

The Sociolinguistic Drawbacks in the English Learning Environment in a Multilingual Society

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Abstract—This research paper focuses on barriers confronting learners of the English language in a multilingual setting specifically, a secondary school in Nigeria. Proficiency in English is used as a yardstick to measure the competency of students in Nigerian schools. Majority of students and graduates in Nigeria are not able to use standard English in their formal and informal discourse. The appalling situation of the educational sector is traceable to myriad of factors, but this paper focuses only on the sociolinguistic variables impinging on the Nigerian students’ effort to learn and use English. It therefore, examines the collective negative impact of linguistic interference, social environment, and the shift in values on the student’s learning and usage of English and recommends more effective measures on the damaging effects of illiterate English use on the learning efforts of students. This study adopted qualitative approach where the observation and interview methods were used to collect data. This paper urges the government to take strategic measures to control the usage of pidgin and vernacular dialects in schools and other elements that can weaken the effort to encourage the usage of standard English.

Index Terms—vernacular dialects, pidgin, multilingual society, learning English, linguistic interference

I. INTRODUCTION

English is now the major communication and learning tool, the access or window to developments in the world - be it political, cultural, economic, social, or technological. English, in Nigeria is the language inherited from their colonial master (the British). Given the multilingual setting of Nigeria (over 400 indigenous languages and dialects), English became the lingua franca for administration, education, mass media, commerce, etc. English is the first and second language of most Nigerians after their mother tongue. According to Adegbite (2003):

The over 400 languages in Nigeria have been categorized in different ways by scholars, based on the parameters of sequence of acquisition, number of speakers and roles assigned to languages ... with the following labels:

1. Dominant language: English
2. Majority languages: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba
3. Minority languages: Angos, Edo, Efik, Tiv, Fulfude, Kanuri, etc (p. 186)

Whenever a group of Nigerians meet and find that they do not share a common language, say Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Edo, etc, they choose to interact in English. Thus, English serves as the lingua franca, a unifying force among the various ethnic groups, the medium of instructions in schools, the means of communication with the outside world, the language of the mass media, and the language of law, commerce and industry. It is obvious from these uses of English in Nigeria that the language at least for now, is very important tool for communication. Subsequently, proficiency in both spoken and written forms of the language is vital. Adegbite’s (2003) functional classification of Nigerian languages is presented below (p.186) :

TABLE 1:
 STATUS OF LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

Status	Languages	Roles
Level V	English	National and International Roles
Level IV	Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba	Regional Lingua francas, used in network news
Level III	Pidgin English	Restricted lingual franca
Level II	Edo, Efik, Fulfude, Idoma Igala, Ijaw, Kanuri, Nupe, Tiv	Ethnic language used in network news
Level I	Other minor languages	Ethnic or sub-ethnic roles

This is the basis of Olaore’s (1992) suggestion that we:

include... in the country's language policy the fact that for a long time to come English will continue to play a prominent role in the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria as the language of administration, politics industry, education, science and technology. (p. 21)

Therefore, English for development is a 'sine qua non' for tapping, exploring and exploiting local and foreign resources. Compared to the zeal and resources put up to fight AIDS/HIV in Nigeria by the local, state, and federal governments, not much effort, emphasis, and concern has been given to the learning of English. This paper would focus on this neglect and the circumstances confronting the Nigerian students in their effort to learn and use English. The researchers examined the negative impact of linguistic interference, social environment, and the collective shift in values on the students' learning and usage of English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Every language is an idiom in the sense that it encapsulates people's vision of the world, their historical experiences, their understanding of the world and their personality (Carrol, 1956). No two groups of people are purely identical in their outlook on life. The language is thus, the distinguishing characteristic medium through which they express themselves. Thus, their reasoning pattern is reflected in the structuring and patterning of their language (Lanza & Svendsen, 2007, p. 276).

The term, 'Nigerian English' is actually the direct consequence of interference because they tend to use their previous mother tongue or first language experiences as the basis for organizing the second language (English) data (Brown, 2008). 'Nigerian English' is actually a reference to the substandard variety of English generally use in Nigeria, especially in social situations. Examples are: '*I am coming*' meaning '*In a moment*' or '*Excuse me*', '*He is not on seat*' meaning '*He is not available in the office*'.

Interference can take place in several forms namely phonological, lexical and syntactical. Phonological interference refer to the sound pattern or features of a given language. English language for example has 44 phonemes of vowel and consonant description. Some of these phonemes or sounds are present in English alone while some are identical or similar to the ones in other languages. For example, the dental fricatives / θ,d/ are not in the local languages of Nigerians (Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Idoma, Edo, Ijaw, etc). But the plosives /t,d/ are among our local language phonemes. Therefore, we tend to realize the plosives /t,d/ in place of the dental fricatives /θ,d/ when we come across them in words. Examples:

Phonological Interference

	English	Nigerian
thank	/θæŋk/	/tæŋk/
thief	/θi:f/	/ti:f/
Tactic	/tæktik/	/tæktik/
them	/ðem/	/dem/
tail	/teil/	Thee /ði:/
third	/θɜ:d/	/tɜd/
division	/diviʒn/	

From the phonetic transcriptions above it is obvious that average Nigerian users of English are not able to realize the dental fricatives / θ,d / in their pronunciation. Aside from this general difficulty, tribal groups in Nigeria have their peculiar phonological difficulties.

The fricatives / f, v/ are difficult for the Hausa speaker of English as illustrated below:

	English	Hausa
fifty	/fifti/	/pipti/
five	/faiv/	/paip/

Note that in place of the labio-dental /f, v/, they tend to realize the bilabial plosive sound/p/.

Also / ð / becomes / z / and / θ / becomes / s /.

The Yoruba speaker tends to realize the fricative /s / in place of the affricate / ts / and palato- alveolar / ʃ /. For example:

	English	Yoruba
church	/tʃɜ:ts/	/sɜs/
child	/tʃaɪld/	/saɪld/
chalk	/tʃ :k/	/s :k/
soil	/s ɪl/	/s ɪl/
son	/sʌn/	/sʌn
soon	/su:n/	/su:n/

Interference is the result of the influence of first language in the process of acquiring a new language which can affect the bilingual communicator's competence to use the acquired language effectively. Quirk & Greenbaum (1973) explained interference as "the trace left by someone's native language upon the foreign language he has acquired". Brown (2008) described the observation as 'the interfering effects of the native language on the target (the second) language' opines that 'adult second language linguistic processes are more vulnerable to the effect of the first language

on the second' (p. 102). It constitutes a barrier because the first language usually has a dominating influence on the organs of speech of the communicator and invariably his grammatical, lexical and phonological systems are affected. Therefore, learning a foreign language amounts to learning to overcome the difficulties imposed by the influence of the native language.

Lexical Interference: also described in linguistic terms as lexico-semantic interference, is when the communicator ascribes the meaning of a word or utterance as obtained in the first language to target language. Thus, an additional or totally new meaning as influenced by the first language is transferred to the word in the second language in performance. Instances are:

"My electric globe is dead"	for	"My electric bulb is burnt"
"The novel is sweet"	for	"The novel is interesting"
"I have put money on her head"	for	"I have paid her bride price"
"Our chairman has eaten our money"	for	"our chairman has embezzled our money"

Syntactic Interference: This form of interference manifests in adopting the syntactic pattern (grouping of words into sense relations to create utterances as a phrase, clause, sentence) of our first language in forming utterances in the target language. Examples are;

"We have been asked to pay two naira"	for	"we have been asked to pay two naira each"
"You are understanding me now?"	for	"Do you understand me now?"
"Thank you of yesterday"	for	"Thank you for yesterday"
"This matter is painning me"	for	"This matter disturbs/worries me"
"Do not frown your face"	for	"Do not frown"

Factors of Interference

There are several factors interfering with the English learning process in Nigeria namely the environment, campus life, and social factors.

The present social environment which is generally dominated by electronic media brings negative impact on the children's morals, education, and culture. Students show more interest in entertainment, money, compact discs (CD) and clothing. They prefer to watch violent movies and listen to music with obscene themes and contain vulgar and offensive lyrics. This attitude is carried to the classroom. Hence, slangs more than pidgin, standard English, even local languages, dominates their language choice in their interactions. There is a painful shift in values from concern for and interest in education to materialism.

Naturally, young people are adept at copying what they see and hear and perhaps made negative improving on their language, character, norms and values (Garrett and Baquedano-Lopez, 2002, p. 339-340). As we learned from philosophers, the quality of a man's language is a good measure of his moral state. That our students now prefer pidgin, vulgar, and slang varieties of English in their discourse is a pointer to their level of debasement and disinterest in acceptable social norms reflected in standard English.

Good English has never been known to be the language of gangsters, prostitutes, armed robbers, motor park touts, market traders, and entertainers. Illiterate English (slang, pidgin, etc) is usually the hallmark of this group of people. They are influenced by the economic status. It can be argued that the economic status of a man determines his social class and thus, his class or variety of language (in this case, English). In total, the general poverty of Nigerians is responsible for their poor education and poor English.

Observation: Campus

In the past, on campus, pidgin English was informally outlawed and users were mocked and ridiculed and everyone was wary and made it a point to use proper English. Proficiency in English was one major mark of recognition of a student. The reverse is the case now. The researchers had on several occasions observed students' common language of discourse, interaction or entertainment is always pidgin English, local language or slang. And we know that it would likely be the same at other schools (primary, secondary, tertiary); never standard English. A glossary sample of current campus slang is presented below:

- "Fade, relocate, discharge" means to disperse; leave a place; or to go away
- "How far?" means "hello; how are you?"
- "Resolve yourself" means "relax, be humble; keep quiet"
- "Halla" means "call "shout; scream"
- "Lock up" "to ignore; be quiet; to say nothing"
- "Which level" means "what is going on?"
- "Over you" means "to be disappointed" a loss
- "Remove, manga, waste, drop" means to "kill"
- "Lugga, fine girl" means 'a gun (pistol)

The researchers noted too that that a large number of teachers conversed with their students using pidgin English. This posed another cause for concern as students view their teachers as role models (Cosin, Dale, Esland, Swift, 1971, p. 4). It was also observed that the children of the rich and privileged speak better English because they came from well nourished and educated background. They only began to encounter substandard English when they met the children of

the poor at school. Bandwagon takes effect and they invariably copied the slangs and pidgin English used by the majority of the students.

The researcher conducted observation in the teachers room for three times a week for two weeks. During the observation sessions, there were at least twenty teachers at a time. They communicated with pidgin English; and this pattern was consistent throughout the observation period.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Sampling

The subjects of this study were thirty students comprised of boys and girls who were in Year Five of secondary schools. They were preparing for the exiting examination. They came from various social strata and with different levels of English proficiency. Twenty teachers teaching English were employed in this study. They possessed degree in English from various institutes of higher learning in Nigeria.

B. Methodology

This study employed the qualitative approach for its data presentation. The data for this study were collected through observation and interview. The observation was conducted in the teachers' room, in the school compound where the students hung out during their break time and in the samples' homes for a period of two months. The observation was carried out fortnightly in order to note some changes if any. The consent of the samples' families were obtained before the researchers visited them. The second method of data collection was through interview. This process allowed the researchers to get more information on factors that discourage them from speaking standard English and also to obtain information that was missing during the observation.

a. Discussion

The researchers observed the choice and patterns of language (English, pidgin, vernacular) used by tertiary school students in a state in Nigeria (the situation in the state would be reflective more or less of the general condition in Nigeria). The purpose was to examine the collective negative impact of L1 transfers, social environment, and values on students' learning and usage of English, highlight the damaging effects of these factors and suggest remedial measures to make learning and use of English more effective in schools.

The observations revealed that the use of English was most often restricted to formal situations (examples, school offices, meetings with teachers, and class presentation) and that outside of these contexts, vernacular or mother tongue (say Hausa, Igbo, Edo, Yoruba, Tiv, etc. depending on the ethnic group in the region) and pidgin English- the common lingual franca especially in southern part of Nigeria-were used in informal situations (at homes, outside of the classroom, most social meetings, etc, see table 1). This situation, by implication limited the students' learning of English and in the classroom. They had limited or no opportunity of acquiring the English language through interactions. As a consequent, they received very little input in English and little outlet for his English output.

The data collected through interviews with 30 students (because many refused the interview session due to shyness) revealed (female:10, male:20) some of the barriers and personal frustrations of some of the students at their effort to use English. They claimed that due to peer group influence they we.re often encouraged to use pidgin or vernacular. Many of their friends and school mates poked fun at them as pretentious 'white boys or girls' when they insisted on using standard English. For fear of mockery and ridicule coupled with the fact that interactions were conducted in languages other than English, virtually killed their attempts to speak standard English. Regarding the negative effects of illiterate English and vernacular use on their general English knowledge, the students interviewed agreed that it had serious impact on their overall English abilities. However, some students succeeded the challenges and were actually able to speak good English.

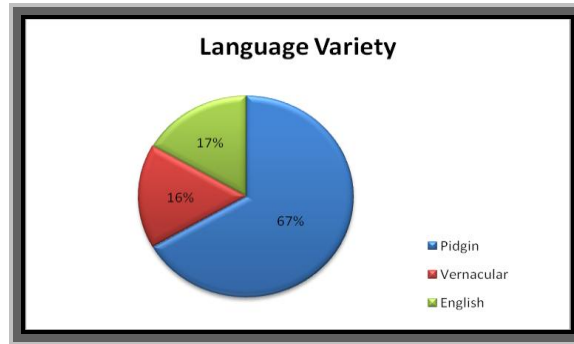
One of the teachers in a primary school in a personal communication with the researchers lamented the dilemma of most teachers especially in the rural areas who are compelled to conduct their classes in pidgin since it is the common language the pupils understand and can use.

b. Interviews

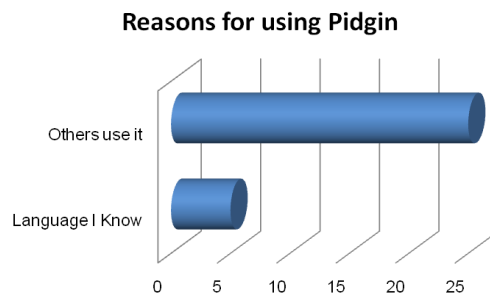
Results from the interview revealed that all the teachers interviewed were disappointed with the falling standard of the usage of English amongst students. They felt that if this trend continues, the role of standard English as a medium of instruction and interaction will be replaced with pidgin. They were also concerned that if no action is taken, the students' academic performance will deteriorate because the texts and examinations are written in standard English. As a result, students may no longer be able to comprehend written text. They also expressed dismay towards their colleagues who encourage the use of pidgin in their classrooms. On the part of the students, those interviewed expressed their desire to continue speaking pidgin and revealed how they were influenced by their peers to speak pidgin instead of standard English. A small number of the students however, disagree with the use of pidgin because they felt that acquiring standard English can guarantee better career opportunities and social status. The following table shows the questions asked during the interview and the results are shown below.

c. Interview Questions and Results

1. Which of these languages do you use regularly: pidgin, vernacular, English?



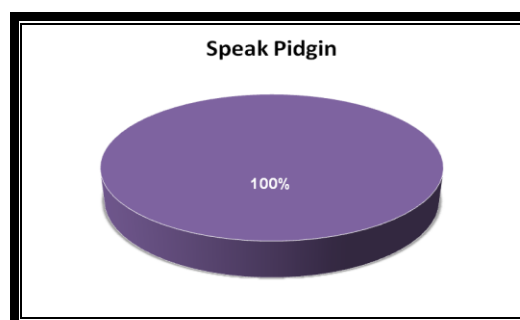
2. Do you use pidgin because others use it or it is the language you know?



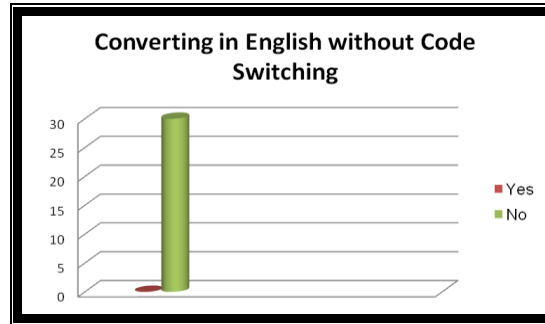
3. Can you comment on the negative effects of pidgin or vernacular on your learning and use of English?



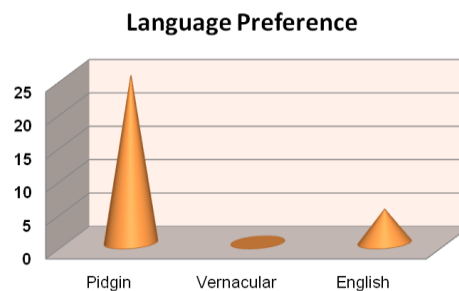
4. Which of these languages do you often use in the classroom without the teacher in class?



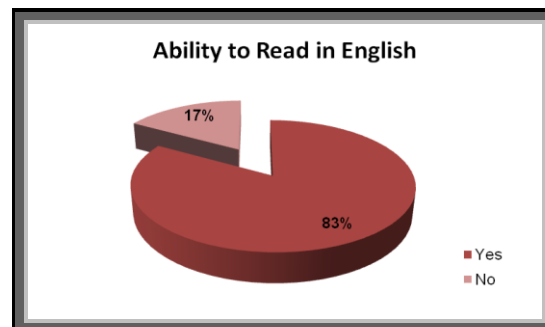
5. Are you able to converse in English without code switching?



6. Do you prefer people speak to you using pidgin, vernacular, English?



7. Do you find it difficult to read English materials?



IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear therefore, that the environment of students in Nigeria *vis a vis* their home was lacking educational material, daily scraping for a living, negative influence of schoolmates, entertainment features, and shift in social values impact negatively on the students' learning and use of English. In effect, the problem of poor English of students in Nigeria must be examined and tackled from both economic and political perspectives and the government is best suited to do this. After all, it is a truism that the English of the poor is nearly always poor (Lanza and Svendsen, 2007, p. 275).

We therefore recommend that:

1. Parents and governments should invest more resources and manpower in education;
2. The Federal and Local Governments should make a determined effort to improve the living standard of Nigerians so a significant number can move up the socio-economic ladder to the middle class;
3. The government should institute harsh punitive measures to control the production, circulation, and sale of pornographic literature and violent movies;
4. Entertainers (especially musicians) be sanctioned for using any obscene language; more so foreign music, media and entertainment literature be strictly censored;
5. More counseling be done in schools on the damaging effect of illiterate English use on the learning efforts of students;
6. Condemn and reject crime and all those who benefits by it. When these are taken care, then children will learn more from what they see and hear and would cease to regard these common thieves, their ways and their language as model personalities; and

7. Youths should be encouraged to be moderate in their dress code as we tend to speak in the manner of our attire. There is every likelihood that a man of unpleasant and shabby appearance would use vulgar, indecent and slangy language.

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