

## **Investigating the Attitude of Undergraduate Students towards the Use of Mother Tongue**

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**Abstract:** *The study investigated the attitude of undergraduate students towards the use of the mother tongue in a university in Nigeria. The sample for the study was randomly selected among students who have spent three years in the university because they are more familiar with the university culture. The sample for the study consisted of four hundred and ninety three students. The design of the study was a descriptive type while questionnaire was used to elicit information from the samples on their attitude towards the use of the mother tongue. The data collected were analysed using frequency counts and percentages. The results of the findings showed that a greater percentage of the students communicated in English language more often than their mother tongues in school. The students were bilingual and about fifty percent of the students communicated in their mother tongues at home. Some of the findings are: some parents encouraged their wards to speak their mother tongues, students agreed that their mother tongues played important roles in the society and that most students were proud of their mother tongues and that they would like to bring up their children by using it. It was concluded that the mother tongue will not go into extinction as feared by many scholars. As a result of the findings of the study, it was recommended that the government should make the study of Nigeria languages compulsory in the curriculum of the General Studies.*

**Keywords:** *communication, role of language, parents, bilingual, multilingual.*

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### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Human beings existence is anchored on communication which facilitates mutual interaction among human beings. Communication is the exchange of information between two or more people Afe (2007, p.1) It takes place everywhere in the community, at home, the market, in the church, at school, business centres, on the farm and everywhere there is a forum for it to take place Afe (2007, p.2) Sinclair (1992, p.17) considers communication as the activity or the process of giving information to other people or living things.

Mother tongue is the first language (L1) that is acquired by a child as he grows up within a speech community. This language is not learnt but naturally acquired from the child's environment and it constitutes one of the indigenous languages of any community. Additional acquisition of other languages makes the individual a bilingual. Bilingualism is a situation whereby an individual speaks two different languages or a society uses two different languages while multilingualism is a term given to the linguistic situation where two or more languages co-exist within the bounds of a society. It involves balanced native-like command of all the languages. The difference in competence in the various languages often range from the command of a few lexical items, formulaic expressions, such as greetings and rudimentary conversational skills, to the excellent command of the different repertoires. Sridah (1996), cited by Wardhaugh (2006, p.96), affirmed that a result of multilingualism is the dialectical variation which is determined by an individual's level of education, as it affects the variety of language adopted. Bilingualism confers linguistic advantages on children and abilities in the two languages are significantly related or interdependent.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Nigeria today, the language policy on education prescribes a role for all Nigerian languages. Languages of the immediate environment are prescribed as languages of instruction for pre-primary and the first three of six years of primary education. English is to be a medium of instruction from the fourth year of primary education onwards, and is to be taught as a subject from primary four. At least one national language is recommended for learning as a subject at the secondary education level while French was recently introduced in the policy as a second official language and is expected to be learnt as a subject. In other words, the learner should be literate in a minimum of three to four languages at the end of the senior secondary education. The policy however, does not prescribe any language of instruction for mass literacy, adult, and non – formal education. Most of the time, the language of instruction adopted is the language of the immediate environment.

The National Policy on Education (1998, 2004) says that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject from the fourth year, English shall be progressively used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.

Language policies affect attitudes, because prescription of which language should be used for what, is a key factor that affects the attitudes of groups towards their mother tongues. Adegbija (2003,p.299) In Nigeria today, where the policy assigns important roles to the exogenous language, that is English, it is only natural that attitudes towards learning using the mother tongue will suffer. By virtue of its accorded status, people are more inspired toward acquiring English via formal education than toward acquiring Nigerian languages. Ofulue, (2008, p.64)

The Nigerian Language policy as noted by Lawal (2005) cited in Olaolorun et al (2013, p.37) “has been very difficult to implement because of the attitude of the educated class who will rather have their children taught English Language right from the cradle”. In the area of education, English Language has come to assume a very important position in Nigeria Parents and pupils are satisfied with the medium of instruction being a dominant language if they see the dominant language as a possible vehicle for social advancement .To try to replace it with native languages as medium of instruction will displease the parents who will want their children to have a competitive chance to use their education in the job market.(Lawal, 2005)

Lawal (2005) cited by Olaolorun et al(2013, p38) noted further that “parents out of ignorance insulate the children from the mother tongue to induce facility in the use of English Language thus depriving children of a basic source of education and imaginative development”. The concepts of empowerment and usefulness make the encouragement of the mother tongue meet with resistance where the children’s mother- tongue is not the dominant language Ofulue, (2008,p.65)

Parental attitude to the mother tongue therefore is negative. English language is preferred as their children’s first language (L1) .Children are motivated from birth to speak English-language. Children’s motivation to learn a language increases as they find themselves more competent to accomplish school tasks in the language. Ofulue, (2008, p.65) When two languages are present in the child’s environment at least one of them must be used to fulfil the affective functions she says.

As parents encourage their children to learn English straight from birth, the mother tongue suffers and may lead to language death after many years of lack of use. In many urban Cities and towns in Nigeria today, many young people cannot speak their mother-tongues. Many private schools prohibit the use of what they call vernacular ( mother tongue), while many parents will not consider taking their children to a school where the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction, as such will be termed ‘local schools’

The unfortunate thing about the situation is that some parents consider it as prestigious when their children speak English language or speak it better than their Mother tongues. The adverse effect of this situation is that many of these youths may become culturally misplaced which in effect leads to serious social and educational problems (Akeredolu- Ale and Alimi, 2002) Cited by Olaolorun et al(2013,p.37)

Romaine (1993) Cited by Olaolorun et al. (2003,p.40) noted that there is strong evidence that some groups of children are characterized by less than native- like skills in the two languages they speak with its detrimental cognitive and academic consequences. They show quantitative deficiencies in smaller vocabularies. They can deviate from the norm in the two languages and have a lower degree of automatism. They also find it very difficult to express emotional meanings. They don't acquire enough vocabulary of the language(s) they speak and so find it difficult to express their thoughts fully.

Among the young people too, inability to understand or speak their mother tongues is erroneously considered prestigious and status - enhancing in relation to their peers who often speak their mother tongue or other indigenous languages.

Matsuura (2004) cited by Olaolorun et al (2013,p.37) noted that teaching in the mother tongue and the official or national language helps children to obtain better results and also stimulates their cognitive development and capacity to learn. This will equally take care of their affective development which goes hand-in- hand with the cognitive development.

One of the projects carried out in Nigeria which has supported the advantage of mother-tongue based education is the Six – Year PRIMARY PROJECT carried out at the University of Ife in the 70's. It was a study in mother-tongue education in Yoruba, whereby primary school pupils were taught strictly in Yoruba (The language of the immediate community) The result of the project indicated that Nigerian children are better educated first in the mother-tongue as had been suggested earlier on by Linguistic Scholars. This finding however has not been replicated or put to use as it is expected, in our primary schools. The consequences of the predominant use of English resulting in the marginalisation of the indigenous Nigerian languages are therefore multi-dimensional.

The use of the indigenous languages which constitute their mother tongues in daily conversations seems to be gradually reducing among the Nigerian undergraduates as undergraduate's languages are usually characterized by Code-switching and Code-mixing, Use of Pidgin English and non standard forms especially in non-formal settings.

As a sociolinguistic phenomenon, code-switching involves rapid switch or change from one language to another, depending on the situations, audience, subject matter etc. It is a consequence of language in contact. Gal(1988,p.247) says ' Code switching is a conversational strategy used to establish, cross or destroy group boundaries; to evoke, or change interpersonal relations with their rights and obligations is a common feature in bilingual and multilingual societies, it is a situation where a speaker changes from one language code to another in a speech event. Lyons (1977) Cited by Wardaugh (2006,p.99) sees code-switching as the ability of members of a language community to pass from one dialect or variety of the language to another according to the situation of utterance. He adds that code-switching is not restricted to language communities employing two or more languages or dialects.

Code-mixing generally takes place in informal situations, usually among speakers with the same linguistic background. It occurs at home, in parties among intimate people etc. Code-mixing is done for specific purposes, serving both linguistic and social functions. Essien (1995, p.281) also asserts that code-mixing is ad hoc and strongest in areas such as the academic disciplines, the professions, politics, the economy etc.

Code-mixing is one of the features of the use of language in Nigeria, resulting from the complex linguistic system.

Each of the 250 or more ethnic groups in Nigeria can converse in pidgin language, though they usually have their own additional words. For example, the Yorùbás use the words *Şe* and *Abi* when speaking Pidgin. These are often used at the start or end of an intonated sentence or question. For example, "You are coming, right?" becomes *Şe you dey come?* or *You dey come abi?* Another example, the Igbos add the word *Nna* also used at the beginning of some sentences to show camaraderie. For example, *man! that test was hard* becomes *Nna, that test hard no be small.*

Nigerian Pidgin also varies from place to place. Dialects of Nigerian Pidgin may include the Warri, Sapele, Benin, Port-Harcourt, Lagos especially in Ajegunle, Onitsha varieties.

Nigerian Pidgin is most widely spoken in the oil rich Niger-Delta where most of its population speak it as their first language (Akande, & Salami 2010, p.72.)

In Nigeria, Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) used to be seen generally as the code of the non-literate as well as a bastardisation of English and its use was, therefore, considered a mark of the level of one's proficiency in English.. However, Akande (2008:37) cited in Akande& Salami (2010, p.71) has noted, that the sociolinguistic reality in Nigeria today is such that NPE is spoken by university graduates, professors, lawyers and journalists. It has also been demonstrated that NPE is not used only in informal settings but also in offices and other formal setting. In other words, the claim that NPE is the code of the non-literate does not seem to have validity as there are a lot of educated speakers in Nigeria who can use both Standard English and NPE proficiently (Akande 2008)

### **3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Students discuss or communicate very often among themselves just as lecturers do while imparting knowledge. In the university campuses therefore, a lot of communication take place. The language of communication is also as diverse as the many tribes of students that are present. It will be expected therefore that different mother tongues will be employed in so doing. It is however known that students often make use of peculiar means of communicating such as the use of Pidgin English, the use of Code-switching and code-mixing which results from their bilingual nature. The predominant use of English in almost every sphere of learning and their endeavours seems to suggest that they speak English language a lot compared to their various indigenous languages. This may subdue their interest in the use of their mother-tongue in the long run or worse still lead to the use of adulterated mother tongue, or diminished interest in it. This study therefore sets out to investigate the attitude of students to the use of their Mother tongue.

### **4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

As a result of the problems stated above, two research questions were raised as stated below:

Will there be any difference between the attitude of male and female students towards the use of mother tongue.

Will the age of students influence the use of mother tongue?

### **5. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS**

One research hypothesis was generated from the research questions raised above.

There is no significant difference between the attitude of male and female students towards the use of the mother Tongue.

### **6. METHOD OF STUDY**

The research design is a descriptive type which elicits information through the use of questionnaire. It is a method which allows researchers to investigate any phenomenon through interview and observation by using structured questions.

### **7. POPULATION**

The population of the study is all students in the third year in the private University used for the study. This group number up to one thousand, one hundred.

The choice of third year students was made because they had spent three years at the University. They have been exposed to the university culture and had interacted with their Colleagues in the university community at large.

The samples for the study were selected through stratified sampling technique. A sample size of four hundred and ninety three (493) was selected for the study.

### **8. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT**

The research instrument was a set of questionnaire which contains fifteen items used for the study. The questionnaire elicits information on the students' attitude towards the use of mother tongue in their communication. Specifically the questionnaire elicits information on the use of

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mother tongue among peers, parental influence and bio data. The questionnaire was validated by content and face validity by language specialists. The reliability was carried out through test and re-test method. The data collected was subjected to Pearson Product Moment correlation Coefficient and a reliability coefficient of 0.65 was obtained. This was good enough for the study.

### 9. ADMINISTRATION OF THE TEST

The questionnaire was administered on the students and collected on the spot after they had responded to the questions. This was done to prevent interaction influence on the responses of the students. The data collect was subjected to frequency counts, Percentages and t-test statistics.

### 10. DATA ANALYSIS

The results of the data analysed were reported below.

**Table 1.** Will there be any difference between the use of mother tongue by male and female students.

Source of variation	frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Male	234	47.5	47.6	47.6
Female	258	52.3	52.4	100.0
Total	492	99.8	100.0	
Missing data	1	02		
Total	493	100.0		

The table above shows the gender influence on the attitude of students towards the use of mother tongue for communication. The percentage of female students that had positive attitude towards the use of mother tongue was 52.4% while 47.6% of the male has positive attitude towards the use of the mother tongue.

This shows that gender influences the use of mother tongue among the female students than the male students.

**Table 2.** Will age influence the use of mother tongue by the university students.

Source of variation age	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
15 – 18 years	329	66.7	66.7	66.7
19 – 21 years	116	23.5	23.5	90.3
22 years above	47	9.5	9.5	99.8
Missing data	1	.2	.2	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>493</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

The table above shows that students between the age of 15 and 18 years forming 66.7% of the respondents were more interested in the use of mother tongue while students between the age 19 and 21 years forming 23.5 were interested in the use of the mother tongue

**Table 3.** Analysis of the questions according to the responses of the samples

S/ N	Description	SA		A		SD		D		UD		Total		
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	N	Q	
1	I communicate in more than one language	213	43.2	173	35.5	37	7.5	28	5.7	39	7.9	1.2	393	100
2	I communicate in mother tongue	170	34.5	154	31.2	52	10.5	64	13.0	53	10.8		493	100
3	I communicate	315	63.9	95	19.3	38	7.7	23	4.7	22	4.5		493	100

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	in English more than my mother tongue													
4	I believe that English language is superior to my mother tongue	100	20.3	67	13.6	88	17.8	93	18.9	144	29.2		493	98
5	I communicate in my mother tongue at home	122	24.7	127	25.8	78	15.8	89	18.1	77	15.8		493	100
6	I often communicate more in my mother tongue	59	12.0	88	17.8	75	15.2	151	30.6	120	24.3		493	100
7	I think mother tongue play an important role in the society	247	50.7	133	27.0	58	118	21	4.3	34	6.9		493	100
8	My Parents encourage me to communicate in my mother tongue	214	43.4	134	27.2	62	12.4	54	11.0	30	6.1		493	100
9	My Parents communicate with me in my mother tongue	169	34.3	15.7	31.8	77	15.6	50	10.1	40	8.1		493	100
10	I feel proud communicating in my mother tongue when in school among my mate	123	24.9	146	29.6	97	19.7	67	13.6	60	12.2		493	100
11	I believe in bringing up my children in my mother tongue	195	39.6	129	26.2	98	19.9	38	7.7	32	6.5		493	100
12	I feel envious when my age mate proficient in their mother tongue	112	22.7	105	21.3	91	18.5	91	18.5	92	18.7		493	100
13	I feel indifferent when my age mates are proficient in theirbn	85	17.2	98	19.9	101	20.5	111	22.5	98	19.9		493	100

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	mother tongue													
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The data on table three above shows the analyses of the respondents item by item. The responses of the samples on item 1 on the number of students who are bilingual, 388 (88.7%) are bilingual while 67. (13.2%) are not bilingual while a script was void.

The implication of this analysis is that majority of the respondents are bilingual. Testing the responses of those who communicate in their mother tongue 320 (65.7%) communicates in their mother tongue while 116 (23.5%) do not communicate in their mother tongue. Also 53 (10.8%) did not decide whether they communicated in their mother tongue or not. The implication of this finding is that most of the students often communicate in their mother tongue.

On the rating of English Language and the mother tongue 16 (33.9) of the (167) respondent believed that English Language is superior to their mother tongue while 181 (37.7%) of the respondents believed in the superiority of their mother tongue to the English Language. Twenty-nine point two 29.2 % respondents did not decide whether their mother tongue is superior to English, 249 (50.5%) of the respondents agreed that they use their mother tongue at home while 177 (33.9%) of the respondents claimed that they did not use their mother tongue at home. It is amazing to note that 77(15.8%) of the respondents were in confused state as they could not decide on the language they use more at home. The analysis of the data collected on the language used often by the respondents showed that 147 (29.8) of the respondents agreed that they used their mother tongue most often while 226 (45.8 of the respondents disagreed and 120 (24.3) were unable to decide. The finding here is that most of the students did not use their mother tongue most often.

The data analysed showed that 380 (77.7%) of the respondents perceived that their mother tongue played important roles in the society, while 79.(15.11%) perceived that it did not play important role. On the other hand 34 (6.9%) were unable to decide on the roles played by their mother tongue. The decision was that the respondents agreed that mother tongue played important roles in the society

The result of the data analysed in respect of whether their parents encouraged them to communicate in their mother tongue showed that 348. (70.6) agreed that they were encouraged while 115 (23.4%) said that they were not encouraged it was observed that 30. (6.1%) of the respondents could not decide. Generally, it was found that most parents encouraged their wards to speak their mother tongue at home.

The data analysed revealed that 326. (65%) of the parents of the respondents communicated with them in mother tongue at home while 127 (25.7%) did not. Also 40.(8.1%) of the respondents could not decide.

On the issue whether the respondents were proud to communicate in their mother tongue while in school 269 (53.15%) of the respondents were proud to communicate in their mother tongue while 164 (32.15%) were not proud to communicate in their mother tongue at school. On the other hand 60 (12.2%) were not able to decide on the issue.

On the issue of whether the respondents would like to bring up their children using their mother tongues 324 (65.8%) agreed while 136 (27.6%) did not agree. It was noted that 32 (6.5%) were unable to decide.

The data analysed whether the respondents were envious of their colleague who spoke in their mother tongue the data revealed that 217 (43.10) were envious while 182 (36.14%) were not. It was observed that 92 (18.7%) could not decide.

On the issue whether they felt indifferent when their mates spoke in their mother tongue, the data analysed showed that 183 (36.11%) agreed that they felt indifferent while 212. (42%) did not. It was observed that 98. (19.95%) of the respondents were not decided.

## 11. DISCUSSION

The study investigated the attitude of undergraduate students towards the use of their mother tongue in a private University. The findings showed that most of the students were bilingual this

is not surprising because an average Nigerian is bilingual. This study revealed that majority of the student could communicate in their mother tongue. This is contrary to the fear expressed in the society that a large proportion of Nigerian undergraduates could not communicate in their mother tongue. It was discovered that gender and age influence the use of the mother tongue. The study support the observation of Wardaugh (2006, p.96) that bilingualism confers linguistic advantage on children because the students will be able to retrieve information at least in two languages. The study further revealed that most of the students used English language more than their mother tongue because they rated English language higher than their mother tongue. This is not surprising because many Nigerians believe that English language is the language of the elites and that of civilization. These findings communicate the submission of Ofulue (2008, p.65) that the status accorded to a language in the society inspired people towards its acquisition. Also the study corroborates the observation of Adegbija (2003) that language policies of a country affect the attitudes of the citizens towards the language favoured by the policy of their country. The situation in Nigeria is that Nigeria language policy favours English Language and people also have favourable attitude towards its use. The study revealed that half of the respondents use their mother tongue at home. This is good enough because the mother tongue is still competing on the average with English language. The finding of the study showed that their mother tongue played important roles in the society. The study also showed that greater percentage of the parents of the respondents encouraged their wards to speak their mother tongues at home. These findings contradict the finding of Ofulue, (2008) that most parents are not encouraging their children to use Nigerian Language at home. The study of course corroborates Ofulue, (2008) that when two languages are present in the child's environment at least one of them will be used to fulfil the affective functions. This study by implication revealed that the mother tongue is the language that is used to fulfil affective function by Nigerian Parents. The finding of the study showed that most of the respondents were proud of their mother tongue and were willing to bring up their children using their mother tongue. The implication of this is that the mother tongue is cherished and could be passed on to the younger generation. This implies that the mother tongue will continue side by side with English Language.

## 12. CONCLUSION

This study had revealed that the death of most of the Nigerian Languages is not imminent as being feared by many scholars. The mother tongue will continue to be used by the people in their communication and interaction with others especially in informal settings.

## 13. RECOMMENDATION

As a result of the findings from the study it is recommended that the Nigerian students should use the Nigerian languages more often than any foreign or second language. It is also recommended that Nigerian languages should be included in the tertiary education curriculum, so that the scope of usage can be expanded beyond the homes.

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