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The Sociolinguistic Consequences of Language Policy Failure in Early Childhood Language Education: Emerging Critical Lessons from Nigeria

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Abstract

In view of the nature of language as a critical global socio-cultural heritage, its communicative imperative and the role of official policy in its development, this study critically examines the provisions of early childhood education (ECE) language policy in Nigeria and the sociolinguistic consequences of its (mal) administration and failure. The study employed observation, content analysis and interview for data collection. It is anchored on Jerome Bruner's language acquisition theory of interactionism and Cummins' linguistic interdependence theory. Collected data were analysed qualitatively, and the results revealed strategic flaws in the ECE language policy and its administration. Some resultant consequences include the abandonment of the age-long effective sequential bilingual education, subliminal cultivation of linguistic prejudice in children and adults, unnecessary multilingual discourse in informal contexts, the emergence of monolingual children in a multilingual environment, and the sustenance of a poor variety of English. The study recommends compulsory adoption and implementation of simultaneous multilingual policy in ECE in English-as-second-language (ESL) and English-as-foreign language (EFL) countries in order to reap the enormous benefits of perfect bilingual or multilingual education.

Keywords: *Language Policy, Nigeria, the English Language, Local Languages, Early Childhood Education, Sociolinguistic Consequences.*

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, as a multi-ethnolinguistic nation with up to 250 distinct languages, speaks, learns and promotes English as a second language (L2). In this sociolinguistic setting, English plays a major role in the educational, administrative, socio-political, economic and cultural life of the people. Nigeria belongs to the outer-circle speakers of English like Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, India, etc, according to "Kachru's (1982, 1985) concentric model" of world Englishes (Bhowmik 2015). Speakers of English from those countries are termed the new English owners, since they study and speak it as a second language (Gildorf, 2002; Jowitt, 2013). Gildorf specifically asserts that Nigeria has her own English. The second-language status of English in many parts of the world seems to be the basis for the controversial ownership and control question about English (Boonsuk and Ambele 2020; Ahn Ohki and Slaughter 2023). Because of the hegemonic status of English and its critical functional roles in Nigeria, it currently receives more attention than other local languages in the entire school system.

In the past, Christian missionaries determined the direction of language education during the period of Nigeria's colonization (1862-1960) (Isaac 2013); they encouraged the teaching and learning of both the indigenous languages and English, which indicated their understanding of the benefits of linguistic diversity and the sociocultural value of every language. The

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acquisition strategy of sequential bilingualism (Finegan 2008; Jackson and Stockwell 2011; Parlakian 2018) seemed to be the missionaries' language pedagogical compass. Educated Nigerians during the period and shortly after that were perfect bilinguals in English and the local languages. Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Wole Soyinka and many others remain notable models of bilingual education of that era. These individuals provide the practical proof of Cummins' (1979, 1980, 1981) linguistic interdependence theory, which posits that L1 facilitates the acquisition of L2.

With the publication of her *National Policy on Education* (NPE) in 1977 and the introduction of early childhood education (ECE), an insidious twist in the language education landscape of Nigeria commenced. ECE centres were initially established in cities, but now they have spread to rural communities. This twist compounded the problems associated with the development and acquisition of English (Nigeria's official language), Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba (Nigeria's national languages), and numerous other minority languages. The responsibility for developing the national languages was, in practical terms, shifted to the regional governments where those languages are native, while the responsibility for developing English remains both a national and state affair.

Despite the huge interest in, and emphasis on, English, vociferous complaints about decadence in spoken and written English by secondary school graduates persists (Ekweribe2013). In addition, a phenomenon of English-only-speaking undergraduates on the campus of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, has surfaced (Nwokolo 2019). This situation has also been observed in other tertiary institutions in the eastern and southern regions of the country. The Centre for Igbo Studies at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, has expressed serious concerns over the development. In Okebalama (2016), English is cited as playing a predominant role in the daily language use of the people in eastern Nigeria. The investigated undergraduates at Nsukka had Igbo parents, and many of them were raised in urban and semi-urban communities in the eastern region and other Nigerian cities. Critics blame the overwhelming role assigned to English in the polity as being responsible for the situation, but no direct link to ECE language education has ever been established.

The study establishes this direct link, using the theoretical frameworks of interactionism, and linguistic interdependence to illuminate its process. Interactionism is a language acquisition theory proposed by Jerome Bruner in 1983. The theory contains the proposition that children's language acquisition and development result from a combination of biological and social factors. Bruner agrees that children have natural innate ability or language acquisition device (LAD) which facilitates language acquisition, but insists that LAD would be useless without social interaction or language acquisition support system (LASS). LAD, which enables simultaneous acquisition of more than one ambient language depends on LASS. For Bruner, LASS comprises the entire social contexts and interactions with parents, siblings, caregivers, teachers, friends, electronic media and peers. He opines that the quality of language and the rate of its development hugely depend on LASS. On the other hand, Jim Cummins' (1979, 1980, 1981) linguistic interdependence theory posits that the level of development and proficiency in an L2 is dependent on the proficiency level in L1 because of the existence of a common underlying proficiency that facilitates cross-linguistic transfer. The implication of this theory is that, for effective L2 acquisition, L1 should not be neglected. While interactionism embodies the possibility of simultaneous acquisition of more than one language and provides insight into the contexts (the policy and its implementation and the resultant psychological, administrative and pedagogical conditions, the teachers, the parents, the government, the peers

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and the consequences of policy maladministration) in which ECE language education takes place in Nigeria, linguistic interdependence draws attention to the positive natural relationship existing between languages (LI and L2) in the process of acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In many commonwealth countries, ECE is conducted in English (Murphy and Evangelou, 2016). In addition, ECE in English seems to enjoy global acceptance, as some countries in Europe, South America and Asia encourage and fund it massively in other to be abreast with the "processes of globalization and internationalization" (de Majia 2016: 43). However, it is important to juxtapose this current trend with the UNESCO's unequivocal declarations in support of formal ECE in the mother tongue (Agbedo 2019). It is also a research-based conclusion that second language acquisition (SLA) is greatly facilitated and enhanced when the mother tongue is acquired first (Cummins 2001, 1979, 1981; Genesee 2016; Awuor 2019). Studies have also shown that simultaneous bilingualism is a reality in many parts of the world today (Genesee, 2008, 2015; Javier-Rivero, 2018; Li and Joshua, 2022). Macgregor's (2009) analysis of the stages of language acquisition in early childhood supports the need for a lucid language policy at the ECE level. His basic schedule for language acquisition shows that the ECE years are the most sensitive for language acquisition. According to him, six stages exist, and the fifth stage, which is the basic mastery stage, starts from the fourth year. By the fifth stage, as posited by Gillis and Ravid (2009: 203), the children have acquired the entire phonological system of their mother tongue, with the exception of "some additional fine-grained morphological and syntactic acquisitions" which can come later. The sixth stage in the schedule is for the elaboration and expansion of grammar and lexicon, which continues throughout life. So, the first five years seems the most critical period in the process of language acquisition; coincidentally, this is the ECE years.

Language policy and language planning are synonymous expressions, since they are mostly used interchangeably (Lo Bianco, 2010; Romaine, 2023). Policy and planning revolve around three key components: status, acquisition and corpus (Lo Bianco, 2010; Agbedo, 2015, 2019). A language policy "determines how far a country could advance in its total endeavours" (Okeke &Ndiribe 2015: 64; Ezema 2015: 67), and such a policy is meant for strict implementation (Fatima, 2022). This critical role, according to Ezema, explains why governments all over the world essentialise it. Though Isaac (2013: 136) describes Nigeria's language policy as 'beautiful," other scholars believe that the policy lacks holistic and fair implementation, as English receives premium attention to the detriment of the local languages (Owojecho 2020; Acheoah 2019; Dlibugunaya 2017; Olagbaju and Akinsowon 2014; Ojetunde 2012; Ezema, 2015). Owojecho maintains that the policy's regulations on language use in pre-primary education are "disrespected;" he cites Igbojinwaekwu & Nneji (2012) who assert that "no reliable records exist to show that any privately-owned, state-owned or federal-owned schools are implementing these policy guidelines."

The current study, therefore, is intended to initiate urgent rethinking of today's ECE and the language policy governing it in many nations, especially in ESL and EFL countries. The study is invaluable as it evaluates the desirability of ECE in multilingual societies, the implications and consequences of language policy directions at ECE level and the policy changes or adjustments that will ensure balanced and successful bilingual or multilingual education in multilingual countries, especially ESL and EFL countries.

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Objectives of the Study

The first objective of the study is to critically examine the nature of Nigeria's language policy in ECE and to investigate its influence on ECE language education in eastern Nigeria. The focus is on the contents of the policy and on the ECE centres'extent of spread in the region, language of pedagogy and communication in the centres and the quality of their personnel. Secondly, the study intends to identify observable sociolinguistic consequences resulting from the failure of the policy.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive investigation of Nigeria's ECE language policy and its sociolinguistic repercussions on eastern Nigeria. Eastern Nigeria, which comprises five autonomous states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo, was chosen as the site for the study because people of the region have unquenchable appetite for Western education. Secondly, the researchers (especially the chief researcher, who was already a graduate of the University of Nigeria in the early 1980s) hail from the region and are very familiar with the area. The policy itself, the ECE centres and the ECE personnel were the primary subjects of the study. Observation, informal unstructured interviews or interactions and content analysis of the policy were tools of data collection. Due to the designed long duration of the study and the familiar nature of the issues involved (everyday language use, childhood education, complaints about the state of the local languages, etc), which parents, teachers, academics often discuss, observation and interview were deemed the appropriate data collection tool. Data collection lasted over two years, during which the researchers and their assistants (who are parents and whose children and wards had gone through the ECE) engaged in conscious observations of, and interactions with, ECEcentre proprietors and teachers, children, parents, officials of state ministries of education and Catholic education commissions and colleagues. Schools, churches, homes, hospitals and shopping malls, in urban and rural areas, provided opportunities for observations and interactions. The observation of, and interaction with, children yielded the language data presented in the study. Parents provided information on their children's use of language in the family and on their opinion regarding monolingual ECE in local languages as prescribed by the language policy. The language policy was examined in order to understand its theoretical motivation and thrust. These observations, interviews and content analysis of the policy yielded the data, which were subjected to qualitative analysis before presentation and discussion.

Findings

Nigeria's language policy contains specific guidelines for language education at all levels of education. Regarding Early Child Care Development and Education (ECCDE) and Pre-Primary Education, the policy provides that "Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate environment" (p. 8). This will remain operational until the child's third year in primary school. According to the policy, ECCDE is a type of education promoted in children from ages zero to four, while pre-primary is a-year programme provided for children who have attained five years. The Policy gives the assurance that government shall "regulate and control the operation" of these schools and, in addition, "set and monitor standard." Apparently, the policy aims to make children acquire their mother tongues first, during the ECE years before encountering any other foreign language (sequential bilingualism). This constitutes a major miscalculation in the policy, in

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view of the prevailing revered and hegemonic status and the inevitable functional roles of English in the life of the people.

Another remarkable finding is the proliferation of ECE centres in the South East. ECE has ceased to be a city affair as the Policy has encouraged the participation of individuals, organizations and groups in the building and maintenance of ECE facilities. The involvement of different Christian missions in ECE and primary school enterprise accelerated the proliferation. This situation is similar in every state of the region, where the Catholic Church plays a major role in the industry through her education commissions established by her 15 dioceses in the area. According to 2022 data provided by Nigeria's Federal Ministry of Education, Abia State had 2730 ECE centres (1911rural centres and 819 urban centres; Anambra State had 2585 centres (1452 rural and 1133 urban); Ebonyi State harboured 1373 centres (994 rural and 379 urban). There were 2829 centres in Enugu State (2019 rural and 810 urban, while the total number in Imo State was 2459 (2032 rural and 427 urban). These are huge figures.

The next finding is the adoption of the English language as the only language of instruction (teacher talk) and of interaction among the children and between the children and their teachers and nannies at ECE centres. No other language is encouraged or consciously promoted. The obvious consequence of this violation of the ECE language policy is the children's preference for English. Interactions with many of these children in schools, homes, churches, streets and shopping malls, including interactions with some undergraduates of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, confirm their monolingualism.

The academic quality of the teachers in whose care the children are entrusted has remained unenviable as the schools deploy individuals with the least allowable qualification to ECE classes. Tacit approval of this situation by parents appears to be the case, since public perception of the centres excludes a place for serious academic engagement but includes a designated mere custodial centres. Nannies do not require any qualification or appreciable competence in the use of English to be employed. In private schools, especially those in semi-urban areas and rural communities, recruitment of unqualified teachers appears to be the norm. Many of these teachers and nannies were obviously deficient in the use of English, since they lacked special, formal training for the job of this nature. As a part of the children's sociolinguistic environment, they also influence the children's language acquisition.

The study also confirms the unwillingness of local, state and federal governments to enforce the unambiguous provisions of the language policy. ECE centres established by private individuals and non-governmental organizations, including government schools in the cities, do not implement this policy. School proprietors expressed the fear of low enrolment if they implemented the policy in their schools; parents would consider their schools old-fashioned. The non-enforcement of this policy translates to abandonment of sequential bilingual education with its educational, intellectual and L2-learning advantages.

A major sociolinguistic outcome of the study is the establishment of a strong link between the implementation of a monolingual ECE in English and the creation of a rapidly-growing large population of children who speak only English in eastern Nigeria, an environment where English is an L2 and where the Igbo language is the mother tongue. The existence of this group has been a cause for concern to the people of the region. The only logical explanation for this linguistic phenomenon, which was non-existent in the 1970s and 1980s in the South East, is the establishment of ECE centres and the consequent monolingual ECE in English. If the

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centres were not created and if the policy were strictly implemented, certainly the phenomenon would not have occurred.

Another major consequence bothers on the attitudes of children and adults to both English and the local languages. Children's attitudes to the languages are shaped right from the ECE days through teacher talk and the communication medium. Through the process of subliminal learning, the children imbibe the notion of superiority of English. The negative attitude to the local languages is manifested in "Stop speaking that thing," which was an angry reaction of a pupil who was addressed by his playmate in the Igbo language. The teachers that reported the incident conceded that they were alarmed but could not help the situation since the local language was not promoted in their school. In a different school, the head teacher bragged before the researchers about the popularity of her school as a result of her pupils' fluency in English, which was achieved by making English the sole means of communication in the school. The denigration of Igbo extends also to the classroom settings, where English features five periods a week on the timetable while Igbo appear once or twice. Also, the practice of punishing pupils for speaking Igbo in classrooms during official hours is still observed in some rural primary schools.

The non-acceptability of multilingualism as a valuable linguistic asset, coupled with the seeming ignorance of the fact of linguistic equality and diversity, could also be traced to ECE in English alone. The only-English situation demeans the local languages. It accounts for the inability of the people to assign separate social roles to the ambient languages: Igbo, English and Pidgin. Consequently, deliberations on a local issue in rural informal settings usually generate what might be termed a multilingual discourse event in which the English-only speakers feature prominently. Language-use in such a gathering usually reflects a demonstration of English-speaking ability and some form of identity construction. The emergent groups of speakers in such a situation include: few pure Igbo speakers, pure English speakers, code-switching speakers, code-mixing speakers, and Pidgin English speakers. The pure English speakers comprise the English-only younger people, who construct the identity of being educated.

The finding regarding the quality of English acquired during ECE reveals similarities between the children's oral production and that of the adults around them: parents, teachers, nannies, and older siblings. The data were collected from children who speak only English. Errors of phonology committed by these children are as numerous as those committed by the adult population, who, generally, pay little or no attention to pronunciation errors. However, language-quality data collection focused more on fossilized grammatical errors passed on to the children. Below are some examples of the data.

a) *I don't know how I will do myself.*

The statement was made by a child of four and a half years who was trying to construct something with his building blocks but got confused in the process. The child wanted to say *I am confused; I don't know what to do next*.

b) Mumy, Chimee off the TV.

A child of four years was complaining that his elder sister had turned off the television. Similar expressions, which have wide usage, include: *off the radio, off the light, off the tap; off the phone*.

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c) My bele is full.

Bele is the pidgin pronunciation/word for belly/stomach. In this situation, a boy of almost five years was responding to his mother's question; the mother sought to know if he wanted more food.

d) They have taken light.

This statement was made by a five-year-old boy when electric power went off. In Nigeria, among the semi-literates, power failure and restoration are expressed in terms of "taking" and "bringing" light. The power company b*rings* and *takes* light. This is the manner this idea is conceived and expressed in the local languages. For instance, in Igbo language, we have the following expression: "Ndi EEDC ewerego oku" (transliterated as, The Enugu Electricity Distribution Company has taken light). So, *take light, took light, taken light, bring/brought light* are common everyday expressions, and the children use them too.

e) *Throw it for me down.*

A three-year-old boy wanted his ball to be thrown down to him from the first-floor balcony of the flat in which he lived.

f1) *Nurse chuck me injection. f2) Sorry. Stop crying.*

It was in a hospital lounge. A child came out from the injection room, crying. The elder brother of about five years asked the sister (for fun) why she was crying. When the sister told him, the boy consoled her with the second statement. Among these children, sharp, pointed objects like knives, sticks, pen and pencils are used to *chuck* or for *chucking.*

g) I don't want to baf now.

This statement was uttered by a five-year-old boy who was being dragged to the bathroom for him to take a bath. *Ba*f is the pidgin version of *bath* and *bathe.* The version is widely used, even by educated individuals.

h) I will tell my daddy for you.

What this three-year-old child wanted to say in this communicative situation is "I will report you to my daddy/ I will tell my daddy what you did".

i) My leg is paining me.

This is the way many people in the area express the idea of feeling pain in any part of the body. In this instance, a girl of six years (who passed through nursery school and is now in the primary) stumbled and sprained her ankle.

j) I am licking my orange.

This way of expressing the idea of eating an orange or sweet is widespread among the uneducated and half educated in Nigeria. It is a literal translation of how the idea is expressed in the local languages. The utterance presented here was made by a boy whose age was three years and eight months.

k) *Dady, I want to barb my hair like your own.*

"Barb hair" is another unEnglish expression widely used by adults. In this situation, a three-year-old boy made the statement while admiring his father's new haircut.

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l) I first all of you.

The use of *first* in this manner is widespread among children and teenagers. They use it to express the idea of coming first. In the instance above, a group of four children was playing a game. Three of them (who were still in the nursery school) were more than three years old while the eldest (who was in the primary) was about nine. Each time a round of the game ended, one of them, including the eldest, would shout, "I first all of you".

m) Me and you will go to Chisora house.

The speaker (a boy of two and a half years) was talking to his elder sister. The issue of interest here is the (unacceptable) placing of the first person pronoun (me) before the addressee (you). This is the usual way adults of both genders, apart from few well-educated individuals who speak in formal situations, handle this structure. Apparently, it is the structure of the Igbo language that has intruded on English and has stuck and persisted. It is unIgbo (sociopragmatically) to reposition the pronouns.

In addition, during the cause of the study, the children's expression of some speech acts was noted. The apology expression, *sorry*, is an example. Adults deploy it not only to express apology but also to express consolation, or sympathy with anybody in pain, sorrow or difficulty. This usage reflects the manner the children also used it. Another example is *I am coming*, which is a perfect literal translation of the Igbo expression, *Ana m abia*. However, the pragmatics import of the Igbo equivalent is *Wait for me; I will be with you soon.* This is the meaning expressed whenever *I am coming* is uttered by Igbo-speaking people.

Finally, in terms of fluency in speech, which is a measure of language proficiency, the researchers also noted that the English-only-speaking children are less fluent than their age mates raised in their mother tongue. At pre-school stage, the Igbo-only-speaking children, express themselves much more fluently, effortlessly and grammatically in any dialect of Igbo they speak. While their English-only-speaking age mates still battle with lexicogrammatical, pronunciation and pragmatic issues, as the examples above show, their age mates in rural communities are almost fully done with the acquisition of what Cummins (2003) calls basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in Igbo as they can express themselves fluently on any topic within the realm of their experience .

DISCUSSION

The overarching purpose of this study is a critical evaluation of the ECE language policy in Nigeria and the sociolinguistic consequences of its implementation in south-eastern Nigeria. Obviously, sequential bilingualism (Palakian, 2018) influenced the policy, and its logical implication is the prohibition of foreign languages in ECE years (NPE, p. 8).This constitutes what the study has identified as the policy's major strategic flaw, which reveals an evident lack of awareness of the postulations of nativism, as incorporated in interactionism, and the wide-spread practice of simultaneous bilingual education during pre-school years (Genesee, 2008). The policy means that the acquisition of English must wait until after ECE and the first half of primary school education. Embracing a policy of this nature in a country where English has acquired appellations of 'revered' and 'unchallengeable' (Akabogu 2014: 163) is unlikely. Perhaps, the policy would have maintained its respect if it were weaved around simultaneous bilingualism, which is attainable and common among children growing up in multilingual contexts all over the world (Li and Joshua, 2022; Javier-Rivero, 2018; Snape and Kupisch, 2017; Genesee, 2015).

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The proliferation of ECE centres, the non-enforcement of the ECE policy provisions and the consequent adoption of English as the only language of instruction and communication in the centres, and the academic quality of the teachers in those centres are shaping language education and development in eastern Nigeria, including the attitude towards languages spoken in the region. A combination of the above human factors has made the English language a cynosure in the area. Many young and old parents share the belief that the English language is 'invaluable, if not indispensable, in the scheme of things' (Ugoji 2011: 92). Ezema's conclusion is that "too much importance is attached to English" in Nigeria (2015:72), while Okeke and Ndiribe (2015:59) share the view that the acquisition of English has become "a sine qua non for the survival of an individual in the nation." This situation subsists because the language policy failed to make provisions for simultaneous bilingualism in which 'most children … learn more than one language during the pre-school years' (Genesee 2008:1).

A major consequence of non-implementation of Nigeria's ECE language policy in the South East is the creation of *special* new *owners* of English, that is, a group of children and youth who speak only English. This special ownership appellation describes these learners' acquisition of only English as their L1in a bilingual environment where English has an L2 status and where their parents are, at least, bilingual in Igbo and English. The controversial ownership question of English has led to the argument that English can no longer be the exclusive property of the English people, as it has assumed a global lingua franca (Boonsuk and Ambele, 2020). Some others believe that ownership can be ascribed in an L2 environment based on the criteria of inheritance and form of use (Ahn, Ohki and Shu, 2023). Cummins (2001:19) affirms the possibility of a complete loss of a mother tongue "in the early years of school" and "even in the home context." In South East Nigeria, the sociolinguistic environment facilitates this loss and promotes the acquisition of only English.

The competence level of the pre-school children in English can be judged against the postulations made by Macgregor (2009), and Parker and Riley (2010) and in view of Cummins' linguistic interdependence theory. In L1 acquisition, according to Macgregor, normal children acquire a good measure of proficiency in the use of their mother tongue by the age of four or five. They are not only in control of "several thousand words", but they also "acquire the major phonological and grammatical systems … as well as the fundamentals of the semantic and pragmatic systems" of their language (Macgregor 2009: 203). The subjects of this study, propelled by the motivation to integrate themselves to their social environment, acquired only English as their L1, but their proficiency level fails to measure up to the expected proficiency standard outlined by Macgregor and others. The quality of English acquired is, therefore, proportional to the quality of the linguistic input received from the environment created by the language policy. The language data presented above support this observation to some extent.

The language-use data contain some lexico-semantic developmental errors, that is, transitional errors that result from a learner undergoing a process of approximation to the target language (Sadeghi and Hushamdar 2020). Though regarded as developmental, they are errors which Igbo-speaking children of their age can avoid when expressing similar ideas (in similar language-use situations) in Igbo. A good number of the recorded language-use problems are fossilized errors which are prevalent in the productions of adults. These fossilized errors – syntactic, semantic, phonological and pragmatic – may further fossilize in their language repertoire, depending on the quality of teachers they encounter after ECE. If these naturally-acquired errors fossilize early, their eradication may be very difficult (Jowitt 2013). For example, it will take a knowledgeable and very skillful teacher to make the children unlearn a

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very common expression like *licking sweet/ orange/ ice cream,* as an interference error. In Igbo, every item of food collocates with a different verb. R*achaa* is the verb that collocates with items like orange, sweet, soup, and ice cream, and *lick* is the English word closest in meaning to it. *Rie (eat* in English) can only collocate with items like *rice, yam* and *beans* or with the word *food,* while items like *mango, apple, guava* and the nuts collocate with *ita/taa* (chew) in Igbo. So, the semi-educated find it difficult to comprehend *ice cream-eat* collocation in English, when the substance cannot be chewed like rice or yam. Errors of this nature may eventually become fossilized and constitute the so-called Nigerian English, which was thought, before now, to be English populated by avoidable common errors.

Summary and Implications of the Study

Embedded in this section are vital lessons to be learnt. A major upshot of the study points to the relationship between efficient language education and careful articulation of a language policy and its implementation. Policy promulgation, no matter how beautifully couched, amounts to a spectacle of nothingness if not strictly implemented. Strict implementation ensures the achievement of the intended objectives of the policy. The second major conclusion is that monolingual ECE in a non-indigenous language in a multilingual country may cause the death of the indigenous languages. A third major conclusion is that monolingual education in English in ESL/EFL countries may not translate to quality English language education. These outcomes point to specific implications.

First, ESL and EFL nations should carefully design, fund and compulsorily implement a simultaneous bilingual/multilingual policy if sequential bilingual education cannot be enforced. The SLA theories of nativism and interactionism support simultaneous bilingual policy. In the SLA research community, the understanding is that "Early childhood professionals can play a vital role in the maintenance of children's first languages;" that these professionals can also "provide opportunities for children to use their first language in early childhood settings and at school and encourage the parents to use the first language at home in order to provide a good foundation for learning English" (Clarke 2009: 9). UNESCO's intervention in this regard is necessary so as to persuade the developing countries to provide balanced bilingual/multilingual education for their citizens. It requires massive re-education of parents regarding the advantages inherent in acquiring heritage languages, one of which is the preservation of one's sociocultural identity (Awuor 2019).

The second implication concerns the need to lay a sound foundation for the learning of English at the ECE level in ESL and EFL countries. Enforcing sequential bilingual education is one way. Availability of well-trained teachers is another. Teachers' proficiency should never be in doubt. This presupposes the establishment of a pre-primary teacher training programme and the designing of an English language curriculum that can take care of the children's basic interpersonal communication needs. At the pre-primary stage, they require appropriate and adequate English input from their teachers, who serve as models. In the words of Clarke (2009:7), 'Children learning English as a second language need explicit modelling and language teaching, appropriate time to acquire the new language and quality exposure to English'. These measures will counter or improve the quality of input received at home.

Also, the globally-trendy, pluricentric and charitable disposition towards the control and ownership of English deserves attention. Native owners of English seem to worry less about the usage and control of English by the outer and expanding circle speakers of the language. The usual emphasis on grammatical competence, proficiency and appropriacy has been

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sacrificed on the altar of "pluricentric understanding of English norms that are not based only on the inner circle varieties" of English (Higgins 2003). With this unfettered, liberal disposition to the ownership and control question, the maintenance and preservation of standard, native English variety may enter a turbulent stage (among ESL and EFL learners) by the turn of the next century. Then, the variety spoken by the rapidly-growing *special* new owners of English would have begun to solidify, spread and suffocate the standard variety. The spread may adversely affect the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, including formal communication at international conferences.

Finally, governments of ESL and EFL countries should revisit their ECE policy to decide its desirability, in view of the attendant potential sociolinguistic problems it could create. Simultaneous bilingualism or multilingualism is recommended in order to ensure inclusive language education and its resultant educational, cultural and cognitive benefits. Cooperation from teachers should be secured to ensure strict implementation of whatever ECE policies that might be adopted.

CONCLUSION

A language policy provides the sociolinguistic contexts that determine the language(s) to be learned and the quality of the learning. This is evident in this study which has demonstrated that Nigeria's language policy in ECE has problems of articulation and maladministration. Schools, which should serve as implementation agencies, find themselves in a position of ambivalence, but eventually yielded to the pressure from the people. Major direct consequences of the failure of the Nigeria's ECE language policy include: the abandonment of sequential bilingual education, the neglect of the local languages, and the creation of the rapidly-growing group of the *special new owners* of English in a bilingual environment where English is non-native. As noted above, the major facilitator of the conditions is the ECE in English, which facilitates the acquisition of only English by the age of five. If ECE should be encouraged and established, it is important that ESL and EFL countries should strictly enforce bilingual/multilingual policies in order to avoid the sacrifice of any language on the macro-sociolinguistic altar of another.

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My tertiary education was at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where I obtained Bachelor of Arts in English in 1986, a Postgraduate Diploma in Education in 1990, Master of Arts in English as a Second Language in 1991, and Doctor of Philosophy in English as a Second Language 19 2019. My teaching career in the university started in 1996 when I was hired to teach the Use of English at Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nigeria. From 2008 to the present, I have been teaching the Use of English at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. I have risen to the position of Senior Lecturer.

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