

English: The Linguistic Alpha and Omega in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: *This paper observed the dominant role of English language in Nigeria. Various factors responsible for the spread and domination of the language in Nigerians' lives were observed. These include; the multilingual nature of the country; the inability of the country to select a national language from the three indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) or other minor languages; influence of the Western culture and attitudes of Nigerians towards the English language. The paper also discussed the various roles English language plays in Nigerian societies which make it dominates the indigenous languages in the country. English is both the official and the National language in Nigeria. It is the language of education, law, commerce and religion in the country. It is the language in which most activities are carried out. The writer concluded by recommending that the indigenous languages, especially the "three big", should be promoted to the status of National language. A credit pass at O level in the indigenous languages should be made a criterion for admission into higher institutions of learning in the country. Otherwise, the values attached to the indigenous culture and traditions will be eroded; the incoming generation will have no indigenous languages to inherit but the English language.*

KEY WORDS: English, linguistic, alpha, omega.

INTRODUCTION

Foyewa (2016), quoting Wikipedia (2015) averred that Nigeria is the giant of Africa and seventh most populous country in *linguistic alpha and omega* the world. It is the most populous country in which majority of the population is black. The country, according to Nigeria education (2016), has an area of 723,768sq km (356,669 sq ml). It's name derived from that of its major river, Niger. Nigeria was christened by a colonial daughter. Foyewa (2016) stated further that Nigeria is a member of both Commonwealth of Nations and African Union, The country, according to him, gained independence from the United Kingdom on October 1, 1960. He explained further Nigeria is a multilingual nation. Therefore, it finds it difficult to adopt any of it's indigenous languages as it's lingua franca. English therefore plays a lot of roles in the country which makes it the in the country. The first set of speakers of English that set their feet on Nigeria soil, according to [www.englishlanguage.com/english/fact/history\(20016\)](http://www.englishlanguage.com/english/fact/history(20016)), did so on (i) commerce, (ii) adventure , (iii) gospel propagation and (iv) colonialism.

Factors Responsible for the Spread of English Language in Nigeria

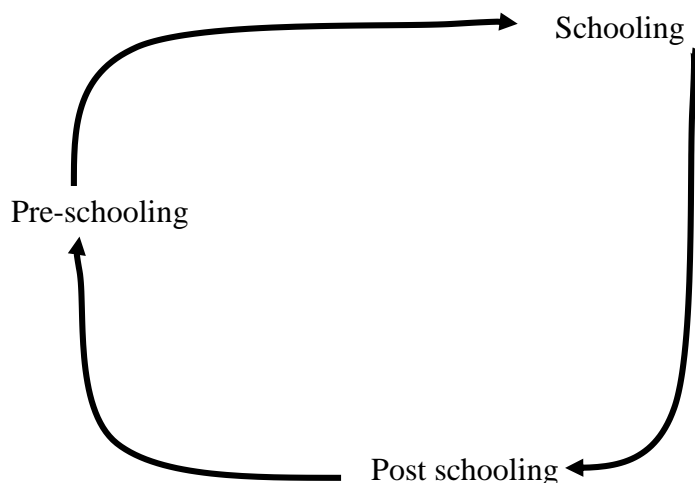
Three major factors are responsible for the spread of English language in Nigeria, these are (i) The multilingual nature of the country (ii) inability to select a national language (iii) influence of Western culture on Nigerians

(i) *Multilingual nature of the country:* Nigeria, with five hundred and ten (510) living languages, needs a language that can unite the heterogeneous communities within the nation. English language is already playing this role; therefore, it is pertinent for every tribe with different languages to learn the language of unity and association, that is, English. Multilingual nature of Nigeria is a strong factor that helps in the spread of English in Nigeria.

(ii) *Inability of the country to select a national language:* A national language is a language that has certain connections in a geographical location. It stands for the national identity of a nation or a country. Nigeria could not select a national language owing to heavy linguistic rivalry among the multi-lingual societies in the country. English is seen as a language that has no affiliation with any of the indigenous languages. Therefore, Nigerian citizens are eager to be trained in English language since it is the only language that functions in that capacity.

(iii) *Influence of the Western culture on Nigerians:* The western culture has influenced the ways of living of most Nigerians in terms of dressing and language. Many Nigerians want to speak like Europeans, want to dress like the Queen and want to eat like the whites. The easiest way to associate with the whites and western world is through the English language. Therefore, they embrace the language and spread it from one generation to another. English language is considered as the road to civilization

No wonder, English language dominates every aspect of Nigerian lives. Foyewa (2014) observed that English language is the life wire in any higher institution in Nigeria without which no qualitative product can be produced. Foyewa (2011) gave the model below to summarize the influence and dominance of English language in every aspect of Nigerian citizen



Model 1: *English in the life of a Nigerian child*

Adapted from Foyewa (2011) English and transformative education in Nigeria.

(i) *Pre-schooling*

- at Home
- in Media
- religious Houses

(ii) *Schooling*

- entrance examinations
- instructions
- textbooks
- continuous assessments
- evaluation/certification

(iii) *Post Schooling*

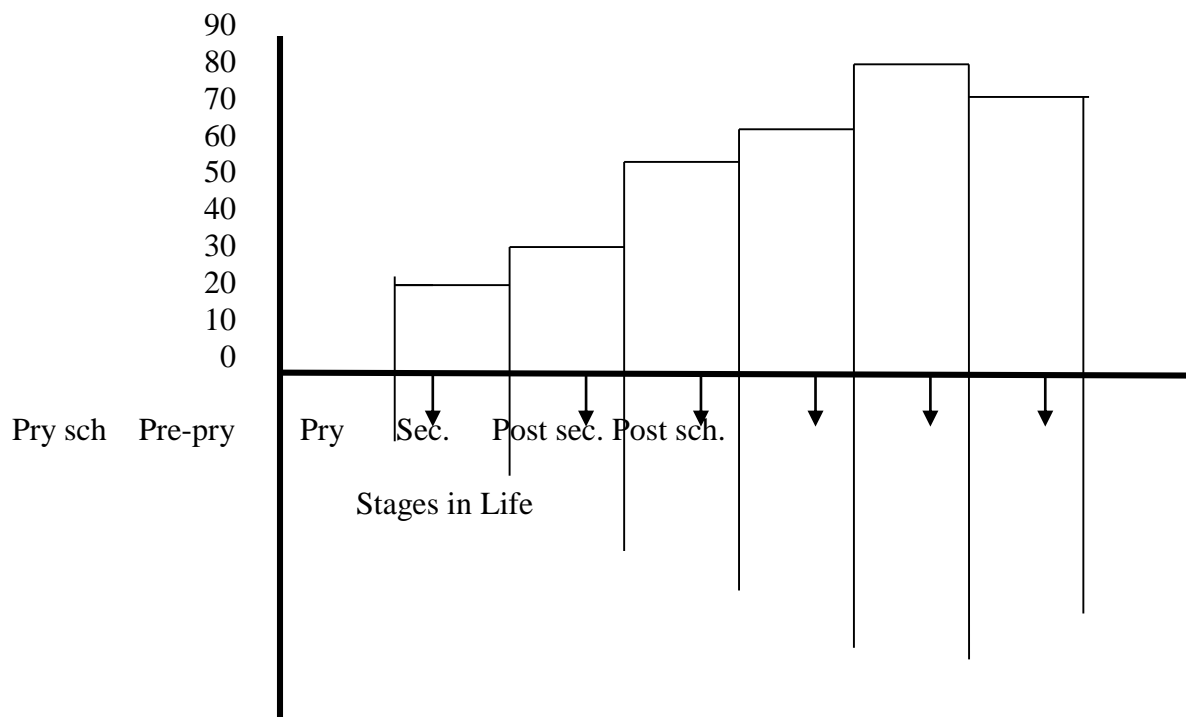
- application letters/interviews
- religious houses
- at home
- offices
- politics, government, commerce e.t.c.

Foyewa (2011) quoting Adebajo and Foyewa (2008) gave the percentage of English language in use in various stages in life. This was given in table form.

Table 1: Percentage of English in use in various stages of life in Nigeria.

S/n	Stages in life	Percentage
1	Pre-school	20%
2	Pre-primary	30%
3	Primary	50%
4	Secondary	60%
5	Post-secondary	80%
6	Post-school	70%

Foyewa (2010) gave histogram of the above table thus;



English as Linguistic Alpha and Omega in Nigeria

Inferences from the earlier part of this work had showed that the English language is the linguistic alpha and omega in Nigeria. The words “*Alpha and Omega*” was first used in the Holy Bible to connote “the beginning and the end”. In this context, “linguistic alpha and omega” is used to denote “language of everything”. The following are the few areas where English plays the linguistic alpha and omega in Nigeria.

(i) **Medium of Communication:** Just like any other language, English is a medium of communication in Nigeria. However, it is the only language that is used to communicate among the six geo-political zones of the country. While Hausa is the major medium of communication in the North-East, North-West and North-Centre, Igbo and other indigenous languages are used to communicate in the South-East and South-South, Yoruba is the major language used as medium of communication in the South-West. The only language that can be used to communicate among the six geo-political zones is the English language.

(ii) **Language of Unity:** It can be inferred from the above point that English unites the multilingual nation called Nigeria.. Adedimeji (2005) discussed extensively the unifying role of English in Nigeria. Through the instrumentality of the English language, inter-tribal marriage is possible among people of different linguistic background in Nigeria.

(iii) **The Government Language:** English is the official language in Nigeria. Government activities are carried out in the language. Budgets are prepared and read to the citizens through the

instrumentality of English. Other government activities are carried out using English as a medium of communication.

(iv) ***The language of Law:*** Laws are enacted and implemented in English language. The language is the official language used in the Federal and State, House of Assembly and Senate. Rulings are passed into laws. In the court of laws, the Nigerian High Court, Appeal Court and Supreme Courts make use of English as medium of communication. Lawyers argue for and against through the use of the English language. Judgments are also delivered by Judges in English language.

(v) ***The National Language:*** The issue of national language has been a major concern to some Nigerian writers. Umunnah (2006) identified some problems militating against the choice of a national language in Nigeria. Foyewa (2016) suggested that the three major languages in Nigeria should be selected as national language. Against all these suggestions, the government has not been able to make a policy statement on the choice of a national language owing to problems that can emanate from such declaration. Therefore, English remains the Nigeria national language till date.

(vi) ***The language of Commerce:*** Commerce and business transactions are carried out in English. Buying and selling at local, state and national levels are carried out using the English language as medium of communication. It is the only language that buyers and sellers from different linguistic background can understand and use during their business transactions. Local and international business transactions are conducted through the instrumentality of the language.

(vii) ***Language of the Media:*** News and other information are disseminated to Nigerians through English language. National and inter-state news are broadcast in English. Advertisement on newspapers, radio and television are also made in English language.

(viii) ***Language of Education:*** writers like Adebija (1994), Makinde (2001), Fakeye (2012) and Foyewa (2012) emphasized the roles of English in Nigerian school system. The function of English language for educational advancement, according to Fakeye (2012), is the most important of all its functions. According to him, it is taught at almost all levels of educational system in Nigeria.

A credit pass in O level English is a prerequisite for admission into higher institutions of learning in Nigeria. English is the medium of instruction in Nigerian schools. Assignments, Continuous Assessment Tests are given and marked in English. Seminars, conferences and workshops are also organized and conducted in English. Tests and examinations are carried out in the language in Nigerian schools. The medium of communication on Nigerian campuses is English language. Most textbooks in Nigeria are written in English language. The roles of English then, according to Makinde (2001) justified its being introduced at all levels of education in Nigeria.

(ix) ***Language of Religion:*** Religious activities are now carried out in Nigerian places of worship in English language. It is the dominant language used in Nigerian Pentecostal Churches. Sermons in Nigerian Mosques are now interpreted in English. Songs are composed in the language. Some traditional worshippers are now making use of English language during their services simply because they believe that English symbolizes civilization and progress.

(x) ***Language of International Relation:*** English is the only language Nigerian use in communicating with the outside world. Williams (1990) stated that English does not only serve the national purpose in Nigeria but an international one also. Foreign news are understood through the instrumentality of the English language.

CONCLUSION

Most Nigerians are bilinguals, not in two Nigerian languages, but in English and their mother tongues. Adegbija (1994) observed that the learning of English is one of the reasons most people send their children to school in Nigeria; and this should not be delayed. If delayed, this could be interpreted as an attempt of government to hold back their children from legitimate advance in civilization. Every tribe in Nigeria ascribed importance to English and that is why a credit pass in English language as remained a pre-requisite for admission into Nigerian higher institutions of learning.

English is believed to have no emotional, psychological or linguistic attachment to any of the indigenous languages (about five hundred and ten (510) spoken across the thirty-six states of the federation. Therefore, it is a neutral language. Hence, every member of each community embraces the use of the language. It is the language in which almost all linguistic activities are carried out in Nigeria. Any attempt to replace these roles played by English in the Nigerian society with any of the indigenous language will be vehemently rejected owing to mutual suspicion among the five hundred and ten living languages in the country, especially the three major languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Therefore, there should be value reorientation towards the indigenous languages since language and culture are two sides of a coin. A credit pass at O level in the indigenous languages should be made a criterion for admission into higher institutions of learning in the country. Otherwise, the values attached to the indigenous culture and traditions will be eroded; the incoming generation will have no indigenous languages to inherit but the English language. Making English the linguistic alpha and omega in Nigeria amounts to linguistic colonialism. Nigerian orientation should be towards developing Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to an enviable position the English occupied should be the target.

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