

Status Reversal in the Use of English in an ESL Context: An Emerging Threat to National Identity

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Abstract: *The Language policy on Education (2004) states that the language of the immediate environment or mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction at all preprimary level of Education until when a child gets to the upper primary level which would require the use of English as a medium of instruction. This is to enable a child who leaves home for formal learning to get acclimatize with the new learning environment. The status of the English Language in Nigeria has made it a world class language used across borders for all official purposes. However, many Nigerians today seem to have relegated the place of mother tongue to the background because of the erroneous assumption of the place of the English language. This notion, therefore, brought about the reversal status of the English language in a second language situation, which has posed danger to the national identity of some Nigerian children. Many Nigerian children have lost bearing on their MT and languages of the immediate environment because their parents frown at such usages. This paper, therefore, sees it as an emerging threat to the national identity of most Nigerian children, who are neither groomed well in the correct usage of the English language nor allowed to be nurtured in the language of the immediate environment. This study adopted a survey design where 441 respondents were interviewed orally on 16 question items. Data collected from the interview were analyzed with simple percentages. It concludes on the note that unless an emergency rescue mission is applied to correct this anomaly, MT usage in the southeast of Nigeria will be heading towards extinction and the national identity of many Nigerian children will become abysmally illusive. The way out of this problem is to go back to the basic and re-introduce the mother tongue to the child pre-school entrance till after primary three as provided in the National Policy on Education (NPE).*

Keywords: *Status Reversal, ESL Context, Emerging Threat, National identity*

I. Introduction

The provision of the National Policy on Education (NPE) is clear on the use of the mother tongue (MT) in the introduction of formal education to the child – from pre-primary to primary three. This provision in the NPE (FRN 2004) indicates that the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment shall be the medium of instruction in the primary school for the first three years, of which period English shall only be taught as a subject. The reverse is now the case in Nigeria especially in the Igbo speaking environments as no school seems to be adhering to this provision of the NPE. Every child especially in the urban areas is now taught in the English language instead of the MT. The end product of the effect is what Babatunde (2002) describes as the falling standard of education and a threat to national identity.

The standard of education has dropped abysmally to the point where everyone should rise up in search of the root cause and solution to the matter. Onukaogu (2002) traced the falling standard on the decline of the English language competence since 1960, perhaps, based on the fact that the English language is introduced to the Nigerian child, Igbo child specifically, at a time when he/she has not fully mastered the mother tongue to provide the strong foundation for the introduction of the English language. It should be noted that most of the subjects offered in Nigerian schools are written in the English language, and failure in English language is assumed to correlate with failure in other subjects. In furtherance to this, Odejide (2000) in agreement adds that most Nigerian secondary school students do not often have the English language competencies and awareness that they need for self-survival and for contributing to the attainment of sustainable development in Nigeria.

In addition, the massive failure recorded in both public and private examinations in all subjects especially in the English language indicate that serious efforts have to be made to uncover the solution to this lingering problem which is getting worse. The reason for these problems is not far-fetched: the less importance placed on the indigenous languages by the current curriculum in use in schools that de-emphasizes the compulsory offering of any of the indigenous languages in Nigerian secondary schools. Previously, it was compulsory for students in the secondary school to offer any of the three major Nigerian languages in addition to other subjects of their choice. Now, students are free to decide not to offer any of the Nigerian languages. This trend is gradually pushing the Igbo language into extinction and the loss of national identity has become so glaring.

In addition to the numerous reasons for the falling standard of education, parents seem not to be helping matters. There is now a reversal status of ESL in the homes as most homes drop the use of Mother tongue, L1 as soon as a new child is born, and suddenly initiates the use of ESL in any form of interaction with the child. Funny enough, it is only when the children are to be addressed that the MT is dropped for the English language and subsequently, the speaker reverses to the mother tongue in every other conversation in the house or when addressing the adult members of the house. The child, who hears so many languages at home during language formation age, grows with that confusion and starts school with same confusion of variants forms of language. This is in line with Ker's (2002) observation that a lot of confusions emerge for the choice of one of the Nigerian languages as a national language. The confusion will persist because the indigenous languages are not given their pride of place by the general populace, especially the parents as well as the teachers that are supposed to use it as a medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education. This overtly or covertly transcends to what Babatunde (2002) refers to as the cause of low standard of education. Babatunde summarizes the reasons for low standard of education in Nigeria to include "inadequate research, lack of effective central administration and hopelessly inadequate teaching materials," and in recent time, status reversal of the use of the English language in Igbo homes. To worsen the confusion, the Nigerian constitution FRN (1999), section 55 recognizes the use of indigenous language in the State Assembly matters but placed emphasis on the fact that the records of the house have to be written and kept in the English language.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with more than 500 languages which makes language problem an inevitable dilemma. There is a need for a unifying language that will capture the needs of the teeming population of Nigeria. Therefore three major languages: the Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba were selected as the three major languages. Nigeria needed a more unifying language and with the coming of the colonial masters and the subsequent colonization of Nigeria by Britain, the English language was adopted as a unifying language and the language policy captures it as the *lingua franca* because every business of the nation is done in it. This unification does not mean that the use of the mother tongue should be relegated to the background. Language is a symbol of tradition, identity and culture. When a particular race loses their language, they lose their national identity. One could be traced to his/her root through the language of his origin.

National identity as a concept is not an inborn trait rather it is essentially socially constructed (Anderson, 1991). A person's national identity results directly from the presence of elements from the "common points" in people's daily lives: national symbols, language, colors, nation's history, blood ties, culture, music, cuisine, radio, television, and so on (László, 2013). What this means is that language and other indices are the elements of national identity. When a child loses grip with the MT at the threshold of his/her language formation stage, what sets in afterwards is a conflicting situation of distorted version of language where a child forms words through co switching.

This problem has now graduated to relegating the MT to the background by parents in the language developmental process of their children. Aliyu (2002) rightly observes that one of the difficulties facing both the learner and the teacher in Nigeria is the dilemma of knowing what is to be regarded as the target model of English. The society has been flooded with varieties of the English language which results from the MT transliteration of the English language which they transmit to their children who subsequently translate it to the society. The unfortunate thing about this development is that the parents that drop the Igbo language and opt for the use of the English language for their children at home need serious help on the English language themselves. The big question is: what are the children learning from such parents in the name of learning the English language? This group of children ends up internalizing errors which may be difficult to correct when they grow up or in the actual learning of the English language in school.

However, Onochie (2002) indicates that in spite of government language policies from 1930 till date, in favour of the use of the child's MT as the language of instruction in the school, the actual practice in the school has not reflected this official stand. This may be, perhaps, because most parents would want to enroll their wards in the schools where the English language is used as a medium of instruction right from the onset of primary school.

Every language transmits the culture of the society that uses it. The Igbo language originates from the culture of the Igbo people and forcing a child to imbibe the English language at a time he/she is supposed to be learning the culture of his origin spells doom to the major cultural entity (language) that binds a people together. Thus the use of the mother tongue in the formative years of a child is not negotiable, if there must be sincerity in the promotion of the standard of education in Nigeria, which we all crave for.

One may wonder the relationship among the falling standard of education, national identity and the use of the mother tongue. Research has it that a child learns better and faster in his mother tongue especially in the early years of life. This may have informed thereason why the National Policy on Education (2004) mandates that mother tongue should be used at the early stages of education. Fafunwa (1989), Emenanjo (1990), and Bangbose (1991) agree with this as they champion the use of mother tongue in providing education to the child to enable the child have the opportunity of exploring his/her natural environment, develop curiosity,

communicate in the native language; develop reasoning ability and improve on self in every area of life. Fafunwa (1989) equally observes that it is universally agreed that a child learns best and develops talents faster when taught in his MT. Maisamari (2002) adds to the contributions made in favour of MT by pointing out that the use of mother tongue helps the child to acquire at a very early stage of life self confidence, initiative, resourcefulness, creative reasoning and adaptability. When all these vital elements of learning are denied the child through status reversal of language use, why will the standard of education subsequently not be affected?

Among the three major Nigerian languages recommended for instruction in the first three years of primary school by the NPE, is the Igbo language. Thus the importance of the Igbo language as a mother tongue for the five Igbo speaking states (Imo, Abia, Anambra, Enugu and Ebonyi) of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. The culture of the Igbo people is embedded in the Igbo language which is expected to be bequeathed from one Igbo generation to the other. Igbo language which is a major identity of the Igbo people is expected to be introduced to a child born by an Igbo parent irrespective of location or place of residence. This seems no longer the case for Igbo parents as many rather prefer to introduce the English language to the child in place of mother tongue. This trend has continued for a long time that it is gradually becoming the norm in society, such that both the educated and uneducated are guilty of the misplaced priority in the use of the English language. The regrettable thing about the status reversal is that the informed parents (educated) who should be guiding the uneducated ones are the most culpable. Gradually, under our watch, Igbo language is fast going into extinction. The big question that this paper intends to answer is: what should be done to reverse this trend? This is because of its threats not just to success in the use of English language but to the national identity of the users. Many children born in the Southeast of Nigeria where the language of the immediate environment is the Igbo language are unfortunately not groomed in this language. Many can neither say a single correct sentence in this language nor use the English language correctly. What we witness is a barrage of confusion where faulty variants of the English Language are being spoken. This is because of the truism of the assertion of Fafunwa (2004) that no education system can go above the level of her teachers. Majority of these parents, who prefer to use the English language for communication at home, often use pidgin, or other substandard version. How would you expect these children to master the tenet of correct English Language usage?

Statement of the Problem

The issue of national identity is already threatened by the gradual extinction of the use of the Igbo language in the Southeast of Nigeria. Many children of Igbo speaking parents have lost hold of the use of their MT because of the choices made by the parents on language preference. This particular trend makes it difficult to trace the roots of most children because they are neither here nor there in language use. They neither have proficiency in the use of MT nor do they know the correct usage of the English language. This degree of incompetence in English language could be traced to the repeated failures recorded in both internal and external examination. Even the functional use of the English language is farfetched. The general poor performances of primary school pupils and their secondary school counterparts in both private and public examinations, especially in the English language, are generating a lot of research to unravel the root cause and proffer solutions. These poor performances have permeated into the tertiary institutions where some university graduates find it difficult to make simple and correct sentences in the English language. Many scholars like Fafunwa (2004) and Maisamari (2002) have thus argued that this indicates the fall in the standard of education in Nigeria. These language experts traced the poor standard of education to the neglect of the mother tongue in the laying of a solid foundation for the child's language development to facilitate academic progress before the introduction of the English language. The MT, therefore, seems to have been relegated to the background by many homes and schools especially the Igbo speaking communities. This trend has grown to a situation where an average Igbo child neither speaks the Igbo language nor the English language correctly and fluently. The adults themselves find it difficult to make few sentences in the language without punctuating it with the English language. Worse still, some cannot speak the Igbo language at all. It has come to a point where both the literates and the illiterates (even when they cannot make correct sentences) prefer the use of the English language to their children at home and in the school. Equally, the entire Igbo society seems to see the language as inferior to any other language, especially to the English language and this has made the Igbo language to be given the second position in the child's language development thereby threatening the very essence of their national identity. This is not the trend in the Southwest and northern part of Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions are formulated to guide the study:

- 1 What is your educational qualification?
- 2 What language do Igbo speaking parents use while communicating with their children at home?
- 3 Can your child speak your indigenous language?

4 What language would the Igbo speaking parents prefer to be used in the education of their children at the lower primary school?

II. Methodology

This study adopted a survey design. A survey design according to Nworgu (2003) is the design where a group of people is studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representing the entire group. The area of the study is Abakaliki metropolis in Ebonyi State. The state is made up of three education zones and thirteen local government areas. The population of the study is 441 Igbo parents in Abakaliki metropolis. This population extends to the university campuses in town where majority of the 2nd degree and first degree holders were found. , both educated and uneducated members of society living in the metropolis were orally interviewed: 97 Elites, 89 Semi-Elites, 90 Traders, 85 Artisans and 80 illiterates, making a total of 441 respondents.

The instrument used for data collection was a face to face oral interview of 16 items. Ten research assistants were trained from the final year students of the Department of Arts and Social science Education and they were the people that retrieved the information via oral interview. The questions sought to know the educational qualification of these parents; what language parents use at home for communicating with their younger children, whether their children could speak their indigenous language , whether they would prefer sending their children to primary schools where the language of instruction for Lower Basic/ pre-primary to primary three will be Igbo language or the language of the immediate environment., and whether they are consistent with the English language they use for the children or switch to Igbo language from time to time.

Oral interview

The oral interview was meant to supplement the structured questionnaire and it is presented in these tables for clarity thus:.

Table 1. What is your educational qualification?

	Item	No of Respondents	No	%
2 nd Degree	1	97	97	97
1 st degree	1	89	89	89
WAEC	1	90	90	90
FSLC	1	85	85	85
None	1	80	80	53

Table 2. What language do you use at home for communicating with your younger children?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo
Elites	2	97	94	1	2
Semi-Elites	2	89	77	8	4
Traders	2	90	40	7	43
Artisans	2	85	409	36	
Illiterates	2	80	53	12	15

Table 3. What language do you use at home for communicating with your older children?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo
Elites	3	97	7	60	30
Semi-Elites	3	89	11	43	36
Traders	3	90	7	37	46
Artisans	3	85	30	40	15
Illiterates	3	80	5	70	5

Table 4. Which of the languages are you consistent with while communicating with your children?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo
Elites	4	97	28	25	33
Semi-Elites	4	89	29	11	50
Traders	4	90	13	17	60
Artisans	4	85	41	14	30
Illiterates	4	80	10	29	61

Table 5: Which of the languages is your MT?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo
Elites	5	97	28	59
Semi-Elites	5	89	11	70
Traders	5	90	17	73
Artisans	5	85	14	71
Illiterates	5	80	10	07

Table 6: Can you communicate efficiently in your MT?

	Item	No of Respondents	Yes	No
Elites	6	97	70	27
Semi-Elites	6	89	60	29
Traders	6	90	70	20
Artisans	6	85	60	25
Illiterates	6	80	70	10

Table 7. Can you children express themselves in their indigenous language /MT?

	Item	No of Respondents	Yes	No
Elites	7	97	20	77
Semi-Elites	7	89	26	63
Traders	7	90	40	50
Artisans	7	85	40	45
Illiterates	7	80	50	30

Table 8: Which of these languages are youfluent in?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo
Elites	8	97	40	10	40
Semi-Elites	8	89	25	35	20
Traders	8	90	12	53	26
Artisans	8	85	11	50	24
Illiterates	8	80	10	40	30

Table 9: Which of the languages would you desire that your children be communicated to inyour community?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo
Elites	9	97	60	15	22
Semi-Elites	9	89	50	10	29
Traders	9	90	60	17	23
Artisans	9	85	51	14	20
Illiterates	9	80	50	20	10

Table 10: Do you have children at the lower primary school?

	Item	No of Respondents	Yes	No
Elites	10	97	70	27
Semi-Elites	10	89	50	39
Traders	10	90	77	13
Artisans	10	85	60	25
Illiterates	10	80	65	15

Table11: Which of the languages do they use in teaching them at the Lower Basic?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo	English/Igbo	
Elites	11	97	70	5		22
Semi-Elites	11	89	72	7		10
Traders	11	90	68	12		10
Artisans	11	85	80	-		05
Illiterates	11	80	65	5		10

Table 12: Are you aware of the provision of the National Policy of Education on the preferred language of instruction at the Lower Basic?

	Item	No of Respondents	Yes	No
Elites	12	97	70	27
Semi-Elites	12	89	50	39
Traders	12	90	30	60
Artisans	12	85	15	70
Illiterates	12	80	07	73

Table 13: Would you send your children to a school where the language of the language of the immediate environment is used at the Lower Basic?

	Item	No of Respondents	Yes	No
Elites	13	97	20	77
Semi-Elites	13	89	15	74
Traders	13	90	10	80
Artisans	13	85	15	70
Illiterates	13	80	70	10

Table 14: Which of these languages is prestigious?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo
Elites	14	97	70	27
Semi-Elites	14	89	61	28
Traders	14	90	67	23
Artisans	14	85	70	15
Illiterates	14	80	60	20

Table 15: Which language is better?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo
Elites	15	97	57	20
Semi-Elites	15	89	60	19
Traders	15	90	57	33
Artisans	15	85	51	34
Illiterates	15	80	62	18

Table 16. Which of the following languages do you perceive the owners are not proud of?

	Item	No of Respondents	English	Igbo
Elites	16	97	4	93
Semi-Elites	16	89	3	86
Traders	16	90	-	90
Artisans	16	85	-	85
Illiterates	16	80	-	80

III. Discussion

The results got from item number 1 showed the number of the respondents who were disproportionately sampled based on their category. 97 of the total respondents were second degree holders because they were sampled from a university environment. Some of them were of the elite's category because of their lecturing profession. 90 of the respondents were traders, 89 semi elites, artisans were 85, while illiterates were 80 in number. Item 2 indicated that the language used at home for communicating with younger children is the English language. Incidentally even the uneducated ones also used the English language instead of the mother tongue (Igbo) for younger children which is an outright 'rebellion' against the provisions of the NPE (2004) that children need to start off with mother tongue (language of the immediate environment. In this case, the Igbo language which is the major language spoken in the southeast of Nigeria. A child who is surrounded by an Igbo speaking environment and who encounters diverse language outside the one spoken by parents, who are not perfect users of the language, will definitely have problems mastering the English languages. Some parents during the oral interview erroneously claimed that since Igbo is their MT, the children will not have any problem learning it at any point in time it is introduced.

The 3rd item showed that a large number of parents preferred to introduce the mother tongue to their children when they are already grown. This is a complete status reversal of placing the cart before the horse. The children were denied the use of the mother tongue at their language formation period, at the very crucial time they needed it most, only for the same mother tongue to be reintroduced when it has little or no significant impact in their learning of the English language. This probably accounts for the massive poor performances of English language which gives rise to the falling standard of education (Fafunwa 2004). This result supported the opinion of many scholars that teaching using the mother tongue in the early grades enhances children's ability to learn better compared to the use of a second or foreign language (Rai, et al., 2011). It has also been reported that if children are taught in languages which are different from their home language or mother tongue, they drop out from school, have low academic performance, and repeat classes due to a high failure rate.

The responses got from the 4th item which is the language the parents are consistent with while communicating with their children indicated that there is hardly any modern Igbo parent that can consistently speak the Igbo language without introducing the English language in between. For example, during the oral interview, it was very difficult for the Igbo parents to speak the Igbo language without punctuating it with English language phrases, and words like 'and', 'but', 'although', 'so', etc. This poses a serious danger to the longevity of the Igbo language. If this trend is not checked, a time will come when the Igbo language will go into extinction.

The 5th item, sought to find out the MT or the LI of the respondents and to the amazements of all, the Igbo language is but most of them do not want their children to be spoken to in the same language instead they will preferred a deviant form of the language such as pidgin to speaking the Igbo language.

From items 6 to 8, it was revealed that most of these parents apart from the educated ones are not fluent in the language they crave so much for. This ugly trend supported the assertion of Fafunwa (2004) that no system can go beyond the level of the teachers. It is therefore, certain that some of these parents cannot give what they do not have. This consequently affects the use of the English language by such children.

Items 9 to 14 revealed the language preference of Parents for communication with their children. It showed that some parents are aversive to the provision of the NPE on the language of instruction. Many preferred the English language and see it as a prestigious language that rates one very high in status. A whopping percentage accepted they will not send their children to the school that is operating according to the provisions of the NPE (2004) where the Igbo language will be used for instruction for pre-primary to primary three. This is a major problem which needs to be seriously addressed otherwise an Igbo child would soon lose his/her national identity or worse still, the problems encountered in the learning of the English language would continue to persist.

IV. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

- The Federal Government through the Ministry of Education should enforce the compliance of the implementation of the provision of the NPE (2004) concerning the use of mother tongue in all lower primary

schools across the federation and any teacher or school found breaking the rule should be severely punished.

- A law should be made that any child within an environment, who cannot speak the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment fluently at pre-school entrance, should not be admitted into any school within that environment.
- Parents and the entire Igbo community should have a positive mindset and a good orientation of the Igbo language as a beautiful cultural legacy bequeathed to us by our ancestors which is a cultural identity that needs to be sustained. They should therefore introduce it first to their children before any other language.
- One of the three indigenous languages recommended by NPE should be made compulsory in the secondary schools for every Nigerian child irrespective of the course he/she wants to offer in the higher institution.

V. Conclusion

The massive poor performances of students in English language and other subjects as well as the falling standard of education has been traced down to the decline in the use of mother tongue by Igbo parents during language formation age of their children. Many Igbo parents now think it fashionable to introduce the English language first to their children instead of the Igbo language and are not willing to send their children to any school that implements the provisions of the NPE (language of immediate environment) for lower primary schools. Igbo parents choose to introduce the English language first to their children, then the Igbo language in later life. This results to status reversal on the use of the English language, causing the decline in the use of the Igbo language. This situation needs to be seriously addressed otherwise the Igbo language will not only face the threat of extinction, it will also threaten their national identity. Language is an important element of culture that enforces unity. Children who are well grounded in their MT have been proven to learn the second language faster and if the status reversal in the use of the English language is not consciously addressed, the future generation of Igbo speaking origin will not only perform woefully in English language but the national identity will be eroded.

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