

Contrastive Analysis of Adjectives in English and Esan Noun Phrases: Implications for Esan Learners of English as a Second Language in Nigeria

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This study presents a contrastive analysis of adjective use in English and Esan noun phrases, examining its implications for Esan learners of English as a second language in both urban and rural areas of Edo State, Nigeria. Guided by two research questions and two null hypotheses, the study emphasises key concepts in contrastive analysis, second language acquisition, noun phrases, and adjectives. Drawing on Lado's theory of contrastive analysis (1957), the analysis yields observable predictions that underpin the proposed test items. A descriptive survey design was adopted, drawing on a population of 80 public senior secondary schools and 4,435 SS2 students in Esan land, Edo State. A sample of 24 public senior secondary schools and 351 SS2 students was selected through a multistage sampling technique. The five local government areas in Esan land, along with a sample of 351 SS2 students, were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using the “Test of Use of Adjectives in the Noun Phrases of English (TUANPE)”, developed for this study. Reliability was assessed using the t-test method and Pearson product-moment correlation, yielding a reliability index of 0.68. The research questions were addressed using mean percentage scores and standard deviation, while an independent t-test was used to test the null hypotheses at a 0.05 alpha level. The findings revealed a significant difference in the performance of Esan learners in using adjectives in English noun phrases between urban and rural areas. Structural differences in the noun phrases of both languages posed substantial learning difficulties, which were evident in students' performance. It is recommended that teachers enhance instructional strategies to address these differences.</i> Keywords: Contrastive analysis, Noun phrases, Second language acquisition, Relationship Between L1 and L2 Acquisition, Use of Adjectives in English and Esan, mother tongue interference, modifiers, Noun Phrase, Esan Learners of English, Rural and Urban Areas.
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Introduction

Language is a complex communication system used by humans, consisting of morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Chomsky and Fitch (2002) define language as a system that involves the development, acquisition, maintenance, and use of this communication system.

The English language, as a global lingua franca, plays a pivotal role in education, commerce, and international communication, particularly in multilingual contexts like Nigeria, where it serves as the official language and medium of instruction (Bamgbose, 1998). For speakers of indigenous languages, such as Esan, learning English as a second language (ESL) often presents challenges due to

linguistic differences between their first language (L1) and English (L2). These challenges are particularly pronounced in the acquisition of grammatical structures, such as adjectives, which modify nouns to convey specific attributes or qualities (Nwala & Obisike, 2014).

In the Esan language, a member of the Edoid language family spoken in Edo State, Nigeria, noun phrases exhibit unique structural and functional characteristics that differ from English, potentially leading to L1 interference in ESL learning (Ejele, 2004). Contrastive Analysis (CA), a linguistic approach that compares the structures of two languages to identify similarities and differences, has been

widely employed to predict and address learning difficulties in second language acquisition (Lado, 1957; Fries, 1945).

In English grammar, a phrase is an assemblage of two or more words that collaboratively convey meaning in a sentence or clause. It is a group of words that does not make complete sense (Murthy, 2007). Various types of phrases exist, including noun phrases (such as "a bad friend"), verb phrases (such as "would have driven"), adjective phrases (such as "very cold and dark"), adverb phrases (such as "too slowly"), and prepositional phrases (such as "in the first place"). While traditionally a phrase is understood to contain multiple words, modern schools of syntax may regard a single word as a phrase if it appears in a specific syntactic position, such as subject or object position (Lockwood, 2002). If the most important part of the phrase, that is, the head, is an adjective, the phrase is an Adjective phrase; if the most important part of the phrase is a noun, the phrase is a Noun phrase, and so on (Elly, 2002).

Noun phrases are a critical topic in both general linguistics and English linguistics. Discussions about their definitions, internal structures, syntactic functions, and semantic roles have been approached in various ways. These include the generative-transformative grammar approach, which emphasises form (Chomsky 1957; Thomas 2005), the functional approach (Millaku, Millaku, and Kafexholli 2022; Thomas 2005), and the systemic functional linguistics approach, which focuses on the ideational meta-function, particularly on experiential and logical structures (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). This study focuses on a contrastive analysis of the use of adjectives in English and Esan noun phrases, aiming to uncover the structural and functional disparities that may impede Esan learners' mastery of English adjective usage. Adjectives in English are versatile, appearing in attributive, predicative, and postpositive positions, and are subject to morphological changes through affixation and comparison (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). In contrast, Esan noun phrases often integrate descriptive elements, such as reduplication or distinct word order, to express similar meanings (Ejele, 2004). Such differences can result in errors, such as incorrect adjective placement or misuse of comparative forms, among Esan ESL learners. By examining these linguistic divergences, this research seeks to provide insights into the pedagogical challenges faced by Esan learners and proposes strategies to enhance English language teaching in Nigeria. The findings are expected to contribute to the broader discourse on second language acquisition and inform the development of culturally responsive teaching materials for Esan-speaking communities.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, English serves as a critical medium for education and socio-economic advancement, yet Esan-speaking learners of English as a second language frequently encounter difficulties in mastering noun phrase structures, particularly when modified by adjectives. These challenges stem from structural differences between English and Esan, especially in the formation and placement of adjectives within noun phrases. A noun in English can be pre-modified or post-modified by an adjective. Esan, on the other hand, can only be post-modified by an adjective. Thus, 'a *beautiful* woman' in English can have a direct translation in Esan as 'okhuo no mon ose' = *woman *beautiful*. The same applies when possessive adjectives are used. My house in Esan = 'uwa non sebhen' = *house my; and demonstrative adjective – that house = 'onuwa nin' = *the house that. The differences in modification and word order between the two languages may have led to the continuous poor sentence construction, which has inevitably resulted in the reported poor performance by students over the years, as noted by WASSCE Chief Examiners. For example, the Chief Examiner's report for May/June 2019 WASSCE summarised the performance of candidates in the English language as follows: "Grammatical/syntactic errors marred the quality of answers of almost all the candidates, thereby significantly diminishing their marks." The Chief Examiner recommended that "candidates should pay more attention to the study of grammar and structure of the English language." Preliminary observations suggest that Esan learners often transfer L1 syntactic patterns, such as adjective-noun order or reduplication, into English, leading to errors like incorrect adjective positioning or misuse of comparative and superlative forms. Despite the importance of adjectives in effective communication, limited research has explored the specific difficulties faced by Esan learners in this area. Without a systematic contrastive analysis of adjectives in English and Esan noun phrases, educators lack evidence-based strategies to address these challenges, potentially hindering Esan learners' proficiency in English.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to contrastively analyse the use of adjectives in English and Esan noun phrases to identify similarities and differences, and examine the implications of these differences for Esan learners of English as a second language in Nigeria. The study aims to provide insights that will inform pedagogical approaches and enhance English language teaching for Esan-speaking students. The specific objectives of the Study are to:

1. examine the difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas.

2. Determine whether or not the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives constitute learning difficulties as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Research Questions

1. What is the difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas?
2. Do the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives constitute learning difficulties, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at a 0.05 level of significance.

Ho₁. There is no significant difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas.

Ho₂. The structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers do not constitute learning difficulties, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Literature Review

The acquisition of English as a second language (ESL) in multilingual contexts, such as Nigeria, is a nuanced process shaped by the linguistic structures of learners' first languages (L1) (Bamgbose, 1998). For speakers of indigenous languages like Esan, which belongs to the Edoid language family spoken in Edo State, Nigeria, mastering English grammatical structures, especially adjectives, presents significant challenges due to the inherent structural differences between English and their L1 (Ejele, 2004). This literature review examines the theoretical and empirical foundations of contrastive analysis (CA), the role of adjectives in noun phrases in both English and Esan, L1 interference in ESL learning, and the pedagogical implications for Esan learners in Nigeria.

Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, proposed by Lado (1957) and later refined by Wardhaugh (1970), asserts that the differences between a native language (L1) and a target language (L2) can help predict potential areas of difficulty in second language acquisition. Contrastive analysis (CA)

is a research methodology used in linguistics to compare and contrast two or more languages. The primary goal of CA is to identify similarities and differences between languages, with a focus on the implications for language learning and teaching (James, 1980; Krzeszowski, 1990). Contrastive Analysis has been extensively utilised to investigate grammatical challenges in ESL contexts, particularly concerning African languages with unique syntactic properties (Nwala & Obisike, 2014).

For instance, studies focused on Nigerian languages, such as Igbo and Nkoro, have illustrated that discrepancies in word order and morphological structures contribute to errors in English usage (Oluikpe, 1977; Nwala & Obisike, 2014). These findings indicate that a contrastive analysis of English and Esan adjective structures could uncover specific difficulties faced by Esan learners. One of the key applications of CA is in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). CA can help researchers understand how learners' native language (L1) influences their acquisition of a target language (L2) (Odlin, 1989).

CA can also inform language teaching practices. By identifying areas of linguistic difference, teachers can develop targeted instructional materials and strategies to help learners overcome these differences (Ellis, 2008). For instance, a contrastive analysis of English and Esan might highlight differences in word order, which could inform the development of teaching materials that focus on sentence structure. Despite its potential benefits, CA has undergone various criticisms and revisions over the years. Some researchers have argued that CA is too narrow in focus, neglecting the social and contextual factors that influence language learning (Bley-Vroman, 1983; Kasper, 1992).

This study perfectly captures the essence of CA. By comparing and contrasting the use of adjectives in English and Esan noun phrases, it aims to identify similarities and differences that inform language teaching and learning practices. This study provided insights into the challenges faced by Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives to modify the noun phrase in both urban and rural areas, and informed strategies for improving language instruction and learning outcomes.

Noun Phrases

A noun phrase or nominal phrase is a phrase that has a noun (or indefinite pronoun) as its head or performs the same grammatical function as such a phrase (Crystal 1997).

Noun phrases are very common cross-linguistically, and they may be the most frequently occurring phrase type. According to Murthy (2007), a noun phrase is a group of words which does the work of a noun. He gave examples of noun phrases, including the following: early to bed, to win the race, teaching English, reading books, playing cricket,

and eating rice. When these phrases are turned into sentences, they will occupy the position of a noun; that is, occurring in the subject or object positions by coming before the verb or after the verb in the sentence, respectively. Murthy (2007) gave the following sentence examples with the noun phrases underlined: Early to bed is a good habit (NP in the subject position). Reading books gives us knowledge and pleasure (NP in the subject position). My friend likes playing cricket (NP in the object position). Bayo hates eating rice (NP in the object position). He has a strong desire to win the race (NP in the object position). Noun phrases often function as verb subjects and objects, as predicative expressions, and as the complements of prepositions. Noun phrases can be embedded inside each other; for instance, the noun phrase “some of his constituents” contains the shorter noun phrase: “his constituents”. A string of words that can be replaced by a single pronoun, without rendering the sentence grammatically unacceptable, is a noun phrase (Huddleston and Pullum, 2002)

Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition occurs in stages, as outlined by Stephen Krashen, who identifies five distinct phases: preproduction, early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency, and advanced fluency (ASCD, 2018; Haynes, 2007).

The first stage, known as preproduction, is often referred to as the silent period. During this phase, learners typically have a receptive vocabulary of up to 500 words but do not yet speak the second language (Haynes, 2007). It's important to note that not all learners experience a silent period; some may begin speaking immediately, although their output may largely consist of imitation rather than creative language use. Additionally, certain language courses may require learners to start speaking from the very beginning.

For those who experience a silent period, it usually lasts around three to six months (Ellis, 2008). The second stage of Krashen's language acquisition theory is early production. During this stage, learners can speak in short phrases or single words, and they can memorise chunks of language, although they may make mistakes in their usage. Typically, learners at this stage have both an active and a receptive vocabulary of about 1,000 words, and this stage normally lasts for approximately six months (Haynes, 2007).

The third stage is known as speech emergence. In this phase, learners' vocabularies expand to around 3,000 words, and they can communicate using simple questions and phrases. However, they may still make grammatical errors. The fourth stage is called intermediate fluency. At

this point, learners possess a vocabulary of about 6,000 words and can employ more complex sentence structures. They are also able to articulate their thoughts and opinions, although they may frequently make errors with these more intricate sentences.

The final stage is advanced fluency, which is typically reached between five and ten years of language learning. Learners at this stage can function at a level comparable to that of native speakers (Haynes, 2007). The time it takes to achieve a high level of proficiency can vary depending on the language being learned.

The Relationship Between L1 and L2 Acquisition

The concept of language acquisition, whether L1 or L2, is critical and is linked with this work. The relationship between first-language and second-language acquisition is one of the frameworks on which this study is anchored. Despite claims that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is still in its early stages (Brown, 1980), educators and linguists continue to propose and challenge theories about how additional languages are learned in relation to the first language. Leaver, Ehrman, and Shekhtman (2005) note that the language-learning experience varies depending on whether it involves the first language (L1), second language (L2), or third language (L3). However, it is often unclear which aspects of the acquisition process are innate and which are influenced by external factors.

Nemati and Taghizadeh (2013) argue that the characteristics and processes associated with the first language significantly influence how the second language is learned. Similarly, the research by Houmanfar, Hayes, and Herbst (2005) concludes that the history of the first language is a critical factor in the acquisition and maintenance of a second language. The prior knowledge of language mechanics and specific features of the L1 certainly plays a foundational role in learning other languages, even if not all aspects of the L1 are applicable in L2 production (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Language transfer issues arise not only in speech production but also in thought processes. Macaro (2001) observes that the choice of language for thinking can substantially impact L2 users' overall competence.

Mother Tongue Interference

The concept of interference is a psycho-linguistic concept that is a reality in language learning. Errors in second language learning are partly attributable to interference, which is a linguistic problem common to communities where second languages (usually the lingua franca) must be learnt (Onike, 2009).

According to Oboh (2025), while English allows adjectives to both pre-modify and post-modify nouns, Esan restricts

adjectives to post-modifying positions within noun phrases. This structural difference sometimes leads to mother tongue interference when Esan speakers learn English. Learners may erroneously apply the Esan adjective-noun order to English, resulting in constructions such as *oni imoto nonjian* "the car red" instead of the grammatically correct "the red car". This phenomenon aligns with the principles of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which suggests that differences between a learner's first language and the target language can lead to systematic errors (Lado, 1957). An example of mother tongue interference can be seen in the placement of adjectives, where negative syntactic transfer occurs from Esan to English. This negative interference happens when the syntactic rule of post-modification in Esan is incorrectly applied to English (Obboh, 2025).

Modifiers and the Noun Phrase

A modifier is an optional element in a phrase or clause structure. A modifier is so called because it is said to modify (change the meaning of) another element in the structure, on which it is dependent. Typically, the modifier can be removed without affecting the grammar of the sentence. For example, in the English sentence: This is a red ball; the adjective red is a modifier, modifying the noun ball. Removal of the modifier would leave: This is a ball, which is grammatically correct and equivalent in structure to the original sentence (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

In English, simple adjectives are typically used as pre-modifiers, although there are some exceptions. The position of an adjective after a noun can sometimes change the meaning. For example, "a responsible person" refers to someone dependable, while "the person responsible" indicates the individual who is accountable for something. Similarly, "the proper town" means the appropriate town, whereas "the town proper" refers to the area of the town as defined. (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002)

The two principal types of modifiers are adjectives and adverbs. It is not all adjectives and adverbs are necessarily modifiers; attributive adjectives are normally modifiers, but adjectives used predicatively are not modifiers. For example, in this sentence: 'That's an interesting idea'. The word interesting modifies the idea attributively. But in this other sentence: 'That idea is interesting', the word interesting is used predicatively. In grammar, an attributive is a word or phrase within a noun phrase that modifies the head noun, while a predicate is one of the two main parts of a sentence, which modifies the subject and usually starts with a verb. For example, in the sentence: My cats are fluffy; 'my cats' act as the subject in the sentence while the predicate is 'are fluffy.' A predicate is seen as a property that a subject has or is characterised by. A predicate is, therefore, an expression that can be true of something (Kroeger 2005).

The Use of Adjectives as Modifiers of the Noun Phrase in English and Esan

Positions of adjectives

When we want to give more information that cannot be provided by using a noun alone, we can add an adjective to identify a person or thing, or describe them in more detail:

- Her new dress = *ukon osogbon nonsole* = dress new hers (direct translation)
- A kind person = *oria ofuekee* = person kind
- A tall man = *okpia otalen* = man tall (Obboh, 2025)

Note: Most adjectives can appear before a noun as part of a noun phrase, placed after determiners or numbers if there are any, and immediately before the noun. Adjectives placed before a noun, as in the examples below, are generally referred to as occurring in the attributive position. In contrast, Esan adjectives are not used attributively as they come after the noun they modify.

- A beautiful girl = *omanbhen nobhonose* = girl beautiful
- Two black shirts = *ewuegbe eva ebhili* = shirts two black
- Three red cars = *imoto eah nejian* = car three red

Note: Most adjectives can also occur as complements of the verb *be* and other link verbs such as become, feel, or seem. Adjectives placed after the verb in this way are generally referred to as occurring in the predicative position:

- Her smile is beautiful. = *ojię non sole omoose* = laughter hers is beautiful
- Mary didn't seem happy. = *Mari bhadia bonoghongho* = Mary didn't seem happy
- He became a strong wrestler. *oidokioria nozeze nondan* = he became a strong wrestler. (Obboh, 2025)

Note: The English structures mentioned above have nearly equivalent forms in Esan due to the way adjectives are used predicatively.

When the information conveyed by an adjective is not the main focus of a statement, the adjective is typically positioned before the noun, known as the attributive position. Conversely, when the primary emphasis is on the information provided by the adjective, it is usually placed after the verb, referred to as the predicative position.

- He handed me a bucket of hot water. (Attributive position)

- I put my hand in the bucket; the water was very hot. (Predicative position, emphasising hot.)

Note: when more than one adjective is to be used before a noun in a noun phrase, they should come in the following order:

Order of Adjectives

- Opinion - as in lovely
- Size - as in big
- Age - as in old
- Shape - as in the triangle
- Colour – as in white
- Origin – as in Italian
- Material – as in wooden
- A beautiful, little and white bird = ukpomi afianbhen non bhon ose non fua = little bird that is beautiful and white = size, (2) (noun) opinion, (1) colour (5)

A big, old, wooden box = ududu ekpeti oran non domaen = big box wooden old = size, (2) (noun) material (7) age (3)

If more than one adjective occurs that expresses an opinion, or describes a general quality, then the adjective with a more general meaning, *nice, bad, fair*, usually precedes the one with a more specific meaning; *comfortable, clean, lazy, soft*, and so on.

A lovely soft basket = okhuae non bhenbhen non bhokho = basket lovely that is soft

- A good hard block = ibloku non zeze non bhen = block strong that is hard
- A wonderful clean city = agbesho ohan ilo non khaikhia = city wonderful that is clean

If two adjectives with similar meanings are used, the shorter one often comes first:

- A soft comfortable pillow = oke uhuonbhen non bhokho non fubhegbe = pillow soft that is comfortable (Obob, 2025)

A close observation reveals that adjectives almost always "post" modify nouns in Esan rather than pre-modifying them. Esan learners of English may find it easy to separate the adjective from the noun because they are distinct words.

Predictably, it may not be difficult for Esan learners of English to modify the noun with an adjective in a noun phrase.

Nouns can be used as adjectives to modify other nouns in noun phrases in Esan and English.

Two nouns are often used together to show that one thing is a part of something else, as in these examples:

- The village church = ono otue non bhi ukpomi ebho = the church village
- The car door = ono odimoto = the door car
- The kitchen window = oni wido ikishin = the window of kitchen
- The chair leg = ono oranbhen aga = the leg chair
- My coat pocket = ekpi ikotu non sebhen = pocket coat my
- London residents = ebho nebhi Londoni = people in London (Obob, 2025)

In the above examples, the first noun is the noun modifier. The first noun modifies the second in each of the phrases.

Note: We do not use a possessive form for these things. We do not talk about:

*the car's door *the kitchen's window *the chair's leg
*the coat's pocket

*the London's residence (Quirk et al, 1985).

Noun modifiers are used to show what something is made of, as in the following examples:

- A gold watch = agogo igodu = watch gold
 - A leather purse = ekpa ohian = bag leather
 - An iron box = ekpeti elonbhen = box iron
- There are noun modifiers used with nouns ending in -er as shown in the examples below.
- An office worker = onon wenan bho ofisi = worker in office
 - A box maker = onon lue ekpeti = maker of box
 - A potato peeler = ebare fene emannumen = peeler for potato (Obob, 2025)

Measurement, Age, or Value are used as Noun Modifiers as in:

A five-hour journey = okhian uwede bhu uria agogo

Nouns ending in -ing are used as Noun Modifiers:

- A driving school = isiku nan da gui moto = school for driving motor
- A swimming lesson = iman ebhin igu ede = lesson for swimming
- A walking holiday
- A grinding machine = imanshin non guebhin (Obob, 2025)

Two nouns could be used to modify another noun:

- London office workers = ene wenan bho ofisi Londoni = workers in office London
- Grammar practice exercises
- Motor Park attendants = ene gbẹ eloghe eja munimotoi = attendants in motor park

- The old newspaper seller
- A tiring fifty-kilometre journey

As observed from the foregoing, the first noun that occurs in the noun phrase modifies the second noun that comes after it in the English noun phrase structure. In other words, the first noun pre-modifies the second. In Esan, however, the second noun that is being modified, as in English, comes first in the Esan noun phrase structure. In other words, the modifying noun comes as a post-modifier.

Predictably, an Esan learner of English may find it challenging to use noun modifiers because, in their native language, the modifying noun comes after the noun it describes. Additionally, Esan adjectives also come after the nouns they modify, which can create further difficulties for Esan learners when adapting to English sentence structure.

The comparative and superlative use of Adjectives in English and Esan Noun Phrases

Every adjective has three degrees of comparison: positive, comparative and superlative degrees. The positive is the base form, and it is used to talk about the quality of a person, place or thing (e.g., tall = ɔtanlɛn, beautiful = ɔbhoose; poor = obogbe, rich = afe; wise = owaen). The comparative degree is used to compare two persons or things or their qualities (E.g. better = ɔbhenɛ (better than); heavier = ɔkhuanɛ (heavier than); taller = ɔtanɛ (taller than). The superlative adjective is used in comparing more than two persons or things or their qualities (e.g. tallest = ɔnɔntanerebhe (the tallest of all); heaviest = ɔnɔkhuanerebhe (the heaviest of all) (Murthy, 2007; Oboh, 2025). In English, comparative adjectives typically appear with 'than' (e.g., She is taller than her sister) or in equative structures like 'as (adjective) as' (e.g. He is as smart as she is) (Biber et al., 1999). Superlatives are preceded by 'the' (e.g., the tallest building) and can modify pronouns or nouns in complex phrases (e.g., the most talented artist in the group). Both forms function attributively (e.g., a taller man) or predicatively (e.g., The man seems taller). Advanced uses include correlative constructions (e.g., The more, the merrier) and idiomatic expressions (e.g., better late than never) (Quirk et al., 1985).

In Esan, the word 'than' is added to the comparative degree, while the definite article is added to the superlative form; just the same way it is in English. E.g. She is wiser than her mother. = ɔle owaenɔnɔnlen = She/he is wiser than the mother. Esan third-person singular and plural personal pronouns are not gender distinguishable; hence ɔle could represent 'he/she' which could only be deciphered in the context where a male or female is being discussed or referred to (Oboh, 2025).

Observation from the above analysis indicates that in both English and Esan, the comparative form of an adjective is used with the word 'than' to compare two persons, things, or their qualities; while the article 'the' is added to the

superlative form to compare more than two persons, things or their qualities. It is predictable, therefore, that Esan learners of English as a second language may not find it difficult to use the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives because of the similarity in their positioning in the noun phrase structures of both languages.

Comparative adjectives are formed in English by adding 'er' to one-syllable adjectives or two-syllable adjectives ending in -y, -le, or -ow (e.g., tall-taller, happy-happier) or by using more for multi-syllable adjectives (e.g., beautiful-more beautiful). 'Less' indicates a lower degree (e.g., less interesting) (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). The superlative degree is formed with the addition of -est for short adjectives (e.g., tall-tallest, happy-happiest) or *most* for longer ones (e.g., most beautiful). Least denotes the lowest degree (e.g., least expensive). Adjectives ending in consonant-vowel-consonant double the final consonant (e.g., big-bigger-biggest), those ending in -e drop it (e.g., nice-nicer-nicest), and those ending in -y change to -i (e.g., easy-easier-easiest). Multi-syllable adjectives like careful always use more/most. (Biber et al., 1999). Esan adjectives are basically formed by the addition of a descriptive /ɔ/ vowel at the initial position of the word, as in ɔtanlɛn = tall, ɔjan = red, ɔfua = white, ɔbhili = black, ɔtotolo = strong, ɔbhiale = wide, ɔkakale = difficult, ɔbhoose = beautiful, ɔkhua = heavy. It should be noted that many Esan words that are not adjectives also begin with the initial /ɔ/ vowel, but the ones that are used as adjectives almost always come after the nouns in predicative positions – a tall man = ɔkpia ɔtanlɛn = man that is tall, a strong person = ɔria ɔtotolo = person that is strong (Oboh, 2025).

A close observation shows that English regular comparative and superlative adjectives are formed by suffixation, while Esan adjectives have a descriptive /ɔ/ vowel at the initial position of the word. It is therefore predictable that Esan learners of English as a second language may find it difficult to form comparative and superlative adjectives by way of suffixation, as this is not applicable in their L1. Post-noun adjectives in Esan may cause word-order mistakes, such as 'man tall' instead of 'tall man' or 'man taller than John' (Ejele, 2003). Learners may also struggle with English's strict adjective order (e.g., 'red beautiful dress' instead of 'beautiful red dress') (Biber et al., 1999).

Irregular adjectives deviate from standard patterns, such as good-better-best, bad -worse-worst, and far-farther/further -farthest/furthest (Quirk et al., 1985). Elder/eldest apply to familial relations, while less/least are used for quantity comparisons (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002). Irregular adjectives are not distinguishable in Esan as it is in English, but words in this group in English could have a descriptive direct (E.g., bad = ɔkhɔlɔ, worse = ɔkhɔlɔne, worst = ɔnɔkakabɔkhɔlɔne = the worst; good = ɔbhen, better =

òḥḥẹṇẹ, ọṇòḥḥẹṇẹ = the best. All of the words have the descriptive /o/ vowel at the initial position like the other types earlier discussed.

Though Esan adjectives are mainly predicative in use, a word like ukpomiebhin = small thing can be used variously before the noun in Esan noun phrase structures as in the following examples: ukpomiokhan = small child, ukpomiaga = small chair, ukpomiomon = small baby, ukpomioria = small person (Obboh, 2025).

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study is the descriptive survey research design. Solaria (2012) notes that descriptive survey design concerns itself with the present phenomena in terms of conditions, practices, beliefs, processes, relationships, or trends, as it is devoted to gathering information about prevailing conditions or situations for description and interpretation. The descriptive research design is appropriate for this study as it enabled the researcher to sample Esan learners of the English language who are in SS2 and have acquired valuable experiences in the use of adjectives in noun phrases. The design also enabled the researcher to generalise the findings of the study by using the sampled Esan learners of the English language in SS2 to predict the population. The population of this study comprised 80 public senior secondary schools and 4,435 SS2 students across the five local government areas in Esan Land, Edo State.

The sample size for this study is made up of 351 SS2 students taken from 24 public senior secondary schools across the five local government areas in Esan Land. The sample size of 351 students was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table for determining sample sizes from a finite population.' Thus, a population size of 4,435 SS2 students elicits a sample size of 351 SS2 Students. The sampling procedure for this study is the multistage sampling technique, which is apt as it incorporates other sampling techniques. Firstly, the five local government areas in Esan land – Esan North East, Esan Central, Esan West, Esan South East, and Igueben- were purposively sampled because of the use of the Esan language in all the local government areas. Secondly, the simple random sampling technique was used to select the 24 sampled public senior secondary schools across the five local government areas in Esan land. This was to give every public senior secondary school an equal opportunity to be selected. The study utilised a sample size of 351 students from SS2, selected through a purposive sampling technique based on specific characteristics that aligned with the objectives of the research. Crossman (2020) supports this method, stating that purposive sampling is a non-probability technique that focuses on the relevant attributes of a population. Additionally, a proportionate sampling

technique was employed to distribute the sample across 24 public senior secondary schools in the five local governments of Esan land. This approach was designed to ensure a fair and even spread, as well as proper representation in the study.

The instrument developed for the study is called “Test of Use of Adjectives in the Noun Phrases of English (TUANPE). The TUANPE is made up of four sections (A, B, C & D). Section A covers the demographic data of secondary school students in terms of school location (urban, rural). Section B contains 10 question items on students' use of nouns as adjectives to modify other nouns; Section C contains 10 questions on students' use of adjectives of colour, and Section D contains 10 questions on students' use of comparative and superlative adjectives with the noun phrase structure of the English language. The questions asked in these sections invariably confirmed or rejected the hypothesis made in these areas. This article was peer-reviewed by experts in the field of English language education who validated the research instrument. The researcher was supported by three research assistants, who received instructions on how to administer the test instrument. The Esan learners of English were given the test, designed by the researcher, to assess their use of adjectives within noun phrase structures.

To analyse the data collected from the respondents, the researcher employed descriptive and statistical tools. Research questions were addressed using mean scores, standard deviation, and the item difficulty index. Thus, research question one was answered using mean percentage scores and standard deviation to establish the difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas. On the other hand, research question number two was answered using percentage analysis and interpreted based on the item difficulty analysis of values. To determine whether or not the mean size differentials between Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas were of significant effect, the researcher applied Cohen's (1988) Statistical power analysis to evaluate the mean differentials. According to Cohen (1988), the following effect sizes (mean percentage differences) can be considered as indicators of practical significance:

- i. Small effect size: 5-10% ($d = 0.2 - 0.3$)
- ii. Medium effect size: 10-20% ($d = 0.5$)
- iii. Large effect size: 20-30% or more.

To determine the item difficulty analysis of value and the decision as to whether an item is Easy/Good or moderate/fair, Ebel (1965) used the educational achievement measurement.

According to Ebel (1965), the minimum figures for a decision of easy/good and moderate/fair are: Easy/Good: $p\text{-value} \geq 0.80$, and moderate/fair: $p\text{-value}$ between 0.40 and 0.79. The null hypothesis was tested at a 0.05 level of significance using the t-test statistic (being a test of significant difference between two sets of measurements).

The decision rule for accepting or rejecting any null hypothesis was as follows: accept the null hypothesis when

the p-value is greater than 0.5 level of significance, and reject the null hypothesis when the p-value is less than 0.05 level of significance.

Analysis and Interpretation of Research

Question One: What is the difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English and Esan noun phrases in urban and rural areas?

Table 1: Analysis of Difference in the Performance of Esan Learners of English as a second language in the use of Adjectives as Modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas

Location of Esan learners of Eng. L2	N	Mean Score %)	Standard Deviation	mean Difference %
Urban	185	26.0	14.84	9.30
Rural	166	16.70	13.30	
Total	351			

The results in Table 1 show that the mean performance scores of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases were 26.0 and 16.70 for urban and rural areas, respectively. A mean performance difference of 9.30 was observed, which indicates that Esan learners of English as L2 in urban areas performed better than those in the rural areas in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases.

Question Two: Do the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives constitute learning difficulties, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas?

Table 2: Item Difficulty Analysis of Structural Differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers by Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Item number	Urban (n = 185) n	Urban (n = 185) p	Urban (n = 185) Decision	Rural (n = 166) n	Rural (n = 166) p	Rural (n = 166) Decision
11	173	.94	Easy/good	86	.52	moderate/fair
12	163	.88	Easy/good	100	.60	moderate/fair
13	151	.82	Easy/good	85	.51	moderate/fair
14	165	.89	Easy/good	87	.58	moderate/fair
15	153	.83	Easy/good	104	.63	moderate/fair
16	163	.88	Easy/good	96	.58	moderate/fair
17	157	.85	Easy/good	87	.52	moderate/fair
18	153	.83	Easy/good	85	.51	moderate/fair
19	165	.89	Easy/good	98	.59	moderate/fair
20	160	.86	Easy/good	96	.58	moderate/fair
Average		.87	Easy/good		.56	moderate/fair

Table 2 shows that the average test item difficulty index of the entire items observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in English noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers was 0.87 and 0.56 in urban and rural areas, respectively.

This indicates that there is a good extent to which urban students have learned the content measured by the items, while there is a fair extent to which rural students have learned the content measured by the items in the use of adjectives as modifiers in a noun phrase structure.

Test of Hypothesis

H₀₁ There is no significant difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas.

Table 3: t-test Analysis of Significant Difference in the Performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in the use of Adjectives as Modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas.

t-test for Equality of Means

Location of Esan learners of Eng. L2	N	Mean	S.D.	df	t	sig.	Decision
Urban	185	26.0	14.84	349	6.188	.027	Rejected
Rural	166	16.70	13.30				

$P < .05$ = Significant Difference between Groups

The test result of the hypothesis in Table 3 shows that $t = 6.188$, $df = 349$, $P = 0.027$, indicating that the probability value (p) is less than the alpha level of 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

This implies that there is a significant difference in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in using adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases between urban and rural areas.

H02: The structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers do not constitute learning difficulties as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Table 4: t-test Analysis of structural differences associated with learning difficulties of Esan learners of English as L2 in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases in urban and rural areas.

t-test for Equality of Means

Location of the Esan learners of L2	N	Mean	S.D	df	t	sig.	Decision
Urban	185	.87	.213	349	13.99	.009	Rejected
Rural	166	.56	.202				

$P < 0.05$ = significant difference

Table 4 shows that $t = 13.99$, $df = 349$, $P = .009$, indicating that the probability value (p) is less than the alpha level 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected. This implies that the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers constitute learning difficulties as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Discussion of Findings

The study's findings provided valuable insights into the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in both urban and rural areas, highlighting the challenges they encounter with English noun phrases.

The study's findings indicated that Esan learners of English as a second language in urban areas outperformed their rural counterparts in the use of adjectives as modifiers. This conclusion is supported by statistical analysis, which showed a mean difference of 9.39%. According to Cohen (1988), this represents a small effect size. Although categorised as a small effect, this difference remains statistically significant when comparing the language performance of the two groups.

The results revealed a significant difference in performance between Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas, specifically in the use of adjectives as modifiers of noun phrases. The t-test analysis of the

significant difference in the performance of these learners indicated a p-value less than the alpha level of 0.05. This finding led to the rejection of the hypothesis, which suggested that there is no significant difference in the use of adjectives as modifiers between Esan learners in urban and rural areas.

The study found that the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as L2 in urban and rural areas, constitute learning difficulties. The t-test analyses of structural differences associated with learning difficulties of Esan learners of English as L2 in the use of adjectives as modifiers, yielded a result of probability value (p) less than the alpha level of 0.05; thus leading to the rejection of the null hypotheses that there is no significant structural differences between English and Esan noun phrases that constitute learning difficulties as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as L2 in urban and rural areas.

The results of the analyses suggest that the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers may constitute learning difficulties, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in both urban and rural areas.

The disparities in mean differentials above suggest that urban learners outperformed their rural counterparts due to

better access to quality education and resources, teacher expertise and training, socioeconomic status and parent involvement, and exposure to English language media and interactions (Ellis, 2008). In addition, Norton (2000) also suggests that urban learners may have more opportunities for language practice and interaction, leading to improved proficiency. The combination of factors mentioned above contributed to urban learners' enhanced understanding and usage of English noun phrases.

Implications for Esan Learners of English as a Second Language

Differences in the use of comparative and superlative adjectives pose challenges for Esan learners of English, potentially leading to transfer errors rooted in L1 interference (Lado, 1957).

Esan's use of tense-inflected adjectives can lead to errors such as "He talls yesterday" or the overuse of reduplication, exemplified by expressions like "very very tall" instead of "taller" (Agheyisi, 1986). Additionally, superlatives may be underutilised if speakers of Esan prioritise emphasis over extreme comparison.

Errors in adjectival modification can hinder academic writing, where precise comparisons are crucial, as in phrases like "the most efficient method" (Hyland, 2006). When there is no explicit instruction on English irregularities, pre-noun placement, and the use of "than/as...as" structures, contrastive analysis should be utilised to highlight these differences. Without this focus, many errors stemming from first language (L1) interference could occur, as postulated by Lado (1957).

Moreover, while incorporating cultural examples from Esan contexts can enhance engagement, a lack of intervention may lead to the fossilisation of errors, ultimately affecting fluency and academic success (Ellis, 1994). Esan's use of tense-inflected adjectives can lead to errors such as "He talls yesterday" or the overuse of reduplication, exemplified by expressions like "very very tall" instead of "taller" (Agheyisi, 1986). Additionally, superlatives may be underutilised if speakers of Esan prioritise emphasis over extreme comparison.

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Conclusion

The study found significant differences in the use of adjectives as modifiers in English noun phrases among Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas. The study also established that the structural differences in English and Esan noun phrases in the use of adjectives as modifiers constitute learning difficulties, as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in urban and rural areas.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, here are some recommendations:

1. To effectively teach adjectives to Esan learners of English as a second language in public senior secondary schools in the rural areas of Esan land, the use of nouns as adjectives should be properly taught with concrete examples that will help students to decipher which noun is used as an adjective to modify the other, because of the post-modification nature of Esan adjectives. A thorough teaching of the attributive use of adjectives will help bridge the learning gap between urban and rural areas, where the problem of misuse is more pronounced.
2. Comparative analysis indicates that Esan students in urban areas have acquired knowledge of adjectives to a greater extent than those in rural areas, who exhibit a moderate understanding of the use of adjectives. To reduce this educational disparity, it is essential to discourage the predominant use of the first language (L1) in rural public schools' communication, thereby mitigating the interference of the mother tongue with second language (L2) acquisition.
3. Policymakers must prioritise the provision of targeted training and support for teachers to effectively address the unique needs of Esan learners of English as a second language in rural contexts. Furthermore, stakeholders, including relevant authorities and philanthropic individuals, should ensure the availability of educational materials and internet access for students in these areas, thereby equipping them to engage in competitive learning and internalisation of adjectives within English noun phrases.

4. To address the structural differences between English and Esan noun phrases, particularly in the use of adjectives, which pose learning difficulties as observed in the performance of Esan learners of English as a second language in both urban and rural settings, it's essential to focus on specific areas where these differences arise. Instruction should prioritise the use of comparative and superlative adjectives, the order of adjectives, the attributive and predicative use of adjectives, and the post-modification of noun phrases by an adjective phrase or reduced relative clause.
5. Books and learning materials that deal emphatically with the use of adjectives within the noun phrase structure of English should be made available for Esan learners of English as a second language for reliability.

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