

## PROBLEMATIC CO-EXISTENCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND NIGERIAN PIDGIN

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**ABSTRACT:** *The English language is the language of formal education in Nigeria. For some time now, students' performance in the language at public examinations has been very unsatisfactory to the stakeholders in education. A linguistic problem is one crucial contributing factor. The research methodology combines two data gathering instruments: the questionnaire and examination of respondents' written essay. The paper discovers that Nigerian pidgin is a linguistic force to reckon with as its co-existence with the all important English language requires a clinical attention by all: especially; the government, curriculum developers and teachers. Those who formulate policy on education would need to plan for the Nigerian pidgin, not only in order to arrest the ever sliding performance of students in English language, but also to improve it.*

**KEYWORD:** formal education, English language, Nigerian pidgin, co-existence, students' performance, linguistic problem.

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### INTRODUCTION

Secondary school education has been a crucial factor for the progression of students in formal education. Students in Nigeria are expected, on completion of the mandatory six years secondary school education, to pass the public examinations conducted by the West African Examinations Council and the National Examinations Council at credit level and above. A credit pass in English language is a major requirement for admission into tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

English is the language of formal education in the country, so students seeking admission into any tertiary institution need to prove their capabilities to acquire tertiary education and express knowledge in correct and acceptable English language. However, there has been a recurring grave concern about the poor performance of students at these public examinations. Students, parents, teachers and the government are often shocked by the results of, notably, English language released by the examination bodies. The performance of very many students in the language has continued to be unimpressive and worrisome.

Stakeholders in education have adduced many other factors for student's unsatisfactory performance in English language. But one crucial factor which contributes to this dismal performance of students in the language is a linguistic problem, which unfortunately is obvious, but is yet to receive concerted efforts to solve. Bamgbose (2013) asserts that 'a major problem with the educational system of most African States is educational failure, which may be traced to the language of instruction.' Though a large percentage of students in Nigeria learn English as a second language and are instructed in it, the Nigerian pidgin seems to interfere with their acquisition of the language and their performance in it much more than their mother tongues. The interference of the pidgin contributes in no small measure to the dismal performance of students in the language.

## **Nigerian pidgin**

According to Gani-Ikilama (1990: 16) Nigerian pidgin was traditionally, a coastal language and that, historically, the language emanates from the contact between Nigerians living around the coastal cities of Port-Harcourt, Sapele and so on, with the Europeans who visited Nigeria for commercial purposes. She asserts that Nigerian pidgin is “markedly different phonologically and syntactically from English ...” which though has English language as its lexifier, is distinctly a different language whose grammar and phonology are remarkably different from English.

Wardhaugh (1986: 55) gives credence to this assertion when he states that Nigerian pidgin is not just a “bad” variety of the English language but a language with its own history, structure, array of functions, and the possibility of winning recognition as a language. This is empirically true. Recently, the Nigerian Television Authority reports that Nigerian pidgin has been adopted for use in China. The Chinese have acknowledged the efficiency of the pidgin for transactions with Nigerians in China. The language has been performing many arrays of functions in: the entertainment industry, the media, politics, and commerce as well as in the social life of Nigeria.

Furthermore, Babawilly, (2001) says that the Pidgin is a comical language which is spoken with spirit, emotion and a lot of gesticulations. Bamgbose (1991:291) also asserts that it is ‘... geographically spread all over Nigeria and is spoken by Nigerians of different ethnic origins, and it is indigenous to Nigeria because it originated, is sustained and is expanding here in Nigeria.’

Thus, the English language which serves as the official language and the medium of instruction in schools in Nigeria co-exists with the language. The long period of the co-existence of the languages exerts pressure on the proper learning and use of English by students. Students are exposed to the massive use of Nigerian pidgin in the society and the exposure hinders a significant proportion of the students from giving good and adequate attention to learning English language which is learnt formally only in schools. There are very limited opportunities for many students to practice with the English they learn at school. Ker (2010) affirms that: ‘For majority of Nigerians, nearly 80% of the population, the language they know very well is not English...it is obvious that English is not the asset it is supposed to be in a multi-ethnic setting such as ours.’ Students in this country enjoy massive exposure to Nigerian pidgin which is prevalent in the society and so they interact with it more than English language.

It is observed that many of the students do not understand that English language is distinctly different from Nigerian pidgin. They do not know that the grammar and vocabulary of the pidgin are foreign and unacceptable to English. These set of students are fooled by the English language vocabulary they use in Nigerian pidgin to assume that the two different languages are the same. Solomon (2007:82) reports that this ignorance makes students to loan Nigerian pidgin vocabulary to the language. As a result of the ignorance, many students impose the grammatical structure of the former on the latter in their written English. These have grave effects on their performance in English language examinations.

### **Theoretical Underpinning**

Cross linguistic interference is a bilingual syndrome which states that the structure and vocabulary of a language that has been previously acquired by a language learner do interfere with the efforts of the learner to learn a target language. According to Berthold (1997:1) it is one language influencing the other at the level of word order, use of pronouns, determinants, tense and mood.

Furthermore, Skiba (1997: 1) states that cross linguistic interference may be viewed as the transference of the element of one language to another at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical and orthographical. When two separate languages come in contact in an individual, there will be observable transfer of the linguistic feature of one of the languages to the production of the other. There are negative transfer and positive transfer. Negative transfer occurs when a learner makes a distinct linguistic feature of one language to function in another different language.

Conscious interference and unconscious interference are types of cross linguistic interference. Columas (1989) views conscious linguistic interference as a conscious influence that is exerted upon a language which results in changes in the inner structure of the language; this can occur at the levels of grammar and phonology. An example from the data that are discussed below is:

\*(NP) I no kom dia (He did not show up there.)

Unconscious interference occurs where the learner of a target language does not understand that the features of the target language differ from those of the other language which has been acquired previously or in cases where the learner is insufficiently skilled to use the correct rules of the target language. Any of these features can compel the learner to resort to the example of the previously acquired language. The learner then proceeds to impose the structures of the previously acquired language on the target language and they can be observed from the performance of the learner in the target language. Unconscious cross linguistic interference is spontaneous interference which can take place under various extra-linguistic factors. For example, the transfer of zero inflectional morpheme in Nigerian pidgin to English language in the expression below is unacceptable.

\*NP: Na two boy kom here.

Transliteration into English: \* two boy came here.\* (incorrect)

Two boys came here. (Correct translation)

### **METHODOLOGY**

Two data gathering instruments are employed to obtain data for this study. They are the questionnaire method, and a scrutiny of the English language examination scripts of the respondents. The questionnaire contains a list of structured questions with a range of answers provided. A population of one hundred students of senior secondary school was selected through the simple random sampling technique, by which one student out of every three was issued a questionnaire. A total of one hundred questionnaires were completed and returned. The data were obtained from respondents who speak Nigerian pidgin very well. Thereafter,

the English language examination scripts of the respondents were gathered and investigated for traces of Nigerian pidgin in their written English. The written English language of the respondents provides a better and verifiable evidence for the study. The data obtained by the questionnaire are analysed, interpreted and summarised. They are further analysed using tables and percentages. Furthermore, the influence of Nigerian pidgin (NP) which is identified in the written English language of the respondents are analysed and discussed. The responses that are gathered from the respondents are presented in the table below:

### Data Presentation and Discussion

Questions	Frequency distribution of responses			
	Yes	No	Invalid	Percentage
Responses				
Do people speak NP around you?	70%	30%	-	100%
Is NP spoken frequently around you?	60%	40%	-	100%
Do students in your school speak NP?	79%	21%	-	100%
Can you speak NP well?	50%	50%	-	100%
Are you sure the English language is the same as NP?	35%	65%	-	100%
Does NP affect your spoken or written English language?	72%	21%	7%	100%
Can you write in NP?	73%	27%	-	100%
Can you speak NP very well?	50%	50%	-	100%

Data gathered by questionnaire

Source: Field study in a Federal Government school.

### Discussion

Seventy percent of the population studied affirmed that Nigerian pidgin is spoken around them. Sixty percent of the respondents indicated that the language is spoken frequently in their immediate environments or homes. Seventy nine percent of the respondents stated that students speak Nigerian pidgin in the school. Fifty percent of the population asserted that they can speak Nigerian pidgin and seventy-three percent can write in the language. The data confirm that the language is widely spoken in Nigeria.

Thirty-five percent of the respondents do not understand that English language is not the same as Nigerian pidgin. This considerable percentage of secondary school students indicate the confusion which the co-existence of the two distinct languages creates for students. The school curriculum as at now has shied away from recognising this problem and neither has it proffered a solution to the confusion. The tendency therefore is that these students will write Nigerian pidgin as English language at public examinations. Certainly, such candidates are likely to fail English language.

In addition, seventy-two percent of the respondents states that the Pidgin interferes with their spoken or written English. Nigerian pidgin is well received and used in every state and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. The electronic media accept the use of the language for advertisement, commercial jingles, public announcements and enlightenment. Moreover, indigenous home movies which are favourites of many of these students make stylish use of the language. The effect of all these is that consciously or unconsciously, students learn to

use it. This invariably reflects in their thought pattern linguistically and manifests in their writings.

### **The influences of Nigerian Pidgin which are identified in the written English language of the respondents:**

\* The errors of direct Nigerian Pidgin translation and lexical selection errors.

Below are samples of errors of direct Nigerian pidgin translation:

1. People no they their. (English version: People were not there/ There were no people there)
2. A no enjoy the place. (English version: I did not enjoy the place.)

Similar Nigerian pidgin expressions include the following:

- a. A no de. (English version: I am not available or I was not around)
- b. A no want. (English version: I do not want)
- c. I no Kom dia. (English version: He did not show up there)

In Nigerian pidgin the lexical item 'no' is used as a negation. It is the equivalent of 'not' in English. The word 'dia' in Nigerian pidgin is a homophone of the English place adverb 'there' and the determiner 'their'. The respondent reveals his confusion by substituting 'their' (dia) for 'there'. The respondent is also confused by the homophones as reflected in the misspelt word. Moreover, the lexical item of Nigerian pidgin 'de' sounds like the English word 'they'. 'De' (Nigerian pidgin) and 'they' (English Language) are homophones. The respondent reveals his confusion by writing the third person (personal) plural pronoun 'they' as the Nigerian pidgin word 'de'.

Furthermore, the structure of: 'People no they their' and 'I no enjoy the place' portrays the syntactic structure of Nigerian pidgin which avoids the use of verbs. The Pidgin avoids grammatical complexity and so it makes less use of verbs. The syntactic structure of the sentences above is that of Nigerian pidgin. These respondents have unconsciously written Nigerian pidgin in English language examination.

### **\* Samples of lexical selection errors that are discovered in the respondents' written English include:**

1. '... after 2 hours nothing will enter the brain again.' (English version: '... after two hours of study the brain will not assimilate anymore.')

The word 'enter', though English is used to mean assimilate and 'again', which also is English, is used to mean *any more*. In Nigerian pidgin, the following are examples of the use of 'enter':

Di moni don enta mai hand (The money is in my hand or possession). Di bol enta di net (The ball touched the net). In these examples, 'enta' (enter) means 'in' and 'touched' whereas in the data, it means 'assimilate'.

2. ‘... that go distop you...’ (English version: ‘... that will disturb you...’ Nigerian pidgin version: dat go distob you...’)

In this relative clause, the word ‘go’ is an English verb, which Nigerian pidgin has borrowed. In Nigerian pidgin, ‘go’ is used as an auxiliary verb. It does not function as a verb. Examples of the use of ‘go’ in Nigerian pidgin include:

Wi no go gree (We will not agree). I go gree (He will agree). A tell am a go chop laif (I told him that I will enjoy life).

The errors identified above are errors of unconscious linguistic interference. The respondents assume that the structures of Nigerian pidgin are one and the same as that of English language. Also, the semantics of Nigerian pidgin lexical items are expressed as English. These respondents and some other candidates who express and write Nigerian pidgin in English language examinations have very little chances of scoring any appreciable mark that is enough to earn them a credit pass in English language examinations.

## **FINDINGS**

- \* As seen from the data above, Nigerian pidgin is a formidable and unassailable indigenous language in Nigeria.
- \* The co-existence of English language and the pidgin is an educational problem in Nigeria.
- \* The negative impact of the co-existence of the two languages exerts some considerable negative effect on the effective learning of English.
- \* The ignorance of some students about the distinct features of the two languages has a grave implication for the learning of English language in the country.

## **Implication to Research and Practice**

- \* The school curriculum would have to be adjusted to accommodate Nigerian pidgin. Students need to be aware, right from upper primary school through to the end of junior secondary school, that Nigerian pidgin is different from English language.
- \* The differences should be taught alongside their negative effects when Nigerian pidgin interferes with English. This campaign should be sustained for the period suggested above so as to afford the students sufficient time to learn how to handle the languages independent of each other.
- \* Teachers in primary school as well as English language teachers in secondary school need to acquire the requisite knowledge of Nigerian pidgin and its negative effect whenever it interferes with English language. The teachers will then be able to teach students as suggested above.
- \* Policy makers in Nigeria need no longer disdain or ignore Nigerian pidgin. Doing the contrary is a disservice to the educational progress of the teeming population of the future leaders of the country.

- \* Nigerian pidgin is a national linguistic force to reckon with in Nigeria. A well articulated programme is, of necessity, needed to develop it. This will enable students and other users of the language to be conversant with the orthography and vocabulary of the language. It is envisaged that this will drastically minimise the interference of Nigerian pidgin with the English that students are taught in schools.

## CONCLUSION

This paper hopes that these measures will contribute to revamping the unsatisfactory poor performance of students in English language, which is vital to both their success and progress in formal education. The government, parents and teachers will achieve greater value from their investments, in both human and material resources, made on education when the teeming population of students passes the all important English language examination. Teachers of English need to be equipped with necessary provisions to enable students overcome the pressures of their massive exposure to Nigerian pidgin in the society. This call for a reappraisal of the teaching of English language is expected to enhance better returns on teachers' efforts.

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