

Parental Attitude to the Learning of L₁ in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

The importance of knowledge of English Language in educating children cannot be overemphasised in Nigeria. However, there is need to pay attention to the children's mother tongue. The study investigated parental attitude to the mother tongue in relation to their choice of L₁ for their children and how this has influenced the children's perception of their mother tongue and consequently their academic performance in English Language. A research question and an hypothesis were raised. The causal-comparative research design was used. The total sample was 286 parents. PLPQ, an adapted questionnaire was used for data collection. The results were analysed using simple percentage, frequency counts and chi-square statistics. The results showed that parental attitude to the mother tongue determines their choice of English Language as L₁ for their children. This choice was found to have detrimental effect on the children's perception of their mother tongue which invariably influences their academic performance negatively in English Language. The study brings critical focus to bear on the failed language provisions of the National Policy on Education and points to possible ways forward.

PLPQ, L₁

Introduction

It is often claimed that children learn more quickly and effortlessly provided that formal instruction is carefully and appropriately presented or that informal context-based learning occurs in a supportive psychological atmosphere with sufficient motivation and opportunity (Edwards, 1994). In an increasingly diversified and multilingual world, with job changes and urban drifts, that involve moving to different parts of the country, more young children find themselves in an environment where more than one language is used. Consequently, children need to interact with not only people from their language groups but with others from different linguistic backgrounds.

The National Policy on Education (1998, 2004) states that:

- The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.
- From the fourth year, English shall be progressively used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.

This policy as noted by Lawal (2005) “has been very difficult to implement because of the attitude of the educated class who will rather have their children taught English Language right from the cradle”. In the area of education, English Language has come to assume a very important position in Nigeria. It is used as medium of instruction in many schools right from the first year of primary school and it is taught as a subject throughout the school. This is in spite of what the NPE says. NPE (1998) has prescribed that the mother-tongue (MT) be used as medium of instruction in the first three years of school while there is a transition to English medium at the fourth year of primary school. However, what obtains in schools is very different as some schools, especially private schools, use English as medium all through with the occasional explanation in the MT. Many factors have contributed to this situation.

Parents and pupils are satisfied with the medium of instruction being a dominant language if they see the dominant language as a possible vehicle for social advancement. To try to replace it with native languages as medium of instruction will displease the parents who will want their children to have a competitive chance to use their education in the job market. Lawal (2005) noted that “parents out of ignorance insulate the children from the mother-tongue to induce facility in the use of English Language thus depriving children of a basic source of education and imaginative development”. Nahuatl speakers in Mexico also, are ashamed to speak it outside their homes because they believe they need to speak the language of power that is, Spanish, that will afford their children the opportunities for success in the main stream culture (Rolstad, 2001).

The concepts of empowerment and usefulness make the encouragement of the mother-tongue meet with resistance where the children’s mother-tongue is not the dominant language. In a country where opportunities for improving one’s life are minimal, keeping the road to empowerment open by insisting on education in the dominant language (official) becomes the order of the day (Baker, 1998). Parental attitude to the mother tongue therefore is negative. English language is preferred as their children’s L1. Children are motivated from birth to speak English-language. Children’s motivation to learn a language increases as they find themselves more competent to accomplish school tasks in the language. This is where the attitude of the parents to the mother tongue comes in. When two languages are present in the child’s environment at least one of them must be used to fulfil the affective functions.

For children who develop simultaneous instant bilingualism, the very situation of being confronted with two interchangeable languages, that is two labels for one concept, at a time when they are developing functional representation of language as a cognitive tool, may

push them towards developing their analyzed knowledge about language. It is important that children perceive their two languages as interchangeable, that is, they perceive that both languages can perform the same functions. Even though a child may have developed the necessary cognitive functions, he may still perceive that one of his languages is not suited to the function and will, therefore, not value it or use it for that purpose. A situation where parents prefer English as their children's L1 calls for attention. Their negative attitude to the mother tongue as their children L1 is erroneous.

The consequence of the continued preference for English means the displacement and replacement of many Nigerian languages. This portends a great danger to the survival of the indigenous languages. Lawal (2005) highlighted this point when she noted that it is no exaggeration that the use of the mother-tongue is completely banned in some private schools. At the same time, some parents are proud to tell their friends 'my children speak only English' (Emenyonu, 1997).

In some urban areas in Nigeria many young people cannot speak their mother-tongues. The unfortunate thing about the situation is that some parents feel that it is a positive sign that their children will acquire a good command of English to the detriment of their mother tongue. The adverse effect of this situation is that many of these youths may become culturally misplaced which in effect leads to serious social and educational problems (Akeredolu- Ale and Alimi, 2002). The same set of youths performs poorly in terminal examinations in English language as noted in WAEC's Chief Examiner's Report. So, despite the fact that many of these children 'speak' English language, yet, they perform poorly in English language examinations. Romaine (1993) noted that there is strong evidence that some groups of children are characterized by less than native- like skills in the two languages they speak with its detrimental cognitive and academic consequences. They show quantitative deficiencies e.g. smaller vocabularies. They can deviate from the norm in the two languages and have a lower degree of automatism. They also find it very difficult to express emotional meanings. They don't acquire enough vocabulary of the language(s) they speak and so find it difficult to express their thoughts fully.

A number of projects have been carried out in Nigeria which have given empirical data supporting the cognitive advantage of mother-tongue based education. The SIX YEAR PRIMARY PROJECT (University of Ife) is a unique study in mother-tongue education in Yoruba (the mother tongue of the immediate community of the schools). Adequate attention was at the same time, given to the learning of English as a subject (Emenyonu, 1997). This project supports the suggestion made by Lawal (2005) that "Nigerian children are better educated first in the mother-tongue".

Even though the language policy of mother tongue education cannot be faulted, it is pertinent to note that what fuels bilingualism is necessity. Against the backdrop of the complex multilingual situation in Nigeria and the fact that 'research results have shown that children are naturally endowed to acquire as many languages as possible as long as they are exposed to them before age six' (Lawal, 2005), additive bilingualism i.e. children acquiring both English and their mother-tongue simultaneously is seen as viable.

In order not to cut Nigerian students off from their root, the educational system should be truly simultaneously bilingual. Matsuura (2004) noted that teaching in the mother tongue and the official or national language helps children to obtain better results and also stimulates their cognitive development and capacity to learn. This will equally take care of their affective development which goes hand-in- hand with the cognitive development.

Methods and Materials

This research adopted the descriptive research design. The South west Nigeria comprising six states was stratified into multilingual and unilingual states. Lagos and Ogun, multilingual states, each with twenty local government areas were randomly selected after stratification. Parents were drawn from five schools in five local governments (Alimosho, Badagry, Epe, Kosofe and Ikeja) in Lagos and five schools in five local governments (Sagamu, Yewa South, Ijebu North, Ifo and Abeokuta South) in Ogun states. The local governments were randomly selected using the pick and drop balloting system to ensure that each local government had equal and independent choice of being selected. Many questionnaire copies were given out but only respondents from Yoruba speaking states were considered as subjects for the study. This is because Yoruba is the unifying language of the Southwest Nigeria. The instrument was administered to the parents on Open Days and Parents' Forum days in the schools randomly selected in the local governments. All the ten schools are public schools. Subjects were drawn from the high, the middle and the low social status. Levels of education and types of profession were indices of the social status of the parents. Two hundred and eighty six parents from Lagos and Ogun states were specifically the sample of the population.

Research question: Are the parents different in the choice of the language(s) they prefer their children to speak?

Hypothesis: There will be no significant difference between the parents and the language(s) in which they prefer their children to function.

Research Instrument

Parents' Language Preference Questionnaire (PLPQ)

This is an 18- item questionnaire adapted from Coardy (2001). This instrument was administered to students' parents on Open Day and Parents' Forum days in the schools. These were collected immediately by the researcher. This instrument sought to know which language parents prefer their children to speak first and which one they encourage their children to use more. It also supplied parents' personal data. The adapted instrument was re-validated by experts in Language Education department at the University of Lagos. The Split-Half method reliability using Spearman-Brown formula yielded a score of 0.92. Frequency counts, simple percentage, chi-square analysis were the tools used to analyse the data generated.

Data Analysis

A total of two hundred and eighty-six (136 from Lagos and 150 from Ogun) parents were the subjects in the study. The analysis is presented below.

Research question: Are the parents different in the choice of the language(s) they prefer their children to speak?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Parents' Language Preference

	Frequency	Percent
More Yoruba than English	42	14.7
More English than Yoruba	74	25.9
Both languages equally	12	4.2
English only	158	55.2
Total	286	100

The instrument used here sought to know which language the parents prefer their children to speak.

Two hundred and eighty-six parents from Lagos and Ogun states were the subjects. About Fifty-five (55.2) percent of the parents prefer their children to speak English language only, 4.22% would want their children to speak both English and Yoruba, while 25.9 want more English than Yoruba. Surprisingly, 14.7 would want more Yoruba than English.

Hypothesis: There will be no significant difference between the parents and the language(s) in which they prefer their children to function.

The table below shows the observed values (O) with their corresponding expected value (E)

Table 2: Chi-square Analysis of Parents' Language reference

$$X^2 = \sum (O-E)^2/E$$

$$= 166.42$$

The alpha level = 0.05

$$\text{Degrees of freedom} = (2-1) (4-1) = 3$$

Observed (O)	Expected (E)	O - E	(O-E) ²	(O-E) ² /E
42	71.5	-29.5	870.25	12.17
74	71.5	2.5	6.25	0.09
12	71.5	-59.5	3540.25	49.51
158	71.5	86.5	7482.25	104.65
				166.42

Hence the critical values $\chi^2(0.05) = 7.82$

It is observed that the calculated chi-square value of 166.42 is greater than chi-square table value of 7.82 i.e. $\chi^2_{cal} > \chi^2_{tab}$. This implies that students' language(s) are significantly dependent on their parents' preferences. Hence the hypothesis that says that there will be no significant difference between the parents and the languages they prefer their children to function is hereby rejected.

Discussion

PLPQ supplied parents' biodata which gave insights into the study. Choice of initial language for children by parents is not influenced by their occupation or job. Highest academic qualification of parents' notwithstanding, bilingualism is still not favored by many of the respondents as 79.7% of parent respondents admitted they spoke English language first to their children.

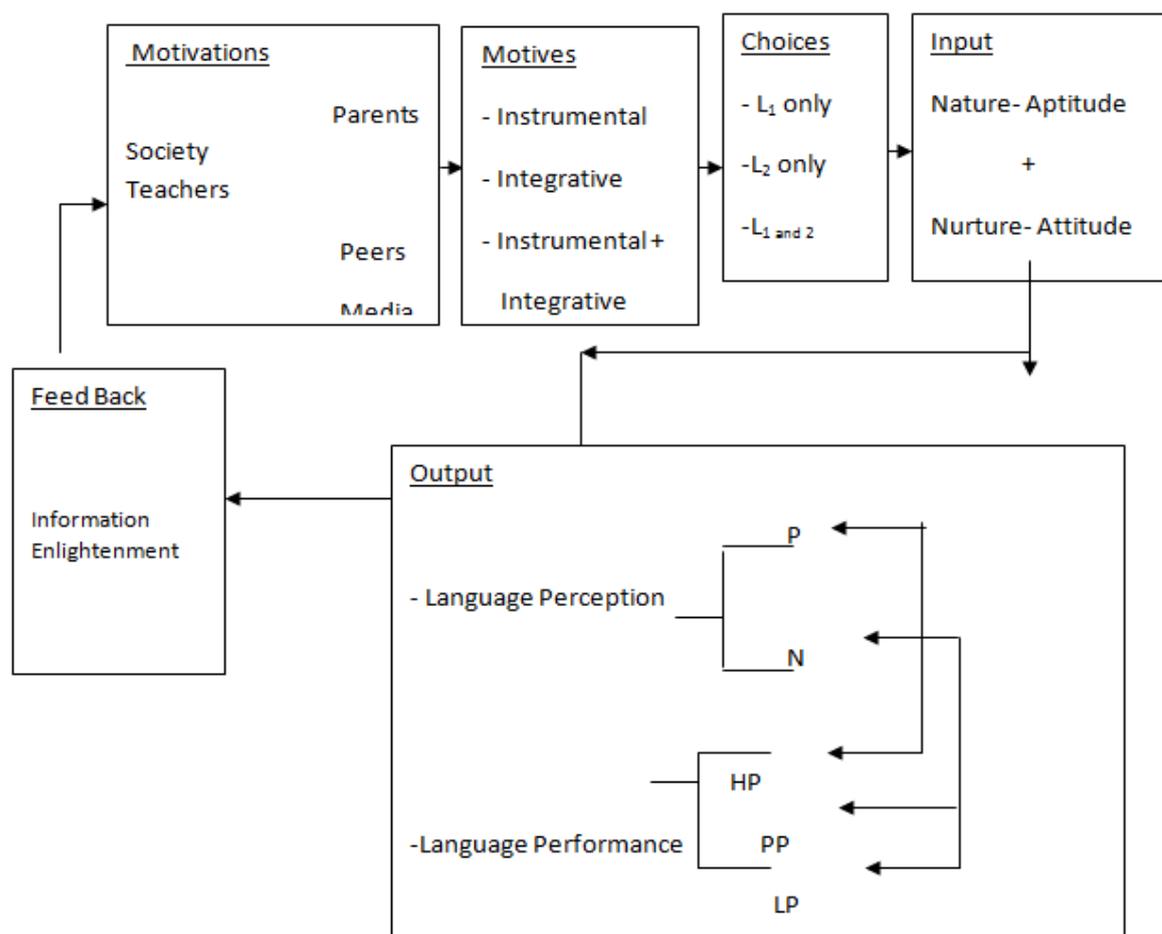
98.6% of the parents claimed they can speak English language, proficiency level notwithstanding, except one (1.4%) who on interrogation said he takes the child to places and relations where the child could learn English language because he wants him to excel academically. 73.0% of the parents admitted that their children cannot speak their indigenous language. Parents are major motivators of which language children perceive positively or

otherwise. Only 33.8% of the parents have positive attitude towards their children speaking both Yoruba and English at the same time. 85.1% of parents believe that the language their children speak goes a long way in determining the children's academic progress. According to LIN (2011) one of the major reasons mother tongue based education policies cannot be implemented is that parents largely resist education that is purely given in the mother tongue. 89.2% of the parents responded that speaking the language to their children will ensure the children continue to speak the language they want them to speak. There is clear indication that many parents need to be enlightened as to the gains of bilingualism. Many of them felt making their children speak only English language makes for their children's academic excellence, yet students' expressive and receptive skills in English Language have been observed to be low.

Available data from WAEC indicates that choice of English- language as children's initial language does not necessarily make for excellent academic performance in the language.

Romaine (1993) noted that there is strong evidence that some groups of children don't acquire enough vocabulary of the language(s) they speak and so find it difficult to express their thoughts fully. This can be traced to the value placed on language (s) spoken by children. Hamers and Blanc (1989)'s Sociocultural and Cognitive Dimensions of the Additive –Subtractive Continuum shows that where a bilingual child's both languages are valued, high cognitive functioning results. Where one language is devalued and the child is made to have a low perception of it, low cognitive functioning results. Parents therefore need to be enlightened on the issue of initial language choice for their children and the implications of the choice(s) made. The Language Choice Model (OlaOlorun,2012)highlights this.

This LANGUAGE CHOICE MODEL is to educate all stake holders on the issue of initial language choice and the implication of the choice(s) made.



P = Positive, N = Negative, HP = High Proficiency,
PP= Partial Proficiency, LP =Low Proficiency

Fig1: Language Choice Model: (OlaOlorun, 2012).

The model underscores the impact and the influence of the environment i.e. the parents, teachers and peers, on students’ perception of their language(s) which in turn determine their performance in such language(s). If the perception is positive, performance is positive .i.e. high proficiency in the language and where the perception is negative, performance is negative. This can result to either partial or low proficiency in the language. The students’ aptitude and attitude as input determine the output. The circle becomes complete as the output goes back to the motivators as feedback.

Recommendations

There is need for result-oriented public enlightenment campaigns by the government. This is with a view to educating parents, teachers and school owners on the advantages of bilingualism. This will make them to have positive attitude towards it. This in turn will reflect in the positive perception of the languages by the children in the languages they function in. In fact, all educational stakeholders need to be enlightened on the need for bilingualism which has become a global phenomenon. In addition, the danger of the imminent loss of indigenous languages should be made known to all stakeholders. These indigenous languages are not being passed on to the children. Many children cannot function in their indigenous languages,

they are not even proud of them, mainly because the parents ignorantly believe the children need only English language for them to excel academically. This however has been found out not to be the case. Knowledge of the mother tongue has been linked with high proficiency in English Language. Timely efforts therefore should be made by policy makers and all concerned to arrest and avert language loss and or death of Nigerian indigenous languages.

Parents, especially mothers should be the target of the enlightenment programme of the government. Educative and instructive posters should be placed at ante-natal clinics and children wards in hospitals. This will enable mothers to know that from birth and indeed early in life, children should be made to speak their indigenous languages. The posters should clearly indicate and vividly highlight the consequences of mother tongue neglect. If mother's orientation to bilingualism is corrected, it will go a long way in indigenous languages' preservation. Additive bilingualism will therefore be achieved as none of the two languages will be devalued. Also, the government should encourage and sponsor the media to produce jingles and programmes on the advantages of children speaking their mother tongue in addition to English language from childhood. This will enlighten the masses on the advantages of bilingualism. The home video producers should be mandated to produce mainly in the indigenous languages with English translation. This will make the indigenous languages' status to be enhanced and valued. There should also be monitoring of programmes on Television and Radio stations as the electronic media go a long way in determining language perception of youths. Programmes encouraging indigenous language usage should be projected. Appreciable percentage of the programmes should be in the language of the immediate environment. Sanctions too should be placed on home video producers who fail to follow the indigenous language with English language translation directives.

Conclusion

English language is a necessity for Nigerian students. However, there is need to pay attention to the children's mother tongue. Parents' attitude to the learning of the mother tongue has to change positively. The indigenous languages should be encouraged and preserved. Parents' expectations of children's linguistic performance influence children's proficiency in language(s). Parent's positive attitude to the choice of the mother tongue as children's L₁ will go a long way in preserving the mother tongue. Nigerian languages are endangered by the current trend where only English language is spoken by overwhelming majority of children. Children need to be entrenched in their culture. It will make for a balanced self perception of these children and their performance in English Language will equally be enhanced. If the indigenous languages are not passed on to the next generally, these languages will be lost and eventually may become extinct i.e. they may die. This will affect both the cognitive and affective development of children.

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