

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **The influence of Pidgin English on educational outcomes among secondary school students in Nigeria**

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**This study was carried out in view of the influences of Pidgin English amongst the students in Nigeria using Port Harcourt Local Government Area in Rivers State as a case study. It was conducted on two hundred students and eight teachers from four selected schools, four government workers and eight staff from the media. This research was executed because of the high rate of communication in Pidgin English amongst secondary school students, which has become a threat to their educational career. However, it was discovered in the course of the study, that there are factors that enhance this issue. The negative impact of the socio-linguistic status of Pidgin English in the Nigerian society has necessitated some recommendations which include: The creation of awareness among parents, the media and the government against the dangers of habitual use of Pidgin English, introduction and training of teachers on introduce effective methods during the English language lesson delivery. The government should invest more resources and manpower in education to enable the children from poor homes improve in the English Language, and Pidgin English should be introduced in the curriculum, so students could know the structures and lexical, to avoid code-switching it with that of the English Language.**

**Key words:** Pidgin English, educational outcomes, socio-linguistic status.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Pidgin English is well recognized in Nigeria. It is spoken by seventy million people as a second language while over one million use it as a first language. Despite the need to gain mastery of the Standard English, Pidgin English is speedily emerging to the degree of being a national language. In fact, the Nigerian Pidgin started as a language of non-literates according to Bamgbose et al. (1995). This is because, acquiring English takes a longer period of time, needs people to go to school and not everyone has access to school and it seems tedious than

Pidgin English. In recent times, it is serving as a lingua franca in higher institutions and even to some extent, among graduates. This variety of English was established due to the trade situation that took place between the Portuguese and Nigerian trade partners especially the coastal people of the Niger Delta from 1469 to about 1529. Then the English people arrived at the beginning of the 17th century and replaced the vocabulary of the Portuguese-based English with words drawn from the English language without changing the grammatical

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structure of the Portuguese-based English though only a few Portuguese words survived. For instance, pikin (child), palaver (problem) etc., can be quoted. From that time on Pidgin English has obtained a sociolinguistic status in Nigeria. The status of Pidgin English in Nigeria has enhanced the poor performance of students in English language and other subjects. There is always the tendency to pronounce English words wrongly: Father is pronounced as /fada/ instead of /'fa:ðə(r)/

Also, students allow the entrenchment of Pidgin lexical items into the English sentences:

- (a) Me I don't know (Pidgin Influenced English) instead of:  
 (b) I do not know

Since a was lifted from the sentence "c" below, which is the Pidgin version of the sentence "a"

- (c) Me a no know

Thus, due to this problem of expression, students rather conceal wonderful ideas in their minds because of limited English vocabulary to express their ideas. These effects of Pidgin English are being enhanced by three factors; the home background of students, peer group influence, the inefficiency of English teachers and students nonchalant attitude towards the subject, English language.

Students who come from homes where Pidgin English is their lingua franca struggle to cope with their English lessons and it takes a long time for them to internalize English lexical items and vocabulary. Furthermore, the teachers who should be agents of solution are sometimes inadequately qualified; either there are interferences from their mother tongue or Pidgin English, or they are just graduates of English language who have not undergone formal training on skills used in teaching the language. The inefficiency of teachers could affect the interest of students towards studying and improving in the English language. If these students who are likely to be emerged as Nigeria's representatives in the global market do not learn to confidently express themselves in the English language which is speedily becoming a global language, it is likely this might impede our international transactions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is focused on highlighting the opinions of authorities on the different issues that will be discussed in this paper. The literature is presented in such a way that it will show what is known and what remains to be investigated in the topic of concern.

### The concept of Pidgin English

Pidgin English has been defined differently by various

scholars and linguists based on the direction of researchers. Holm (1980: 4) defines Pidgin as a reduced language used by groups with no language in common who need to communicate for trade or other purposes. It can also be seen as 'A language which arises to fulfill certain restricted communication needs among people who have no common language' (Todd, 1974). From these two definitions, we see Pidgin English as a language that is been used to communicate between groups of people that have no common language.

Furthermore, Ojaide and Ashuntantang (2020) see it as a language that emerged due to contact between people of different languages that is usually a combination of different languages. This shows that though it is limited lexically and structurally, it is only suitable for specialized communication. It has some unique features such as: uncomplicated grammatical structure, reduction of syllabus codes, reduction of consonants clusters, no tones, such as those found in West Africa and Asian languages, separate words to indicate terms usually preceding the verb, reduplication to represent plurals, superlative and other parts of speech that represent the concept being increased, a lack of morphemic variation (Wilson et al., 2013). Similarly, Decamp (1971), Hymes (1974) and Hudson (1990) in Idiagbon (1999) give a summary of the characteristics of Pidgin as follows: Elimination of grammatical devices like inflections, plural possessives and tenses, the use of reduplication as intensifiers, ability of a word to have semantic extension, that is, expanded meanings.

### Overview of Pidgin English in Nigeria

The entrance of Pidgin English into Nigeria was made possible through the trade situation between Nigerians and the Portuguese during 1469 to 1539, and with the British during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. From that period onwards, Pidgin English has become a recognized language code in Nigeria. To support this idea, Faraclas (2004:828) says:

Well over half of the 140 million inhabitants of Nigeria are now fluent speakers of the language Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), making it the most widely spoken language in Nigeria, as well as the indigenous African language with the largest number of speakers. Given the rapid spread of NPE among younger Nigerians, this proportion will increase to cover over seventy or eighty percent by the time the present generation of children reaches adulthood. There is no Creole language worldwide with nearly as many speakers as NPE. It should be noted that Nigerian Pidgin varies from place to place and has several peculiar varieties. Obiechina (1984) meticulously deliberated on the variants of the Nigerian Pidgin as he identified five varieties namely: Bendel which includes: Abraka, Warri, Isoko, Sapele,

Agbor, Itsekiri, Effurun, Agbaraha- Oto, Urhobo and Ewa; Calabar which includes: Calabar, Cross River, Akwa Ibom and the Kalabari regions; Lagos variant which includes: South West, Eastern Part and South-Central; Kano/Maiduguri variant which includes: North-East, North-North, North-South and North-West; and Port Harcourt, which includes: Port Harcourt and the Regional Suburbs. Furthermore, NPE is widely used in the major cities and towns in schools and market domains, in radio jingles, television adverts, and drama/plays. Akande (2008: 38) notes that there is a sense in which NPE could be regarded as a marker of identity and solidarity. It is an inter-ethnic code available to Nigerians who have no other common language.

### **The status and functions of English in Nigeria**

The colonization of Nigeria by the British introduced English as a medium of communication. Ever since the attainment of independence, English has maintained its status as the major medium of inter-ethnic communication. It is both studied as a subject and used in communication in schools. The National Policy on Education (NPE), 1977, revised in 1981 and 2004 stated that the English language should be used as a school subject in primary education, while it should be studied alongside any two Nigerian languages in high schools. To indicate its superiority, a credit pass in English is now mandatory for a candidate to gain admission into higher institutions. Also, it is also mandatory for first-year students in higher institutions to undertake a course in the 'Use of English' and pass the course before they can graduate. Thus, to an extent, this kicks against the use of Pidgin English for communication in schools. Therefore, it is believed that the students' excellent performance in the English Language can enhance encouraging performance in other subjects.

### **The negative influences of Pidgin English on Educational outcomes**

This attitude of students, communicating more in Pidgin English has the adverse effect on their academic performance. For instance, students perform better in Mathematics questions that are asked in Mathematical form, than word problems. For instance: Simplify:  $[2/3+21/25] +2/10$ . Students usually leave their answers in this form-'48/50' instead of '24/25'. This is because they do not know the significance of the word 'simplify' in the questions. Also, below are the effects of the interference of Pidgin English in the English Language. For example:

Syntactically: In the sentence 'Come here quick, quick' is used instead of 'Come here quickly'

This supports what Mitsugi said as cited in Da Pidgin Coup (1999: 12) 'If you speak pidgin, you think pidgin, you write pidgin'. Apart from speech effects, socially, students become timid due to lack of proficiency in the English Language. The use of Pidgin English to a large extent is likely to diminish peoples' effort at mastering the Standard English (Obiechina, 1984; Akinnaso, 1989).

### **Factors that enhance the negative influence of Pidgin English on Educational outcome**

#### ***Home background of students and peer group influence***

The family is the first institution of socialization of a child. Socialization begins in the home and continues at school. Family background to a great extent determines the performance of students in the English Language. Omolewa (2002) affirmed that academic performance of a child could be traced to the kind of friends he keeps and the home he comes from. It is necessary to realize that the school is not the only agency responsible for the education of the child. Parental background of the child equally plays a significant role and there is a family-school relationship as stipulated in the family-school relationship model (Adams et al., 2000 as cited in WordPress, 2016). When there are similarities between cultures at home and school, children use what they acquired at home in addition to knowledge from school to build structures that will improve their language skills; but when there is a disparity, the process is disrupted. It is a popular belief that second language acquisition (SLA) is influenced by the learner's first language (L1). The clearest support for this belief comes from 'foreign' accents in the second language (L2) speech of learners. When a Frenchman speaks English, his English sounds French. The learners L1 also affect the other language levels, namely, vocabulary and grammar. This is perhaps less immediately evident, but most language learners and teachers would testify to it. It is also a popular belief that the role of the L1 in SLA is a negative one. That is, the L1 gets in the way or interferes with the learning of L2 (Ellis, 1989; Pakzadian, 2012). This view comes from a learning theory called behaviorism. According to behaviorist learning theory, learning is achieved through habit formation and old habits get in the way of learning new habits. Krashen (1981a) also reports that learners can use their L1 to initiate utterances when they do not have sufficient acquired knowledge of the target language. Perhaps, Ellis (1989) gives a more realistic view of the role of L1 as he suggests that the learners' L1 is an important determinant of SLA. It is not the only determinant, however, and may not be the most important. The L1 is a resource of knowledge which learners will use both consciously and subconsciously in order to help them shift the L2 data in the input and to

perform as best as they can in the L2.

Therefore, it is clearly stated that students who come from homes where pidgin is the first language or the language of communication would always struggle with their performance in the English language. These homes mostly comprise people in the working class or those who might have some level of education but for some reasons live in ghetto areas.

Furthermore, it has been noticed that despite the homes some students come from especially those surrounded by elites, when they come in the midst of friends, they gradually start speaking in Pidgin English as this is usually the language of communication amongst young people. Schuman (1986), cited in (McLaughlin, 1987; Ellis, 1994) has put forward the Acculturation Theory to account for second language acquisition development in natural settings. He defines acculturation as the process of becoming adapted to a new culture and his claim is that contact with the target language and culture is crucial. This process requires both social and psychological adaptation. Learning the appropriate linguistic habits to function within the target language group is one part of this process. Acculturation is determined by the degree of social and psychological 'distance' between the learner and the target language culture. According to this hypothesis, the greater with Pidgin English speakers, these students will gradually pick these words and will unconsciously code-switch it with the English Language during written and verbal communication.

### ***Inefficiency of English teachers***

The teacher occupies a unique position developing positive attitude amongst students "towards the study of language". Fafunwa (1969:80) presenting the report of the National Curriculum Conference stated that: "The conference agreed that the teacher is the key to the entire educational program in the world". Thus, teachers ought to be well efficient to aid students to achieve proficiency in the English language. According to Michael (1979), there are many English speaking teachers who think that their proficiency in speaking the English language makes them qualified to teach it. Unfortunately, their ideas on the phonetic and grammatical makeup of English are sometimes short-sighted. When teachers do not follow the rules of English language, their students develop the lack of interest in the subject which to a great extent affects their performance.

Unoh (1986) also examines the situation of oral English in Nigerian secondary schools. He asserts that teaching of English pronunciation in Nigeria suffers from peculiar handicaps unknown to the teaching of English language or any other school subject (for that matter). For any subject to be effectively taught, there are at least two very important conditions that must be met:

- (i) A high degree of motivation on the part of both student and teacher;
- (ii) The teachers' competence in the subject, and his or her mastery of the techniques of imparting knowledge in it.

### **Students' nonchalant attitude towards the English Language as a subject**

Many students see the English Language as a simple subject they can communicate with, whether or not they maintain the ethics of the language. This has enhanced their poor performance in the English language a subject. In the same vein, Gardner and Lambert (1972) observe that success in mastering a second language depends not so much on intellectual capacity or language aptitude as on learner's attitude towards the particular language. To support this idea, Kings in Fakeye (2010) states that a positive attitude is mostly seen as a determining factor for success. Students sometimes perceive those who often speak the English language as haughty. In another case, these students give low preference for English since it is not their mother tongue. Moreover, the younger speakers being given to peer pressure prefer to speak Pidgin English, which is used amongst their friends in order to have the sense of belonging. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), intrinsic motivation is related to basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness; this implies that the lack of students' motivation to study and improve in the English language will certainly impede successful proficiency in the language.

Conclusively, through the above information from various sources, one can understand how Pidgin English gained its status in Nigeria, why is it the most spoken language code. Also, the effects of its usage on educational outcomes have been further illustrated alongside some factors that boost its negative influence.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In this study, qualitative study was done to gather the data for this academic paper; while quantitative research was used to determine the students' and teachers' responses. The participants in this research composed of two hundred students and eight teachers from four selected schools, eight staff from four media houses and four staff from government parastatals in Port Harcourt; a total of two hundred and twenty individuals. The questionnaire- interview method was used. The questionnaire has four sections with twenty items. Also, it had four point Likert rating scale as follows: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The limitations of this study stem from inability to investigate a larger sample that would have enhanced the quality of this study. This was due to insufficient fund, time and shortage of respondents.

### **Research questions**

**What are the negative effects of Pidgin English amongst students?**

The responses to the above question are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Negative effects of Pidgin English amongst students?

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Difficulty in other subjects	130(59%)	20(9%)	70(32%)	-
2	Presence of errors in speech and writing	180(81%)	30(14%)	5(2%)	5(2%)
3	Ineffective communication in future International transactions as future leaders	150(68%)	-	70(32%)	-
4	Lack confidence in domestic and international competitions	150(68%)	-	70(32%)	-

**Table 2.** Factors that enhance the negative effects of Pidgin English amongst students?

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Poor uneducated homes	140(82%)	20(9%)	20(9%)	-
2	Living in ghetto areas	200(91%)	-	20(9%)	-
3	Unqualified teachers	80(36%)	30(14%)	80(36%)	30(14%)
4	Poor teaching methods	200(91%)	-	20(9%)	-
5	Mother-tongue interference during delivery of English lessons	170(77%)	30(14%)	-	20(9%)
6	Social Pressure	210(95%)	-	-	10(5%)
7	Students' nonchalant attitude towards the subject, English language	190(86%)	-	-	30(14%)

**Table 3.** The language status Pidgin English should have in Nigeria?

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Mother tongue/ first language	95(43%)	45(21%)	25(11%)	55(25%)
2	Second language	65(30%)	35(16%)	45(21%)	75(33%)
3	Official language	160(73%)	-	15(6%)	45(21%)

#### What are the factors that enhance the negative effects of Pidgin English amongst students?

The responses to the above question are given in Table 2.

#### What language status should Pidgin English have in Nigeria?

The responses to the above question are given in Table 3.

#### What can be done to curb the negative effects of Pidgin English on Educational outcomes?

The responses to the above question are given in Table 4.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From the literature review and research results in Tables 1 to 3, it is very obvious that Pidgin English has got deep roots in Nigeria. This is because of its non-strict rules and it could be easily used in inter-ethnic conversations. Previously, it was assumed that only those who reside in the ghetto areas or are illiterates are conversant with Pidgin English. Recently even the elites and the media

prefer communicating in Pidgin English. Nevertheless, this status given to Pidgin English is becoming a threat to students' proficiency in English language as well as impeding their successful performance in other subjects. Fapohunda (2016) and Adesulu (2015) reported the performance of students in the West African Senior School Certificate Examination, that is the percentage of candidates that obtained credits in five subjects and above, including English Language and Mathematics from 2013-2016 as follows: 2013 (38.68%), 2014 (31.28%), 2015 (38.68%) and 2016 (52.97%). This report is an evidence of the negative effects of Pidgin English. This is worsening due to peer pressure, the media programs in Pidgin English and the laxity of students towards English language and inefficiency of teachers as noted in the responses from Table 3, of which social pressure seems to be the factor that is more felt as it an issue very common with young people. They tend to imitate others and are likewise influenced when found among friends. This is followed by environment factor, which is life in the ghetto. Anyone born or finds himself or herself in such environment must be given to more communication in Pidgin English than English language as most of the occupants of this environment are either

**Table 4.** How to curb the negative effects of Pidgin English on Educational outcomes?

S/N	Items	SA	A	D	SD
1	Parents should ensure that Pidgin English is less spoken or never spoken at home	120(55%)	-	-	100(45%)
2	The teachers should introduce effective methods during the English language lesson delivery	80(36%)	50 (23%)	90 (41%)	-
3	Awareness should be done against the dangers of habitual use of Pidgin English	100(46%)	20(9%)	40(18%)	60(27%)
4	Government should invest more resources and manpower in education; to enable those from poor homes improve in the English Language	150(68%)	-	70(32%)	-
5	The media should avoid using more of Pidgin English	80(36%)	20(9%)	70(32%)	50(23%)
6	Pidgin English should be introduced in the curriculum to enable students to make students know the structures and lexical, to avoid code-switching it with that of the English Language	120(55%)	-	100(45%)	-

uneducated or semi-educated.

This is an indicator that the L1 or the first language or the frequently used language will always interfere with acquisition of a second language. Therefore, students will constantly struggle with studying the English language because they will pick vocabularies in Pidgin English and use it in completing sentences in English language. Moreover the social distance students have with Pidgin English is closer than that of English language, as they are been surrounded with friends, classmates, the media or even relatives who enjoy communicating in Pidgin English. The closer the distance, the faster the acculturation with a particular language will occur. This indicates that the performance in English language as well as other language will keep falling as long as Pidgin English maintains its popularity. Although, the propositions to make Pidgin English an official language is to stop the marginalization of the language; if it is adhered to all the negative effects explained in this paper will keep occurring and Nigeria might not stand the chance of fitting effectively in the global market.

## Conclusion

Pidgin English is indeed a language with unique characteristics; it can be used by everyone without educational disparity. However, with the fast rate of students' acculturation and maintenance of a closer social distance with Pidgin English, the English language will gradually become unfamiliar to the Nigerian society. This situation as explained in the paper is of little or no benefit to Nigeria as regards the recent trend of globalization. Moreover, to calm these contentions, the English Language should still maintain its official status.

More resources should be invested by the government

to conduct research on the structures and lexis of Pidgin English as well as the skills that could be employed in teaching Pidgin English as a second language in schools so that students would avoid code-switching Pidgin English with English language. In addition, teachers and other academicians in the tertiary level can be sponsored to undergo training to have knowledge of these lexis and structures of Pidgin English alongside with acquiring skills on effective teaching of Pidgin English and English language, respectively.

Awareness programs have to be carried out by the media and schools on the dangers of habitual usage of Pidgin English. This is because whatever choices a country makes, the international sector has to be put into consideration. Thus, if Pidgin English does not aid Nigeria in accruing benefits internationally, it should not be given an official status. If there are recent complaints about other countries that use interpreters during international transactions, then Nigeria should not decide to embark on this futile journey. Students in Nigeria are the prospective leaders of the nation; therefore their academic performance should be a priority that must not be overlooked. The factors posing as threats towards academic excellence should be worked on.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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