English as a Second Language in Contemporary Nigerian Society, a Reality or Farce?

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Abstract
It is no longer news that the English language in Nigeria has been the official language and the language of teaching and instruction in Nigerian schools, of legislature and governance ever since the coming of the colonial master. This stance occupied by the language in Nigeria has resulted in the use of the language for daily linguistic activities both in Nigerian homes and outside of it. The persistent preference and the prestigious stance assigned to the English language have led to a dramatic shift from the use of the indigenous languages to English which threatens to dislodge the Igbo language from its natural position in the society. This study therefore strives to discover the actual status of English language as L2 and the indigenous languages, in this case Igbo, as L1 in Nigerian homes and schools, particularly, in the urban areas. The study also hopes to direct its search effort towards the root causes of the linguistic status assigned to the two languages in the contemporary Nigeria, the users attitude towards them, the looming linguicide posed by one of them on the other and finally make some useful recommendations on how to salvage the situation.

Introduction
Language provides the avenue for social, political, religious and intellectual interactions among the users. It is a form of identity for speech communities. Language provides the vehicle through which education is made available to the citizenry of a nation. The English language which has sojourned in Nigeria for more than a hundred and fifty years has been institutionalized by the government to serve various purposes.
The use of the language in varied spheres of Nigerian nation has displaced the indigenous languages from their initial positions. This is because the colonial master adjudged the English language a superior one. This judgment informed the subsequent
enthronement of the language to a very high pedestal by the Nigerian premier leaders. The step taken by our premier leaders resulted into various uses of the language and which consequently metamorphosed into a language of class identifier, to the extent that deficiency in the possession of the ’all-important’ language places one at societal ebb of affairs.

During the pre-colonial era, the indigenous languages in Nigeria thrived. People used their native languages, at both rural and urban places, for interaction in their social contexts. With the constant use of the languages, cultural values were maintained, and the tie between the users and their ancestral heritage was intact thereby boosting the linguistic confidence of the people. Unfortunately the benefits that go with the use of indigenous languages, particularly, in teaching the young ones, were gradually dwindling as a result of the use of English language for daily communication in Nigerian urban homes, and schools.

Baldeh noted that such benefits include ’the preservation of cultural heritage, the dignity of the Blackman, and the cultivation of a sense of nationalism’ (5). Language serves as an interface into the culture, way of life and attitudes of the people. These point to the notion of language determinism which claims that “language determines certain nonlinguistic cognitive processes. That is, learning a language changes the way a person thinks” (Carroll 377). This is exactly what English language does to the Igbo, particularly the children who acquire the language as their L1. Because language and its culture always accompany each other, our children in urban cities, through the process of acculturation, consequently imbibe foreign culture and lose theirs. They no longer benefit from the dignity that indigenous language bestows to the owners and worse still, they are deprived of the great opportunity of cultivating a sense of nationality and the local wisdom that go with languages.
The Igbo language is one of the eight major languages in the Benue-Congo group of African languages (Echeruo 1). The language is currently ranked the 50th in the world, in terms of number of native speakers, after Chinese, English, French etc. (The Igbo Network). According to Echeruo, “the Igbo language is spoken by an estimated twenty million Nigerians (1). The Igbo child who was nurtured and who grew up in a natural Igbo speech environment with various dialects had a genetic ability and environmental base to acquire the Igbo language and use it for his/her need in the same social environment. But with the invasion and imposition of the English language through our educational system and the linguistic state in various urban families, the indigenous language compete, unfavourably with English. Igbo people tend to abandon their native language in favour of English because of its ‘supposedly’ benefits.

People’s acceptance of the English language arose as a result of the attendant socio-economic gains thereby resulting to neglect of the Igbo language. The neglect of the Igbo language turned the Igbo people into language tenants in their own native/social environment. The use of the English language has become a common place that some natives, especially children and youths, cannot confidently and fluently interact in their own native language. When it comes to the use and understanding of Igbo proverbs, idioms and wise sayings, they are totally illiterates. This situation has rendered the native languages almost to the point of extinction in the rural areas. Uzoezie frowned at the effect of the English language on the indigenous languages when he said that, ’English is behaving as a linguistic cannibal to our indigenous Nigerian languages’ (104), a sort of language hegemony.

Language is basically for communication and interaction in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The Igbo language already fulfills that function for the Igbo child who
does not need the distraction of a second language at such an early stage of his life. The introduction of another language at an early stage may hinder sufficient acquisition of another. Talking in this line Lyons said that:

in language, as a child progressively acquires his mother tongue, he or she progressively loses the facility for easily learning another language partly due to the theory of language acquisition popularly called lateralization, which starts at about the age of two and tapers off as the child enters the teens (249).

The implication of Lyons statement to the linguistic situation of the Igbo child is that, since s/he is initially exposed to English (L1), a foreign language, s/he will progressively lose the facility of learning Igbo, his/her indigenous language (L2), and may never be proficient in it as a result of the lateralization process that might have set in.

However, Nigeria government identified this situation quite early and specified in the National Policy on Education (1981:10) that the medium of instruction at the pre-primary level “will be principally the mother tongue of the language of the immediate community… ”(Olaofe 50 in Emenanajo Ed). The same policy further stated that “the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English” (50). But what is obtainable today in Nigerian schools? Both the government and private owned schools, starting from pre-primary to university levels instruct and teach our children using the English language. The most baffling and ironic situations in the issue is that at the tertiary level, the so called Igbo departments in Nigerian Universities also teach and carry out researches in English! Universities all over the world are known for setting the pace
when it comes to transfer and maintenance of standards. The reverse is the case in Nigerian Universities.

At the pre-nursery and nursery levels of Nigerian schools, the Igbo child meets a different language (believing that the child is lucky to come from few homes that still communicate in their local language in the home) where s/he is made to recite and memorize verses in English. S/he meets ’aunty’, an epitome of ’new’ authority who ensures that every child speaks English and frowns seriously at the use of Igbo in the school environment. Some schools go as far as insisting, through the registration form, that the language to be spoken to the child at home must be English thereby forcing parents into a linguistic pact of killing Igbo language at the family level. The new generation churches are the highest offenders where their leaders are practically competing among themselves on who will outdo the other in the charismatic way of speaking English in their bid to gain more congregations. Their prayers and preachings are hardly rendered in Igbo. When they do, they are never coherent. Our children are part of the congregation and they look-up to these ’men of God’ as epitome of everything worthy of emulation. The resultant effect is an Igbo child who has no safe and promising environment to learn his/her mother tongue proficiently. S/he grows up resenting his/her language and sees it as the inferior other. Okafor noted in a colloquium organized by Prof. Ezenwa-Ohaeto Resource Centre on 9th August 2012, that there is “Ako na Uche” (aboriginal/native wisdom) that goes with the knowledge of a particular language. If an Igbo child speaks English at home, at school, in the church and other places, s/he will definitely be an inheritor of the ’Ako na Uche’ talked about by Okafor. The child is never deprived of the life-time opportunity to take pride in his/her language, his/her culture and his/her history. The implication is a child who is not only Igbo by birth but also Igbo in practice.
Being the future leaders and hope of posterity, the Igbo child should be imparted with the knowledge of his/her language so as avert the looming language death that is facing Igbo. An Igbo child can never be proficient in the language because of the acquisition he had through teachers and parents who learnt the language as L2 with the consequent linguistic implications that go with L2 learning. An Igbo child who falls victim of this is linguistically unbalanced. He is neither here nor there linguistically speaking.

**Attitudes of the family, Schools and Government**

Parents and the immediate family members are the first contacts a child makes. This means that the two have the very first opportunity to establish the first linguistic impression on the child. This also means that they have the great opportunity of giving the child language identity and cultural pride. The language the child encounters at this early stage of his/her life tells so much about whom s/he is and his/her origin. It bestows on the child a sense of belonging and exposes him/her to ancient wisdom as well as helps in the growth and sustenance of the culture. It equally leads to living in unity and coherence in the native environment and offers opportunity to indigenous science in the child’s future. Therefore the family has a great role to play in language acquisition.

Regrettably, the average conventional Igbo family in the cities enthrones English as the medium of communication at the detriment of Igbo, thereby depriving their children of their birthright. Some of them reason that they have to start in time to expose their children to English because a credit in English in WASC and other equivalent examinations is prerequisite for further studies in Nigerian institutions of higher learning. They claim that children will ‘pick’ Igbo in their later interaction in the environment. Others do so because they believe that ability to interact in English boosts their social class. Contrary to their
reasoning, age is an important factor in language learning and that the earlier “the learning process begins, the easier it would be to master a second language”. (Okediadi 44 in Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Ogbazi). The Igbo child at that tender age has no set goals for himself or herself and so does not have the patience and resilience it takes to learn a second language. A language that is ‘picked’, as noted above, and not acquired, definitely can easily be dropped. What this means also is that the child acquires English as first Language (L1) firstly at home and later is consolidated by school curriculum which will take the child through the lexical, phonological, morphological and syntactical development of the English language as well as the written form of it. S/he will also be exposed to English literature from which the child unconsciously internalizes the English culture. Later, the child acquires Igbo as second language (L2) by ‘picking’ it up probably among his/her peers. Noteworthy here is the fact that in most private owned schools, the Igbo language is non-existent. Speaking the language in the school environment is a taboo and it is not taught as a subject either. In most government owned schools, it is taught either once or twice a week while English lesson is a daily class activity; taught as a subject and used for interaction.

A major setback for the use of the Igbo language is the non-implementation of the policies of the language of the immediate community as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE). On the aspect of teaching primary school pupils, the policy stated that it is the duty of the government to ensure that the language policy, as noted earlier in this paper, is implemented. But in our local schools, the reverse is the case. The language of instruction at that early stage of Igbo child’s education is the English language and the pupils are barred from speaking the Igbo language and in some schools, are even punished for doing so. The policy, like every other policy made in Nigeria, ends on paper. The implementation has become impossibility. It must be
stated categorically in this paper, that it is a sign of irresponsibility and a mark of inefficiency on the part of the government to abandon a policy as important as that of language, a policy that was made by government herself, which has direct implication on education, at the hands of business people. School proprietors and even government-owned schools absolutely pay no heed to the policy and the government pretends to be completely ignorant of the happenings in the schools who flout the stipulations and proviso of the policy. Government’s ineptitude towards the implementation of language policy is slowly and steadily destroying Igbo language and culture. What the situation translates to is that Nigerian government has failed woefully in its avowed responsibility to “ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue of the language of the immediate community” (NPE 1981: 10)

Giving the above linguistic situation in the conventional Nigerian society, this paper sets out to find out if the Igbo language still retains its position as L1 and English as L2 in the Igbo urban cities. It also hopes to find out the reason behind the swapping of linguistic positions of these languages in Igbo homes and schools. The paper will equally try to find out the possible danger(s) posed by such a linguistic swap and make some useful recommendations.

**Study Population**
The study population consisted of teachers in four schools from the cities of Awka, Nnewi and Onitsha, all in Anambra state. Two private and two public nursery/primary schools were selected from each city. A total of 100 pupils were selected; 25 pupils from each school and the sample population consisting of nursery 1 to primary 3 pupils using oral interview while questionnaire was administered to their teachers. The parental attitude to the Igbo language and culture were examined using the instrument of
questionnaire and interview. Four secondary schools and two Universities in Anambra state were equally sampled.

Findings and conclusion
From the data generated for this study, it was discovered that the medium of instruction in all the schools sampled at both primary and secondary levels is the English language, even at the pre-nursery and nursery levels too. The teachers reported that the reason is to start early to expose the children to the language so that they will be proficient in it.

The whole schools sampled at the primary level also indicated that their students perform better reading English passages than Igbo ones. They also use more of English proverbs and idioms in their essay writing. About 16 out of 20 teachers sampled reported that students are punished or reprimanded for using Igbo in the school premises. 8 out of the 20 teachers sampled wrote that their school authorities insist in the registration form that the language spoken to the children at home must be English. The schools involved in this very act are all private-owned schools.

At the University level, African and Asian studies Department of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and Department of Igbo Language, Anambra State University, Igbariam Campus were sampled. It was discovered that at the First degree level, the students write their long essay, commonly termed ’project’ using Igbo Language. But at the Masters and Ph.D levels, they write their theses and Dissertations in English Language.

Using demographic information generated from this study, the data collected showed that 10 parents within 25-40 age range speak Igbo in their homes. 11 parents within the same age range use English, while the remaining 19 who fall within 18-25 age range use the English language in their homes. What is derivable here is that 30 out of the 40 parents sampled use English in their
various homes, while the remaining 10 use Igbo. It was also discovered the age is not a factor in determining the language used in Igbo homes in the cities.

**Conclusion**

From the findings, it is obvious that in most homes and schools in the Igbo urban towns, the English language has over-taken Igbo in both as a medium of instruction and for interaction outside classroom and in the homes. The blame is clearly on the parents who feel that speaking Igbo to their children at home will boost their social class and probably enhance their performance at school. The school authorities, particularly, the private-owned ones share in this blame for not only flouting the proviso of National Language Policy on Education but going further to insist that the language at home must be English.

The Nigerian government takes the highest blame for feigning ignorance at the misnomer in our schools. The above situation has proven that actually English is no longer a second language for our children residing in the urban cities but has turned out to be their first language. Igbo, regrettably, has taken the position of the second fiddle (L2) in its own natural environment.

This paper therefore advocates that the language of instruction, both in the homes and in the school for the Igbo child at a very tender age, should be the Igbo language in order to harness the potentials and unique abilities of the child. The Igbo language as one of the major ethnic languages in Nigeria, has great potentials for cognitive growth of the child. However if nothing is done very soon to arrest the ugly situation that is prevalent in the schools and homes, it may degenerate into an unmanageable state.

The attitude of the parents of the Igbo child is one of the
numerous challenges of the growth of the Igbo language. Language is one form of identity. When a people loses their language, they inevitably lose their identity, culture and reason for existence. ’Ndì Igbo’ seem to have no value for their language. For the average Igbo parent, the child does not have any tangible need for the Igbo language, which according to them, is of no socio-economic value.

The already jeopardized situation of the Igbo language is worsened by the activities of these “unfortunate Igbo people” who have infiltrated the local schools, where pupils are punished severely for speaking the Igbo language. The Igbo child is intimidated and harassed for expressing him/herself in his/her God-given and God-inspired language. The child automatically develops inferiority complex and is constantly embarrassed when he/she cannot express himself in the English language, which he/she found so difficult to acquire because he/she was forced to do so at an early age when it is of no benefit to him/her. The child is viewed as unintelligent when he cannot cope with learning the second language which is a society-imposed linguistic task forced on him too early in life.

On the contrary, researches have proven that when a child communicates with other people in a language that he is at home with and the language of his/her immediate environment, the child assimilates more, in academic work, the child equally learns faster, and become more creative. In fact, the child develops vastly cognitive-wise, psychomotor-wise and affective-wise. S/he also will develop ’Ako na Uche’( aboriginal wisdom) which singles him/her out in any inter-ethnic and international dealings. According to Ezeani, European Trade Union Committee for Education (ETUCE) called on every European citizen to learn how to speak, read and write his or her native language (23). This points to the necessity of the use of the L1 for different speech acts in a national social environment. If Igbo is spoken all the time and fluently, the Igbo language will be admired by our children.
and the language will grow as people will love to socialize and even do businesses in the Igbo language. This will increase the economic value of the Igbo language and foster cordiality among the non-Igbo, who have learnt the Igbo language and so reduce crime and religious intolerance. The mother tongue is the natural way to learn because it plays powerful roles in teaching and learning and so should be revived and renewed to serve the people better.

Parents are strategically positioned to teach their children the indigenous languages from the cradle and so should rise up to the task in order to stop the language from going into extinction.

**Recommendations**

Going by the findings made by the researchers, this paper recommends that Government has a great role to play in reversing this ugly situation. Once the government takes its proper position, every other thing will gradually fall into its normal place. The following should therefore be done:

1. The Nigerian government should wake up to its responsibilities. It should indeed “ensure” that the National Policy on Education (1981:10) is not only a paper work. Government should promulgate a decree that will take care of any school that flouts the laid down rules in connection with the implementation of the education policy. To foster this, an NPE implementation committee should be set up which should be empowered to either close up any defaulting school or be dealt with according to the law.

2. The Government should constitute another committee whose duty it will be to transfer all local knowledge including Art, Music, Medicine, Agriculture etc into English and vice versa.

3. A systematic and consistent enlightenment campaign should be mounted which should aim at educating parents.
on the dangers caused to our indigenous languages and culture and to the cognitive development of our children as a result of exposing as well as formally instructing them with a non-native language particularly when they are growing up in their native environment.

4. Nigerian Government should make frantic efforts towards restructuring Igbo and reversing the prevailing language shift in Igbo land.

5. Parents are strategically positioned to teach their children the Igbo languages from the cradle and so should rise up to the task in order to stop the language from going into extinction. To achieve this, this paper suggests that a plan for reversing the language shift being experienced in the Igbo language should be made.

This paper therefore utterly agrees with Fishman’s eight stage plan for reversing language shift. He grouped the plan into two:

A: Ensuring Intergenetalional Transmission
Stage 8: Reconstruct the language
Stage 7: Mobilize Fluent Speakers
Stage 6: Restore the Intergenerational Transmission
Stage 5: Teach the language in the School

B: Extending the Usage
Stage 4: Implement Immersion and Strong Bilingual Education
Stage 3: Use the Language in the Work Environment
Stage 2: Offer Government Services in the Language
Stage 1: Use the language in Higher Education, Media and Government.
(http://wwwf.nesc.ca/publications/pdf/language)
The starting point is forming a language Committee that will be charged with the responsibility of meeting with elders and some fluent speakers and record words and phrases with their meanings, sounds and usage, songs, stories, histories, and speeches that are important examples of our language is a good starting point. They should also find, catalogue, edit, and duplicate materials that can be kept and used for teaching our language. These materials could be located with elders, in the churches, other community members, in the universities or colleges, in the Band office, in museums, in regional, provincial or federal archives and professionals who have previously worked in the community.

The next stage involves mobilizing fluent speakers. Fishman postulates that elders and other fluent speakers should be encouraged to speak the language with their children, grandchildren, and other young people. Elders and other speakers should endeavour to teach the language in formal and informal settings, and they should be provided with skills to help them do so. People who understand the language should be encouraged to start speaking the language too. The next stage talks of intergenerational transmission of the language which involves promoting the use of the language in families and in the immediate community. Fishman believes that constant daily usage of the language in everyday life and in public gathering can foster greatly with the transmission of the language from generation to generation. ’Teaching your Language in the School’ is the next stage in which education programs, such as aboriginal language programs in schools, evening classes, and weekend classes can be organized. Partial or complete immersion program can also be used as part of the effort to reverse language shift. Encouraging the use of the language in work places, in community businesses can be useful. This may call for literacy training for workers so that they can use and understand the language, translate
documents, and create opportunities for people to use the language regularly.

Offering government services in the language is another good strategy that can help in the effort in reversing language shift. This could mean incorporating the language on informational pamphlets, letters, and forms. Another important means of fighting the ugly trend is an effort made towards promoting the use of the language in institutions of higher learning, in the government and the Media. This translates into using the language in newspapers, newsletters and on the internet, and in the local radio station. All these can help in elevating the status of the language.

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