

Peer group dynamics and students' academic performance in English Language in Rivers State

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Abstract- This study investigated the relationship between peer group dynamics and students' academic performance in English Language in Rivers State. The correlational research design was used to carry out the study. The population of this study consisted of 57,669 SS II students from 353 public senior secondary schools spread across the 23 local government areas of Rivers State. The sample of the study consisted of 397 SS II students from the three Senatorial Districts of Rivers State. The multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting the participants for this study. Peer Group Dynamic Scale (PGDS) and English Performance Test (EPT) were used to collect the required data. Validity of PGDS and EPT were ascertained by experts from the field of Psychology and English Language. The pilot testing approach was used to determine the reliability coefficient of the instruments. Cronbach's Alpha test was used to analyse the data, PGDS recorded a coefficient of 0.80, comprising Gang Group Scale (GGS) = 0.74 and Clique Membership Scale (CMS) = 0.85. The research questions were addressed, and the corresponding hypotheses were tested using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient at a 0.05 level of significance. The findings showed that gang group affiliation had no significant association with students' academic performance in English Language, whereas clique membership demonstrated a significant association with students' academic performance in the subject. The recommendations were that; school administrators should develop programmes that discourage student involvement in gang groups while promoting positive peer group interactions through mentorship and supervised extracurricular activities, among others.

Keywords: Peer Group, Gang Group, Clique, Academic Performance, English Language

I. INTRODUCTION

English Language (EL) serves as the official language and the primary medium of instruction across Nigeria's educational system, including senior secondary schools (SSS) where it is central to both

communication and academic progression. Outside of Mathematics, EL is a compulsory subject in schools at all levels. Aina and Olanipekun (2023) described EL as a very important tool for communication, social interaction, and academic success. Proficiency in English is essential for understanding curriculum content, completing examinations, and accessing opportunities in tertiary education and the labour market (Adekola et al., 2015). Given its status, students' performance in EL not only reflects individual achievement but also has broader implications for educational standards and human capital development in contexts such as Rivers State. Empirical evidence suggests mixed outcomes regarding student performance in English across Nigeria. Out of the nearly two million candidates who took the 2025 West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE), only 38.32% obtained a minimum of five credits, including English Language and Mathematics. This indicates a significant drop in performance in core subjects (West African Examinations Council, 2025). Although the Council later revised the figure to 62.96% after correcting grading errors in English and other subjects, the initial low pass rate underscores ongoing concerns about learning outcomes in essential subjects such as EL (Abubakar, 2025). These statistics indicate that a substantial proportion of Nigerian secondary school students continue to struggle with English, highlighting the need to examine non-instructional influences such as peer group dynamics on students' academic achievement (Adeniyi et al., 2015; Adeniyi, & Jinadu, 2021; Lanre-Babalola et al., 2024).

Peer groups play a critical role in adolescent development and academic outcomes. Peer group refers to social clusters of individuals of similar age or status whose shared behaviours and norms can

significantly shape attitudes and actions (Steinberg, 2015). Within peer group dynamics, cliques small, often exclusive subgroups and gang affiliations represent distinct forms of social alignment in school settings, each potentially influencing study habits, motivation, and school engagement (Brewer, 2014; Baumeister & Leary, 2015; Sial et al., 2019). For example, positive peer influence might encourage collaborative learning and participation, whereas association with gangs that prioritise non-academic activities could detract from students' commitment to academic tasks and undermine classroom performance.

Theoretically, this study is anchored in social learning perspectives that posit behaviour and attitudes are acquired through observation and interaction within social contexts (Bandura, 1965). Peer groups serve as influential social systems where norms are modelled and reinforced, impacting individual academic behaviour and outcomes. Despite substantial research on educational predictors, limited studies in Rivers State have specifically examined how different dimensions of peer group affiliation relate to senior secondary students' performance in EL (Hawley et al., 2016; Cialdini et al., 2017; Glaeser et al., 2020). Given the socio-cultural diversity and educational opportunities in the region, understanding these relationships is timely for informing targeted interventions that support positive peer influences and educational achievement.

Statement of the Problem

The performance of students in EL at the senior secondary school level has continued to generate concern among educators, parents, and policymakers because of its central role in academic success and future educational advancement. Despite the compulsory status of EL and its function as the medium of instruction, many students demonstrate weak proficiency, reflected in poor comprehension, limited expressive skills, and unsatisfactory examination outcomes. This situation raises serious questions about the non-instructional factors influencing students' learning, particularly during adolescence when social relationships increasingly

shape behaviour, attitudes, and academic engagement.

In Rivers State, peer group dynamics constitute a significant social and environmental influence that may either support or undermine academic performance (ACP). Gang group affiliation exposes students to behaviours that may conflict with school norms, such as truancy, disinterest in academic tasks, and resistance to authority, thereby threatening effective teaching and learning. Similarly, clique membership, though sometimes subtle, can foster conformity pressures that discourage academic effort, isolate students from broader learning interactions, and reinforce attitudes that devalue scholastic achievement. These peer-related challenges are further compounded by urbanization, socio-economic disparities, and community influences prevalent in many parts of Rivers State, making schools vulnerable spaces where negative peer influences can easily thrive if unchecked.

This study was therefore necessitated by the need to empirically examine peer group dynamics as critical correlates of students' ACP in EL within the Rivers State context. By focusing specifically on gang group affiliation and clique membership, the study seeks to isolate key dimensions of peer influence that are most relevant to adolescents' school experiences. The outcome of this study are expected to establish evidence-based insights that can guide teachers, school administrators, and counsellors in developing strategies to manage peer group influences, promote positive social interactions, and enhance students' ACP in EL.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study was to investigate the association between peer group dynamics and ACP in EL in SSS students in Rivers State. Specifically, the objectives were to:

1. examine the association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State.
2. assess the association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State.

Research Question

1. What is the association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State?
2. What is the association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State?

Hypotheses

The hypotheses that guided the study and tested at the 0.05 alpha level included:

1. There is no noteworthy association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State.
2. There is no noteworthy association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a correlational research design to look at the association between peer group variables, specifically gang group and clique affiliations, and students' ACP in EL. This design was appropriate for establishing the degree of association between the variables (IV & DV) without manipulating them.

The population consisted of 57,669 SS II students from 353 public SSS spread across the 23 LGAs. The population comprised 34,183 female and 23,486 male in Rivers State (Source: RSSSS Board, 2022/2023).

A sample of 397 SS II students was selected from selected schools that were drawn from the three senatorial zones of the State. The sample size was derived from the Taro Yemen Sample determination formula. The selection of the sample was done using a multi-stage sampling technique involving census selection of senatorial districts, random selection of Local Government Areas and schools, and simple random sampling of students, ensuring broad representation across the state.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and an English Performance Test. The questionnaire, titled Peer Group Dynamic Scale (PGDS), measured peer group variables using a four-point Likert scale, while ACP was assessed with a 20-item multiple-

choice English Performance Test titled English Performance Test (EPT), based on the SS II syllabus. The instruments were validated by experts in measurement, evaluation, and EL education to establish face and content validity. Reliability was determined using the test-retest method. PGDS recorded a coefficient of 0.80, comprising Gang Group Scale (GGS) = 0.74 and Clique Membership Scale (CMS) = 0.85 through Cronbach Alpha Statistics. The English Performance Test yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.886 using the Kuder-Richardson method.

The instruments were administered with the support of trained research assistants after obtaining approval from school authorities. All questionnaires and tests were properly administered and retrieved, resulting in a 100 percent response rate. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 26, and Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to answer and test the research questions and hypotheses respectively at the 0.05 level of significance.

III. RESULTS

Research Question 1: What is the association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL?

Hypothesis 1: There is no noteworthy association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL.

Table 1: PPMC analysis of the association between gang group affiliation and students' ACP in EL

		Correlations	
		Gang	Academic Perf.
Gang	Pearson Correlation	1	0.09
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.08
	n	397	397
Academic Perf.	Pearson Correlation	0.09	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.08	
	n	397	397

Analysis result of research question one as revealed in, Table 1 shows the extent to which gang group correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. This result implies that the extent to which gang group correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State is very weak since the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.09$) is within the range of $r \geq \pm 0.01$ to ± 0.19 .

In testing null hypothesis one, Table 1 shows the correlation between gang group and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. The result revealed that there is a very weak, and no significant correlation ($r = 0.09$, $r \geq \pm 0.01$ to ± 0.19) between gang group and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State, with a p -value = $0.08 > 0.05$, leading to the acceptance of the first null hypothesis at the 0.05 alpha level.

Research Question 2: What is the association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL?

Hypothesis 2: There is no noteworthy association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL.

Table 2: PPMC analysis of the association between clique membership and students' ACP in EL

Correlations		Clique	Academic Perf.
Clique	Pearson Correlation	1	0.86**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00
	n	397	397
Academic Perf.	Pearson Correlation	0.86**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.00	
	n	397	397

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Analysis result of research question two as revealed in Table 2 shows the extent to which clique correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. This result implies that the extent to which clique correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State is very strong since the correlation coefficient ($r = 0.86$) is within the range of $r \geq \pm 0.80$ to ± 1.00 .

In testing null hypothesis two, Table 2 shows the correlation between clique and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. The result revealed that there is a very strong and significant correlation ($r = 0.86$, $r \geq \pm 0.80$ to ± 1.00) between clique and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State, with a p -value = $0.00 < 0.05$, leading to the acceptance of the second null hypothesis at the 0.05 alpha level.

IV. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The result in Table 1 revealed that the extent to which gang group correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State is very weak. Additionally, the result of hypothesis one revealed that there is a very weak and no significant correlation between gang group and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. The findings of this study are corroborated by the study by Sial et al. (2022) reported that affiliation with friends' gangs did not show a meaningful link with students' academic achievement, although their findings indicated a higher prevalence of gang involvement among students in urban settings compared to those in rural areas. Similarly, Ogunsanwo (2020) observed that various social factors play a substantial role in distinguishing adolescents' levels of psychological well-being. Apeh and Nteh (2020) also reported that students receive varying forms of support from parents, teachers, classmates, and peers, while gang affiliation exerts a notable influence on academic performance. Their findings underscore the importance of a nurturing home environment in which strong interpersonal bonds, sound parenting practices, open channels of communication, and the modeling of positive behaviours foster adolescents' healthy psychological development.

The result in Table 2 shows that the extent to which clique correlates students' ACP in EL in Rivers State is very strong. The result of hypothesis two indicated that there is a very strong and significant correlation between clique and students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. These results align with those of earlier empirical studies. Filade et al. (2019) observed that membership in cliques has a substantial effect on the academic performance of undergraduate students, indicating a strong relationship between clique involvement and learning outcomes. In a similar vein,

Temitope and Ogunsakin (2015) established that affiliation with cliques significantly influences the academic performance of secondary school students. Ekiugbo (2020) further demonstrated that cliques especially peer acceptance groups are integral to the teaching and learning process, as they contribute to enhanced academic achievement and more effective classroom interaction. The study also emphasized the positive role of parental support in improving students' performance in tests and examinations.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that peer group dynamics exert differential effects on students' ACP in EL in Rivers State. While gang group affiliation showed a very weak and non-significant association with ACP, suggesting that mere association with gangs may not directly impair students' English achievement, clique membership demonstrated a very strong and significant correlation with performance outcomes. This implies that closer, more cohesive peer associations such as cliques have a greater capacity to influence students' academic behaviours, attitudes, and learning engagement, either positively or negatively. Therefore, the study concluded that although gang affiliation may not be a critical determinant of EL performance, clique associations constitute a significant peer influence that should be carefully managed within school contexts to promote effective teaching, learning, and improved academic achievement.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. School administrators should develop programmes that discourage student involvement in gang groups while promoting positive peer group interactions through mentorship and supervised extracurricular activities.
2. Parents and guardians should encourage and monitor their children's peer interactions, fostering productive friendships and study groups that enhance ACP.

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