

## APPRAISING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS FIRST OR SECOND LANGUAGE TO IGBO SPEAKING STUDENTS

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### **Abstract**

*Language has been an indispensable tool for communication. Its acquisition, learning, and use have drawn the attention of many linguists as well as psychologists. English language, as the world lingua franca, introduced and used by the colonizing British in Nigeria has enjoyed much prestigious status and its use has become a mark of enlightenment and exposure. This elevated position of the language has resulted in its acquisition and used early in many homes especially those from Igbo origin, thereby denigrating their native language - the Igbo language. This paper, therefore, sets out to investigate whether the English language is the first or second language for students of Igbo origin and the attitude of these youths towards their language. To examine this, the researcher adopted two theoretical frameworks; language acquisition theory (Innateness) by Noam Chomsky and Interactionist theory by Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner. A structured questionnaire is used to elicit responses from 100 Year one students of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri who are Igbos, and the data is analyzed using the descriptive quantitative and simple percentage methods. The outcome of this work exposed the fact that the English language, which before now, has been learned as a second language in schools, has taken a lead to be the first language acquired and spoken by students, particularly the Igbo speaking students.*

**Keywords:** English Language, First Language, Second Language, Acquisition

### **Introduction**

Language is the most significant aspect of the human species that differentiates man from other species. Consequently, language acquisition depicts an impressive aspect of human psychological and cognitive development. From birth, a child becomes exposed to a particular language- the code his/ her parents use in communicating with the child from 0-24 months of his/ her early life. Chomsky (2000) lent credence to this in his innateness theory where he postulates that a child has an inborn ability to acquire language from infancy. The faculty for language acquisition is innate as one's brain possesses a neurological circuit that carries linguistic data at birth.

One of the impacts of post-colonization in Nigeria is the endorsement of the English language as the official language despite the presence of over 520 indigenous languages spoken in the country as a multi-ethnic nationality. These languages are acquired as mother tongues as they are usually the code of interaction among members of the family.

However, the advent of civilization occasioned by constant migration outside the country, the quest for white-collar jobs and modernization has led to the relegation of these languages to the background as the English language is seen as the language of the educated, language of instruction in schools as well as the official language used in offices and other formal settings. Part of the reason why the English language enjoys this prestige could be ascribed to the fact that Nigeria is a conglomeration of different languages based on its multi-lingual and multi-ethnic background. Again, it is regarded, globally, as a lingua franca spoken during most international summits.

This elevated status has led to the adoption and use of the English language, previously learned in schools after acquiring the native language, to be spoken at home as a means of interaction among members of the family. The indigenous languages were regarded as the native language or mother tongue of every Nigerian child before now and were also seen as the child's first language. In other words, the indigenous languages were acquired at home before the child comes in contact with the English language probably in school or any other social setting.

Today, one of the greatest concerns of some linguists rests on the fact that the status of the native languages, particularly the Igbo language as the first language acquired at infancy has gradually dwindled due to migration and the elevated status ascribed to the English language. The effect of this denigration, therefore, hinges on the super elevation of the English language as the first language, spoken in various homes of Igbo elites as a show of class and status. Consequently, the English language, which ab initio was taught as a second language in schools has switched positions. It is acquired and spoken by an average Igbo child due to the fact that he/she was not exposed to or introduced to his/her native language at infancy.

However, the result of this anomaly is that most youths of Igbo origin speak English more comfortably and fluently than their mother tongue. The worst scenario remains, that they find it difficult to communicate in their indigenous languages. Some linguists submit, that if care is not taken, some of the

indigenous languages, especially the Igbo language may go into extinction in the next 50 years.

This paper, therefore, appraises this position of the English language as well as investigate the attitude of Igbo speaking students towards the Igbo language. It seeks to examine the circumstances that have led to this. Again, given that the English language is not learned in the midst of the original owners of the language (through immersion) to be able to acquire the native speaker's linguistic competence, but learned from people who mastered it as a second language (parents, neighbors, teachers, etc), these youths still exhibit near-native speaker's competence in the usage of the language. However, the conflict of the position of the English language as used by youths from Igbo ethnic background has resulted in learning their native language (Igbo) as a second language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is anchored on two theories; Noam Chomsky's language acquisition theory (Innateness) and Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner's Interactionist theory of language acquisition.

Chomsky (1957) submits that every child's brain has a special language learning mechanism from birth. In other words, children have an innate faculty to acquire language which is biologically determined as a person's brain has a neurological track that contains linguistic knowledge at birth. He argues that a child's natural quest to master a language is triggered by hearing utterances and his brain interprets whatever he/she hears based on the basic principles or designs it already comprises.

The limitation of this theory pivots on children being predisposed to language but takes no cognizance of the interplay between children and their caregivers, and the reason why children might want to speak. This limitation prompted the researcher to adopt a second theory; the Interactionist theory of language acquisition. Although both theories agreed that children are given birth to with brains that predispose them with the ability to pick languages, the latter emphasizes the child's desire to communicate. They argue that babies prompt their parents and other adults into giving them the linguistic exposure they need to learn a language. The Interactionists assert that children learn language from anyone who wants to interact with them.

Vygotsky (1986) created a prototype of human development which he called the socio-cultural model. He argued that cultural advancement in children can be examined in two stages. Firstly, the child observes the interaction between other people and then begins to develop the same. This means that the child first and foremost, watches the adults in his environment communicating amongst themselves, and then, later develops the ability himself to communicate. In his line of argument, Vygotsky hypothesizes that a child learns best when he interacts with people around him to solve a problem. In the first instance, the adult interacting with the child is accountable to lead the child before the child then becomes able to solve problems on his own. This assertion is in the affirmative with language since the adult talks first at the child before the child learns to respond in turn.

Snow (1976) throws more light on this as she speculates that adults are key players in a child's language acquisition process and suggests proto-conversation, which she tags as 'conversational exchange' between the infant and the caregiver. Supporting this assertion, Bruner (1978) submits that both infant and adult do converse in as much as the child may be unable to speak. The use of games and non-verbal communication by adults and infants help in building the structure of language even before the infant can communicate vocally.

Interactionist theory, therefore, highlights the presence of both the learner's internal process and the linguistic context in language development. The thrust of the theory is that learning emanates from the interactions between linguistic information and the learner's mental competencies. Therefore, children acquire language so as to interact and also to learn the linguistic code.

To further understand the pose of the English language as L1 or L2, we shall have a conceptual analysis of first and second language learning and acquisition.

### **First Language and its Acquisition**

A first language connotes the language acquired and first spoken at home. It is the language one learns from birth or speaks confidently. The first language is part of a child's personal and sociolinguistic identity. Some linguists also term it as one's indigenous language, native language, or mother tongue as it is the language a child acquires from infancy until about 7 or 8 years. Even after those years, a child can keep learning the language to master all the idiomatic expressions, sentence structures, and many more areas (Pfaff, 1987). Children,

naturally and effortlessly learn the language by listening to their parents communicating with it to them or listening to other people conversing with it.

For children whose parents come from different linguistic backgrounds, they might be acquainted with those languages at the same time. In such a case, the child is said to be exposed to two first languages as he/she can learn both languages.

First languages are usually referred to by linguists as L1. Although it is usually acquired, children can learn it through reinforcement in the classroom to highlight the knowledge of grammatical rules, syntax, idiomatic expressions, metaphors, and many other concepts. Although a non-native speaker may develop proficiency in a targeted language after about two years of immersion, it can take between five and seven years for the child to be at the bar with their native-speaking counterparts (Brown, 1973).

Could the above scenario be applicable to youths of Igbo origin? Since they are more exposed and disposed to speaking the English language more than the Igbo language, could English then be regarded as their first language or their native language? Before answering the above, we shall look at the concept of a second language and its acquisition or learning.

### **Second Language; its Acquisition and Learning**

This involves the analytical study of how humans acquire or learn a language besides the first language or mother tongue. In other words, second language acquisition involves the process of learning other codes different from the indigenous language. For example, a child who can communicate in the Igbo language may begin to learn English when he starts going to school. Normally, children are usually faster in learning L2 than an adult.

L2 can be learned formally in the classroom or acquired with little or no formal learning. This usually happens when a language is learned by immersion (everyday interaction with the original owners of the language in the workplace, market, parks, or anywhere else). So, language can be acquired through an unintentional process during which they are oblivious of the rules of grammar. It does not presume teaching and the child determines the tempo unlike in language learning which is a deliberate process that presumes teaching and the teacher determines the pace (Mc Laughlin, 1991; Ellis, 1994; Brown, 2007).

## **Some Important Concepts in L2 Acquisition**

### **a. The concept of nature and nurture**

The concept of nature and nurture focuses on ascertaining the degree in which biological inclinations and socio-cultural dispositions affect us as we grow up. According to Skinner, language could basically be learned by emulating caregivers' utterances, while Chomsky proposes that learning a human language is too complicated. We must have some congenital tendency to expect human dialects to be systematized in certain ways.

### **b. The concept of competence and performance**

Competence involves the ideational and latent impression of language expertise inborn in man, with its tendency to produce and comprehend natural speeches in a given language as well as rules of grammar. The performance itself, is a defective view of competence, partly because of the processing complexities in speaking or other forms of language skills which may lead to slips and mistakes in (e.g. listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

### **c. Fossilization**

Learners tend to stop making any visible progress, despite the number of lessons they join, or how intently they continue with their L2 for interactive purposes. In their explanation, the Psycholinguists submit that the language-specific learning components accessible to a child simply stop functioning for older learners, and cannot easily be recreated. Lending support to this, the Sociolinguists argue that older L2 learners do not have the social opportunities, or the morale to identify with the native speakers' domain.

### **d. L1 Interference**

In Corder's (1978) work, he tried to underpin how interference can be adjusted to become a learner "strategy". He posits that the learner's L1 can advance the susceptible course of learning an L2. He further argues, that when learners find it difficult to express an idea because of a lack of linguistic repertoire in the target language, they tend to makeshift to their L1 to make up for the deficiency. This scenario lends credence to why the L1 is depended upon at the initial learning procedure. Krashen (1982) made the same proposal that learners may utilize their L1 to make utterances when they do not have adequate knowledge of the

L2. Krashen and Corder's submissions take the source language as a resource that learners could utilize as an improvised version to reduce their shortcomings.

### **e. The concept of Communication Competence**

This concept originated from Dell Hymes (1967), a sociolinguist who feels Chomsky's (1965) idea of competence was quite inadequate. Research on communicative competence conducted in the 1970s distinguished between communicative competence and linguistic knowledge to buttress the difference between ability that allows one to communicate practically and interactively and knowledge about the language patterns. Canale (1983) and Canale and Swain (1980), identified four different elements that constitute communicative competence. The first two subgroups exhibit usage of the linguistic system.

(i) *Grammatical competence*: involves the aspect of communicative competence that entails insight into lexical units and of rules governing morphology, phonology, syntax, sentence-grammar, and semantics. This also includes the competence that we attribute to the knowledge of the linguistic symbols of a language, which is Hymes' 'linguistic competence'.

(ii) *Discourse competence*: This is the skill to relate utterances in extended speech and ultimately get significant stretches of utterances. Evidently, grammatical competence involves sentence-level grammar while discourse competence dwells on relationships between sentences.

The last two subgroups explain the more operative areas of communication.

(iii) *Sociolinguistic competence* is the ability to use language as it relates to discourse and socio-cultural rule. Sociolinguistic competence requires the comprehension of the general context of language use; the roles of the interlocutors, the function of the interaction, and the information they disseminate. It is only in a context that judgments be made on the suitability of a particular utterance (Savignon,1983).

(iv) *Strategic competence*: involves both vocal and non-verbal interactive patterns that can be utilized to make- up lapses in conversation as a result of performance determinants or inadequate competence (Canale and Swain1980). This type of aptitude highlights one's proficiency in making amends, managing blemished knowledge, and preserving interaction by way of 'paraphrasing, hesitation, avoidance, circumlocution, repetition, and guessing, as well as transitions in register and design.

## **f. Interlanguage**

Selinker (1969,1972) invented the concept of 'interlanguage' to showcase the makeshift grammars articulated by L2 learners in an attempt to arrive at the target language. The interlanguage seems obvious from both the learner's L1 and from the target language. Over time, this develops as learners use different internal styles to understand the input and to induce their personal output. In Selinker's (1972) submission on interlanguage, he argued that it is a unique linguistic method emanating from the L2 learner's quest in the construction of the target language rule. He identified five main psychological processes associated with L2 learning to include:

1. Transfer of language from the L1.
2. Transfer of coaching procedure adopted in training in the L2.
3. Styles of learning in L2
4. Styles of communication in L2.
5. Oversimplification of L2 linguistic property.

Selinker perceived the evolution of interlanguage as in variance with the process of L1 advancement due to the prospects of fossilization in the L2. Fossilization is a situation that occurs when the L2 learner stops involving interlanguage to some extent, despite the length of exposure, new data, or new teaching (Hoque, 2017).

## **The Igbos: Language, Customs and Values**

The Igbo people also spelled Ibo are one of the ethnic groups in Nigeria. This group is mainly found in Abia, Imo, Anambra, Ebonyi, and Enugu states. There have been speculations concerning the root of the Igbos as it is not known exactly how they came to be. Structurally, the Igbo land is made up of two sections that are not evenly divided by Niger River- eastern and western sections. As regards learning the language, the Igbo language seems hard because of the large number of dialects, its magnificent affixes, and strong intonation. Also, the Igbo language is a tone language and there are several dialects of it.

The most famous and notable novel that involves the Igbo and their cultural practices is Chinua Achebe's, *Things Fall Apart* written in 1959. The novel



captures the Christian missionaries and British colonial rule's influence on Igbo traditional community at a time in the 19th or early 20th century.

Some researchers have revealed that many Igbo personalities who had been acquainted with the Europeans have been swayed and overwhelmed negatively by the white man's tradition resulting in Igbo culture being relegated to the background and this has immensely affected their idiosyncrasy which most times, negate the norms and values they have imbibed. Taking a lead from this standpoint, therefore, the researcher seeks to x-ray one of the Igbo values which seem to have been affected by the white man apart from language.

Child-rearing is one of the key responsibilities in Igbo culture. It is the major task of parents particularly mothers to raise their children to be abreast with the customs and traditions of the Igbos. Listening to folk tales from their parents has been one of the ways to learn the values, norms, customs, and traditions as well as the language of the Igbos. As part of their daily routine, parents and other elderly members of the family gathered the children to instruct them using Igbo folktales and stories. The children were taught to be able to distinguish between good and bad behaviors and the dividend for such behaviors. The children were inspired to be well-behaved as these stories served to educate them on the effects of different behavioral patterns and the accruing reward.

Today, some parents do not have the time to raise their children properly through folktales in order to inculcate norms and values in them; instead, they get exposed to all kinds of games, movies, and the internet thereby parading bad behaviors which are contrary to good ethics, that may affect their personalities. Unfortunately, these negative activities are not showcased in the Igbo language rather in the English language.

Before now, children were guided in some areas of knowledge and dexterity in order to discover their gifts for them to live an independent life between adolescence and adulthood. In order to have extensive knowledge of his chosen career, a child may serve as an apprentice with a master for a period of time to expose him to his career. During this period, a child focuses on learning skills required in his choice of career with proper guidance from his employer.

Contrarily, youths of today have no interest to undertake life's challenges, neither do they wish to learn a handiwork, trade or even go to school, but they would rather prefer to make fast money, live in mansions, and use expensive cars. Undoubtedly, this may be the reason why these youths are involved in

cheating, cultism, robbery, kidnapping, cybercrime, hacking of phone lines, ritual killing, and many other things, which negatively affect human advancement.

Again, Igbo informal education gave rise to children with impeccable characters and behavior. The maidens were trained to behave properly always in order to have good suitors. For instance, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* showcased this behavior, as he ordered Ezimma to sit properly like a maiden (Achebe, 1958). The issue came about the time Ezimma seemed to have lost her manners as she did not sit properly in the presence of her father Okonkwo and was interrogating her father while he was eating despite the fact that one of the values inculcated in an Igbo child is table manner which entails keeping mute while eating to avoid getting choked with pepper.

More so, before the white man came, Igbo parents groomed their children to be self-reliant. The fathers trained their sons to be diligent and independent instead of being a nuisance in the villages. This coaching enabled the children to begin early to feign for themselves instead of sitting idle, waiting for a white-collar job that was not even forthcoming. This way, a child manages and maintains the family trade or business and makes a living out of it.

Furthermore, the Igbo language played a conspicuous role in helping to impart in the children the cultural values, norms, beliefs, and customs of the Igbos, hence, assisted to broaden their knowledge as well as respect for Igbo culture. This laudable feat is basically attained by the parent-child relationship, whereby the child is exposed to the language, values, customs, and norms of the people by the parents. It was also discovered that children raised in their own culture will hardly deviate from it as they grow. This idea was typically captured in a verse of the Holy Bible (Proverbs, 22: 6) which says, Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is getting old, he will not depart from it.

Finally, foreign cultures and practices have drastically affected the present-day Igbo society especially in a language that has captivated the minds of many youths of Igbo origin.

## **Methodology**

This research engaged 100 year-one students of Federal University of Technology, Owerri who were purposively selected (Students from Igbo origin). A structured questionnaire is used to elicit survey responses from the

respondents and the instruments are analyzed using descriptive quantitative analysis and simple percentage methods.

### Data Presentation

We interviewed our subjects on six issues relating to their consideration of English language as their first or second language.

### Non- Polar Questions

- \* When did you start speaking English Language?
- \* Where did you learn it?
- \* From whom did you learn it?
- \* Do you consider English Language as your first or second language?
- \* How do you feel about your native language (Igbo language)?
- \*Who do you think is to blame for your inability to speak your mother tongue?

### Presentation and Analysis of non- polar questions

**Table 1:** (a) When did you start speaking English Language?

University	Infancy	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
FUTO	83%	12%	4%	1%

**Table 2:** (b) Where did you learn it?

University	At Home	In School	Neighborhood	Anywhere
FUTO	47%	28%	10%	15%

**Table 3:** (c) From whom did you learn it?

University	Friends	Parents	Teachers	All
FUTO	7%	51%	30%	12%

**Table 4:** (d) How do you feel about your native language (Igbo language)?

University	Proud	Lost	Ashamed	Indifferent
FUTO	25%	24%	8%	43%

**Table 5:** (e) Who do you think is to blame for your inability to speak your native language?

University	The Society	Parents	School	Myself
FUTO	35%	54%	9%	2%

**Table 6:** (f) Which do you consider your first language?

University	English Language	Igbo Language
FUTO	79%	21%

**Table 7:** Responses to Polar Questions on their consideration of English Language as their L1 or L2.

S/N	Questions	YES	NO
1	Can you speak Igbo Language?	28%	72%
2	Can you write with it?	14%	86%
3	Do you understand the language?	89%	11%
4	Do you read literature text written in Igbo Language?	15%	85%
5	Should it be used as a medium of instruction in schools?	47%	53%
6	Are you proud of Igbo Language?	68%	32%
7	Would you consider it your first language?	14%	86%

### Discussion of Findings

This work has focused on appraising the English Language as first or second language to Igbo speaking students. In this study, we considered the fact that the students are products of different secondary schools in Nigeria who would have lived in different locations where their native languages may or may not be spoken.

Basically, every child is a product of a home, and language acquisition and learning begin at infancy. However, the researcher took cognizance of the fact that one can also learn language by immersion. Federal University of Technology (FUTO) is located in Owerri where the Igbo language is the indigenous or native language. Although the school is a conglomeration of students from different ethnic backgrounds, we focused on eliciting responses from students of Igbo origin.

As a tertiary institution where GST 101 (Use of English) is taught as a general course in year one, one would expect some of the students to be near perfect in some of their language skills especially in speaking, reading, and writing.

Based on the results from the questionnaire, the majority of the students started speaking English at infancy, right from their homes with their parents before starting school. This submission emanates from the fact that 83% of the students claim to have started speaking English at infancy, 47% before starting school and 57% learned it from their parents. 79% of the students consider the English Language as their L1, 43% feel indifferent towards their native language while 54% consider their parents responsible for their inability to speak their indigenous language and as such, do not regard the Igbo language as their L1. Given that the brain of a child has an inborn neural circuit that processes language information, it therefore, portrays the fact that the first language a child gets exposed to becomes his/ her L1 as he/ she has more linguistic competence in it.

Although the majority of the respondents put the blame more on their parents, 35% attributed their deficiency in the use of their mother tongue to the society as it places more value on the English language.

This aspect of the impact of interaction in language acquisition and learning brings us back to Jerome Bruner's Interactionist theory which buttresses the interaction between kids and their caregivers. He further points out the fact that the language behavior of adults when talking to children unconsciously supports the acquisition process. In other words, many Igbo parents are more inclined to speaking the English language to their babies at infancy and the tendency remains quite high for the children to acquire competence first in the use of English before their native language.

Having acquired proficiency in the use of the English language, 72% of the respondents claim that they cannot speak the Igbo language, 86% cannot write in the language but 89% of them do understand the language. This portrays the fact

that although these students may not be proficient in the use of the Igbo language, they comprehend what is spoken. So, since they do not have total exposure to their native language and lack the linguistic repertoire to interact freely with it, the students do not consider it their first language.

### **Conclusion**

Due to the inclination of the English Language, currently used in many Igbo homes as the first code to interact with children from infancy, it therefore, becomes a lot easier for them to master the linguistic components of the language and get proficient in its use. Although more of the students blame their parents for deficiency in their linguistic competence in the Igbo language due to the fact that it was not the language they got exposed to, they also blamed the society for elevating the use of the English language as a mark of literacy and civilization.

Again, the fact that indigenous languages are not used in schools, offices and not always used as a medium of dissemination of information by the government as much as the English Language is used, many of the subjects felt that the low status of Igbo language and attitude towards it are contributory factors to its relegation to the background.

No language has pacified the world as the English language does today. Lifting the English language while denigrating indigenous languages has been a pillar of English and American nationalism for well over a hundred years. Many languages gradually go into extinction as subsequent generations become bilingual and as such, begin to lose proficiency in their indigenous languages. This usually occur when people aspire to learn a more-esteemed language so as to avoid discrimination or to gain social and economic advantages.

Nevertheless, the dominance of English has grave consequences, one of which is; it has fast-tracked the loss of values and customs of many non-English-speaking countries and, invariably, has become a menace to the world's cultural diversity and language preservation.

### **Recommendations**

1. Just as the Use of the English language has become a compulsory course taught in the universities in the first year, the National University Commission (NUC) should also include the Igbo language as a general course learned in the first year in order to give students who were not opportune to learn the Igbo language at home, the chance to do so. The urgency of this need emanates from the fact that some students currently in the university have lost their identity as Ibos.

2. At the nursery school level, the Igbo language should be used as the language of instruction to enable the child to acquire and learn the language first before the introduction of the English language. Some educationists have argued that children learn faster or internalize concepts more when they are instructed in their native languages. More so, the extinction of a language usually occurs as a result of lack of usage. If things are allowed to continue the way they are, some of the indigenous languages especially the Igbo language would become a dead language.

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