

Nigerian Creole as language of instruction: Will Nigerian lecturers use Nigerian Creole?

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This mixed questionnaire survey sought to determine if lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before English are willing to use the language as medium of instruction. The respondents were comprised of 560 lecturers and graduate students (i.e. master's, doctoral) selected through a purposeful random sampling frame from 15 public institutions of higher learning in Nigeria. Lecturers declined to use Nigerian Creole as medium of instruction because they feared that its use might negatively affect their students' learning of English. Graduate students indicated willingness to receive instruction through a combination of English and Nigerian Creole because they perceived the use of Nigerian Creole as *fun* and representative of the voice of a new generation of Nigerians. The sample reported that prior knowledge of Nigerian Creole does not facilitate the learning of English because both languages are too different to facilitate a transfer of learning.

Background

Language of instruction is an indispensable part of teaching and learning. Spoken and written language influences thought patterns and helps teachers and learners vocalise their ideas and assume any role of their choice during instruction (Cazden 2001; Freire & Macedo 1987; Gee 2011; Vygotsky 1978). Conversely, students in classrooms in multilingual societies represent a divergence of languages, which creates room for competition (Hoffman, Sailors, Makalela & Matthee 2009). As a result, some teachers align with policy makers and use standard languages over other languages that represent students' experiences (Freire 1978). Be that as it may, the best teachers are those who envision themselves as engineers of the learning environment and employ any language that promotes student learning (Bain 2004). In Nigeria, English is the language of instruction at all levels of education in spite of the 527 languages spoken in the country because fluency in English is erroneously perceived as a hallmark of being educated (Adegbija 2004; Fakeye & Ogunsi 2009; Igboanus 2008; Lewis 2009). Also prevalent is Nigerian Creole, the Sapele and Warri variant of what is often called Nigerian Pidgin language (Ukwuoma 2013), described as the most extensively used pidgin in the world (Faraclas 1996). As such, effort is made to replace *Nigerian Pidgin*, *Naija* or *Nigerian Pidgin English* with Nigerian Creole in previous studies cited in this article

In fact, Nigerian Creole is spoken by 'over 75 million people as a second language and [the] number of first language speakers [is] put roughly at between 3 and 5 million' (Ihemere 2006:297). Yet it does not have any official recognition as a Nigerian language, and lecturers at institutions of higher learning are not using it as a medium of instruction. Consequently, scholars have advocated for official recognition of the language and its use in the Nigerian education system as a subject for students to learn or a language of classroom instruction (Awonusi 1990; Dada 2007; Deuber 2005; Elugbe & Omamor 1991; Gani-Ikilama 1990; Igboanus & Peter 2005; Ndolo 1989; Oladejo 1991; Oloruntoba 1992). Such advocacy is particularly important because findings from several studies have confirmed that 'creole languages can be used as an integral tool for improving educational achievement' (Migge, Leglise & Bartens 2010:16). However, no study has determined if Nigerian lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before English are willing to use the language as medium of instruction, or explored the beliefs of such lecturers regarding the instructional utility of Nigerian Creole in formal classroom settings.

Thus, it is important to understand their beliefs because teacher-beliefs birth teacher philosophy which largely determine teacher instructional attitude (Lin 2013; Sercu, Méndez García, & Castro Prieto 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine if lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before English are willing to use the language as medium of instruction. Three research questions guided the study:

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1. Will lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before English indicate willingness to teach using Nigerian Creole along with English language?
2. Are graduate students interested in receiving instruction in their content areas through a combination of the English language and Nigerian Creole?
3. Do lecturers and graduate students report that prior knowledge of Nigerian Creole facilitates the learning of English?

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study links theories regarding second language acquisition to those within the realm of critical literacy. According to Freire and Macedo (1987), language represents the realities of individuals and should constitute the foundation upon which learning is built. Consequently, a teacher who ignores a learner's own language in preference for a standard language is silencing the most powerful voice a learner has to make sense of what is being taught. Other researchers have emphasised the importance of using a more familiar language as a starting-point for learning, so that an emotional connection to the subject matter can be created before moving to languages originating from unfamiliar social contexts (e.g. Au 1997; Carrington 2001; Cummins 2009; Migge *et al.* 2010; Omamor 1983; Siegel 2002). By drawing from prior knowledge of their first language, learners may more easily come to understand new languages. Critical literacy also opens avenues for discussion on existing conditions with regard to permitting language choice. This notion is particularly relevant, because English should not be the sole language for making meaning when an individual's first language is not English.

Review of literature

Nigeria is a product of the 1914 unsolicited amalgamation of the northern and southern protectorates by Fredrick Lugard under the direction of the Queen of England (Ukwuoma 2013). The country has an estimated population of about 170 million, and languages that are quoted to range between 400 and 527 representing about 20% of all languages spoken in Africa (Adegbija 1997; Lewis 2009; Simpson & Oyetade 2008; Central Intelligence Agency 2011). Portuguese was the earliest European language to be used in Nigeria, but at the attainment of political independence in 1960 from Britain, Nigerian officials continued with the English language. French and three other Nigerian languages, namely Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were later added as co-official languages of the country (Igboanusi 2008; Omoniyi 2003).

Nevertheless, English has remained the language of instruction at all levels of education in the country. The narrow colonial definition of literacy as the ability to read, write and understand English language is also perceived as the goal of education in Nigeria. Thus, students make every possible effort to grapple with English language amidst competing local languages (Crowther, 1962; Ekpe, 2005; Spencer, 1971). Nigeria has a mother-tongue

language of instruction policy, which stipulates that every child should be taught in a mother-tongue medium or language of the immediate environment at pre-primary level and during the first three years of primary school (Igboanusi 2008; Oluwole, 2008). Although not officially a Nigerian language, Nigerian Creole qualifies as language of immediate environment in the country as it is spoken by a majority of Nigerians.

Pidgin and creole languages are increasingly used around the world in the media, public health awareness, vocational training and political campaigns because they are capable of facilitating the expression of thoughts as in languages such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish (Bloomfield 1933; Holm 2000; Jespersen 1922; Migge & Leglise 2007). However, pidgin and creole languages are largely rejected as methods of formal classroom instruction for children who speak them as first languages. This view may be considered to be a human rights violation of such children (Hamel 1995; Skutnabb-Kangas, Phillipson & Rannut 1994; UNESCO 1968). Several research findings indicate that initial literacy in pidgin and creole languages has a positive effect on future learning, hence the recommendation that learning should begin with languages learners are familiar with instead of alien languages that are from different social contexts (Au 1993; Carrington 2001; Cummins 2009; Migge *et al.* 2010; Siegel 2002).

Consequently, educators can spur change towards pidgin and creole languages if they accommodate them in formal classroom instruction as a way of engaging in culturally responsive teaching that allows learners to make language choices (Au 1993; Erickson 1987; Hornberger 1998; Kephart 1999; Siegel 1992). In a landmark work that featured how pidgin and creole languages were being used in education, Migge, Leglise and Bartens (2010) gave a description of programmes at the global level to integrate pidgin languages in education. The researchers highlighted three such programmes: accommodation, instrumental, and awareness-raising programmes. Although the researchers did not deal specifically with Nigerian Creole, they found evidence to support the contention that pidgin and creole languages are capable of facilitating teaching and learning. As noted by the authors, there are various ongoing pidgin and creole language programmes in educational institutions in pidgin-speaking communities such as Bislama in Vanuatu and Papiamentu in Curacao Bonaire among others. Thus, it may be of educational importance to expect a similar development in Nigeria, a country that has pidgin and creole languages existing alongside over 500 languages (Lewis 2009; Online Nigeria n.d.; Simpson & Oyetade 2008).

Method

Research design and instrument

This study was a descriptive research that applied a purposeful random sampling frame (Kemper, Stringfield & Teddlie 2003). The survey was conducted utilising a researcher-developed mixed questionnaire entitled Nigerian

Pidgin as Language of Instruction Questionnaire (NPLI-Q), attached as Appendix A. The NPLI-Q was hand-delivered to allow respondents to indicate their preferences on closed questions and to respond to open-ended questions (Bryman 2006). Prior to this study, the NPLI-Q was piloted twice with faculty members and graduate students at a regionally accredited university in southern United States.

Participants and setting

A total of 560 lecturers and graduate students that comprised of 98.75% Nigerians ($n = 553$) and 1.25% ($n = 7$) non-Nigerians from 15 public institutions of higher learning participated in the survey. The institutions included one college of education, one polytechnic, 13 universities located in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city, and pidgin-speaking communities in southern Nigeria. Lecturers made up 38.57% ($n = 216$) of the survey, whereas graduate students made up 61.25% ($n = 343$). The respondents, who were speakers of 61 Nigerian languages, resided in 48 cities from various Nigerian ethnic nationalities as indicated in Table 1. With 48.75% females ($n = 273$) and 51.25% males ($n = 287$), the respondents qualified as 'information-rich sources' capable of providing answers to the research questions (Patton 1987:58). Additionally, the respondents had an identical sample relationship because they completed one questionnaire that contained quantitative and qualitative questions (Onwuegbuzie & Collins 2007). However, respondents who indicated an ethnolinguistic affiliation to *Igbo*, a Nigerian ethnic group whose first language is also known as *Igbo*, appeared to have been over-sampled because they featured in all of the surveyed 15 schools. As such, their numerical strength constituted an uncontrollable limitation to this study.

Analysis

Simple frequency count and percentile distribution were used to analyse structured survey responses to NPLI-Q, whereas responses to open-ended items were coded and categorised using the framework proposed by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). Data from qualitative and quantitative components of NPLI-Q were compared and contrasted to check how they complemented each other in addressing the purpose of the study.

TABLE 1: Ethnic Composition of respondents.

Ethnicity	f	%	Cumulative
Hausa-Fulani	18	3.21	3.21
Igbo	217	38.75	41.96
Yoruba	134	23.93	65.89
Northern minority	4	0.71	66.61
Southern minority	184	32.86	99.46
Others	3	0.54	100.00
Total	560	100	-

f, frequency

TABLE 2a: Order of language learning of lecturers.

Order	Result	Total
English before NC (%)	75.93	164
NC before English (%)	24.07	52

NC, Nigerian Creole

Results

Tables 2a–2b display results that answer the first research question from the quantitative component of NPLI-Q. The second and third research questions are addressed in Tables 3, 4a and 4b respectively. Both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that most lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before English did not indicate a willingness to use Nigerian Creole as a medium of instruction. Their reasons ranged from a lack of a generally accepted orthography for Nigerian Creole to personal fears regarding how its use might negatively affect students' learning of English. They also cited their concerns over the limited technical vocabulary of Nigerian Creole. Graduate students indicated their preference in receiving instruction through a combination of Nigerian Creole and English language. Graduate students did so because they see the use of Nigerian Creole as *fun*. They also believe that its use allows wider communication in Nigeria. Graduate students are convinced that Nigerian Creole represents their voice, the voice of a new generation of Nigerians. Some graduate students blame the abuse of power by policy makers on the non-use of Nigerian Creole as a medium of instruction. Half of the graduate students, and most lecturers, did not believe that prior knowledge of Nigerian Creole facilitates the learning of English. Both graduate students and lecturers regard the two languages as being too different to facilitate transfer of learning. Some expressed fear that knowledge of Nigerian Creole may negatively influence the learning of English because of certain grammatical similarities shared by both languages.

Discussion

Orthography of Nigerian Creole

The purpose of this study was to determine if lecturers who learned to speak and understand Nigerian Creole before

TABLE 2b: Willingness of Lecturers who Learned NC before English to Teach Using NC.

Willingness	Amount
Will use	10
Will not use	42

NC, Nigerian Creole

TABLE 3: Will Graduate Students Receive Instruction Using NC?

Willingness	Result	Total
Will receive (%)	50.15	167
Will not (%)	49.25	764

NC, Nigerian Creole

TABLE 4a: Does Knowledge of NC Facilitate the Learning of English?

Variable	Strongly disagreed	Disagreed	Agreed	Strongly agreed	Neutral
Lecturers	37.50	26.39	11.11	8.80	16.20
n	80	57	24	19	35

TABLE 4b: Does knowledge of NC facilitate the learning of English?

Variable	Strongly disagreed	Disagreed	Agreed	Strongly agreed	Neutral
Graduate students	25.66	26.53	14.87	7.00	25.95
n	88	91	51	24	89

English are willing to use Nigerian Creole as a medium of instruction. Admittedly, Nigerian Creole is a tonal language that has given linguists many problems with representation in writing (Elugbe & Omamor 1991; Mafeni 1971; Oyebade 1983). However, linguists such as Elugbe and Omamor (1991) and Faraclas (1996) have developed phonemic orthographies for the language. In 2009, the Naijá Langwej Akedemi, a committee for harmonising Nigerian Pidgin Language, proposed a harmonised orthography for writing the language (Esizimotor & Egbokhare n.d.). Sowunmi and Hankey (2003) is a primer on Nigerian Pidgin. In addition, Okonkwo *et al.*'s (2007) *Mek Wi Rid Naijiria Pijin* is another primer for teaching how to read and write the language. Interestingly, *Naijiria Pijin Lanwej Baibul* (2011) published by Mercy Christian Ministry International is a translation of the Bible into the variants now known as Nigerian Creole. Considering the degree of orthographic consistency maintained in some of the above works, the issue of a lack of orthography appears to have been addressed.

Nigerian Creole and English language learning

Although this study did not set out to measure the effect of Nigerian Creole on the learning of English, a lecturer within the age bracket of 55–60, who had taught for over 23 years in one of the surveyed schools in southern Nigeria, indicated that 'Nigerian Creole will negatively affect my students' efforts to learn English language'. However, available literature on Nigerian Creole does not portray the language in such light. Aina (1991), who administered a standard English test of oral reading, essay composition, and silent reading comprehension to 10 students in a public secondary school in southern Nigeria, found that knowledge of Nigerian Creole enhances reading comprehension of English. However, she discovered that the language inhibits the writing of English because the sampled students were prone to errors such as mistaking meet for meat, a problem the researcher inferred can be solved by developing the morphology of Nigerian Creole. To teach Nigerian Creole, Igboanusi (2008:6) suggested that teachers should point out the 'differences and similarities between the language and English'. Igboanusi is of the opinion that teaching Nigerian Creole as a subject in schools the way English is being taught will enable users of both languages to understand inherent differences. Nevertheless, the congruence in opinion of graduate students and lecturers that English and Nigerian Creole are different from each other is consistent with research findings that Nigerian Creole is not English or a dialect of English (Akande 2010; Ihemere 2006). On the grammar of Nigerian Creole, Mensah (2012:167) has shown that it is 'not contact induced from English but rather a language – internal phenomenon'. The problem of absence or limited technical vocabulary in Nigerian Creole can be tackled through status planning, which should begin with the Nigerian government duly recognising Nigerian Creole as a Nigerian language (Igboanusi 2008). Faraclas (1996) described Nigerian Creole as the most widely spoken language in Nigeria. Other scholars have identified the language as being systematic and rule governed, thus capable of fulfilling human linguistic

needs as one would expect from languages such as Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish (Bloomfield 1933; Holm 2000; Ihemere 2006; Jespersen 1922; Migge & Leglise 2007).

Nigerian Creole and emotional connection in familiar language

In her remarks, a female graduate student asked: 'Can you imagine how awesome it will be to teach my students mathematics in Nigerian Creole when I graduate? It will truly be fun'. Research findings have consistently shown that students stand a better chance of meeting instructional objectives when teachers begin with familiar languages (Au 1997; Cummins 2009). One must concede that 'knowledge is constructed based on social interactions and experience' (Woolfolk 1999:279), and Nigerian Creole is the preferred language of social interaction amongst Nigerian youths in institutions of higher learning (Ajibade, Adeyemi & Awopetu, 2012). It follows that Nigerian Creole should not be seen as less suitable for a medium of instruction. Furthermore, lecturers should consider the fact that Nigerian Creole is the language their students use to make sense of their experiences and generate new knowledge (Freire & Macedo 1987). Such a language that forms part of students' everyday social contexts may facilitate learning if it is included in school instruction. Similarly, graduate students consider Nigerian Creole as belonging to a new generation of Nigerians who have understood the linguistic and ethnic diversity of Nigeria. They now prefer Nigerian Creole because it is neutral and enjoys cross ethnic acceptance in Nigeria. A graduate student pointed out that 'Nigerian Creole is our own, it does not represent any ethnic group in Nigeria but policy makers will not allow us use the language in school because it will unite us, I think it has to do with power and corruption'.

Conclusion

The literacy rate of Nigeria is put at 61.3% (CIA 2011). Perhaps literacy is still being measured for Africa's most populous country as the ability to read and write the English language (Adetugbo 1984; Awonusi 2004; Bamgbose 1995; Ekpe 2005). Such perception calls for repositioning another Nigerian language alongside English. The performance of Nigerian students in English contrasts with popular perceptions in Nigeria regarding the dominant role of English (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen 2006; Akeredolu-Ale 2007; Omo-Ojugo 2004), hence the need to incorporate Nigerian students' first language in instructional practices. This study reveals that university lecturers, who might themselves be able to employ Nigerian Creole as a medium of instruction, have negative attitudes towards the language because of societal prejudice or fear that students will not learn English.

At the same time, the younger generation is more open to its use because they feel it better represents their voice. Clearly, there is misunderstanding and prejudice surrounding Nigerian Creole since it is often seen amongst the Nigerian people as merely an ungrammatical form of English,

spoken by those who they deem less educated. In fact, most pidgin varieties in Nigeria have become creolised. Policy shift is needed to educate the populace about the value of vernacular languages. There is a role for universities and, more specifically, teacher education programmes for such an educational campaign.

Future research on incorporating Nigerian Creole into formal education as a medium of instruction should take several steps. First and foremost, this study should be replicated in secondary schools and other institutions of higher learning in southern Nigeria, particularly in colleges of education. Secondly, research should use poor performance in English and fluency in Nigerian Creole as outcome variables to determine the effect of the use of Nigerian Creole on students' performance in English and language arts. Such studies may provide the necessary empirical base that can prompt an evidence-based assertion on whether Nigerian Creole can be a standalone language of instruction or be used along with English as a medium of instruction. Nevertheless, in answer to the question posed in the title of this work, statistical evidence from this study suggests that Nigerian lecturers may not use Nigerian Creole as a language of instruction.

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Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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Appendix starts on the next page →

Appendixes

Appendix A

Nigerian Pidgin as a Language of Instruction Questionnaire (NPLI-Q)

PLEASE CHECK THE CATEGORY THAT APPLIES TO YOU:

1. Indicate your gender: Female Male
2. Nationality: Nigerian Non Nigerian
3. Indicate your ethnic group:
 Hausa-Fulani Igbo Yoruba
 Northern minority ethnic groups Southern minority ethnic groups Others: (Please specify) _____
4. What is your native language? _____
5. What is your age group? 20 & under 21–25 26–30
 31–35 36–40 41–45
 46–50 50–55 56 & above
6. What is your current city of residence? _____
7. How many years have you lived in this city? _____
8. I am a lecturer graduate student

PLEASE RESPOND TO QUESTIONS 8–10 BASED ON YOUR LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY:

9. My ability to speak and understand English language is:
 Poor Fair Good Very good Excellent
10. My ability to speak and understand Nigerian Pidgin is:
 Poor Fair Good Very good Excellent
11. Which of the following languages did you learn to speak and understand before the other?
 English Language Nigerian Pidgin

PLEASE CIRCLE THE ANSWER THAT BEST FIT YOUR OPINION:

The rating scale of 1–5 indicates: **1** = Strongly Disagree, **2** = Disagree, **3** = Neutral,
4 = Agree, **5** = Strongly Agree.

12. My knowledge of Nigerian Pidgin helps me to learn and understand English Language

1
2
3
4
5
13. My knowledge of English Language helps me to learn and understand Nigerian Pidgin

1
2
3
4
5

LECTURERS; PLEASE RESPOND TO ITEMS 14–18:

14. Which language do you currently use while teaching your students in a formal classroom setting?
 English Language only Nigerian Pidgin only
 English Language and Nigerian Pidgin. Others (Please specify) _____
15. Would your course contents be better explained using Nigerian Pidgin?
 No Yes
16. Would the use of Nigerian Pidgin as a language of instruction alongside English language facilitate comprehension for your students?
 No Yes
17. Briefly explain the reason for your answer on item 16 above:
18. How many years of post secondary school teaching experience do you have? _____

GRADUATE STUDENTS; PLEASE RESPOND TO ITEMS 19–23:

19. Does your lecturer switch between English language and Nigerian Pidgin while teaching you in a formal classroom setting?
 No Yes
20. Besides English language, what other language or languages does your lecturer speak while teaching you in a formal classroom setting?

21. Would concepts you learn in class be easier to comprehend if the lecturer taught them using Nigerian Pidgin?
 No Yes
22. Briefly explain the reason for your answer on item 20 above:
23. Should lecturers use Nigerian Pidgin alongside English language to teach?
 No Yes

FROM A LECTURER OR GRADUATE STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE:

24. Please note anything else you think is important for the researcher to consider:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire!