Bayelsa State were inadequate for rural people and advised that local messengers and Nigerian Pidgin be used at town hall meetings to reach those without formal education. In the North West, Mohammed and Garaba (2019) observed that public library services in rural areas were used mainly by literate residents, while the non-literate majority rarely used them; indeed, their own questionnaire had to be translated into Hausa and read aloud to reach non-literate respondents.

In the South East, Opara (2008) found that farmers in Imo State depended on interpersonal and expert sources, particularly extension agents, for agricultural information. More recently, Fidelugwuowo (2021) found that the main sources of agricultural information for rural farmers in the South East were friends and fellow workers, and that the farmers' knowledge and skills for accessing agricultural information were generally low. These results indicate that face to face channels remain the channels of choice and that the ability to use formal sources is limited, although none of these studies measured language proficiency directly. Library studies in Imo State have also examined the extent to which available library resources are used (Nwanekezie & Igbokwe, 2022) and the extent to which information technology has been applied in Nigerian libraries (Nwanekezie, 2022), but the language in which resources and services are provided has not been considered as a variable in its own right. This is one reason why the present investigation was carried out.

Digital Information Resources and Language Barriers

Although vast amounts of information can now be accessed online, that information is available in very few languages. Paolillo (2007) demonstrated that the linguistic diversity of the Internet is far lower than that of the world's population and that Internet resources are concentrated in regions of low linguistic diversity. Although first language speakers of English represent only a small proportion of the world's population (Eberhard *et al.*, 2023), about half of the ten million most visited websites currently use English as their content language (W3Techs, 2026). Connectivity itself is unevenly distributed. In Africa in 2022, approximately 64% of urban residents used the Internet compared with approximately 23% of rural residents, a far wider gap than in Europe or in Asia and the Pacific (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2022). English is the default language of government business and formal communication in Nigeria (Bamgbose, 2000; Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013), and official digital services largely follow the same pattern. No published, systematic audit of the language provisions of Nigerian government portals was found in the course of this review. Rural citizens with low English proficiency are therefore likely to be excluded from digital civic participation and from government information and services.

Empirical Studies on Language and Information Access

In the African setting, Mutula (2005) explained that the digital divide in sub-Saharan Africa has distinctive characteristics, including cultural and linguistic diversity, poverty, gender discrimination and low awareness of information technologies, and that these call for approaches to intervention different from those developed in industrialised countries. Direct evidence of the value of indigenous languages is provided by Tommy and Sunday (2025), who studied the communication of the Federal Government's COVID-19 palliative programme. Using a survey of 312 respondents and in-depth interviews, they found that messages in indigenous languages were better understood and more trusted by rural residents than messages in English alone, with radio the most effective channel, although limited language coverage and weak media infrastructure reduced their reach. Overall, this literature implies that language mediates information inequality in Nigeria, but few studies have measured the strength of that relationship by means of a direct test of language proficiency.

Gap in the Literature

Three gaps emerge from the review. First, most studies conducted so far examine access to information in a single domain, such as agriculture or health, rather than across domains. Second, research in Nigeria that measures English proficiency directly, instead of using educational attainment as a proxy, and relates it to information access is limited. Third, few studies have considered the sociodemographic factors associated with English proficiency among rural adults in the South East. The present study aims to fill these gaps.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

The study was conducted using a cross-sectional survey design, which is suitable for exploring the relationships among variables at one point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A quantitative method was used to assess the extent of language barriers, to explore the relationship between English proficiency and information access, and to determine the factors associated with proficiency.

Study Area and Population

The study was carried out in six local government areas (LGAs) in three states of the South East of Nigeria, namely Ideato North and Ideato South in Imo State,

Umuahia North and Ikwuano in Abia State, and Awka North and Dunukofia in Anambra State. Two of these LGAs, Umuahia North and Awka North, contain or adjoin state capitals and their urban fringes. For this reason, only rural communities in the six LGAs were sampled, and the urban wards and peri-urban settlements of the state capitals were excluded. The communities included were those whose populations are primarily engaged in subsistence farming and petty trading and which lack the concentration of public and commercial services found in urban centres. According to the 2006 census, the combined population of the six LGAs was about 1,247,000 (NPC, 2010); this figure covers the LGAs as a whole, including their urban parts, and predates the study by eighteen years. Literacy levels of rural residents of the South East are lower than those of their urban counterparts (NPC & ICF, 2019).

The target population consisted of adults aged 18 years and above who resided in the selected rural communities and were not enrolled in formal education, so that their English competence reflected long term acquisition and retention rather than current schooling. The accessible population was estimated at about 820,000 adults by projecting the 2006 census figures for the rural wards of the six LGAs to 2024 at an average annual growth rate of 2.5 percent and applying the estimated proportion of the population aged 18 years and above (about 55 percent).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The sample size was determined with Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, $n = N/(1 + Ne^2)$, where n is the sample size, N the population and e the margin of error. With a population of 820,000 and a 5% margin of error, the minimum sample size was 400. To allow for nonresponse, 450 questionnaires were administered, of which 387 (86%) were complete and usable.

A multistage sampling procedure was used. First, two LGAs were purposively selected in each of the three states. Second, after urban and peri-urban wards had been excluded, three rural communities were randomly selected from each LGA from a numbered list of communities obtained at the LGA headquarters, giving 18 communities. Third, 25 households were selected by simple random sampling in each community, and one eligible adult was chosen in each household with the Kish grid (Kish, 1949).

Research Instruments

Two instruments were used: a structured questionnaire and an English Language Proficiency Assessment (ELPA). The questionnaire consisted of three sections. Section A gathered demographic data: age, gender, educational attainment, occupation and length of residence in the community.

Section B, the Information Access Scale (IAS), had 20 items, four in each of five domains: health information, agricultural information, government and civic information, economic and market information, and digital (online) information. The items were rated on a five point scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). Two further items asked how often respondents obtained information at community meetings and through word of mouth; these were analysed separately as a measure of locally mediated information access, that is, information passed on orally by other people in the community rather than read or retrieved by the respondents themselves. The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of the IAS was 0.89.

Section C, the Language Barrier Experience Scale (LBES), had 15 items on the frequency and severity of language related difficulties in seeking information, such as comprehension problems, communication problems and avoidance of English medium sources. Responses were rated on a five point scale, and moderate to severe difficulty was defined as a mean score of 3.0 or higher. The LBES had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91.

The ELPA was adapted from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) for the Nigerian setting. It comprised reading comprehension (15 items), listening comprehension (10 items), vocabulary knowledge (20 items) and functional writing (5 tasks) based on everyday documents such as a clinic card, a public notice and a simple form. The listening items were read aloud by the research assistant from a standard script, and the writing tasks were scored with a marking guide. Scores were converted to percentages and classified as Basic (0–40%), Elementary (41–60%), Intermediate (61–80%) and Advanced (81–100%). The reliability coefficient (KR 20) of the ELPA was 0.87, and it correlated with self-reported English ability at $r = 0.74$.

All the instruments were checked for face and content validity by five experts in language education, library and information science, and measurement and evaluation, and were pretested with 40 adults in a rural community in Ngor Okpala Local Government Area, Imo State, outside the sampled communities. The items were modified in the light of the experts' comments and the pretest responses, and those who took part in the pretest were excluded from the main study.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected between March and May 2024 by six research assistants fluent in English and Igbo, who had received three days of training on the instruments, the Kish grid, the reading of listening items and research ethics. Instructions were provided in both languages so that respondents could receive them in the language they preferred, while the ELPA itself measured English competence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, gave ethical approval (approval number UNN/REC/2024/018, dated 20 February 2024). Administration took approximately 45 minutes per respondent.

Data Analysis

SPSS version 27.0 was used to analyse the data. Descriptive statistics were used for the demographic variables and for objectives (i) and (iii). Pearson's product moment correlation was used to test H01 and to compare domains (objective iii). H02 was tested with multiple regression, while H03 (objective iv) was tested with a second regression together with the independent samples t test and one way analysis of variance. All tests were conducted at the 0.05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows the characteristics of the 387 respondents. Just over half (53.2%) were female. The largest age group was 31–45 years (31.3%), and 17.5% were above 60 years. Secondary education was the most common level of educational attainment (38.5%), and 14.2% had no formal education at all. Two thirds (67.2%) were engaged in farming or petty trading, 18.3% were artisans and 14.5% were in other occupations or unemployed.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 387)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	181	46.8
Female	206	53.2
Age group		
18–30 years	87	22.5
31–45 years	121	31.3
46–60 years	111	28.7
Above 60 years	68	17.5
Educational attainment		
No formal education	55	14.2
Primary education	102	26.4
Secondary education	149	38.5
Postsecondary education	81	20.9
Occupation		
Farming or petty trading	260	67.2
Artisan	71	18.3
Other or unemployed	56	14.5

Objective (i): Extent of English Language Barriers

Overall, the ELPA indicated limited English competence among most respondents (Table 2). Nearly a third (31.3%) had Basic proficiency and 34.6% had Elementary proficiency, so that 65.9% had no more than Elementary proficiency; only 9.8% reached the Advanced level. The mean score was 48.7% (SD = 19.4), which falls within the Elementary level.

On the Language Barrier Experience Scale, 72.3% of the respondents reported moderate to severe difficulty in using digital information resources because of limited English proficiency. Furthermore, 68.5% reported difficulty in understanding health materials provided at health facilities, 64.2% in understanding government announcements and policy documents, and 58.7% in using agricultural extension information published in English. Only 12.4% reported no significant language barrier.

The most common challenges were inability to understand medication instructions and health leaflets (71.3%), difficulty in completing official forms (67.8%), difficulty in using smartphone applications and websites in English (65.4%) and difficulty in understanding agricultural market broadcasts (61.2%). Over half (54.8%) reported that they avoided sources they considered too difficult linguistically, thus excluding themselves from potentially useful information.

Table 2: Distribution of English Language Proficiency Levels (N = 387)

Proficiency level	Score range	Frequency	Percentage
Basic	0–40%	121	31.3
Elementary	41–60%	134	34.6
Intermediate	61–80%	94	24.3
Advanced	81–100%	38	9.8
Total		**387**	**100.0**

Objectives (ii) and (iii) and H01: Proficiency and Information Access

There was a significant positive correlation between English proficiency and overall information access ($r = 0.684$, $p < 0.01$), which led to the rejection of H01. As Table 3 shows, the correlation was significant in all domains. It was highest for digital information ($r = 0.721$) and civic information ($r = 0.687$), and lowest for locally mediated information obtained through community meetings and word of mouth ($r = 0.412$).

Table 3: Correlation Coefficients between English Proficiency and Information Access Domains (N = 387)

Information access domain	r with English proficiency
Digital (online) information	.721**
Government and civic information	.687**
Health information	.658**
Economic and market information	.634**
Agricultural information	.612**
Locally mediated information	.412**
Overall information access	.684**

*Note: ** $p < 0.01$. Domains are listed in descending order of correlation.*

H02: English Proficiency as a Predictor of Information Access

Table 4 presents the regression of information access on English proficiency, educational attainment, age and gender. The model was significant ($F(4, 382) = 68.74$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 46.8% of the variance in information access (adjusted $R^2 = 0.468$). English proficiency was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.524$, $p < 0.001$), followed by educational attainment ($\beta = 0.187$, $p < 0.01$). Age had a slight negative effect ($\beta = -0.112$, $p < 0.05$), while gender was not significant. H02 was thus rejected.

Table 4: Multiple Regression of Information Access on English Proficiency and Demographic Variables

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	18.42	3.21		5.74	<.001
English proficiency	0.68	0.05	.524	12.86	<.001
Educational attainment	2.34	0.67	.187	3.49	.001
Age	−0.18	0.08	−.112	−2.25	.025
Gender	0.87	1.12	.038	0.78	.437

Note: $R^2 = .474$, adjusted $R^2 = .468$, $F(4, 382) = 68.74$, $p < .001$.

Objective (iv) and H03: Factors Associated with English Proficiency

Proficiency differed significantly across levels of educational attainment ($F(3, 383) = 87.42$, $p < 0.001$): respondents with postsecondary education had a mean score of 72.3%, compared with 24.6% for those with no formal education, a difference of 47.7 percentage points. In a regression of proficiency on the demographic variables, educational attainment was the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.412$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 17% of the unique variance. Proficiency was negatively related to age ($\beta = -0.186$, $p < 0.01$). Males scored slightly higher than females (M = 51.2% and 46.5%; $t(385) = 2.14$, $p = .033$), a statistically significant but small difference. Proficiency also varied by occupational group ($F(2, 384) = 12.36$, $p < 0.001$), with those engaged in farming or petty trading scoring lower than artisans and those in other occupations. H03 was thus rejected.

Discussion

The study shows a strong association between English proficiency and access to information among rural adults in the South East. The finding is in line with van Dijk's (2005, 2006) argument that inequality at the skills stage of access is carried forward into unequal usage, and it supports extending the skills stage to include language proficiency. It also supports the narrower claim drawn from Phillipson (1992) and Bamgbose (2000) that institutional reliance on English excludes those who lack it. English proficiency was the best predictor of information access, even after controlling for education, age and gender.

Approximately two thirds of the respondents had no more than elementary proficiency. Combined with the use of English as the dominant medium of formal information channels, this creates what can be termed a language trap, in which people are unable to use the very information that could improve their situations. The trap is reinforced by the behaviour of the respondents themselves: over half (54.8%) reported avoiding sources they considered too difficult linguistically. Such avoidance suggests that the language barrier is not only a matter of competence but also a matter of affect. Feelings of uncertainty and anxiety influence information seeking, and individuals

who believe that a source will be difficult may withdraw from it before attempting to use it (Kuhlthau, 2004; Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025a). Learners of English in other settings likewise report that difficulties with vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar undermine their confidence and make them anxious about using the language (Muradi & Amarkhil, 2024; Vergara-Burgos, 2025). Understanding English texts, moreover, requires more than general proficiency; it also depends on the reading strategies the reader brings to the text (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2025b). It is therefore clear that this group will not be reached simply by providing more English information; their confidence and strategies in using such information also need to be developed. The findings support Bamgbose's (2000) argument that policies which favour English exclude the majority who are not proficient in the language, and Fidelugwuowo's (2021) finding that rural farmers in the South East have low skills for accessing agricultural information. They differ from the latter in one regard: whereas Fidelugwuowo described low information skills in general terms, the present study shows that a directly measured language skill accounts for much of the difference in access.

The pattern across the domains is informative. The association was strongest for digital information, consistent with the concentration of online content in a few languages, particularly English (Paolillo, 2007; W3Techs, 2026), and with the low level of Internet use in rural Africa reported by the ITU (2022). It was weakest for information gathered at community meetings and through word of mouth. This indicates that oral, community channels, which typically operate in Igbo, partly offset the language barrier. The finding agrees with Opara (2008) and Fidelugwuowo (2021), who found that rural farmers in the South East rely mainly on extension agents, friends and fellow workers for agricultural information, and with Tommy and Sunday (2025), who found that messages in indigenous languages were better understood and more trusted than messages in English. It also aligns with Etebu's (2020) call for local messengers and Nigerian Pidgin to be used to communicate with rural residents who lack formal education.

Educational attainment was the strongest predictor of proficiency in this study, which confirms the crucial role of formal education in learning English in Nigeria, where English becomes the medium of instruction after the early primary years (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2013). Since education is unequally distributed between urban and rural areas (NPC & ICF, 2019), the finding suggests that the rural disadvantage in schooling may carry over into a disadvantage in information access, although the present cross-sectional data cannot demonstrate this directly.

A large proportion of the respondents (72.3%) reported moderate to severe difficulty with English information, which directly affects public communication. If a majority of the rural population cannot fully grasp information communicated through official channels, the effectiveness of government announcements, public health campaigns, agricultural extension and empowerment programmes is diminished. The finding is consistent with the linguistic dimension of the digital divide in sub-Saharan Africa described by Mutula (2005), and adds a language dimension to the obstacles to rural information services in Nigeria identified by Uhegbu (2001) and Etebu (2020). It also parallels Mohammed and Garaba's (2019) observation that rural library services in the North West are used mainly by the literate minority.

Proficiency and information access were both negatively related to age. Many older rural residents were of school age in the early postindependence era, when schooling was less available in rural areas, and they therefore face a double disadvantage in an increasingly information driven society. The finding points to the need for interventions targeted at older adults.

Males scored slightly higher than females, but the difference was small. It may reflect differences in educational access between men and women in rural communities, and it implies a need for gender sensitive interventions, such as scheduling literacy classes at times that suit women's farming, trading and domestic work.

CONCLUSION

This study found a strong association between English language proficiency and information access among adults in rural communities of South East Nigeria. About two thirds of the respondents had only basic or elementary proficiency, proficiency was the strongest predictor of access, the association was strongest for digital information, and over half of the respondents avoided linguistically difficult sources. Language is therefore a critical component of information inequality. Researchers applying resources and appropriation theory (van Dijk, 2005, 2006) should measure proficiency directly. Public libraries, primary health care centres and agricultural extension services should train librarians and other workers as language intermediaries who interpret English information in Igbo (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2026b); adult literacy programmes should combine functional English with information literacy (Igbokwe & Nwanekezie, 2026a); community radio should broadcast essential information in Igbo; and government agencies should provide Igbo versions of digital public services and health materials. The cross-sectional design does not permit causal inference, and the purposive selection of local government areas in three states and a single language community limits generalisation. Future studies should use longitudinal and mixed methods designs, cover other zones and language groups, and evaluate interventions such as indigenous language interfaces and trained intermediaries.

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