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LANGUAGE PREFERENCE: PARENTS' CHOICE OF LANGUAGE TO BE FIRST LEARNT TO SPEAK BY CHILDREN IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on Parents' Choice of Language to be First Learnt to Speak by Children in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. The study, which is a descriptive survey research design purposively sampled one hundred parents of different language backgrounds residing in Ebonyi State Metropolis, the language they brought up their children to speak first and reasons behind their choice. Questionnaire, Oral interview and Observation were the instruments for data-gathering. Results showed that among children under 5 years of age 93 (93%) understands their parents indigenous language but 80 (80%) could speak it. In age group of 6 – 11 years 96 (96%) understand their parents' L_1, while only 81% could speak it. this showed that one-third (1/3) of the children have not acquired their parents L_1. Parents who brought up their children to speak L_1 did so mainly because they felt the children ought to know the language and culture of their people. Parents who chose to bring up their children to speak English said it was because the children needed English for school. Regretting the growing inability of some children to speak indigenous language and the attendant identity crisis, parents gave some of the following advice: Parents should speak their L_1 to their children right from birth and make them respond in L_1, expose the children to folktales, songs and games in L_1, take children home to the village and grandparents periodically among others.

Keywords: Language acquisition, Parent's choice, Language preference, Indigenous language, Children.

Introduction

It is observed that within Abakaliki Urban, that parent's converse with people in the environment in an indigenous language, but turn to speak to their babies in English. Similarly in many households, parents especially the elitists class, communicate in indigenous language, but speak to their new born babies and infants in English. Thus, right from birth many Nigerian babies and infants are addressed in English rather than in their parent's indigenous language. That explains why many of these children are growing up, without being able to speak their parent's indigenous language. It is equally observed that most Nigerian children now displays amazing competence in English than in any indigenous language.

Researchers on child language acquisition while they may differ on the issue of the process of language development in children, nevertheless all agree that a pre-requisite is that the child be exposed to language data by people in the environment. For innatists, such as Noam Chomsky (1965; 1966), every child is born

with natural endowments that enable it acquire language. When, from birth, the child is exposed to language and addressed in the language, this act as a trigger for the Language Acquisition Devise (LAD). This learning device enables the child, unconsciously to formulate hypotheses about the structure of the language to which it is exposed, test out its own language production against the data it hears and constantly modify his own speech to be close to the standard of adult speech (Ohiri – Aniche, 2004).

This theory of the process of language acquisition differs from that proposed by behaviorists such as B.F. Skinner (1957). For them, the child acquires language by being exposed to speech in the environment and addressed in the language. This acts as "stimulus" to which the child "responds" thus making his own utterances. Positive reinforcement from people around encourages the child to repeat correct responses, thus consolidating his learning of such utterances. Incorrect responses, on the other hand, are not reinforced, and so the child drops them and their learning is extinguished (Ohiri-Aniche, 2004).

Language remains the basic tool of acculturation of the child. Through language, the child comes to terms with the values, norms and tradition of his environment. The language a child is brought up with therefore, determines the child's world – view and an estimation and expression of his total experience. English language as a colonial legacy has been Nigeria's official language, and is fast becoming a domestic language. Increasingly, it is observed that, the ability of a child in Nigeria to speak in English in all situations appears to be the barometer used to measure the child's cognitive and linguistic development. This is pursued to the detriment of our indigenous language. The Director – General, National council for Arts and culture (NCAC), Otunba Segun Runsewe, has expressed concern over how preference for foreign languages was affecting Nigerian languages. He said that unless something drastic was done to protect Nigerian languages that a lot of them would go into extinction in the near future (Guardian, 2022).The DG, said that the problem was more pronounced with the use of English language, because it is the Country's official language. He lamented that, if you go for an occasion and you speak English language wrongly people will laugh at you. "But if you speak Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba in that manner, that nobody will know you made a mistake because it flows, it is natural.

According to him, the problem is that parents want their children to speak English Phonetics, and they would make sure the children come out to interact with their visitors. Runsewe called for adequate enlightenment to enable parents, schools and relevant agencies to know the danger poor usage of Nigerian languages posed to sustaining Nigeria's culture. Additionally, the DG NCAC, called for adequate sensitization on the importance of parents teaching their wards Nigeria languages and the dangers of their children not understanding these languages. It is against this situation that this study investigates the language parents prefer their children to acquire first among the following languages in Abakaliki Urban: English,

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major Nigerian Languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Statement of the Problem

Many Nigerian children are no longer addressed in their parents' indigenous language. Rather, right from birth, these children are spoken to in English by parents and other people in the family. Without being exposed to indigenous language data, the child would find it difficult to acquire his indigenous language or mother tongue. Furthermore, it is observed that these children replied in English when spoken to in an indigenous language. This pose serious threats for the survival of our indigenous languages. It is against this situations that this study investigates the language parents bring up their children to speak.

Purpose of the Study:

The main purpose of the study was to find out the language parents in Ebonyi State, prefer to bring up their children to speak. Specifically, the study sought to:

a) Investigate the language parents prefer to bring up their children to speak.
b) Ascertain the reasons for such choice.
c) Find out the indigenous language competence of the children aged 1-5 years and 6-11 years
d) Examine whether the language practices in Nursery School support the development of indigenous languages in children.
e) Examine the consequences of not handing over their indigenous languages to children.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the course of the study.

1) What language do parent prefer to bring up their children to speak?
2) What reasons inform this choice by parents?
3) What are the indigenous language competence of children aged 1-5 years and 6-11 years?
4) How do language practices in Nursery Schools support the development of indigenous languages in children?
5) What are the consequences of not handing over their indigenous language to children?

Significance of the Study

The study is significant in that it calls attention to the dangerous trend of dwindling competence in indigenous language among children. By focusing on parents and families, the study would have alerted them, and whole nation to the crucial roles of these agents in ensuring that indigenous languages are handed over to children, from generation to generation. This is the only way to ensure that our indigenous languages do not go into extinction.

Scope of the Study:

The study focused majorly on parents whose first language is one of these three major Nigerian languages; Hausa, Igbo, & Yoruba. Parents from other ethno-linguistic group are not sampled for the study. Similarly, only five Nursery/ Primary Schools were sampled out of the numerous such establishment in Abakaliki. It is hoped that the results obtained from the study

would shed some useful light on the problem of loss of indigenous languages among Nigeria children, especially in Urban areas.

Research Method:

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The design utilizes a structured questionnaire which contain items designed in line with the personal experience of the respondents on the issues regarding parents' choice of language to be first acquired by children in Ebonyi State Metropolis. The population of the study covers parents from different language backgrounds and different walks of life. They included Staff of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, EBSU Staff School, and Hope High International School. Saint Martins International School, CSMT International School and Jesus is Lord International School; Traders and Artisans in Abakaliki International Market, Rice Mill and Mechanic Village. Additionally, head teachers from the Nursery and Primary Schools listed were interviewed. 100 parents were purposively sampled for the study. They speak the same Nigeria majority language as their spouses (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba). These were termed Homogenous Majority language parents: Igbos =50, Hausas =25 and Yoruba =25 Total =100 parents.

Procedure:

The survey was personally conducted by the research in the areas visited, except in the markets and Hausa and Yoruba Quarters where the survey was carried out by two able research assistants. Questionnaire, oral interview and observation were the instruments for data-gathering.

Results:

Table 1 displays the findings from the questionnaire administered to parents. The findings are reported in frequencies and percentages to respond to the research questions which guide the study.

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Table 1: Language parents prefers to bring up their children to speak:

S/N	Respondents	=	Homogenous Majority Lang. Parents and No. of Respondents			Total all Parents
			Igbo parents	Hausa parents	Yoruba parents	100 (100%)
			50 (100%)	25 (100%)	25 (100%)	
1	Parents speaks his/her indigenous language	Response yes	50 (100%)	25 (100%)	25 (100%)	100 (100%)
		No	- -	- -	- -	- -
2	Language mostly used to communicate with spouse	Indigenous language	40(80%)	25 (100%)	20(80%)	85(85%)
		English language	- -	- -	- -	- -
		Indigen.l ang./ English.	10 (20%)	- -	5 (20%)	15 (15%)
3	Language mostly used to communicate with children at home	Indigenous language	5(10%)	23 (92%)	17 (68%)	45 (45%)
		English language	2 (4%)	- -	3 (12%)	5 (10%)
		Indigenous language	43 (86%)	2 (8%)	5 (20%)	50 (50%)

Table 2: Language Competence of children aged 5 years and below & 6-11 years.

S/N	Respondents	=	Homogenous Majority Lang. Parents and No. of Respondents			Total All Parents
			Igbo parents	Hausa parents	Yoruba parents	100 (100%)
			50 (100%)	25 (100%)	25 (100%)	
1	Children aged 5 years and below **understand** parents indigenous language	Yes	45 (90%)	25 (100%)	23 (92%)	93 (93%)
		No	4 (8%)	- -	2 (8%)	6 (8%)
		N/A	1 (2%)	- -	- -	1
	Children aged 5 years and below **speak** parents indigenous language	Yes	40 (80%)			
		No	5 (10%)	- -	3 (12%)	8
		N/A	- -	- -	- -	- -
	Children aged 6-11 years **understand** parents indigenous language	Yes	48 (96%)	24(96%)	24(96%)	96(96%)
		No	5(10%)	- -	- -	1
		N/A	1(2%)	1(4%)	1 (2%)	3
	Children aged 6-11 years **speak** parents indigenous language	Yes	45 (90%)	23(92%)	20 (80%)	80(80%)
		No	3 (6%)	- -	3 (12%)	6
		N/A	- -	2 (8%)	1 (2%)	3

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Table 3: Reasons for bringing up children to first speak parents' indigenous language (L1)

S/N	Item	Majority Language Parents			Total Parents
		Igbo parents 50	Hausa parents 25	Yoruba parents 25	
1.	Children should know parents L_1	48 (96)	24 (96%)	2 (80 %)	92 (92%)
2.	Children should be able to communicate at home in parents L_1	49 (98	20 (80%)	(19 (76%)	88 (88%)
3.	Children should know the language and culture of their people.	50 (100%)	25 (100%)	24 (96%)	94 (94%)
4.	Children will have the opportunity to learn English later at school	45 (90%)	4 (16%)	10 (40%)	59 (59%)

Table 4: Reasons for bringing up children to first speak English

S/N	Item	Majority Language Parents			Total Parents
		Igbo parents 50	Hausa parents 25	Yoruba parents 25	
1.	Children are better of knowing the language of the environment	15 (30%)	1 (2%)	8 (32%)	24 (24%)
2.	Children need English for school	30 (60%)	10 (20%)	15 (60%)	55 (55%)
3.	Speaking English makes children more civilized and modern	20 (40%)	13 (52%)	7 (28%)	40 (40%)
4.	Exposing children to indigenous language will confuse them	2 (4%)	- -	- -	2 (2%)

Observations in Homes and Nursery Schools.

In most of the homes visited, bilingualism in English and indigenous language obtained. However, while parent's older children and other adults communicated in their indigenous language, they invariable spoke to babies and infants in English Usually, this was by some unwritten rule, but in a few cases this practice was by the agreement of parents. In a few cases also parents have made out right rules either saying that the indigenous language be used solely in the home, or that English be used. Similarly in the nursery Schools, the language of instruction and of general communication is English.

Oral Interview with Parents

The question of the language in which to bring up children is one that raises very strong emotional reactions. In some families, the researcher was told that it has caused a violent disagreements between spouses. Interestingly, it is usually the fathers that wanted the indigenous language while the mothers preferred English. Generally, all parents regretted that their children were no longer competent in their indigenous languages, but many said they were mindful of the fact that children needed English for school and in their wider Nigeria context. When asked if they did not think beyond the utility of

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English to the long time effect of possible language death of their languages and disintegration of their communities, many of the parents became sorrowful, confessing that they had not given thought to these other dimensions.

Oral Interview with Head-Teachers of Nursery Schools

The head teachers were aware of the provisions of the National Policy on Education (1977, revised 1981, 1998, and 2004) which require the medium of instruction in nursery schools to be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. They, however said that in urban/cosmopolitan areas, this was impracticable due to the various language backgrounds of the pupils, hence English was used. In their opinion, the burden of bringing up children to speak indigenous languages rests squarely with parents, in homes. Secondly, as long as English remains the country official language and the medium of instruction in schools (from primary 4 upward) parents would always want the nursery schools to give their children a head start in English.

Discussion of Findings

Among the children aged 1-5 years, 92% understand their parents' indigenous language, but 80% speak it. This means that more than 20% of the under 5 years old have not acquired their parents indigenous language. Similarly, children in the age of 6-11 years, 20% of them have not acquired their parents' indigenous language. This information was given by their parents. The finding also shows that the children are still within the critical period in language acquisition. The critical period hypothesis according to Penfield and Robert (1959) in Cook (1996), claims that a child who did not learn a first language by age nine (9) would not only fail to learn new language with a native-like fluency, but would in fact never be able to acquire more than a basic linguistic understanding regardless of future study.

For parents who choose to bring up their children to speak indigenous language, the main reason was the belief that their children should know the language and culture of their people. Such parents insisted on their mother tongues being spoken in the home, involved children in many socio-cultural activities of their people and periodically took the children to their home towns and villages. A growing number of parents on the other hand, run monolingual English homes. This is especially so with young educated parents. According to them, the need for English in school, college and world of work motivates them to raise their children to first speak English. In crèches, play groups and preprimary schools, English is the language of communication between teachers and pupils and between children themselves. Some of the children who can speak their parents' language pretend not to do so in front of their peers.

Finally, it was observed that most parents have not given much thought to the long-term effect of not passing on their language to their children, which is outright extinction of the language and the community. The parents then gave some useful suggestion to combat the problem.

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Suggestions

Below are some of the suggestions from parents, head teachers and the researcher on how to ensure that children acquire and use indigenous languages:

1. Right from birth, parents should speak their L_1 to their children and make them respond in L_1
2. Expose children in the home to folktales, songs, games, home video, story books in the L_1
3. Hold family morning devotions in the L_1
4. Take children home to the village and grandparents periodically.
5. Encourage children to participate in indigenous cultural activities.
6. Parents should be made aware that it is a crime against a child and abuse of human rights to deprive it of its heritage language.
7. Parents should constantly let their children know the advantages of being able to speak their parents' L_1. It is the language of intimacy which brings the family close together; it makes the children know who they are and be proud of their identity; it prevent them from being foreigners in their communities.

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