

ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The English language is by international treaty, the dominant language in communication, science and technology, sports, commerce, law, aviation, maritime, entertainment, diplomacy and the internet. This is why the English language can conveniently be referred to as a world language. But it does not necessarily mean that the indigenous languages should experience a language shift or go into extinction. The English language should exist alongside the indigenous languages. Researchers have proven that a child learns faster and is more creative when he communicates in the language of his/her immediate environment. This study sought to find out preferences for the English and Igbo languages. This study also sought to ascertain which language between English and Igbo languages people would prefer for official language and to know whether the use of English language is an advantage or a disadvantage. This study tried to find out also the language of instruction in pre-primary and primary schools. This study discovered that majority of the people sampled prefer the use of Igbo language especially in discussion or in giving a detailed report. Also, despite this preference for Igbo language, they still wanted English to remain the official language. The study also discovered that the medium of instruction in all the pre-primary/primary schools sampled is the English language. This study therefore advocates the use of language of immediate community for instruction in pre-primary/primary schools for both the private and public schools.

Keywords: English, Language, Nigeria

Introduction

The English Language is undoubtedly the most important legacy of the British Colonial Masters to Nigeria (Fodeh, 1990). The adoption of the English language for wider communication dates back to 1862 when Lagos was formally established as a Colony by the British invaders. Its subsequent spread is, therefore linked closely to British Colonial rule and its attendant Christian evangelical crusade. The name 'Nigeria' according to Uzoezie "is a borrowed gown and one of the inheritances of our colonial experiences" (Uzoezie qtd in Obi-Okoye, 2001). Before the creation of Nigeria in 1914, what is known today as Nigeria consisted of empires and kingdoms. These are the Northern Empires, the Calabar Kingdom, the Oduduwa Empire, the Benin Empire and minor empires like the Nupe Empire, the Borno Empire, the Zazzau Kingdom, the individual heterogeneous communities in the Eastern parts and some parts of present-day Ghana and the Cameroon. The Europeans came with economic interest which later gave way to religious and political interests. Later, provinces were carved out from these empires and kingdoms for effective administration. These provinces were Lagos Colony, the Northern provinces, the Eastern provinces and the Western provinces. Then, in 1914 Lord Lugard amalgamated the Northern and the Southern protectorates into what is called Nigeria today. (Obi-okoye, 2008)

The initial contact through trade paved the way for the introduction of the English language into Nigeria. The European, his language and the native language came in contact. Bamgbose (1995) states that "this led to a more formalized relationship and subsequent development were to convert English into a second language with a distinctive Nigerian flavour and to ensure for it a dominant position as the country's official language". Omolewa (1975) states that English language came to Nigeria before the advent of the missionaries in the country. The 'coastal English' spoken then according to him, was highly adulterated. It was a transactional and functional kind of English used by traders along the coast of Nigeria. (qtd in Obi-Okoye, 61) Bamgbose (1995) identified basically three types of Nigerian English. These are Contact English, Victorian English and School English. Bamgbose affirms that contact gave birth to an inter-language which he calls "Contact English". Contact English has Nigeria pidgin and Broken English as its variants. The spread of the English language could be linked closely to the British Colonial rule and influx of English missionaries. There arose a great need for language to adopt for communication between the heterogeneous communities and the foreigners. From a very early period, the colonial masters' attitude towards the local languages was contemptuous.

Omotewa affirms this view as he quotes Rev. M. Sunter an inspector of schools, who dismissed the vernacular as “only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use to civilization” (1975). Sunter further asserts that as far as he and his countrymen were concerned, the indigenous people “must and will know English in spite of all well-meaning but diseased notions; it is the language of commerce and the only education worth a moment’s consideration”. During this period as Baldeh (1990) puts it, the implantation, acceptance and role of English in the body politic of Nigeria started with it being adopted as the channel of instruction in 1882 and a vehicle for the training of badly needed manpower to run the fledging government services. (1-2)

Consequently, the education ordinances and codes were enacted in quick succession in 1882, 1896, 1918 and 1926 promoting the new language for general internal use. (Baldeh 1990) English was now raised to an enviable status by the demands of the certification system. (Baldeh 1990) Pupils were taught so many subjects through the English language. The English language became the language of power and success to those who acquired it. To obtain a lucrative job then, in the public or private sector, a pass in English was a necessary prerequisite. (Baldeh 1990) This was the first factor that facilitated the ascendancy of the English language in Nigeria. Given the lucrative jobs and enviable status the English language accorded those who were versed in it, the vernacular languages were regretfully relegated to the background. Children who speak the indigenous/ vernacular language were punished severely. This is another factor that aided the ascendancy of the English language. According to Baldeh, (1990) the resultant effect was “a progressively waning enthusiasm for the local language” This made the Phelps-stoke commission in 1921 to recommend that learning should be in the mother tongue. Despite this recommendation, many people still clamored for it.

The indigenous languages were challenged by a lot of setbacks like unavailability of textbooks and teaching materials, multiplicity of dialects etc. Then, with the establishment of the British Council charged with the task to promote a wider knowledge of English language, further sounded the death knell for these local languages. Thus, the English language became the language of education, government commerce, industry, law and administration. The backwardness of the Northerners could be traced to their opposition of the English language which was the vehicle par excellence in ushering in modernity. The emergence of the English language as the national language or lingua franca has two reasons. The English language offers neutrality which other indigenous languages could not. Then, its status as a world language. Given the above situation, this paper sought to find out if the Igbo language is used in the teaching of pupils in primary schools. It also sought to ascertain which of these languages (English/Igbo) people prefer speaking. This paper equally sampled people’s opinion as to which of these languages (English/Igbo) they prefer for official purposes. Finally, this paper tried to find out if the English language is an advantage or a disadvantage to the Igbo people.

Materials and Methods

The study population consisted of people living in Awka South and Awka North Local Government Areas. While Awka South represented the urban population, Awka North represented the rural population. A total of 100 persons were selected from each L.G.A. and questionnaire was administered to them. Two private primary schools and two public primary schools were also selected from Awka metropolis to ascertain the language of instruction.

A total of 100 pupils were selected, 25 pupils from each of the above mentioned schools and oral interview was administered to ascertain the of instruction.

Findings

Ten out of the 100 questionnaires distributed were not retrieved.

Table 1: Age Distribution, of Respondents

Age	Number of respondents (%)
16-26	47(52)
27-37	22(24)
38-48	5(6)

49-59	14(16)
60-79	2(2)
Total-	90(100)

This table shows the age distribution of respondents. The highest number of respondents is within the age bracket of 16-26years while the least number of respondents is from the age bracket of 60-79years.

Table 2: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Sex	Frequency	%frequency
Male	30	33
Female	60	67
Total	90	100

This table shows the gender distribution of respondents. Within the sample population, the males were thirty and constituted 33% of the sample population while the females sampled were 60 and represents 67% of the population sampled.

Table 3: Residential Distribution of Respondents

Residence	Frequency	%frequency
Rural	37	41
Urban	53	59
Total	90	100

This shows the residential distribution of respondents. The rural residents were 37 and constituted 41% of the sampled population while urban residents were 53 and constituted 59% of the sampled population.

Table 4: Literacy Level Distribution of Respondents.

Literacy level	Frequency	%frequency
FSCE	9	10
WAEC	24	27
First degree	49	54
Second degree	8	9
Total	90	100

This table shows that within the population sampled, the literacy level distribution of most of the respondents fall under the first degree.

Table 5: The Preference of Respondents for the English Language and Igbo Languages

Preference	Frequency	%frequency
English	35	39
Igbo	55	61
Total	90	100

This shows that 55 respondents which constituted 61%of the population prefer speaking Igbo language while 35 respondents which is 39% of the population indicated they prefer speaking English language.

Table 6: The Preference of Respondents for the English Language or Igbo Language for Official Use.

Preference	Frequency	%frequency
English	68	76
Igbo	22	24
Total	90	100

This table shows that 68 respondents which is 79% of the sampled population prefer the English language for official purposes while 22 respondents which is 24% prefer the Igbo language for official purposes.

Table 7: Respondents' Opinion on the Advantage or Disadvantage of the Use of the English Language.

Opinion	Frequency	% frequency
Advantage	65	72
Disadvantage	25	28
Total	90	100

This table shows that 65 respondents which is 72% of the population have the opinion that the use of English language is an advantage while 28% of the population share the opinion that the use of English language is a disadvantage.

Discussions of findings

From the data generated for this study, it was discovered that majority of the respondents prefer speaking Igbo language to English language. About 55 out of 90 respondents sampled prefer speaking Igbo language. Some indicated in writing that they feel at home with the Igbo language especially in giving a detailed report or discussion.

The study also discovered that despite the preference for the Igbo language by majority of the respondents, the English language is still preferred as the official language. 68 respondents out of 90 prefer it. On the opinion of the respondents as to whether the use of English language is an advantage or a disadvantage, received an overwhelming affirmation that the English language is an advantage to the Igbos. About 65 respondents acknowledged that the English language is an advantage while 25 respondents refuted this.

It was discovered that the medium of instruction in all the pre-primary/ primary schools sampled is English language. In all the private pre-primary/ primary schools sampled, the pupils communicate in English language and the school authorities insist that the language spoken to the children at home must be English. While in the public primary schools, the pupils communicate in Igbo, English is only used as a medium of instruction.

Conclusion

From the findings, it is obvious that Igbo people prefer speaking Igbo language especially when engaged in a detailed discussion. Majority prefer English as official language because according to them, English offers neutrality which other indigenous languages could not. This is in line with what Kebby (1986) observed when he said "No Nigerian language can perform scientific and technological need...because no one is perfect." All schools must make the language of the immediate community as the language of instruction as stipulated in the National Policy on Education. It is also the duty of the government to ensure that the language policy is implemented. School authorities have no right to insist that the language at home be English. This attitude has jeopardized the learning of the Igbo language from cradle. In as much as majority advocates the continual use of English language as the official language, this paper pleads that the indigenous languages be given a chance. A child is more integrated in all the domains and acquires aboriginal wisdom when he/she is reared up in the language of the immediate community.

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