

BULLYING AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WELL-BEING AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN IMO EAST, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the impact of bullying on the well-being and academic performance of language learners in Imo East Senatorial District, Imo State. The objectives were to examine the influence of bullying on psychological well-being, classroom participation, and academic engagement of language learners. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised all senior secondary school students (SS1–SS3) in Imo East Senatorial District, while a sample of 500 students was selected using a multi-stage sampling technique from five schools across five randomly selected LGAs out of the nine in Imo East Senatorial District. Data was collected using a structured, closed-ended questionnaire titled “The Impact of Bullying on the Well-being and Academic Performance of Language Learners in Imo East Senatorial District, Imo State”, thereby confirming the instrument’s reliability using Cronbach's Alpha with a coefficient of 0.83, hence making the instrument reliable. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and linear regression. Findings revealed a significant negative relationship between bullying and psychological well-being ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.05$), a significant effect on classroom participation ($\beta = -0.44$, $p < 0.05$), and a strong inverse relationship with academic engagement ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.05$). It was concluded that bullying has a detrimental effect on language learners. The study recommends that school management strengthen anti-bullying policies and promote student counselling, thereby filling the knowledge gap regarding the impact of bullying on academic performance.

Keywords: Bullying, Language Learners, Academic Performance, Student Well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying remains a persistent and deeply damaging phenomenon within educational settings across the globe. Defined as a repeated aggressive behaviour that involves an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the victim, bullying can manifest in physical, verbal, relational, or cyber forms (Chika, 2024). In school environments, the impact of bullying extends beyond physical harm; it includes significant psychological trauma and academic setbacks that often remain unaddressed, particularly among marginalized student populations.

Language learners, students acquiring a second or foreign language in an academic environment, are especially vulnerable to bullying. Their perceived accents, grammatical errors, and limited proficiency often make them targets of ridicule, exclusion, or verbal assault (Afolabi &

Animashaun, 2023). These experiences may trigger communication apprehension, lowered self-esteem, and academic disengagement. As such, language learners occupy a unique risk space, where bullying not only threatens their mental health but also obstructs their educational attainment and classroom participation (Tambawal & Rukayya, 2017).

In Nigeria, the issue of school bullying has garnered increasing scholarly and policy attention. Studies have shown that up to 65% of secondary school students have experienced one form of bullying or another, and the psychological and academic effects are often severe (Dadson, 2020). Despite growing awareness, bullying among language learners remains under-researched, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas like the Imo East Senatorial District, where ethnic diversity and linguistic differences can intensify students' vulnerability.

Statement of the Problem

While various studies have explored the effects of bullying on general student populations, limited research specifically investigates the intersection between bullying and the academic experiences of language learners. In the Imo East Senatorial District of Imo State, a linguistically diverse region with multiple dialects and ethnic groups, language learners in senior secondary schools often struggle with social hostility stemming from linguistic differences.

This research seeks to fill this critical gap by examining the specific ways bullying impacts the psychological well-being, classroom engagement, and academic performance of these students. Without focused intervention, the sustained victimisation of language learners could lead to long-term emotional distress, truancy, and eventual academic failure (Smiley et al., 2021; Oluwamumibori et al., 2022).

Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to assess the impact of bullying on the well-being and academic performance of language learners in Imo East Senatorial District, Imo State. The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the influence of bullying on the psychological and emotional well-being of language learners in secondary schools.
2. Investigate the effect of bullying on students' willingness to participate in classroom language activities.
3. Assess the relationship between experiences of bullying and the academic engagement and attendance of language learners.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How does bullying affect the psychological and emotional well-being of language learners in secondary schools?

2. In what ways does bullying influence classroom participation and communication confidence among language learners?
3. What is the relationship between bullying experiences and the academic engagement or attendance levels of language learners?

Hypotheses

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses were tested:

H₀₁: There is no significant relationship between bullying and the psychological and emotional well-being of language learners.

H₀₂: Bullying has no significant effect on classroom participation and communication confidence among language learners.

H₀₃: There is no significant relationship between experiences of bullying and the academic engagement or attendance of language learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Bullying

Bullying is broadly defined as repeated aggressive behavior involving an imbalance of power, where the victim is subjected to intentional harm physically, verbally, or psychologically by one or more individuals (Chika, 2024). Within school environments, bullying manifests in multiple forms: verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling, insults), physical bullying (e.g., hitting, pushing), relational bullying (e.g., exclusion, rumour-spreading), and cyberbullying (e.g., online harassment via social media or messaging platforms). These behaviors are often motivated by perceived differences and target students based on race, socioeconomic status, religion, gender identity, or language ability (Emeri & Olabiyi, 2022).

In Nigerian secondary schools, bullying remains a pressing concern. A national survey by Okafor (2021) found that over 60% of students reported experiencing at least one form of bullying, with verbal and relational bullying being the most common. Bullying not only affects students' academic lives but also contributes to long-term behavioral and emotional issues, undermining their ability to thrive in a structured learning environment.

Language Learning and Vulnerability to Bullying

Language learners, including students who are learning or using a second language (L2) as the medium of instruction, are particularly vulnerable to bullying. Their linguistic differences, such as unfamiliar accents, pronunciation errors, or code-switching behaviors, make them easy targets for peer mockery or marginalization (Anoliefo et al., 2025). In multilingual societies like Nigeria, where ethnic and dialectal distinctions are prominent, students whose mother tongue differs from the dominant classroom language are more likely to be bullied or excluded.

Research by Fauzan & Sulaeman (2024) found that immigrant and dialect-minority students in language-rich environments are more likely to be victims of school-based harassment. Similarly, Anoliefo et al. (2025) reported that secondary school students in South-East Nigeria who struggled with English language proficiency often faced classroom ridicule, resulting in poor academic self-concept and avoidance behavior.

The marginalization of language learners is further compounded by institutional neglect, where teachers may unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes through labeling or public correction of mistakes, creating hostile learning atmospheres (Fareo & Habila, 2018).

Psychological and Emotional Impacts of Bullying

Bullying significantly undermines the mental health of victims. Numerous studies have linked school bullying with psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and emotional dysregulation (Kyere et al., 2017). These effects are particularly pronounced among adolescents, whose developmental stage renders them more susceptible to peer perceptions and social validation.

In a Nigerian context, Afolabi & Animashaun (2023) conducted a cross-sectional study across 12 secondary schools and found that bullied students had significantly higher scores for depressive symptoms and school avoidance behaviors. Similarly, Tiauzon & Malquist (2019) reported that bullying had a moderate-to-strong negative correlation with students' perceived emotional safety, particularly among female students and linguistic minorities.

Language learners experience amplified psychological challenges, as their perceived incompetence or difference is frequently used as a tool of humiliation. The internalization of negative peer feedback can lead to communication apprehension, fear of participation, and generalized anxiety disorders (Asakil, 2025).

Bullying and Classroom Participation

One of the most immediate effects of bullying on language learners is the reduction in classroom participation. The Affective Filter Hypothesis, proposed by Krashen, suggests that emotional variables, such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation, significantly impact language acquisition. A hostile classroom environment, where students fear ridicule, raises their affective filter and blocks meaningful input (Emeri & Olabiyi, 2022).

In addition, communication apprehension theory posits that learners who experience anxiety related to speaking are more likely to withdraw from classroom interactions. According to Kimanzi et al. (2015), bullied language learners often develop chronic speech anxiety and classroom mutism due to the fear of negative evaluation.

Moreover, Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that behavior is learned through observation and imitation. Suppose language learners observe peers being bullied for attempting

to speak a second language. In that case, they may choose silence as a protective strategy, which can further reduce participation and slow language development (Dadson, 2020).

Bullying and Academic Engagement

Beyond emotional well-being, bullying has also been strongly correlated with reduced academic engagement. Victims of bullying often exhibit declining grades, frequent absenteeism, and diminished interest in school activities. According to Asakil (2025), students who experienced repeated bullying had significantly lower academic performance and were more likely to drop out before completing senior secondary school.

A study by Okeke et al. (2024) in urban Nigerian schools found that bullied students had reduced class attendance and lower cumulative scores in language subjects. The researchers concluded that emotional distress interfered with cognitive processing and academic persistence. Furthermore, disengaged language learners are more likely to fall into a cycle of poor performance and further bullying, leading to systemic exclusion and underachievement (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Institutional responses also mediate the link between bullying and poor academic engagement. Schools that lack effective anti-bullying policies or that normalize aggression through peer hierarchies tend to record lower student morale and higher dropout rates, especially among vulnerable student groups (Uche & Ngwu, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Bronfenbrenner's model posits that a child's development is shaped by interactions within nested systems, the microsystem (peers, teachers), mesosystem (school culture), exosystem (education policies), and macrosystem (societal attitudes). Bullying, as a behavioral outcome, is influenced by and in turn reshapes these systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2013). Language learners operate within these overlapping systems and are often at the intersection of personal vulnerability and institutional neglect.

Bandura's Social Learning Theory, meanwhile, emphasizes that students model behaviors they observe in others, especially if those behaviors are reinforced. In schools where bullying is not actively discouraged, students may learn to bully as a means of gaining social dominance. Victims, especially language learners, may internalize passive or avoidant behaviors that hinder learning and development (Bandura & Hall, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, which is suitable for investigating existing conditions, attitudes, and perceptions within a defined population without manipulating any variables. The choice of this design was informed by the study's aim to assess the impact of bullying on the well-being and academic performance of language learners in their natural school

environments. Descriptive survey designs are effective for gathering quantitative data from a large sample and for establishing statistical relationships between variables (Siedlecki, 2020).

The target population for this study comprised all senior secondary school students (SS1 to SS3) enrolled in public secondary schools across the Imo East Senatorial District of Imo State, Nigeria. This senatorial district includes nine Local Government Areas (LGAs), characterized by linguistic diversity and varied socio-cultural dynamics that can influence bullying behavior and educational outcomes.

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, five LGAs were randomly selected from the nine LGAs in the district using a simple random sampling method. In the second stage, one public secondary school was randomly selected from each of the five LGAs. In the final stage, 100 students were randomly chosen from each of the five selected schools, ensuring representation across SS1, SS2, and SS3 classes. The sampling strategy was designed to ensure geographic spread, diversity of experience, and statistical reliability of findings.

A total of 500 students constituted the sample size for this study. The sample was evenly distributed across the five schools, with each school contributing 100 respondents. This number was deemed sufficient to enable meaningful analysis while balancing time and resource constraints. The large sample enhances the external validity of the findings and reflects the demographic diversity within the Imo East Senatorial District (Tamayo et al., 2020).

The main instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled: “The Impact of Bullying on the Well-being and Academic Performance of Language Learners in Imo East Senatorial District, Imo State”.

The questionnaire was closed-ended and organized into four sections:

Section A: Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, class level, LGA)

Section B: Bullying experiences (e.g., type, frequency, location)

Section C: Psychological and emotional well-being indicators (e.g., anxiety, fear, self-esteem)

Section D: Academic participation and engagement (e.g., attendance, participation, performance)

Items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), allowing for consistent quantification of perceptions and attitudes.

Content validity of the questionnaire was established through expert review. Specialists in educational psychology, language education, and psychometrics from two Nigerian universities assessed the instrument for relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Minor adjustments were made based on their feedback to align the items with the study objectives.

To ensure reliability, a pilot test of the instrument was conducted using 30 students from a secondary school outside the selected sample. The reliability coefficient was determined using Cronbach's Alpha, and the instrument yielded a value of 0.83, indicating a high level of internal consistency and reliability (Taber, 2018).

Permission was obtained from school principals and education authorities prior to data collection. The researchers visited each of the selected schools and administered the questionnaires directly to the students during regular school hours. Participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality, and informed of their right to withdraw at any point. Questionnaires were retrieved on the same day to maximize response rate and completeness. The entire data collection process spanned three weeks, ensuring minimal disruption to academic activities.

Data collected were systematically coded and analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 25. The analysis involved:

Descriptive statistics (frequency counts, means, and standard deviations) to summarize demographic data and general response trends.

Pearson Product-Moment Correlation to determine the strength and direction of relationships between bullying and the dependent variables: well-being, participation, and academic engagement.

Linear regression analysis to assess the predictive impact of bullying on each dependent variable, thereby testing the hypotheses.

RESULTS

Relationship Between Bullying and Psychological Well-being

To test **Hypothesis 1 (H_{01})**, a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation analysis was performed to assess the relationship between students' experiences of bullying and their psychological and emotional well-being.

Table 1: Correlation Between Bullying and Psychological Well-being

Variables	Mean (M)	SD	Pearson r	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% CI for r	p-value
Bullying Score	3.78	0.84				
Psychological Well-being	2.43	0.71	-0.58	< .001	[-0.63, -0.52]	<0.05

The result shows a moderate negative correlation between bullying and psychological well-being ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.05$). This implies that as experiences of bullying increase, the psychological and emotional well-being of language learners significantly declines. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is rejected, confirming a statistically significant relationship between bullying and well-being.

Effect of Bullying on Classroom Participation

To address Hypothesis 2 (H_{02}), a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effect of bullying on students' classroom participation and communication confidence.

Table 2: Regression Analysis: Bullying as a Predictor of Classroom Participation

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients (B)	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients (β)	t	Sig. (p)	R ²	F (df = 1, 498)	p-value
(Constant)	4.92	0.18	–	27.33	< .001			
Bullying Score	-0.67	0.07	-0.44	-10.42	< .001	0.19	108.59	<0.05

$R^2 = 0.19$, $F(1, 498) = 108.59$, $p < 0.05$

The result shows that bullying significantly predicts a reduction in classroom participation ($\beta = -0.44$, $p < 0.05$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2 = 0.19$) indicates that approximately 19% of the variance in classroom participation can be explained by bullying. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is rejected, affirming that bullying has a significant negative effect on classroom engagement.

Relationship Between Bullying and Academic Engagement

To test Hypothesis 3 (H_{03}), another Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between bullying experiences and students' academic engagement and attendance levels.

Table 3: Correlation Between Bullying and Academic Engagement

Variables	Mean (M)	SD	Pearson r	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% CI for r	p-value
Bullying Score	3.78	0.84				
Academic Engagement	2.21	0.69	-0.61	< .001	[-0.66, -0.55]	<0.05

The analysis revealed a strong negative correlation between bullying and academic engagement ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that increased experiences of bullying are associated with lower academic engagement and reduced attendance. Consequently, Hypothesis 3 is rejected, confirming a statistically significant relationship between bullying and academic disengagement.

Summary of Findings

The results provide robust evidence supporting the study's assumptions:

1. Bullying significantly correlates with reduced psychological well-being.
2. It negatively affects students' classroom participation and communication confidence.
3. It is strongly associated with lower academic engagement and attendance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study revealed a moderate negative correlation ($r = -0.58$, $p < 0.05$) between bullying and psychological well-being. This finding is consistent with global and local literature emphasizing the emotional toll bullying takes on adolescents. Uche & Ngwu (2016) noted that students who experience bullying are at greater risk of developing anxiety, depression, and feelings of social isolation. Within the Nigerian context, Afolabi & Animashaun (2023) reported that repeated exposure to verbal and relational bullying leads to heightened emotional distress and lower self-worth among victims.

The results further confirm the unique susceptibility of language learners, who often contend with communication anxieties in addition to academic stress. This dual burden renders them more emotionally fragile, particularly when they are subjected to ridicule over their speech patterns or comprehension errors (Asakil, 2025). Therefore, the decline in psychological well-being among bullied language learners in Imo East Senatorial District can be interpreted as an intersectional outcome of both linguistic vulnerability and peer aggression.

The study's regression analysis showed that bullying had a significant negative effect on classroom participation ($\beta = -0.44$, $p < 0.05$). This outcome aligns with Kimanzi et al.'s (2015) research on communication apprehension, which established that learners exposed to frequent ridicule tend to withdraw from classroom discourse to avoid embarrassment. Language learners, in particular, are at higher risk of communicative silence, especially when their efforts are met with mockery or social exclusion.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (as cited by Emeri & Olabiyi, 2022) provides a theoretical explanation for this finding. In emotionally unsafe environments, learners' affective filters are elevated, impeding the acquisition and use of new language input. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura & Hall, 2018) further supports this, suggesting that students who observe peers being punished—socially or physically—for linguistic errors may learn to self-censor or disengage entirely to avoid similar consequences.

An unexpected outcome, however, was the relatively high percentage (19%) of variance in classroom participation explained solely by bullying. This underscores bullying as a core factor in academic disengagement, even more so than previously theorized in general education literature, which often considers factors like curriculum difficulty or home background.

The study found a strong inverse relationship ($r = -0.61$, $p < 0.05$) between bullying and academic engagement, indicating that students exposed to bullying are significantly less likely to attend school regularly or maintain consistent academic interest. This aligns with findings by Okeke et al. (2024), who documented increased truancy and declining academic performance among bullied students in Lagos and Abuja secondary schools. Globally, Fauzan and Sulaeman (2024) also

reported that victims of school bullying show reduced intrinsic motivation, heightened dropout rates, and emotional detachment from school activities.

For language learners, this disengagement is compounded by the feeling of being unwelcome or misunderstood in the classroom, which can transform school from a site of opportunity to a space of threat. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2013) helps frame this in terms of systemic interaction—where negative microsystem interactions (e.g., peer bullying) reverberate through the mesosystem (e.g., poor teacher response), leading to macro-level consequences like academic failure.

Language learners represent a uniquely vulnerable subgroup because their core challenge—developing communicative competence—is publicly observable and prone to critique. In linguistically heterogeneous settings, such as Imo East, where English is often the second language and dialectal variations are prominent, linguistic performance becomes a social marker. Students who speak with a non-dominant accent, make frequent speech errors, or rely on code-switching are more easily identified and stigmatized (Ibrahim et al., 2024).

Additionally, the intersection of language learning with adolescence—a developmental stage marked by identity formation and peer comparison—further intensifies vulnerability. Victims may internalize bullying experiences, leading to long-term psychological harm and chronic academic underachievement (Ibrahim et al., 2024). In such contexts, the school becomes a barrier to expression rather than a facilitator of learning.

The study's results align strongly with both Bandura's Social Learning Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Bandura's theory suggests that bullying behavior is modeled, reinforced, and perpetuated through social cues. If students witness that aggressive behavior goes unchecked, they are more likely to imitate it. This perpetuates a culture of silence and avoidance among vulnerable learners, especially those with language deficits.

Bronfenbrenner's framework explains how bullying is not merely a peer-level issue but one influenced by multiple environmental systems. For instance, a lack of school policies against bullying (exosystem), negative teacher reinforcement (mesosystem), and societal attitudes towards minority dialects (macrosystem) all interact to compound the experience of bullying for language learners. The data clearly support this systemic view of how language learners are simultaneously shaped and constrained by the socio-educational ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of bullying on the well-being and academic performance of language learners in the Imo East Senatorial District, Imo State. Through a descriptive survey of 500 senior secondary school students across five Local Government Areas, it was found that bullying significantly undermines learners' psychological well-being, diminishes classroom participation, and strongly correlates with reduced academic engagement and attendance.

The statistical analyses revealed a moderate to strong negative relationship between bullying and the core academic and emotional experiences of language learners. Psychological well-being was notably affected, suggesting that emotional safety is a precondition for effective language acquisition. Classroom participation declined among students who were bullied, especially those fearful of making linguistic mistakes in public. Furthermore, the study found that bullying was a strong predictor of disengagement from school activities, thereby heightening the risk of academic failure.

These findings reaffirm the urgent need to address bullying, particularly as it affects marginalized student groups like language learners. In multilingual societies, where linguistic differences often intersect with social stigmas, it is crucial to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. Tackling bullying is not only a moral obligation but also a critical educational strategy for safeguarding the academic trajectories and mental health of vulnerable students.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. School authorities across Imo State and Nigeria at large should implement clear, enforceable anti-bullying policies. These policies should explicitly address verbal, relational, and psychological bullying, with specific provisions for protecting linguistically diverse students.
2. Trained school counselors should be deployed to provide psychological support to students experiencing bullying. Counseling should be proactive, confidential, and tailored to help language learners build resilience, self-confidence, and coping skills.
3. Teachers should foster an atmosphere of acceptance and patience toward students who struggle with language proficiency. Encouraging respectful peer interactions, positive reinforcement, and error-tolerant teaching practices can greatly reduce anxiety and boost participation.
4. Educators should receive regular training on how to identify signs of bullying, especially those that are subtle or relational, and how to intervene appropriately. Teachers must also be sensitized to avoid reinforcing bullying through classroom language or disciplinary practices.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study was limited to five Local Government Areas within Imo East Senatorial District. As such, the findings may not fully capture the experiences of students across all nine LGAs or reflect conditions in other senatorial districts of Imo State or other parts of Nigeria. The study also relied solely on quantitative survey data, which may not provide rich insights into the subjective experiences and coping strategies of language learners.

Future research should consider expanding the sample to include all LGAs within Imo State and adopt a mixed-method or purely qualitative approach to explore students' lived experiences with bullying. In-depth interviews, focus groups, and case studies could reveal nuanced insights into how language learners internalize, navigate, or resist bullying. Additionally, longitudinal studies

could investigate the long-term academic and psychological effects of bullying on language learners.

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