

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

With over 300 languages, Nigeria is unarguably one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa. However, none of these languages has a prominent status as the English language which serves as the medium of instruction from the primary to the tertiary level, the official language and the language of inter-ethnic communication. In order to be relevant in this digital age, Nigerian students who are basically bilinguals, need to be proficient in the all- important global language, English. Accordingly, the teaching and learning of English have a prominent place in the education sector. This paper explores the diverse linguistic terrains of Nigeria in which all the languages function as equals although English is evidently more equal. It also examines the implications of this sociolinguistic situation for ESL pedagogy.

Keywords: Linguistic diversity, Multilingualism, Ethno linguistic groups, Language, Education, Lingua franca

Introduction

Speech communities in Sub-Saharan Africa are distinguished by multilingualism, a socio-political and socio-linguistic factor that has a direct bearing on development plans in developing countries. Multilingualism is viewed by scholars - e.g., Bamgbose (1989) - as both a resource and a problem. As a resource, it makes available more languages to the polity and increases the potential for language learning. On the other hand, as a problem, it has divisive potentials and with special reference to education, leads to challenges in the area of provision of learning materials in more than one language medium. Members of multilingual societies can only gain access to a language of wider communication (Fishman, Ferguson, & Das-Gupta, 1977) for example, English, French, Arabic, by the acquisition of a second non-native language.

Unlike their African counterparts, European countries are generally unilingual, and the linguistic heterogeneity tends to be confined to the frontiers and is therefore local and peripheral. Romaine (1989, p.23) posits that 25 out of 36 European countries are officially unilingual. Minority languages do exist in European countries, but according to Hechter (1975), they are severely marginalized. This article explores the complex ethnolinguistic landscape of Nigeria, the most populous and most multilingual country in Black Africa, and

examines the implication of the diversity of languages for the teaching of English, a language closely tied to the destiny of the nation.

What is known today as Nigeria came into being following the amalgamation of three British colonies in 1914 by Lord Lugard, the then colonial governor. The colonies were the Northern Protectorate, the Southern Protectorate, and the Lagos Colony. Prior to the amalgamation, what existed was, according to Akinnaso (1991, p.134):

A sprawling territory of apparently unrelated ethnolinguistic groups each with its own distinctive history, language and traditional patterns of religious, political, social, and economic organization. The amalgamation thus extended the scope of an already complicated linguistic landscape.

The principal ethnic groups (see Table 1) existed alongside hundreds of minority ethnolinguistic groups in the Plateau Belt now known as the Middle Belt and in the Delta area in the south, whose distinctiveness from the large groups were not recognized by the colonial government.

Table 1: Principal Ethnic Groups in the British Colonies of Nigeria by 1914

Colony	Ethnic Groups
Northern Protectorate	Hausa, Fulani, Tiv, Bachama, Nupe, Shuwa, Ibira, Kaje, Gwoza, Kanuri, Suyawa
Southern Protectorate	Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ishekiri, Urhbo
Lagos	Yoruba

In 1947, the protectorates were renamed “regions” while the North remained intact because Hausa served – and still serves – as the lingua-franca.

The Southern Protectorate was split into Eastern and Western regions, partly in recognition of the major linguistic and cultural differences between the Igbo and Efik-Ibibio in the East, and the Yoruba and Edo in the West. These three regional structures lasted until May 1967 when they were abolished by the military regime and the country was further split into twelve states mainly along ethno-linguistic lines. Before then, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba had been substantially developed and were being used in education and the mass media. Even though it was not used on the same scale as the aforementioned languages, Efik was also considerably developed due to the activities of the Church of Scotland missionaries who settled in Calabar in 1846.

Strident demands for separate regions by language minorities, especially the Edos and the Urhobos, led to the creation of a fourth region in 1963 – the Midwest – with headquarters in Benin. The demands by other ethnolinguistic groups for the creation of regions were wisely ignored by the British Government before granting political independence in 1960 for fear of civil unrest. In the same vein, the desire to maintain unity among the diverse groups in Nigeria is to a large extent, the determining factor in the present 36-state structure based mainly on ethnolinguistic groups.

The Multilingual Nature of Nigeria

The issue of determining the exact number of languages in Nigeria has engaged researchers for several decades, yet, it is not clear exactly how many languages coexist in Nigeria. Tiffen (1968) puts the number at 150 while Greenberg (1971), suggests that there are 248 languages. Bamgbose (1970), after a rigorous investigation, says there are 400 languages. Bamgbose's claim is supported by Hansford, Bendor and Stanford (1976). Hoffman (1975), reported that there are between 400 and 513 living languages. Oyetayo (2006) posits that there are 510 living languages and 9 extinct ones.

Apart from the indigenous languages, there are four other languages namely English, French, Arabic, and Pidgin. Some scholars, for example, Agheyisi (1984) and Akinnosa (1989), have classified the languages used in Nigeria into three: indigenous, exogenous, and neutral. A brief discussion of these three are hereby presented:

Indigenous Languages

These are the 510 languages that vary greatly in terms of status, geographical spread, and characteristics. Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba which are by government fiat, designated as national languages, are spoken by an estimated total of 53% of Nigerians. Nine languages are spoken by a combined estimated total of 27% of the population, and function as regional languages. These languages are Efik, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Tiv, Ijaw, Idoma, Nupe, Igala and Edo. About 380 minority languages spoken by roughly 20% of the population are classified as local. The national languages have a double status as they also function as regional languages.

In terms of structure, a great deal of similarity exists between Nigerian languages, with 70% of them deriving from the Niger-Kordofanian phylum, while the rest derive from the Afro-Asiatic phylum, except Kanuri, Dendi and Zuma which are of the Nilo-Saharan stock (Akinnaso 1991, pp. 34-35).

Two facts about minority languages which are relevant to this discussion are summarized as follows:

2/3 of the minority languages are spoken in the North, while the rest cluster around Edo, Delta, Rivers and Cross River States.

The South is equally linguistically fragmented but has no indigenous lingua franca because none of the dominant languages – Igbo and Yoruba - spread beyond its native borders. Moreover, English and Pidgin English developed earlier in the South through the agency of missionaries, European traders, free slaves, and colonial administrators also exist and enjoy great acceptability in the South.

It is pertinent to explain briefly, the difference in the sociolinguistic development between the North and the South in order to put the language situation in Nigeria in perspective. Hausa spread in the North partly because of the common religious heritage and binding web provided by Islam and partly because it was the language used by the colonial administrators in governing the region. The South is home to two major languages; Igbo and Yoruba and the numerous minority languages.

Exogenous Languages

The exogenous languages are Arabic, English, and French. They found their way into the country variously through the process of expansion, unification, and cosmopolitanism (Siguan& Mackey, 1987, pp. 29-31).

Arabic is the earliest foreign language in Nigeria, dating back to the 9th century. It came with Islam and the trans-Saharan trade, and stayed until the 19th century, when its influence began to wane following the emergence of English. It served “H” functions like judicial and political administration, literacy, and scholarly activities. It is still the major language of Islamic worship and Quranic teachings.

The next exogenous language is English, and it is by far, the most important language in Nigeria. English is used for most “H” functions and doubles as the language of inter-ethnic communication among the educated elite. “H” here refers to ‘high’. So ‘H’ Functions means “High functions”. So we have high functions and low functions. ‘H’ functions of language include (a) interactional (b) textual (c) interpersonal (Halliday, 1975).

English was first introduced into Nigeria in the 16th century by European traders. Later in the 18th century, it was adopted by the missionaries who also taught it to their converts to facilitate the work of evangelization. In the 19th century when the British assumed control of Nigeria, it became the colonial language and later in the 20th century, the official language.

The third of the exogenous languages, French, is taught and learnt in elitist private schools and Federal Government Colleges. Apart from diplomatic transactions and border communications with Francophone countries, there is no other significant purpose the language serves in the country.

Neutral Languages

Pidgin is appropriately termed neutral because it does not lean towards any of the indigenous languages. Rather, it is a compound of English and some indigenous languages and began life as an L2, used for “a limited range of purposes especially trade and communication between two races (Akinaso, 1991). Specifically, it was between African and Portuguese traders. Wardhaugh (2011) captures the Nigerian situation as he states that Pidgin is a language that is no one’s native language but is a contact language and the product of a multilingual situation in which those who wish to communicate must find or improvise a simple language system that will enable them to do so.

Pidgin is generally regarded as a stigmatized variety of English, commonly spoken by the uneducated or those incapable of learning Standard English (Jowitt, 1999, p.12). Originally functioning as a medium of inter-ethnic communication among less educated people and as a lingua franca among ethnic minorities in Edo, Delta, Rivers and Cross River States, it has spread nationwide and is now the most popular medium of communication in the civil services, educational institutions, marketplaces, sports and entertainment and even among people of the same linguistic group.

Pidgin does not however, appear to have any prospect of formalized use for educational purposes, in spite of its popularity. The main reason for this is that ESL teachers regard it as

an ever-present source of problem in the teaching and learning of Standard English. It is perhaps necessary to point out that despite its stigmatization in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa by ESL practitioners, in Papua New Guinea, Pidgin English, known in the country as Tok Pisin, has the status of an official language.

Constitutional Provision for Language

Forging national unity out of the diverse ethnic groups has been of major concern to Nigerian governments since colonial times. At the centre of this diversity are language factors which are characteristically potent instruments for the dismemberment of nations. 'Unity in diversity' thus, became an article of faith for successive governments in Nigeria as is reflected in the defunct National Anthem in the following lines:

Though tribe and tongue may differ
In brotherhood we stand.

(This anthem was discarded for, among other things, the word, 'tribe' which was considered pejorative.)

Between 1945 and 1989, all the Constitutions addressed the issue of reconciling unity with diversity. In 1945, the then Governor, Sir Arthur Richards, conscious of language diversity as one of the principal obstacles to unity, recommended that in revising the Nigerian Constitution, 'the language would be Hausa in the North and English in the West and East'. This recommendation was probably based on the socio-linguistic fact that Hausa is the lingua franca of the North and that the South could get on with English better having been exposed to it through contact with the Europeans.

The 'Hausa-in-the North, English-in-the-South formula' remained in force until 1954 when another constitutional amendment approved 'the use of Hausa in addition to English in the North' and proclaimed English, for the first time, Nigeria's official language, a position it has maintained till date.

While endorsing the status of English, the 1979 Constitution also accorded Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba the status of national languages to be used at the National Assembly. In the words of the Constitution: *The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore (Section 51)*

At the State Assembly, English and the local languages were approved for use:

The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve (Section 91)

The principle underlying the linguistic pluralism of the 1979 Constitutional provision is primarily to ensure unity in diversity by accommodating, as much as possible, the various language groups. What happened in practice was that at the National Assembly, English was used in all deliberations in order, according to one Member of Parliament, 'to avoid trouble'. Regarding the State Houses of Assembly, the provision was implemented only in the

linguistically homogeneous states. In such states as Rivers, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and Plateau where there are many languages, English was the obvious choice.

The varied linguistic situation in Nigeria which has been described in this discourse complicates considerably the challenges of ESL teaching and learning. In specific terms, the situation places a large number of learners at a disadvantage and calls for increased research efforts aimed at improving the learning of Standard English.

Language in Education

The importance of language in the education process is underlined by the truism that the extent to which one can learn is largely dependent on one's mastery of the language of instruction. Vygotsky (1980), a famous psycholinguist, for example, believes that thought cannot be separated from language, for language is the vehicle of thought. Bamgbose (1991) posits that a discussion of language in education in multilingual societies brings up three major questions: a) what language? b) For what purpose? c) At what level?

Regarding the first question, the choice of a language of education in any multilingual country, particularly in one that has also been subjected to the inevitable imposition of a foreign language arising from colonialism such as Nigeria, always presents a major challenge. Effective language policy and planning is the pathway to addressing the challenge. Bamgbose (1991) recommends six options: (1) the learners' MT, which serves as the medium of informal education in the home and of socialization process among their peers. (2) the language of the immediate community (particularly in the case of speakers of minority languages) which serves as a local or regional lingua franca, e.g. Igbo for Ikwerre speakers. (3) As an alternative to the language of the immediate community, there is in some African countries, a widely spoken lingua franca or national language e.g. Swahili in Tanzania. (4) A language of wider communication (LWC) which was the official language during the colonial period, and which has become a second language in the countries concerned. E.g. English in Nigeria and Ghana. (5) A language associated with a religion e.g. Classical Arabic in several African countries with predominant Muslim population e.g. Libya. (6) A language of wider communication learnt as a foreign language e.g. French in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, option 4 is in operation and brings with it several challenges, the most daunting perhaps being underachievement, which is a consequence of a lack of proficiency in the language. To address this challenge, ESL researchers and teachers should investigate the deviations in the written English of students at the various levels of primary and secondary education.

Regarding the second question – for what purpose? The purpose of language in education is to learn the language of inter-ethnic communication and global language (English) as well as the mother tongue for over all language and social development. This answers the question, 'for what purpose?'

Regarding the third question – at what level? – It is associated with the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. A language may be introduced as a subject at any point at each of the three levels. However, for a language to serve as a medium of instruction at the secondary and higher levels, it must have been taught as a subject at the primary level.

The issue of which language to use in the education of the Nigerian child dates back to the colonial era. Before the 1882 Education Ordinance made the teaching of English language a condition for the award of government grants to schools, Christian missionaries had started mother- tongue education by training their converts to read the Bible and other religious literature in Nigerian languages. However, following the recommendations of a commission set up in 1919 by the Phelps–Stokes fund of US to look into the education system of the colonials, the local language or the learners’ mother tongue was adopted for instruction at the lower level i.e. kindergarten to primary 3 while English was used at the upper primary and post-primary levels. That was the first time Nigerian languages were officially assigned a definite status and role in education. The 1919 policy was more or less in operation until when the National Policy on Education (2014), section 1, paragraph 8, introduced the three-language formula.

The three language formula provides that the Nigerian child, should in the interest of national unity, be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

What the formula demands of the Nigerian pupil, in effect, is proficiency in Mother Tongue (MT), proficiency in Other Tongue (OT)– Hausa/Igbo/Yoruba - and proficiency in Further Tongue (FT) (English) – (Brann, 1980, p11). This policy is however effectively operational only in Federal Government Colleges and in some elitist private secondary schools.

The three-language formula, as it was conceived, was meant to yield tangible benefits even if it would have made a serious demand on the cognitive ability of the learners. Its full implementation has been hampered by, among other factors, acute shortage of well-trained language teachers and appropriate curriculum materials (Oladejo, 1999, pp.91-102). Other obstacles to the implementation of the policy have been highlighted by other researchers like Ogunyemi (2009), Owolabi and Adebile (2011), Owolabi and Dada (2012). These include the absence of pragmatic language planning, the existence of many languages and the inability of most of the existing languages to function as a medium of education, and above all, the need for everyone to key into the 21st century trending internet revolution and immigration to foreign countries. These last two obstacles to implementation of the NPE both demand proficiency in the English language.

English vs. Nigerian Languages

The incongruence between policy and practice in relation to language use is apparent in the constitutional provisions for language which we have so far tried to review. While the intention of policy makers is that language policy process will be basically endoglossic, that is favouring indigenous languages, the outcome is, in fact, exoglossic, that is favouring foreign languages. English thus remains inextricably intertwined with education in Nigeria. Though the importance of English in the education system is a reflection of our national socio-linguistic situation, arguments have been raging for and against its continued use (rather than Nigerian languages) as a medium of instruction. We will briefly consider a few of these arguments:

In favour of the continued use of English as a medium of instruction, it has been argued that a change to another medium implies major changes in curriculum, teacher training programs, textbooks and teaching aid, all at enormous cost. However, opponents of the status quo counter the enormous-cost argument by saying that books, curricula, training programs, etc must be modified and adopted to suit changing Nigerian conditions whether or not English remains the medium of instruction.

The second argument has to do with the question of a common language. The selection of one language to replace English would seriously threaten the unity of the nation since all Nigerians do not have a common language. A counter argument is that an African language (it does not have to be a Nigerian language) could be used. Swahili, which is spoken by many Africans as a second language readily comes to mind. But then, the enormous-cost argument will be replayed here.

The third argument is that Corpus Planning is still going on in Nigerian languages in science and technology; so advocates of English medium argue that no Nigerian language is sufficiently developed for educational purposes. It is doubtful, the argument continues, if conscious vocabulary expansion and propagation would improve their chances in the future considering the huge costs involved. In debunking this position, it has been pointed out that languages like Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa can speedily acquire technical and scientific vocabularies; but the cost will certainly be humongous.

The fourth argument is that the modern world is fast moving towards a common language and that the adoption of any language other than English would effectively exclude Nigerians from worldwide communication since English is a major world language.

In support of the use of Nigerian languages, it has been asserted that the small groups of Nigerians who are involved in international communication would be better catered for in special courses such as English for Specific Purpose (ESP). It is further argued that this is an English as an International Language (EIL) rather than an English as a Second Language (ESL) argument. It is therefore, not an argument for using English as a medium but rather for teaching English as thoroughly as possible. Moreover, it is doubtful whether it is really in the interest of the students when badly taught English is used as a medium of instruction.

Those who favour the replacement of English with Nigerian languages anchor their stand on the research findings of UNESCO (1953), Fafunwa (1975), Phillipson (1992), Afolayan (1976) and argue that Mother-Tongue Education is better for a child's cognitive development. With regard to Nigeria, it was noted that English is an elitist language spoken by less than 2% of the entire population of Nigerians, that English fosters cultural alienation and finally that the linguistic imperialism which the language fosters must be rooted out. Advocates of mother tongue medium of instruction appear to have been inspired by the view of the foremost linguist, Carroll (1968 p .7) who posits that "perhaps no other potent factor in the life of an individual has larger possibilities for the development and the building of the reputation of the person as a well-educated person than his mother tongue".

The fact remains, however, that Nigerians even though they like their languages, admire and prefer English because of its association with greater individual and collective advantages. All

the arguments about cultural identity and patriotism notwithstanding, very few parents would sincerely support education in a medium they believe would not liberate their children from economic and political restrictions.

Implications for Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL)

The linguistic terrain of Nigeria where the English language functions as the official language and the language of education from primary three to the tertiary level has several implications for English language teaching. In the first place, the contact between English and Nigerian languages inevitably results in inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors and other deviations associated with second language learning. The English language teacher in Nigeria should therefore, be versed in the most effective strategies for teaching ESL. A deep knowledge of the significance of Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA) and Inter-language (IL) in ESL teaching is here suggested as a key requirement for teachers. Regular staff development programs and in-service courses are required by the English language teachers in order to keep abreast of innovations and strategies in the teaching of the subject.

The situation also has implications for textbooks and other teaching materials. Course books should be written by writers who are knowledgeable about the sociolinguistic situation of Nigeria and who are familiar with the concept of teaching English language as a second language

Another implication of the situation is the language learning burden imposed on the Nigerian child. This burden can be reduced by intensifying efforts towards effective L1 education at the primary level so that the learner would have some skills to transfer to L2 since language skills are transferable. It is therefore absolutely essential to train more teachers of indigenous Nigerian languages who are also speakers of English as a second language.

Nigeria with its complex linguistic situation can be described as 'a living laboratory of languages with varying influences in the form of missionaries, settlers, colonial administrators, language policies tied to the preservation of national unity. This necessitates active collaboration between Nigerian linguists and their overseas counterparts using the living language laboratory to identify and solve the problems of ELT in a multilingual setting. Closely related to the foregoing is the need for increased studies in sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics and language acquisition which we believe will enable the relevant government agencies to formulate an effective and sustainable educational language policy as well as facilitate proficiency in the use of English in Nigeria.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is appropriate to emphasize that for English to function satisfactorily as the medium of instruction as well as the official language, it must be taught efficiently as a subject. To this end we believe that the extant educational language policy should be vigorously implemented and as pointed out earlier, the teachers should be exposed to best practices in ESL pedagogy through periodic in service and staff development programs in collaboration with such well-known organisations as The British Council and USAID. Considering the importance of competence in the use of a global language both for the individual and for the nation, a huge amount of resources should be committed by the Nigerian government and education stakeholders to English language learning and teaching in Nigeria.

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