

INTERNET AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR REVIVING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: *The trend at which Nigerian students (undergraduates) are unable to express themselves or adequately write in their Mother Tongue (indigenous languages) in Nigeria is worrisome. Majority of them have to a large extent anglicized their names in their online profiles, necessitating the need to incorporate the Internet in revitalizing the indigenous languages. The aim of this paper is to examine the ways to adapt the tools of the Internet in reviving the indigenous languages in order to save the languages from dying or going into extinction for posterity. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire which were administered on 79 undergraduate students of the Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro during the Covid 19 pandemic. The students who filled in the questionnaires electronically were randomly sampled from the School of Engineering and Environmental Studies. The Findings revealed that the majority of the students could not speak or write in their indigenous languages as they could in the Foreign language, especially the English Language. The study also discovered that a very high percentage of the students interact on the internet-enabled social media mainly through the English language and also almost all the students are neither aware of nor visit websites designed in the indigenous languages. The paper therefore concludes that the stakeholders of education in Nigeria need to urgently put measures in place through the Internet to revive the indigenous languages through web presence and digital indigenous language trainings. The paper recommends that websites on indigenous languages such as Igbo Google, Yoruba Google, Hausa Google, etc. be designed for students to access.*

Keywords: Language, indigenous, education, speakers, nation

1. INTRODUCTION

As a multilingual nation, Nigeria has over 500 languages with three recognised as major: Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa (Owolabi & Dada, 2012). In the midst of all these indigenous languages, English and other foreign languages such as French and German are also introduced. Since the introduction of the foreign languages, English has taken the center stage in Nigeria as the language of government, language of instruction in the schools, the language of business and commerce, the language of internal communication among Nigerians of different language backgrounds (Akindele & Adegbite, 1999). Most importantly, it is the official language and the supposed lingua franca of Nigeria. The elevation and popular high status accorded to English has relegated Nigerian indigenous languages which are sometimes regarded as “vernaculars”.

Going by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)’s (2010) prediction in its Endangered Languages Project, some Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered and need to be revived. Some of the factors considered in making the endangerment prediction are negative attitude of native speakers, non-implementation of governmental language policies, reducing number of speakers and few numbers of teaching and learning materials. In particular, increasing the number of teaching and learning materials using the Internet will definitely revive the indigenous languages and change their dwindling statues.

The internet as a global computer network providing a variety of information and communication facilities is a good resource for changing the endangerment status of indigenous languages. The introduction of the internet has reduced the world to a global village in which massive information is generated and shared in seconds. The 21st century has witnessed giant strides in Internet-mediated communications disseminated in various social media such as Blogs, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, We chat, Instagram, Snapchat, Google⁺, etc.

The network including the social media has thus become a veritable platform for the exchange of ideas, opinions, and the dissemination of information. Today, millions of people all over the world are internet subscribers and users who communicate using language. According to Adegbija (2004), English is the predominant language of the social media as Nigerian indigenous languages are yet to be fully incorporated into the social media world. Many inputs on the internet are mostly written in English as opposed to the indigenous languages. Indigenous languages are therefore dying and threatened as they are not utilized in the current fast-growing mass means of communication. This negative position can be reversed and revived using the internet

which is the most important tool for communication in the world. This study therefore examines the ways and means by which the internet constitutes a veritable tool for reviving Nigerians indigenous languages. Through a sociolinguistic analysis of structured questionnaire and interviews, the study discusses as well as establishes the status and characteristic features of the indigenous language as well the areas that the internet can assist in changing their statuses.

The English Language, Indigenous Languages and the linguistic situation in Nigeria

As stated above, English occupies a prominent position in Nigeria as the official language, language of education, judiciary and higher commerce. The English in Nigeria was first introduced around 15th century when the Portuguese sea Merchants and pirates came to the West coast of Africa in search of a new trade route to the orient (Awonusi, 2004). However, the language was fully implanted and sustained through trade relations, missionary activities and colonial interests (Igboanusi, 2002). Consequently and as result of the high status and prestige that the language has, English was adopted as the medium of instruction and communication in different sectors of the country.

There are three principal languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and other minor languages such as Edo, Efik, Kanuri, Tiv, Urhobo, Fulfude, Igala, Nupe, Ijo, Isekiri, Ebira, Annang, Gwari, etc. (Bamgbose, 1992). Over and above these languages, English could be said to be more important and has a higher status. Some scholars have supported its vital role in the national life of Nigeria since it is the unifying tool in multilingual and multiethnic nation. The negative effect is that most of the indigenous languages are threatened and at the verge of dying due to lack of use. The need to revive indigenous languages is articulated by Adegbiya (1994:4) who states that all languages in a multilingual context whether major or minor, exoglossic or endoglossic should be seen as resources that need to be effectively harnessed for the total national good and that language policies need to respect, support and encourage the mutual harmonious coexistence of all languages, no matter their origins and the political or economic power or numerical strength of their speakers. From his submission, non-implementation of language policy is considered as one of the factors that contribute to the negative status and under-development of indigenous languages.

The contact between both standard and non- standard forms of English and the multiplicity of languages and culture in Nigeria has birthed a second language variety of English, Nigerian English. It is a domesticated and nativised variety of English which manifests the linguistic (phonological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and socio-cultural) characteristics of the Nigerian social and physical environment (Bamgbose, 1995). This new variety of English which is predominantly used in Nigeria has exceptionally contributed in subjugating the indigenous language.

The linguistic situation in Nigeria could best be described as multilingual. Hans-George (2001) put the number of languages at 471 (including English and Nigerian Pidgin) but recent official data puts the number of languages at over 521, with nine already extinct (Yakuba, 2017). The most widely used languages are Hausa (and Fulani) which constitute 29% of the population as L1 speakers and a lingua franca in the North; Yoruba with 21% of the population and a lingua franca in the West, Igbo with 18% of the population and a lingua franca in the East and Nigerian Pidgin which has the largest number of speakers and cuts across ethnic and social boundaries (Wolf, 2001; Igboanusi, 2003).

Language Policy and Language Revival in Nigeria

In Nigeria, after independence, Nigeria adopted the available language policy of the colonial master which accorded English prominence as the official language. Since then, most of the language policies in Nigeria have been tailored in line with the submissions of the British colonial master. According to Oyetade (2003:107), there has not been a comprehensive language policy for Nigeria as a deliberate and planned exercise. The official language status succeeded in shifting attention substantially from the indigenous languages towards English. This also affected the attitude of users who think that it is financially more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages. This is coupled with the certification becoming conditional upon passing English. In addition, lack of implementation of language policy by the government has aided subjugation and demotion of indigenous languages. One of the sections in the NPE (2004:10) states that: *The medium of instruction in Primary School shall be in the language of the environment for the first three years and the language of the immediate environmentshall be taught as subject.* This section states clearly that teaching and learning at early stage of learning should be carried out in the language of the immediate environment of the child. It therefore means that education during the first three years of learning in the primary school should be carried out in the mother tongue, that is, one of the indigenous languages. The non-implementation of this has resulted in death of some indigenous languages especially the minority languages and endangerment of the major ones. There is therefore the need to take measures towards ensuring and monitoring full implantation of this policy to revive the languages. Reviving indigenous language involves expansion of its vocabulary and harmonizing its orthography and grammar (Cooper 1989). This would make the languages clearly pass information, exchange ideas, cultural values, ethics and norms

effectively. The internet is a good tool for transmission and reception of culture but sometimes attitudes of people deter them from using indigenous languages on the internet.

Attitude of the Nigerians towards the Indigenous Languages

Generally, the attitudes of Nigerians towards the indigenous languages have been negative and positive to the English language. Literacy is often attributed to the ability to speak and write English language. That is, anybody who cannot read and write in English is called illiterate. This effect makes everyone to strive to learn the English language at the expense of indigenous languages. Consequently, a lot of parents and schools make sure that their children and wards use English at homes and in schools and those who cannot speak English are looked down upon. Some parents do not allow their children and wards to speak their indigenous languages at all. In addition, most private and government schools do not allow their students to speak their local languages while in school and even the teachers are prohibited from speaking indigenous languages while in school as well, the penalty ranges from fine to suspension or hard labour. This attitude has negatively impacted on indigenous languages which still have undeveloped orthography and literature. To further promote English, the English language is a prerequisite for gaining admission into any tertiary institution and a ticket for securing white collar jobs.

Internet and Indigenous Languages Revitalization

2. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a survey design. The data for the study were collected through interviews and structured questionnaire administered on 120 students out of which only 76 completed and returned. The respondents who are students of the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, South-western Nigeria come from different geo-political zones in Nigeria, especially, South East and South West. The institution is among the higher institutions that have high exposure to the use of internet in teaching and learning. The questionnaire is designed to ascertain/test:

- (a) The frequency of use of internet by the respondents
- (b) The influence of English in using internet
- (c) The respondents proficiency in the mother-tongue (Igbo and Yoruba)
- (d) The ways the internet can be harnessed to revive indigenous languages

Thus the focus was on the possibility of the Internet aiding revival of indigenous languages. The first part of the questionnaire consists of the respondents' personal information (sex, age, educational level, state of residence, geographical zone of origin, mother tongue, etc. while the second part consists of information on the awareness and use of the Internet, status and frequency of use of the English in different contexts, competence in the use of the indigenous language and the use of English and indigenous language in internet enabled interactions. These consist of 21 test items as well as three open-ended questions. The 21 test items require the respondents to select from five options: SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree and UD – Undecided. The students were randomly selected to cover all the five schools in the institution.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Summary of Students' Responses to the Questionnaire

S/N	Section A: Awareness and Use of the Internet	SA	A	D	SD	UD
1.	Internet is a common tool for communication and socializing	74.5	25.5	0	0	0
2.	English is basically the main language of social media communication	81.2	18.8	0	0	0
3.	Language is an embodiment of culture	75.3	24.7	0	0	0
Section B: Status, Frequency of Use of English						
4.	English is widespread in Nigeria as Nigerian English.	74.7	24.0	0	0	1.3
5.	English is the main medium of instruction in my school and home	34.1	38.2	27.7	0	0
6.	English is spoken exclusively at home/in the school	57.3	31.7	10.0	1.0	0
7.	I constantly mix-up English and my mother tongue in conversations	72.0	21.7	2.3	4.0	0
Section C: Assessment of Competence in Indigenous Languages						
8.	I understand Igbo or Yoruba well	79.7	20.3	0	0	0
9.	I speak Igbo or Yoruba very well	22.1	77.9	0	0	0

10.	I understand but cannot speak or write Igbo or Yoruba	45.7	22.1	19.5	11.7	0
11.	I understand only simple commands in Igbo or Yoruba	0.6	23.2	20.7	34.5	21.0
12.	I am not competent at all in Igbo or Yoruba	25.4	17.5	18.2	1.8	14.9
13.	Nigerian indigenous languages need to be standardized	52.3	44.8	0.6	0.7	1.7
Section D: Internet, English and Indigenous Languages						
14.	I use only English is chatting and sending messages online	50.8	23.3	25.9	0	0
15.	I sometimes code-mix English and my indigenous in my online interactions	57.1	21.5	10.7	10.7	0
16.	I use only my mother tongues in chatting and interacting online	10.7	19.5	39.7	23.1	7.0
17.	English is the first language I start interaction with online	64.0	27.0	10.3	0	1.7
18.	I study only online materials written in English	84.3	10.7	3.0	2.0	0
19.	I am not aware of some websites designed in my mother tongue	34.5	17.6	26.9	21.0	0
20.	I have visited some Websites designed in my mother tongue	1.3	17.9	20.6	17.2	42.8
21.	Nigerian languages have their own websites, such as google Igbo, google Yoruba, etc.	43.1	11.4	19.9	0	25.6
Provide the Igbo or Yoruba Versions of the following expressions (Competence in MT)						
a. What is your name _____						
b. How old are you _____						
c. I want to go to the market _____						

Discussion of Findings

Table 1 presents responses of Students of Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro to the questionnaire on ‘Internet as a Veritable Tool for Reviving Indigenous Language’ The questionnaire comprises two major sections, A and B. While Section A elicits demographic information on sex, age, educational level, state of residence, geographical zone, mother tongue, etc., Section B demands answers on awareness and use of the internet, frequency of the use of the English and the indigenous languages in different contexts, competence in the use of the indigenous languages, etc. Though Section A is not the main point of interest, its findings reveal that 79.6% of the respondents are males while only 20.4% are females. This is not surprising as the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro comprises mainly males due to the nature of the courses the institution offers. The questionnaire recorded 100% for the ages between 15 – 35 and ‘Graduate’ as the level of education. This result is also not surprising as the age bracket fits into youth time and the age for seeking admission into higher institution as well as the age for graduation. Expectedly, all the respondents are still at the graduate level as they are all yet to graduate from the higher institution. This makes the study interesting as all of them are expected to have at least a fair knowledge of the internet which has been adopted in teaching and learning in higher institutions. Findings in this section also reveal that majority of the students at 88.2% and 93.9% are from the South-west and have Yoruba as the Mother-tongue. The remaining 11.8% are either from the South-east or South-South region. Also, only 6.1 claim that their Mother tongue is either Igbo or others (English). There is none whose Mother Tongue is Hausa. These results are not unconnected to the fact that the study is carried out in Ilaro town, South-western part of Nigeria where Yoruba is mainly used as the Mother Tongue.

As stated above, Section B is designed to elicit answers on students’ awareness and exposure to the use of the Internet as well as their frequency of use of their competencies in the English and the indigenous languages in different contexts, including electronic (online) context. It comprises six subsections A - E; A: Awareness and Use of the Internet; B: Status, Frequency of Use of English; C: Assessment of Competence in Indigenous Languages; D: Internet, English and Indigenous languages; E: Provides the Igbo or Yoruba Versions of the following expressions (Competence in MT). All these subsections have their questions which students are expected to select one option from the list of options. Data from Question 1 shows that the entire population accepts the fact that Internet is a common tool for communication and socialization as 74.5% strongly agree while 25.5% agree. This shows that the students are fully aware that the Internet provides a platform for their interaction online. In the same vein, responses to Question 2 reveal a strong acceptance that English is basically the main language of social media communication. This is so as 81.2% strongly agree while 18.8% agree. The implication of this result is that most of the interactions on the social media provided by the Internet are conducted in the English language and not in the indigenous languages. A total 75.3% and 24.7% of the population strongly agree and agree respectively that Language is an embodiment of culture. This implies that any language that is mainly used projects the culture of the native speakers of the language. In this case, since the English language is mainly used as seen in the responses to Question 2, it then means that the culture of Britain is dominantly being spread in the Nigerian society in general and Nigerian higher institutions in particular.

Subsection B tests the frequency and use of English in home and school contexts. First, students' responses depict that a total 98.3 are in agreement that English is widespread in Nigeria and that it is used as Nigerian English. About 1.3% are undecided. This shows that Nigerian English, a variety of English that reflects peculiar Nigerian socio-cultural context in its lexical, syntactic, phonological features, is dominantly spoken and written in Nigeria. The insignificant number is probably not aware that the variety of English used in Nigerian socio-political, economic, educational and religious contexts is called Nigerian English. In the same vein, a greater percentage of the students at 72.3% accept that English is the main medium of instruction in both the school and at their homes. A small percentage (27.7) disagrees. This less number constitutes those whose parents are not educated and speak the indigenous languages to their children in their homes. Also, 89.0% of the students were strong in their opinion that English is spoken exclusively at home and in the school. This result is however unexpected as Federal polytechnic Ilaro is located in a rural area and students are expected to use Yoruba, the indigenous language of the immediate environment. However, the high percentage could be linked to the fact that a good number of the students come from neighbouring states, such as Lagos, a cosmopolitan city where English is used as a major means of communication among people of diverse cultures and language groups. In this wise, 10% disagree and 1.0% strongly disagree with the exclusive use of English at home and in the school. On the question of code-mixing or code-switching, English and indigenous languages, a very high percentage of the population, 93.7%, consent that they constantly mix-up English and their mother tongue in daily interactions. This corroborates studies by Banjo, Bamgbose, Adegbite, Jowitt, etc. that mother tongue interference is a core feature in English as second language context. Just a small number at 2.3% disagree and 4.0% strongly disagree, there might be people who are not fluent in either of the languages and can barely use the ones that they are not competent in.

Subsection C assesses the competence of students in the indigenous languages. While 79.7% strongly agree that they understand their indigenous languages (Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, etc.) very well, 20.3% agree. Also, while 22.1% strongly agree that they speak the indigenous language very well, 77.9% agree. None of the students disagrees to understanding and speaking very well of their indigenous language. It is also observed that the number that strongly agrees to speaking them is less than the number that strongly agrees to understanding. This implies that most of the students can understand the language but are not competent in the actual use of the languages. This assumption is partially corroborated by 45.7% who consent that they understand but can neither speak nor write very well in their indigenous languages while only 11.7% strongly disagrees to that. In the same vein, a total of 23.8% agree that they understand only simple commands or everyday words in their indigenous languages while 55.2% disagree. Those who disagree are of the opinion that they are competent in understanding beyond simple conversations in their indigenous languages. Unexpectedly, 21.0% were undecided. Subsequently, a total of 42.9% reveal that they are not competent at all in the use of their indigenous languages while 20.0% disagree and opine that they are competent in their use. Also, 14.9% were undecided. A very high percentage saw the need for standardizing the indigenous language. Here, about 97.1% suggest that the languages need to be standardized and codified to meet international standard and mutual intelligibility. Only 1.3% disagree while 1.7% were indifferent. Standardizing a language would make the language have uniform features as well as achieving greater communication goals beyond the immediate community.

In Subsection D, the students were tested on their use of either the English or the indigenous languages in online learning and interactions. Majority of the students at 74.1% state that they use only English in chatting on the social media while 25.9 disagree. In the same vein, 78.6% also state that occasionally they code-mix English and their indigenous language in their online interactions while 21.4% disagree. The import of the findings is that majority of the students often use English in social media chats while majority of them code-mix occasionally. This is done at the expense of the indigenous languages which only very few students sometimes use when they code-mix. On the other hand, only 30.2% use their mother tongue in chatting and interacting online while 62.8% disagree and 7.0% are undecided. This actually presents the need to revive the indigenous languages through the Internet. A very high percentage, 91.0%, start online interaction with the English language while 10.3% disagree and 1.7% is undecided. This still supports the assumption that English is the language of computer-mediated communication. This view is corroborated with the result that 95.0% accept that they study only online materials written in English while only 5.0% state otherwise. The implication is that either the students are not fluent in the indigenous languages or there is paucity of electronic materials in the indigenous languages. The second option seems to be plausible as 52.1% accept that they are not aware of some materials and websites designed in their indigenous languages. However, very few of such websites, BBC Igbo, BBC Yoruba, etc. exist as 9.2% state that they have visited websites designed in their indigenous languages while 37.8% have not and 42.8% is undecided. However, 54.5% were quick to add that Google has search site for Nigerian indigenous languages and 19.9% disagree. A fairly good number at 25.6% is undecided as they are not sure if such websites exist.

Overall, Only 39.6% of the students were able to render correctly the indigenous languages interpretations of the following open-ended expressions (a) What is your name?, (b) How old are you? And (c) I want to go to the market. 50.4% had some mistakes ranging from spelling and syntactic arrangement while 10% did not complete the section as they are not fluent in the written version of their indigenous languages

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has examined the use of the internet as a tool for reviving indigenous languages in Nigeria. It also discusses the effect of mother tongue interferences as well as the domineering influence of the English language in online interactions. It is geared towards determining the ways and means by which the Internet would be utilized as a veritable tool for reviving indigenous languages. The findings from the completed questionnaires show that the majority of the students could not speak or write in their indigenous languages as they could in the Foreign language, especially the English Language. The study also discovers that a very high percentage of the students interact on the internet-enabled social media mainly through the English language and also almost all the students are neither aware of nor visit websites designed in the indigenous languages. These findings foreground the need for the indigenous languages to be salvaged for the posterity and for global competitiveness since digital communication is the order of the day.

The study makes the following recommendations: (a) the government, in conjunction with all educational stakeholders should develop mobile Apps in the indigenous languages. (b) Government should make a policy for the indigenous languages to be included as a technological language as in the case of banking online mobile apps. (c) Stakeholders of education should create a website for the indigenous languages for students to access in addition to options in the banking choices of language to withdraw money in banking system mobile Apps (d) Indigenous languages should be made compulsory in the school's curriculum beyond the secondary school level in Nigeria. (e) The body in charge of Polytechnic education on SIWES should inculcate indigenous languages in training the students of local names of the Mechanical Engineering, Agricultural and Marketing terminologies of the Internet meaning of the imported equipment for vocational studies to overcome the problems of conflicts of meaning and interpretations.

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Appendix
DEPARTMENT OF GENERAL STUDIES
FEDERAL POLYTECHNIC ILARO, OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

Dear Respondent,

I am a researcher from the above named institution and department. At the moment, I am conducting a research on the topic: **INTERNET AS A VERITABLE TOOL FOR REVIVING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA.**

I, therefore, solicit your sincere response to the questions so as to actualize the purpose of this research. All views will be treated with utmost confidentiality.

Thanks.

Degboro Olufunke (Mrs)

Instruction: Please tick [✓] as appropriate and specify other views where necessary.

SECTION A: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Sex: Female [], Male []

Age: Below 15 [], 15 - 35 [] 45 - 65 [] 66 - and above []

Educational Level: Primary Sch. [] Secondary Sch. [] Graduate [] Post Graduate []

State of Residence: -----

Geo-political zone: South-east [] South-west [] Others []

Mother-tongue: Igbo [] Yoruba [] Hausa [] Others []

Work Sector: Educational [] Political [] Health [] Business [] Legal [] Media []

Agricultural [] Others []

SECTION B: INTERNET AND LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

Instruction: Kindly indicate if you agree or disagree with the following statements about the status and role of English language, based on your opinion and perception, using this 5-point scale: Strongly agree (SA) = 5, Agree (A) = 4, Disagree (D) = 3, Strongly disagree (SD) = 2, Undecided (UD) = 1

S/N	SECTION A: Awareness and Use of the Internet	SA	A	D	SD	UD
1.	Internet is a common tool for communication and socializing					
2.	English is basically the main language of social media communication					
3.	Language is an embodiment of culture					
SECTION B: STATUS, FREQUENCY OF USE OF ENGLISH (Please indicate as for section A)						
4.	English is widespread in Nigeria as Nigerian English.					
5.	English is the main medium of instruction in my school and home					
6.	English is spoken exclusively at home/in the school					
7.	I constantly mix-up English and my mother tongue in conversations					
SECTION C: ASSEMENT OF COMPETENCE IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES (Please indicate as for section B)						
8.	I understand Igbo or Yoruba well					
9.	I speak Igbo or Yoruba very well					

10.	I understand but cannot speak or write Igbo or Yoruba					
11.	I understand only simple commands in Igbo or Yoruba					
12.	I am not competent at all in Igbo or Yoruba					
13.	Nigerian indigenous languages need to be standardized					
SECTION D: INTERNET, ENGLISH AND INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES (Please indicate as for section C)						
14.	I use only English is chatting and sending messages online					
15.	I code-mix English and my indigenous in my online interactions					
16.	I use only my mother tongues in chatting and interacting online					
17.	English is the first language I start interaction with online					
18.	I study only online materials written in English					
19.	I am not aware of some websites designed in my mother tongue					
20.	I have visited some Websites designed in my mother tongue					
21.	Nigerian languages have their own websites, such as google Igbo, google Yorua, etc.					
Provide the Igbo or Yoruba Versions of the following expressions (Competence in MT)						
a. What is your name _____ b. How old are you _____ c. I want to go to the market _____						