

Emerging Sociolinguistic Teaching Trends of English As A First Language in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine the emerging sociolinguistic trends in Nigeria with the view to ascertaining the use of English as a first language among its speakers particular in Calabar, Nigeria. The study adopts Vygotsky's (1978) Social Interactionist Theory. The theory is relevant because it accounts for the intentional and changing linguistic attitudes of children believed to be influenced by their early exposure to English as the language spoken by adults and peers within their immediate environment. Data for the study were generated through primary sources, particularly by means of participant observation and administration of questionnaire. Using random sampling technique, 468 questionnaires were distributed to children within the school age bracket of 06 - 13 in 10 selected Private Primary and Junior Secondary Schools in Calabar. With the aid of 20 trained research assistants who are bi/multilinguals in some Nigerian indigenous languages and English, 400 questionnaires filled under supervision were retrieved from the respondents from where the data were extracted and collated for analysis. Findings indicate that 37 percent of the pupils/students are monolinguals who speak only English as their 'first and native language'. Similarly, 32.5 percent of the target population understand their mother tongue(s) while 30.8 percent affirm that they speak the indigenous language(s) fluently. Also, it is observed that a total of 63 percent are bi/multilinguals in their mother tongue(s) and English language and could switch or mix codes. The reasons for the increasing preference towards English language, the researchers have observed, range from the persuasive influence from parents, teachers and peers, and the consequences of globalization in addition to the multiple domains of use of English language. This trending communication practice would continue to increase the growing population of English speakers in Nigeria while the indigenous are further endangered.

Keywords: Sociolinguistic trends, English language, First language, Language preference, Official language, English speakers

Introduction

The sociolinguistic situation in Nigeria is pluralistic, heterogeneous and multilingual in nature (Egbeji 2019). Although there have been conflicting figures on the number of languages spoken in Nigeria, but many scholars peg it at somehow above 450. For instance, Ojeniyi and Aleminu (2013) put the estimate of Nigerian indigenous languages at 500. The simultaneous existence of this high number of languages is bound to create communication barrier especially in interactions involving Nigerian discourse participants from mutually unintelligible linguistic groups. The multiplicity of languages and the difficulty the situation poses in a supposedly seamless trans-ethnic communication within the Nigerian nation stimulated the quest for a linguistic bridge-builder. English has been consciously adopted to perform this role in formal, and even extending to informal domains. By this, the role of English in the Nigerian sociolinguistic landscape is increasingly becoming enormous.

The emerging sociolinguistic trends in Nigeria has taken an attitudinal dimension specifically in relation to individual and collective dispositions to the use of language(s). In this direction, Obi (2014) avers that, depending on the language(s) in question and the roles it performs, and the social, psychological, historical and political factors associated with its use, speakers' dispositions could be ambivalent, lackadaisical, negative or positive. These describe the trends in Nigeria and the conscious 'distribution' of language(s) according to the users, usage and domains. The attitude towards acquisition/learning of language(s) in Nigeria is gradually being directed towards the negative or positive depending on the roles the particular language(s) performs in one or more settings. This scenario has created a divergent and competitive atmosphere between Nigerian indigenous languages with limited functions and domains of use on one hand, and English with increasingly enormous statutory functions and domains of use on the other. The implication of this multifactorial influential situation has created the pressure for the stimulation of a changing linguistic behaviour that enhances the preference towards the acquisition and learning of English against one or more of the numerous Nigerian indigenous languages. The socially-induced pressure and the flourishing status of English is capable of 'breeding' a segment or generation of young Nigerians confronted with the bi/multilingual dilemma of choice, who are, made to speak and use English as their 'mother tongue' as well as technically becoming monolinguals in the variety of English that may not be the absolute version of the native speakers'.

The thrust of the study is therefore an investigation of the emerging sociolinguistic trends in Nigeria, particularly in Calabar (a multilingual cosmopolitan city and the capital of Cross River State) in order to establish that there exist some growing numbers of children who are monolinguals in English. The study, it is believed, will inspire the desired consciousness including the fact that young population of English monolinguals exist in other Nigerian urban cities and non-native speakers of English environments in the global sphere. There is no doubt that English is currently a global language with a wider spread and usage, and that it also bridges the communication gap in the Nigerian multilingual environment. However, before the implantation of English language in Nigeria by the colonial masters, there has existed (and there still exist) Nigerian indigenous languages which also communicate the sociocultural and ethnolinguistic diversity of Nigeria. The emerging sociolinguistic trends where English is gradually 'eroding' the rich and diverse sociocultural and ethnolinguistic nature of Nigeria, and the lackadaisical attitude towards the breeding of a set of young monolinguals in English constitute the problem of this

research. The study is intended to make evidential observations that would be depended upon to have a redirection in language issues aimed at saving the indigenous languages in Nigeria.

The study is descriptive and a sociolinguistic survey, and aims to examine the trending issues in terms of language choice and use particularly the preference of English to Nigerian indigenous languages in Calabar which is a micro representation of other Nigerian urban cities, where there exists a set of children who speak English as their first and only language. The study is relevant to scholars, linguists and students in the field of sociolinguistics and language issues generally. It is also relevant to parents, language planners and policy makers, the government and indeed Nigerians. It is significant to all because the research exposes the emerging sociolinguistic situation which establishes the possibility of acquiring a foreign language as the first and mother tongue in a non-native speaker's environment. It is also a reawakening call on Nigerians to adopt measures to curb the continuous endangerment of the indigenous languages as a result of the overwhelming influence that excite the preference of the English language.

Literature review

There are useful scholarly insights into the Nigerian sociolinguistic landscape. The position that English was implanted in Nigeria by the colonial masters in addition to existing indigenous languages is an indisputable fact. In terms of the approximate number, Chepkemai (2019) claims that there are over 520 languages in Nigeria with roughly 79 million Nigerians who speak English. The 'roughly 79 million' is probably an underestimation of the number of Nigerians who currently speak English at various levels of proficiency given its preference against indigenous languages because of the roles it performs.

Drawing Nigerians attention to the development, Emenyonu (1992) acknowledges that English is becoming more natural and easily in the lips of Nigerian high and middle class urban dwellers who speak some form of English language in preference to their native language. Affirming that the trend is extending to the villages, Uwen (2019) in a study on English loanwords as lexical enrichment to Erei language, declares that English lexical items are gradually being indigenized. Osoba (2014) attributes the preference in the present-day Nigerian sociolinguistic situation to the predictable and long readily-made linguistic ambush laid by the imperial British to destroy indigenous languages and cultures. The British 'weapon' (was) is catalytic because language is best propagated or endangered through the spoken medium. This prompts Osoba and Alebiosu (2016) to aver that the spoken medium of language makes it more vulnerable to extinction because its speakers could abandon it for a more prestigious one as it is the case for English in Nigeria. The scholars add that in recent times, Nigerians tend to use non-native languages, like English more often in various discourse domains because of a growing negative attitude towards indigenous languages. The increasing negative attitude to indigenous languages has been attributed to several linguistic and extralinguistic factors.

Commenting on the factors responsible for the English preference, Udofot (2007) believes that parents should be held accountable because they feel that English being the language of education in Nigeria with some sort of prestige, it is therefore better for their children to be equipped in it for readiness for predictable linguistic challenges in life. Also, Osoba (2014) blames parents for the growing trend. The linguist reveals that parents often prevent their children from acquiring, learning or speaking their mother tongues which they consider inferior, substandard and inappropriate for communicative activities in a multilingual setting like Nigeria. Parental pressure against the use of indigenous languages appears to be a global phenomenon. For instance, Turano and Malimas (2013) reveals that even in Philippines, Filipino children are 'heavily' pressured from

their parents and teachers to speak English. Philippines is a multilingual country where according to www.babal.com, has 183 living languages which in 1987, the Constitution has designated Filipino, a standardized version of Tagalog as the national language and an official language along with English. However, there is also the increasing preference of English by the young Filipino population.

Aside from parental influence, scholars have identified other reasons for the preference of English to local language. For instance, Ayenbi (2014) claims that the trend is enhanced by the limited scope and usefulness of indigenous languages. Beyond the multifaceted scope of English, Tamunobelega (2015) states that English is preferred because of political considerations, and use for science, technology and scholarship. Similarly, Osoba and Alebiosu (2016) agree that in addition to the official language status and enormous functions of the English language in Nigeria, it also performs the role of the lingua franca, the language of mass media, external affairs, education, law, business and commerce, and information and communication technology. On the advantages of this phenomenon to the individual, Ikande (2020) believes that a proficient Nigerian English speaker has limitless opportunities to explore. Such advantages include: self-development, career growth, establishment of love and friendship, safety in travels, reading technical literature and earn more money, among others. In addition to the factors enumerated above, Uwen (2020) maintains that globalization and its linguistic consequences, inter-marriages of couples from different linguistic backgrounds, the decreasing trend in parents-to-children language transmission, geographical mobility and the need for social inclusion, separately and collectively account for the dwindling dispositions of Nigerians towards the use of native languages in favour of English.

As already established by Turano and Malimas (2013) that a section of faraway Filipino children uses English as their L1, in both homes and schools, there are also scholarly indications that the same situation occurs in the contemporary Nigeria. According to Ekpe (2010), in a lecture document for the National Open University of Nigeria, the presence and the prestige awarded English language in Nigeria has turned some Nigerians to speaking English as their first language occurring mostly in homes of professionals and middle class parents. Corroborating Ekpe's observation, Kperogi (2012) states that thousands of Nigerian children in urban areas are becoming monolinguals who speak only English which technically means that English is their 'mother tongue'. To further buttress this developing trend, Umera-Okeke (2019), in a study on the sociolinguistic dilemma of the Nigerian English speakers, emphasizes that in Nigeria today, English, though an official language, is becoming the first language of a lot of children in urban areas who freely speak English in their homes and other domains. Children, especially those residing in urban areas appear to be the population clearly identified with speaking English as the only language. This is even more worrisome because they constitute the preservative reservoir for the propagation of the indigenous languages which the reverse has incidentally become the case. Scholars have also noted that English spoken in Nigeria has its defined peculiarities common with English speakers in a non-native environment with indexical markers showing lexical appropriations and semantic adjustments (Ekpang & Bassey, 2014; Ekpenyong & Bassey, 2014; Mishina & Iskandar, 2019). These features are even more pronounced, as Uwen and Ansa (2018) affirms in their study on pluralization in Erei and its implications on the learning of English, where the already acquired the indigenous language as L1.

Categorically, the positions canvassed in the contributions of scholars reviewed above have provided insights into the contemporary sociolinguistic situation in Nigeria. The status and enormous functions of English account for the persuasions that gave rise to its preference, thus,

‘breeding’ a growing segment of Nigerians who are (or are becoming) monolinguals in English. As useful as the insights are, there is only the blanket mention of the Nigerian urban areas without the specifics. Also, there is no segmentation of the identified population such that the percentage could be determined. The study is therefore aimed at ascertaining the existence and possibly the percentage of the young population of English monolinguals in Calabar as a subset of the Nigerian urban cities. This could be the basis for the determination of the pace of indigenous languages’ endangerment and the flourishing of English.

Theoretical framework

The theory considered relevant to this research is Vygotsky’s (1978) Social Interactionist Theory. Lev Vygotsky proposes that the human learning process represents a defined innate and social nature; a system that facilitates children’s development of their communication capacity from the people and environment surrendering them. The theory holds that children do not encounter language in isolation, rather, the child analysis language from utterances encountered from adult speakers in the context of interactions. The environments that form the domains of social interactions provide the little linguists (the children) the opportunity of making sense of their (linguistic) behaviours and the perception on their surroundings with the assistance of adults to develop and increase their vocabulary. Bruner’s (1984) elaboration of the theory further suggests the language acquisition support system which explains the adult entourage who adapts their behaviours towards children to enable the children create scenarios and scripts which are communicated through language in the appropriate contexts.

Children appear to be in the ‘vulnerable’ population that easily acquire or learn language effortlessly. This is because “children and adolescents or adults are quite different types of learners, for example, because of the spontaneous nature of language acquisition by children and contrasting, more cerebral, logical processes of the adult” (McDonough, 1989, p. 95). Also, infants have been observed to grow ‘linguistically’ in experience, they learn by consistently identifying language in the behavioural and environmental contexts, from their regular social interactions, they gain the needed insights into useful linguistic ways for the expression of ideas they had previously heard from (others) adults (Rivers, 1989). From the expressions of ideas facilitated by the spontaneous innate capacities, they gradually increase the size of their vocabulary. The Social Interactionist Theory is relevant to the study because it aligns with the adoption for acquisition and learning of English as the immediate and available language the particular segment of children are exposed in their homes and people within their immediate environments where communicative activities are carried out using English as the only medium of expression

Research method

Data for the study were derived from primary sources; by participant observation and administration of questionnaire. Using the random sampling technique, following the permission from the selected school authorities and parents, 468 questionnaires were issued to children within the school age bracket of 06 to 13 in Calabar. The target population was drawn from 10 selected Private Primary and Junior Secondary Schools (JSS). The city is urban, cosmopolitan and multilingual with Efik as the indigenous and supposed dominant language. The choice of the schools is informed by the target on children of parents who are of the middle and high class in the Nigerian society. The class of parents are assumed to be influential on their children’s choice of language and can also afford the ‘high’ fees charged in private schools. With the aid of 20 research assistants who, just as the researchers, are also bi/multilinguals in English and some

Nigerian indigenous languages, the questionnaires were filled under their supervision while 400 were retrieved from the respondents. The research assistants are trained final year students of the Departments of Linguistics and English and Literary Studies. The opinions of the respondents form the extracted data used for the analysis.

Findings and discussion

The relevant data were extracted from respondents’ opinions collated from the segregation of the different segments of the questionnaires. The information collated from the analysis of the questionnaires are grouped into four sections summarized in Tables I to IV. The sections are respondents’ age and class of study, respondents’ ability in mother tongue(s), respondents’ skill in English language, and respondents’ domains of use of English and mother tongue(s).

Respondents’ age and class of study

Table I below shows the age per class distribution of respondents who are within the school age bracket of 06 to 13 and within from Primary one to JSS3.

Table 1. Showing age and class of respondents

S/ N	Age Class	06		07		08		09		10		11		12		13		Total		
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
1	Prim.1	25	62.5	30	7.0														55	13.75
2	2			40	10	30	7.5												70	17.5
3	3					30	7.5												30	7.5
4	4							55	13.75	30	7.5								85	21.25
5	5									20	5								20	5
6	JSS 1									20	5	30	7.5						50	12.5
7	2										30	7.5	30	7.5					60	15
8	3														30	7.5			30	7.5
9	Total	25	6.25	70	17.5	60	15	55	13.75	70	17.5	60	15	30	7.5	30	7.5	400	100	

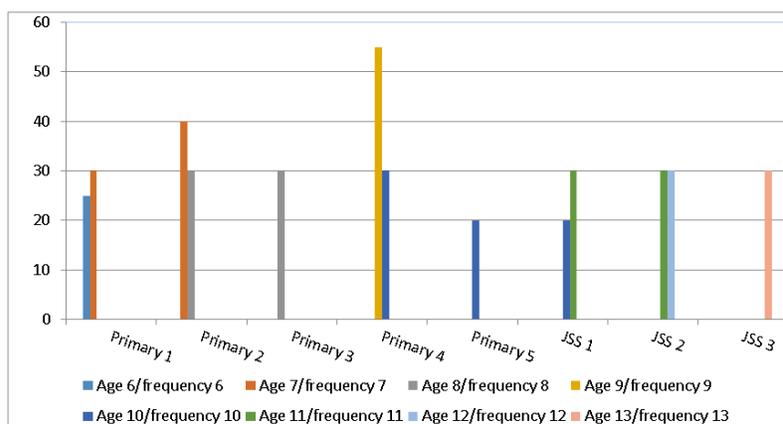


Figure 1. Showing age and class of respondents

Table I above shows the evenly distribution of respondents in classes and age. It is indicated that 55 questionnaires were retrieved from respondents in primary one representing 13.75 percent from which 25 and 30 are aged 06 and 07 representing 6.25 and 7.5 percent respectively. In Primary two, 70 pupils were administered questionnaires amounting to 17.5 percent of the total respondents, 40 are at 07 years old while 30 are aged 08 indicating 10 and 7.5 percent respectively. For primary three, 30 questionnaires representing 7.5 percent were retrieved from respondents

aged 08. Primary four pupils numbering 85 (21.25 percent) were issued questionnaires, while 55 pupils (13.75 percent) are aged 09, 30 pupils (7.5 percent) are aged 10. Also, 20 pupils representing 5 percent returned their questionnaires from Primary five. In the JSS classes, 50 students (12.5 percent) submitted their questionnaire, from which 20 (5 percent) are aged 10 and 30 (7.5 percent) aged 11 in JSS One. While 60 students (15 percent) were randomly selected from JSS Two, 30 (7.5 percent) are within the age of 11 while the other 30 (7.5 percent) are 12 years old. Similarly, 30 students (7.5 percent) of the total respondents aged 13 years are members of JSS three.

Respondents’ ability in mother tongue(s)

Table II below represents the assessment of respondents’ ability in their supposed mother tongues (MT) particularly in the skill of speaking, reading and writing which are basic language skills that determine competence.

Table 2. showing respondents’ ability in their mother tongue(s)

S/N	Item	I know the name of my MT		I can barely speak		I can speak fluently		I can read		I can write		Total	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
I	Mother tongue(s)	298	74.5	130	32.5	123	30.75	68	17	55	13.75	400	100

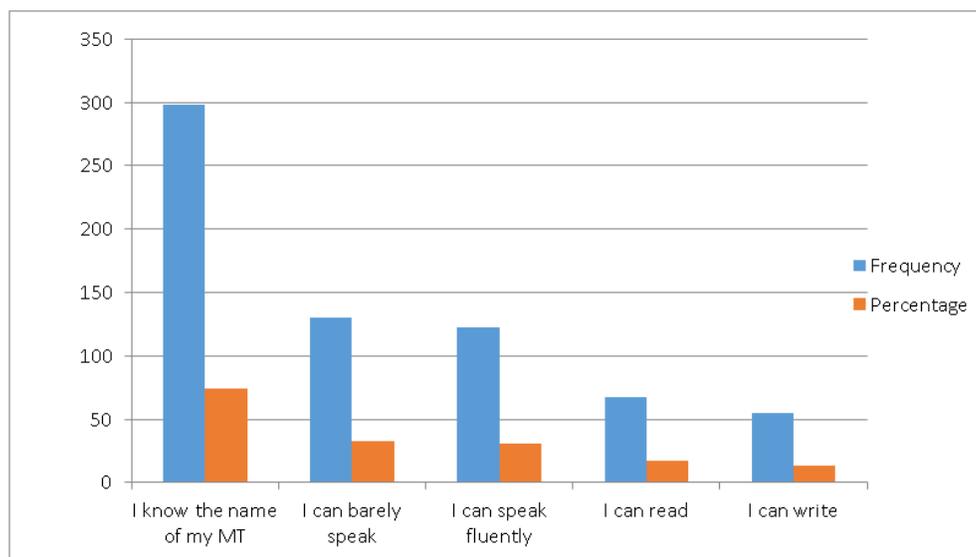


Figure 2. Showing respondents’ ability in their mother tongue(s)

In table 2 above, it is indicated that 46 representing 11.5 percent of the 400 respondents speak indigenous language(s) at home, none claims speaking same in the school, while 13 (that is, 3.25 percent) affirm that they speak their mother tongue in churches, whereas 8.75 percent (45 respondents) claim to use indigenous language(s) in public places. On the contrary, 354 pupils/students making 88.5 percent of the 400 respondents believe that they speak English at home while every respondent avers that he/she uses English in school. Also, 387 (that is, 96.75 percent) of the total respondents reiterate that they use English in churches while 365 children representing 91.25 percent are of the opinion that they speak English in public places.

The observations made in the claims in Table IV include the fact that the 11.5 percent of the respondents who use their indigenous language(s) at home represent the segment of speakers who maintain some consistency in speaking the native languages, while there exists the other set who likely code mix code switch depending on circumstances. Also, 3.25 percent of respondents who declare that they are among those speak native language(s) in churches could be probably representation of the Nigerian Christian songs rendered in the different indigenous languages.

Conclusion

In the study, it has been demonstrated that there are evolving but striking sociolinguistic trends in Calabar as a micro urban city representing a similar linguistic phenomenon in other Nigerian cosmopolitan multilingual cities. It is established in the study that 26 percent of the younger generation of Nigerians within the school age bracket of 06 to 13 years are not aware that they have an indigenous language while 37 percent of them are already monolingual in English which has technically become their first language. The 63 of the research population that possess gradable degree of speaking skill are proven to be bi/multilinguals in the native language(s) and English.

In addition, the increasing inclination towards the preference of speaking English against the use of mother tongue(s) has been observed to exist as responses from basically external factors as a result of uncontrollable gradable degree of pressure and/or influence. This scenario could be situated within the increasing and enormous roles of English, inter-marriages, consequences of globalization, educational policy and the need to be integrated and accommodated into formal communicative activities within the social environment. The implication of this drift is that Nigerians will continue to swell up the population of English monolinguals which ultimately endangers the indigenous language(s) the more, except urgent and systematic language policies are undertaken to motivate the young people to use the native languages widely.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors state that there is no conflict of interest concerning the publication of this paper.

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