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INVESTIGATING NIGERIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARDS ENGLISH LANGUAGE DOMINANCE OVER THEIR INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract: The language policy in Nigeria granted English language the status of being the sole official language, and the language of instruction in the country. This approach influenced the educated people's competence, and subsequently, attitudes towards English and their native languages respectively. The study aims to investigate the perception of the Nigerian university students regarding the dominance of English over their indigenous languages and the role of the language policy of the country in this concern. The qualitative data collected by interviewing eight students from two universities in the Northern side of Cyprus answers the following questions: 1) what is the Nigerian university students' perceptions of the dominance of English over their national languages? 2) How do the Nigerian university students evaluate the language policy in their country and what they think about its potential effect on their national languages? The findings revealed that Nigerian university students use English frequently for both formal and informal contexts in their daily conversations. They also felt that their native language competence decreases gradually while their English mastery develops constantly. Although they hold positive attitudes towards English as the official language of Nigeria, they feel the need to reconsider the language policy and adopt the main national languages as official languages in addition to English. This study contributes to our understanding of multi-lingual people's attitudes towards their heritage language and supports the research literature which shows that personal connection to the heritage language plays a significant role in individuals' attachment to the language rather than the actual proficiency of speakers.

Keywords: Language attitude, language policy, ethnolinguistic vitality, language dominance

Introduction

The complicated Nigerian linguistic communication network cannot be understood without investigating the sociolinguistic situation of the country. With more than 400 local minority languages, three main national languages and three foreign languages, Nigeria is a perfect multilingual community. English is the dominant language due to its colonial origins and its post-colonial position as the sole official language of the country. English is also used as the main medium of instruction in the Nigerian educational system.

The language policy of the country undermined the position of the indigenous languages. As a result, new generations, particularly educated people, think that it is worthy to master English rather than their native languages because it enables them to gain higher social prestige and more economic benefits.

The study aims to investigate the Nigerian university students' attitudes towards English as an official language in Nigeria and its potential impact on the development of their native languages. In addition, it aims to identify the students' beliefs about the language policy of the country and the monolingual approach of educational system in Nigeria.

The research questions were formulated as follows:

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- Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of the conference

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What is the Nigerian university students' perception of the dominance of English over their national languages? How do Nigerian university students evaluate the language policy in their country and what they think about its potential effect on their national languages?

The Significance of the Study

In spite the fact that this study focuses mainly on the Nigerian context, it aims to highlight the potential consequences of adopting monolingual language teaching approaches and policies in general. In many other parts of the world, where colonial languages were allowed to dominate, the national languages are subject to lose their natural role as a vehicle of communication and cultural representation.

In multilingual communities, where people have to communicate via different languages, the official language is assigned to play the role of the mediator language in which the community members can exchange their thoughts and feelings. This official language is normally the native language of the majority of that community, and it would be used as the language of instruction in the educational system in that country. However, this monolingual policy has negative impact on the native language(s) of the minor ethnicities in that community.

Myers-Scotton, (2005) explained how personal and group beliefs and psychological orientations affect the decisions made by speakers, and even by nation states, about becoming bilingual. These decisions are mainly formulated under the effectiveness of two intertwined factors, namely: the speakers' language attitudes, and the language ideologies of the nation states. The paradox of the Nigerian case, however, is that the assigned official language of the country, English, is none of the Nigerian citizens' native languages.

This study tries to uncover the multi-lingual people`s attitudes towards the mono-lingual policies of language teaching and their impact on their heritage language, and supports the research literature which shows that personal connection to the heritage language plays a significant role in individuals` attachment to that language rather than the actual proficiency of it.

Literature Review

English is widely regarded as a universal language, the lingua franca of the modern world, and the language of globalization. However, for some cultures, this English dominance causes the loss of their indigenous languages. To investigate the nature of the role that English plays in Nigerian educated people's life, it is important to present the notion of language dominance in general.

Background

In social policy, language works as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication. In addition, it has a cultural importance as a tool of the dominant ideology. Language represents a large portion of the people's culture by which they express their folklore, proverbs and history. It also conveys the characteristics of human behavior. Hemández-Chávez, Burt, & Dulay, (1978) defined the Language Dominance as "the degree of bilingualism manifested by individuals who know two languages, that is, the relative proficiency level of each of them." Hemández-Chávez, et al. (1978) explained: "A person may know both languages equally well, namely: balanced bilingualism. Or, the speaker may show greater control of one language over the other, i.e. dominant language bilingualism. Like some other African countries, English is the second and official language in Nigeria. In addition, it is the vehicle of instruction in the most stages of the education system. Gradually, English, and, to some extent French, took the dominance over the national languages to the extent that some of their speakers consider them as their first languages.

Akinnsaso (1993) listed three major types of language in Nigeria, namely:1) about 400 indigenous languages, 2) three exogenous languages (English, French, and Arabic) , 3) Neutral language (Pidgin English). Among all these various languages, English took its place as the most important language due to its position as the official language and the language of education, mass communication, administration, trade, and global communication. However, the language policy of the country allows the supplementation of English by the major Nigerian languages namely: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. According to Akinnsaso(1993), although language policies and experimental research projects showed the usefulness of initial mother tongue literacy, the prognosis of universal mother tongue literacy in Africa leaves little or no room for optimism, because no single African multilingual nation managed to provide a mother tongue as an official language for the divergent multilingual communities. This made the elite reluctant in accepting the policy in practice. The review study predicted, among other

predictions, that the colonial or world languages may continue to be used as the main instructional medium of education, and the most favored medium of communication.

Language Policy in Africa

Phillipson (1996), stated that the Organization of African Unity, OAU Language Plan of Action for Africa aimed to upgrade the African languages by setting out priorities of action at various levels. The aims of the program were:

- 1- To promote every Member State to have an obviously defined language policy.
- 2- To guarantee that all languages within the boundaries of Member States are accepted as a source of common enrichment.
- 3- To liberate the Africans from dependence on the usage of non-native languages as the dominant official and educational languages.
- 4- To guarantee that African languages, by suitable provision and practical support, assume their rightful role as the means of official communication instead of European languages which have played this role.
- 5- To encourage the usage of African Languages as a means of instruction in all education phases.

However, the implementation of these policies was another story. In many African countries, including Nigeria, there was a general feeling, according to Phillipson (1996) , that language problems are not urgent, and the solutions to them can wait. According to Bamgbose, (1991), cited in Phillipson (1996), language policies in African countries had one or more of the following problems: avoidance, vagueness, arbitrariness, fluctuation, and declaration without implementation.

Phillipson (1996), called for multilingualism approach to be adopted in general education. Otherwise, he assumed that English-medium education in postcolonial education systems would likely to produce an elite what is progressively separated from the rest of population.

The Dominance of English

Rooy, (2013) discussed the potential language shift from African languages (Afrikaans) to English, and the position of Afrikaans in Vaal Triangle region, South Africa. Language experience questionnaires were prepared to describe the language repertoires of a large population of multilingual students. The main findings demonstrated that although Afrikaans-English bilingualism (and bi-literacy) is prominent among the Afrikaans participants in the study, the position of English as an essential language in the bilingual repertoires of the participants was confirmed. However, Afrikaans was firmly set as the language that mainly contributes to the identity of those participants.

The delay of finding solutions for the decline of indigenous languages versus colonial foreign languages in African countries led to more and more acceptance and positive perception of these foreign languages among the educated people in many African countries. The role of English language in Nigeria, as a medium of communication, was recently examined by Danladi, (2013) to show how English had an influential role in forming the national integration of the Nigerians through its "official language" status. The study suggests that despite the politically driven forces behind the use of native languages in Nigerian society, the prospects for English language in Nigerian national affairs are extraordinarily slim, and if English language survives, it could mean a Nigerian version of African English, in African tone: a Nigerian Pidgin.

Danladi, (2013), examined the complicated issues connected to the language policy in Nigeria from its colonial origins, and the distinguished position of English language as the official language in Nigerian. According to Danladi, (2013), The Nigerians ascribe themselves to any language that will maintain the unity of the country. However, it should be taken in consideration that some indigenous languages, such as Hausa language, gain a strong perspective among their speakers. As a result, the English hegemony is diminishing steadily from its role as the official language of the country.

Ethnolinguistic Vitality

Giles, Bourhis and Taylor (1977), defined Ethnolinguistic Vitality as "what makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations." In other words, it is a group identity issue. According to Tajfel (1978), social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance related to that membership.

According to Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT), Status, Demographic, Institutional Support and Control factors constitute the vitality of ethnolinguistic groups. An evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of a given group based on these dimensions would classify the ethnolinguistic groups into those who have low, medium, or high vitality. Low vitality groups are most likely to go through linguistic absorption and may not be considered a distinctive collective group. High vitality groups, however, are likely to survive and maintain their language and distinct cultural qualities in multilingual contexts. Compared to other models, Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory (EVT) and its instruments give a wider and inclusive framework for the investigation of language maintenance and shift. However, the empirical evidence obtained in some contexts indicates an underestimation of the actual vitality of some minority groups.

Myers-Scotton,(2005) claims that languages that have small numbers of speakers and little or no community support system or much, if any, official support possess lower vitality. These include many indigenous languages, with small number of speakers and little or no official support, in parts of Central and South America. Official support includes using a language as a medium of instruction in educational system. Subjective ethnolinguistic vitality, on the other hand, put emphasis on a group's perceived status that may differ from the status that would be based on actual conditions. Many researchers have developed Subjective Vitality Questionnaires to measure group member perceptions about the status of their group in relation to other groups. In general, the model of ethnolinguistic vitality aims to explain the beliefs and attitudes that a group has about its own language variety.

Language Attitudes

In her book, *Multiple voices: An introduction to bilingualism*, Myers-Scotton,(2005), defined language attitudes as subjective evaluations of both language varieties and their speakers, whether the attitudes are held by individuals or by groups. Myers-Scotton,(2005), mentioned the nature of group identity and the role of the language in symbolizing a positive or negative identity for a group, showing how "language as identity" can be the most obvious sign of a group's ethos, the cover term for a group's disposition or character.

According to Myers-Scotton,(2005), (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977) introduced Ethnolinguistic Vitality to explain why groups maintain or shift from their languages. It is still used as a construct in many discussions of the attitudes of groups towards how their own language is holding up in competition with other languages in the community. The basic notion is that ethnolinguistic vitality has a cognitive basis. It refers to the mental image that a group has of itself, and the assumption is that groups with little ethnolinguistic vitality are likely to disappear as entities, while other groups that possess high level of ethnolinguistic vitality are likely to survive, and even thrive, as groups. Two basis of vitality are developed, objective measures (things that can be counted) and subjective measures (attitudes). Objective measures are based mainly on three components: The size of the group in a given territory, the institutional support (support in education system and official support), and the number and the types of domains in which the language is used.

Over a decade ago, Adegbite (2003), examined the effect of enlightenment on attitudes of the Nigerian elite to the roles assigned to English and indigenous languages in Nigeria. The study investigated the attitudes of undergraduate students in a Nigerian university and supposed that enlightenment of citizens on the importance of indigenous languages comparing to English in Nigeria might bring about a positive shift in their attitudes towards their mother tongues.

According to Igboanusi (2008), in spite of the fact that the National Policy on Education in Nigeria set plans for a multilingual policy by involving the learning of a child's mother tongue (L1), or one of the three main national languages: (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) and English, this policy has not been implemented effectively. The large scale quantitative study investigated the attitudes of 1000 participants of the students, teachers, parents and administrators, from different five states in Nigeria, towards bilingual education. The results proved that the respondents favored the early immersion of the mother tongue in the education system along with English, and they were not positively disposed to the use of only one of them.

Bell, (2013), argues that language attitudes can be positive or negative, and can have both constructive and destructive impact on language revival/survival. His study aimed to explore the effect of language attitudes on revival scenarios of Aboriginal language communities in Australia. Other studies were conducted in different contexts, such as: (Ng, & Zhao, (2014) in China,& Ricent, (2013), in Canada), showed the common awareness of the potential negative impact of the dominance of foreign official languages on the cultural identity of their speakers and called to the support for multilingualism to give an equal value for the regional languages.

In a review study, Ricent, (2013) discussed the consequences of official bilingualism, English & French, on the position and perception of non-official languages in Canada. The author argues that continued dominance of English and French in Canada, not only tends to marginalize the role of other languages, but it also draws an image of Canada that does not reflect the demographic changes and linguistic complexity of the country.

In China, Ng, & Zhao, (2014) focused on the language attitudes of Cantonese-speaking students in Mainland, China, towards Cantonese, Putonghua and English. The survey results showed strong integrative attitudes towards Cantonese, the local language, whereas Putonghua and English were perceived as instrumental tools for career development and global communication. The authors called for policies that equally value official, indigenous and regional languages in China.

Kanana, (2013), compared the case of Tanzania, Ethiopia and Egypt, where Kiswahili, Amharic and Arabic respectively have been used as languages of education, trade and commerce, with other African countries, where the ex-colonial languages have continued to strengthen their status at the expense of the indigenous languages. The results proved that the development in the latter African countries, including Nigeria, slowed down, since essential communication relies on foreign languages and the parties involved in the process of development cannot interact effectively.

Methodology

Research Design

The study was conducted in the Northern part of Cyprus where universities gather a variety of multicultural students from many different countries. Nigerian students comprise one of the majorities in this multicultural community. In order to answer the research questions, a qualitative method was approached. Data was collected through semi-instructed interview form, where 16 open-ended questions were formulated to cover the data required to answer the research questions. The participants are Nigerian university students from two different universities in North Cyprus. The sample consists of eight male students who were randomly chosen. All participants are male students because it is convenient for the researcher. After getting the interviewees' consent, the interviews were recorded, and then transcribed verbally.

Data Analysis

Background

The participants are mainly male adults, who belong to two major Nigerian tribes, namely: Hausa and Yoruba (4 participants belong to Hausa, and 4 participants belong to Yoruba). They are all bilingual or multilingual students who speak, at least, one indigenous language, in addition to English, the national language of the country.

Language Dominance

All participants stated that they frequently speak English in both formal and informal contexts. In response to the question related to the average frequency of using English in their daily life, the answers were: often, frequently, all the time .. etc. However, the participants stated that it depends on the situation, whether it is formal or informal. For formal contexts, official and educational settings, it is clear that English is always used by the participants to compensate for the lack of any other national language to be used for communication with people from different tribes. However, English is habitually preferred by the participants for more informal settings. Family conversations and friends' talks, for instance, take place in both codes, and code switching is often used even when the interlocutors share the same indigenous language.

P7: *" I think I would love to speak English in the formal context rather my mother tongue because I feel I can speak better in English in a formal context."*

P7: *" Actually, when I speak to my parents, brothers and sisters, I do a lot of code switching because I am using to English, and with talking a lot of time with native language without English....I don't really feel comfortable."*

Personal activities are also performed mostly via English. In particular, computer activities, reading, and writing are carried out mostly in English. Yet, some participants enjoy more the English music and movies.

The Effect of English on Native Languages

The students' awareness of the influence that English has on their mother languages mastery is mature for some of them. While some students acknowledge the negative impact of English on their native languages, others do

not. Ironically, in response to another question, they acknowledge it in other words. These two contradictory answers came from one participant:

P1: " Ah... no really, because I speak English fluently, speak Yoruba fluently, so .. there is no effect."

P1: " Of course, because I think.., when I was young I could master my mother tongue easily and quickly more than now.. yes...the level has changed."

In addition, even those, who argue that there is no effect, made it clear that they understand, speak, read, and write English better than their native languages. In general, students feel that while their native languages knowledge is noteworthy lower than it was before, their mastery of English is getting better day by day.

Language Policy

Language policy in Nigeria assigned English as the sole official language of the country, and the language of instruction in education system. The participants' perceptions reflect two perspectives. On the one hand, they are happy because English is a universal language that gives them the opportunity to attain the contemporary knowledge and communicate with people from all over the world, but on the other hand, they feel worry about the future of their mother tongues.

P3: "I'm not saying I'm not happy because I..., as a person, I have been able to balance between English and mother tongue, but the policy should be supported for the Yoruba language. The awareness is that the language is gradually fading away...There is a need to change the policy because I don't see any future for my people."

The students think that using English as an official language is essential, but the three major indigenous language, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, should be given more power by assigning them as official languages, each in its region, along with English.

There is a belief among the participants that there is no other language than English, at least at present, can replace English as the official language which unify the divergent Nigerian community. When asked if he believes that English is the best choice as an official language in Nigeria, one participant responded as follows:

P6: " Yes, because we, as a diverse people with different languages that we can't select one to be official language, but we have to put other official languages with English."

Different Attitudes

The data analysis revealed that Yoruba students feel that people in their community do not give enough support for their native language. Teachers and lecturers, for example tend to use English, rather than Yoruba, when they speak to them. In contrast, Hausa people are more adherent of their indigenous language. One Hausa student, for example, stated that they are not allowed to speak English at home. A Yoruba student, (P2), expresses his sorrow because his same tribal lecturer refused to respond him in Yoruba although he knows that they belong to the same tribe and the same language. He appreciates the positive attitude of Hausa towards their native language and wishes the same support would be given to Yoruba language.

P2: " I really disagree with the only English language as an official language. Other languages should be official languages. Both would go hand in hand. But people, like Hausa, prefer to use their native language. They promote their language. Why Yoruba people don't do so? They promote English language."

Results and Discussion

Having analyzed the collected data, it is obvious that English dominates many aspects of the Nigerian university students' life. It is widely spoken and used as the main medium of communication most of the time. Both formal and informal activities are preferably performed in English. Most students feel that they master English better than their native languages. However, the main trend among the students is that the indigenous languages should gain more support by assigning them as official languages, along with English, to protect the linguistic and cultural identity of the diverse Nigerian societies.

The over reliance on English, as the medium of communication, media, and educational instruction, influenced the students' competence of their mother tongues. The absence of bilingual approach of education gradually diminished the competence, and subsequently, the position of those native languages. This case represents what "

Hernández-Chávez, Burt, & Dulay, (1978)" categorized as "Dominant Language Bilingualism" where the bilingual master one language rather than the other. Normally, people tend to master their native languages rather than the languages that they learn or acquire later. However, it is not true for the Nigerian case. The second language, English, is the dominant language over the native languages.

It is not enough for the mother tongue to be informally acquired during the childhood. The formal learning is also essential to develop it, particularly to master reading and writing skills. Nigerian indigenous languages were eliminated from the official and educational contexts for the sake of English language. This policy gave the power and priority for English on the expense of the national languages.

The university students' perception of the dominance of English language over their native languages reflects two overlapped views. English is seen as the most important language that works as the lingua franca in which they can communicate in their variant community. It is also regarded as the international language that enables them to acquire the universal knowledge and opens the door to the wider universe. However, there is a trend towards the positive attitude for the national languages and their role in the social and cultural life. There are concerns about the negative impact of the dominant English language on the progression of the other local languages. As a result, there is a call to integrate the three main indigenous languages, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, along with English, to be the languages of instruction in the whole levels of educational system. These findings are compatible with those revealed by previous studies dealt with Nigerian context (Adebite (2003) & Igboanus (2008), and similar international studies:(Ng, & Zhao, (2014) in China,& Ricent, (2013), in Canada) .

Based on the theoretical models, discussed in Myers-Scotton,(2005), the Nigerian case of language attitudes can be interpreted under the light of Ethno-linguistic Vitality Model. In addition to the subjective measures (attitudes) drawn by Nigerian university students towards their national languages versus English, as a foreign official language, the objective factors have an addition effect on their perception of the power and the importance of both English and their indigenous languages. In other words, among the three factors that determine the position of a language, only one still supports Nigerian local languages: that is the large number of their speakers. Unfortunately, the language policy of the country weakened the other two important factors, the institutional support and the domain of usage.

However, the results showed that the Ethno-linguistic vitality for Nigerians is slightly different. Some tribes, such as Hausa, tries to foster the positive perspective towards their native languages. Hausa people tend to use their native language whenever it is possible. This attracted other tribes, such as Yoruba, to do so. Yet, it is very necessary for the government to activate the Language Plan of Action set by (OAU).

English as official language is well accepted by Nigerians since they think that it is the sole available language that keeps the unity of the country. Nigerians believe that it is difficult to choose one national language to be assigned as the official language because this may damage the unity of the country. However, they do not agree to the monolingual approach of the educational system. It is seen as a reason for the consequential shrink of their national language.

Conclusion

Language policy and language attitudes are closely related. In Nigeria, the educated people language attitudes towards their national languages were drawn by the influence of the language policy of the country. The status of English, as the sole official language and the language of instruction, led to its domination over the rest indigenous languages. The findings of the study reveal the tendency to use English rather than the local languages among the university students. This can be attributed to the gradual decreasing of their exposure to their native language due to the over reliance on English language as the only official language of the country. It is crucial to provide more institutional support, and to expand the number and type of domains in which these languages are used in the future. This policy will steadily influence the subjective aspect of attitudes of the Nigerian students towards their mother tongues.

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