

*Original Paper*

An Investigation into the Attitudes and Practices of Nigerian  
Students towards the Use of English Language and Their Native  
Languages in a Culturally Diverse Society

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**Abstract**

*The study investigated the attitudes and practices of Nigerian students towards the use languages (English and native) in a culturally diverse society as the native languages are endangered because the English language is taking over the world linguistic environment as a lingua franca. Ten students who speak different Nigerian native languages were selected randomly from an international university (pseudonym) in Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). A qualitative research method was adopted for the study using multiple sources of data collection, which include unstructured interview, personal stories, field notes and informal chats. The findings indicated that they acquired their native languages from birth at home, while they learn additional languages in their environment. They have positive attitudes towards the native languages, indicated by the value accorded them while English enjoys its official position. It was found out that the native languages were used for solidarity, prayers, identity and heritage preservation, whereas English language pertains the status of official language. In summary, Nigerian students studying in a culturally diverse context aim at preserving their language, culture, and identity by using it in their daily lives while they prefer using English language only for official purposes.*

**Keywords**

*attitudes, practices, native languages, language use, Nigerian students, culturally diverse society*

## 1. Introduction

Nigeria is the most popular black nation in the world and the most populous country in Africa; it is highly a multilingual and multicultural society with over 500 indigenous languages (Ginsburgh & Weber, 2011). English is Nigeria's official language while French is considered as a foreign language. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria identified Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba as major indigenous Nigerian languages, while others are classified as minority languages. Politics, geographical spread and numerical strength contributed to such language grouping. It is a fact that many minority languages in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world are at high risk of extinction in the near future, as they are endangered because of persistent changes and/or increases in socio-economic and political developments that fail to provide a level playing ground for minority languages to compete favourably with other languages (Adegbite, 2003; Igboanusi, 2008; Akande & Salami, 2010; Borghetti & Beaven, 2017; Yee & Chan, 2018).

Language is of critical significance to the existence of man. It contributes exceptionally to learning, creative thinking and social change (Ejeh, 2004). One crucial thing in a multilingual society is the choice of language use. This was the situation in Nigeria after independence, choosing language for educational use was a problem. Lastly, the language of the colonial masters was adopted for education as well as for other official uses. However, for the junior primary education, the medium of instruction was initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as stated by the National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 1977; Adegbite, 2003), but it is hardly adhered to especially in the urban areas and most especially the private schools.

People's attitudes could be negatively or positively directed towards language or the speakers of the language. Therefore, the change in attitudes is vital and unavoidable chunk of any pedagogical initiative. Having attitudes towards language or its behaviour can be associated with social meanings related to social models in a particular speech community where language is a symbol of identity for the people (Akande & Salami, 2010). Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 1) defined attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favour or disfavour". Language practices and policies within African countries are often at odds. The language people use in their everyday practices is mostly far apart from the planned constructs of the state (Pennycook, 2013).

The study covers the attitudes and practices of Nigerian students at an international university (*pseudonym*) in TRNC towards language use in a culturally and linguistically diverse society, considering the endangered nature of the local languages. The results of this study will therefore add significantly to the existing knowledge in the field of sociolinguistics and straightening of cultural identity of the people as well as maintain their heritage languages. More so, Cultural and linguistic diversity promote and improve inter-group and inter-cultural relationships communication. Therefore, the speaking of native languages constantly helps in reserving the language, the culture, the identity and be a source of solidarity for the indigenous people, keeping such languages out of danger of

extinction. It is based on this that the native languages receive higher positive attitudes above the English language, though it plays significant roles especially in the area of education and economic growth of a community as well as for international communication.

### *1.1 Attitudes towards Language Use*

Attitudes are predisposition to react favourably or unfavourably towards a given object. Therefore, attitudes towards a language are considered by people as partly connected to some sort of prejudices, which can be controlled to some degree through critical self-reflection, personality profile, linguistic background and general socio-biographical variables. Language attitudes encompasses the beliefs, preferences and desires of individuals and groups about language. It therefore determines what an individual sees, hears, and thinks as well as do because it influences behaviour. Attitudes towards language use depends to an extent on social hierarchies that are obtainable within a certain community or geographical area (Nolan, 2013; Dewaele & McCloskey, 2015; Javid, Farooq, Umar, & Gulzar, 2017; Sardegna, Lee, & Kusey, 2018). Attitudes change because of social and political perceptions and some intrinsic linguistic features of the language (Holmes, 2013).

The study of language attitudes is done from three main approaches: the analysis of the societal treatment of the language varieties. This is the cognitive components, which show people's beliefs and behavioural purposes present in communications. Another approach is the direct measure approach, ordinarily referred to as evaluative components. This is more popular in applied linguistics because it stimulates language attitudes through making direct questions about language evaluation and preferences. Then, the indirect approach, which is more concerned with conscious awareness; considered as behavioural components (McKenzie, 2010; Javid, Farooq, Umar, & Gulzar, 2017; Lasagabaster, 2017; Nolan, 2013). Terms such as language shift, language policy, the survival of the minority languages, the shift or loss of a language, and language maintenance in sociolinguistics are linked to attitudes in language use (Wilson, Ward, & Fisher, 2013; Kuyumcu, 2014; Dewaele & McCloskey, 2015).

The choice of language use is influenced by different factors especially in the case of multilingual speakers. Some factors, which can account for such choice according to Bichani (2015), include the domains of usage, which have to do with factors that language is designed to play a certain function or has to fill a particular space and be used by certain people in the society. Therefore, such domains could be family domains, religious domains or work domains. Interlocutors, their ethnic groups, their relationship, their age, their gender as well as topic of discussion are determining factors for choice of language use as some discussions are better handled or done in some languages (Holmes, 2013) especially in multilingual societal contexts.

### *1.2 Multilingual Language Practice*

Multilingual children at their early age are able to develop sensitivity to the language used by different interlocutors. The context of discourse and language dominance in the community are some factors which may mediate the degree of language differentiation in preschool age children. Cultural frame

exists for people who have assumed two cultures, and for them, priming leads to different cultural frames of reference, but it is only for those people who have internalised the norms of that identity. A social practice perspective of language use denotes approaching multilingualism in terms of linguistic repertoires for communicative resources. The link between language and identity gives a means of membership. Traditionally, language and identity study focus mainly on how individuals or groups maintain, negotiate, construct or project their social identities through linguistic practices. Identities are multiple, fluid and culturally constructed but not fixed and sometimes aligned with such as ethnicity, gender, and occupation (Kuyumcu, 2014; Lillo-Martin, Quadrons, Pichler, & Fieldsteel, 2014; Clist & Verschoor, 2017).

English is spreading as a lingua franca according to Steyaert, Ostendorp and Gaibrois (2011), therefore, its linguistic globalisation is as a result of it been considered as favourable, critical and ambivalent. Its dominance is given on the fact that it is an efficient means by which the speakers from different linguistic backgrounds are connected. The adoption of English as a lingua franca is on the ground that it is a common language and is considered as language of international communication.

In recent studies, the “imagined communities” construction aided in understanding L2 and identity relationship, Norton and Pavlenko (2019) believe that such can affect students’ trajectories as well as influence their agency, investment, motivation and resistance as well in the learning of English language. Australian children of India descent in their linguistic practices and choices study Hindi in their primary education. They chose to speak their mother tongue despite the chances to speak English. Those born in Australia maintained their language in the home, as some of them have strong religious royalties and favour their languages too—Nepalese and Punjabi. The non-working mothers and the grandparents made the language maintenance possible at home says Bissoonauth (2018).

Meanwhile, Mohr (2018) studied the changing dynamics of language use attitudes by the Tanzanians towards the English language. The investigation showed the people’s attitudes towards English was positive, as they no longer consider it as the language of the elites only. In the case of Malawi, her policy used to encourage the use of mother tongue because it is endangered, controversy came in with the implementation of English as a language to be used in the country’s universities. The students and the staff display positive attitudes for multilingual language skills (Reilly, 2019). Meanwhile, Nguyen and Hamid (2018) see bilingualism as a resource in the case of Vietnamese ethnic minority students’ attitudes towards informal and formal language policies in different domains such as the church, school, ethnic community as well as towards their individual bilingualism.

English on the other hand is considered as language of business as in the language ideologies explored in two European corporate contexts by Cogo and Yanaprasart (2018). They explored the ideologies of multilingualism and English, which dominated the workplace as well as the official and unofficial corporate adopted policies. English is considered as a fixed language of business and it is unquestioned. This study is tilted towards multilinguals’ language use aimed at investigating the attitudes and practices of Nigerian students at a university in TRNC towards English language and their native

languages. No record of such study existed to the best of my knowledge. In order to achieve its aim and objectives, the study tries to answer the following formulated research questions. 1) How do the Nigerian students acquire languages? 2) What are the Nigerian students' attitudes towards their native languages? 3) What are the Nigerian students' attitudes towards English language? 4) What are the Nigerian students' practices towards their native language use? and 5) What are the Nigerian students' practices towards English language use?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Participants

The research used ten participants, which is within the range suggested by Creswell (1988). The Nigerian graduate students are studying various courses in different departments at an international university (*pseudonym*) in TRNC, and each of them has spent two or more semesters on the Island. These people communicate with people of different nationalities in the university, as it is a multilingual and multicultural environment. The participants are from different Nigerian geo-political zones. Four females and six males participated as summarized in the demographic Table 1 below. The names are common Nigerian names used as pseudonyms for the seek anonymity.

**Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information**

Participants	Gender	Age	Native Language	L1	Documentation of Native Language	Fluent in Native Language	Literacy in Native Language	Nigerian languages fluent in	Nigerian language Literate in
Audu	Male	42	Fulfulde	Fulfulde	Yes	Yes	Yes	Hausa & Fulfulde	Hausa & Fulfulde
Ken	Male	55	Ibibio	Ibibio	Yes	Yes	Yes	Ibibio & Yoruba	Ibibio
Yinka	Male	35	Yoruba	Yoruba	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yoruba & Hausa	Yoruba & Hausa
Joshua	Male	28	Kaka	Hausa	No	Yes	No	Kaka, Hausa & Fulfulde	Hausa
Nneka	Female	35	Igbo	Igbo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Igbo	Igbo
Salau	Male	27	Hausa	Hausa	Yes	Yes	yes	Hausa	Hausa
Hannatu	Female	43	Kuteb	Jukun	Yes	Yes	No	Kuteb, Jukun&	Jukun& Hausa

Pam	Females	38	Berom	Berom	Yes	Yes	Yes	Hausa Berom& Hausa	Berom& Hausa
Zainab	Female	50	Bab̄er	Bab̄er	Yes	Yes	No	Bab̄er& Hausa	Hausa
Daniel	Male	31	Banso	Banso	No	Yes	No	Banso, Fulfulde, Igbo & Hausa	Hausa

*Source:* Fieldwork (2019).

The demographic table shows all the participants are within the age range of 27 to 55 years, speaking different languages. 3 out of the 10 participants are native speakers of the three major Nigerian languages of Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa, while the remaining 7 are drawn from the so-called minority languages. All the participants' L1 are documented except Banso and Kaka; all the participants can speak their native languages to some extent; some may not be very fluent as gathered from informal chats but can communicate. Meanwhile, four of the participants are not literate in their native languages but all are literate in at least one major Nigerian language. In addition, all except two can speak their native languages only but all other participants speak two or more Nigerian languages.

### 2.2 Procedures

Qualitative research method was employed using content analysis to study the participants' attitudes and practices towards language use. It is aimed at getting detailed perspectives of their experiences from the interview, making the research more real, because it generates objective data (King, Keohane, & Verba, 1994; Zhang & Creswell, 2013; Bernstein, Kilinc, Deeg, Marley, Farrand, & Kelley, 2018).

### 2.3 Instruments

In collecting the data for the study, multiple sources were used for the data gathering, which include unstructured interview and personal stories aimed at probing deeper into participants' experiences and perceptions as they are unique and rich sources of information (Kvale, 1996; Pavlenko, 2001; Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014). In addition, informal chats and field notes were employed because they offer extensive local knowledge and emerging sensitivity (Emerson, Frez, & Shaw, 2001). They aid in triangulation, and extraction of information from the participants' on their attitudes and practices towards their language use. Participants were informed before recording the interview; and were made aware that their identity would be protected. They also signed the consent forms. The interview lasted between 6-11 minutes for each interviewee.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The findings were discussed under different themes showing their attitudes towards a language to determine their practice of language usage. While they are so concerned about their identity and culture, which are hidden in their native language, the English language gives them global view.

#### 3.1 Language Acquisition and Learning

The participants' responses displayed how they acquire and learn language(s) as requested by question one. The participants acquired their native languages as their L1 at home from their parents and their siblings. As stated in a discussion with Zainab, she said to have acquired her L1 from birth with the help of her parents, especially her father, who always insisted that his children speak their native language. She says, "I learned Babar at home from my parents. Our father was very strict when it comes to speaking our native language. So, everyone had to learn it because it is our identity". It is more than just a native language for them but an identity and most participants are of this idea. In the case of Hannatu and Joshua, their native languages are different from their L1 because they acquired their L1 before learning their native languages as stated by Hannatu:

I first acquired Jukun, but my native language is Kuteb. I learned it through my father and the church, because the church we attend, they speak Kuteb, they sing in Kuteb. When we go to our village, we relate with our people who speak Kuteb.

In the case of Ken, he speaks one major Nigerian language—Yoruba in addition to his native language. He says, "I learned Yoruba because I lived among the Yorubas for many years". In addition to their native languages, the participants have learned other languages through socialization, especially when they were younger, and so, acquired such languages as used by the people in the community, which agrees with Lillo-Martin, Quadrons, Pichler and Fieldsteel (2014) that children are able to develop sensitivity to different languages at early age. This is equally true of Daniel, who could speak four Nigerian languages, out of which two are major languages—Igbo and Hausa, while the remaining two are minority languages—Banso and Fulfulde. When he was asked on how he learned the languages, he said, "I acquired them in different communities we stayed while I was growing up with my peers". It was gathered from informal chats, researcher's field notes, as well as personal story that most of the participants learned extra languages as a result of peer group socialization.

All the participants speak more than one Nigerian languages, except for Nneka and Salau, who could only speak their native languages—Igbo and Hausa respectively. Majority of the participants can speak at least one major Nigerian language and as well literate in them; this is because such languages are taught in schools as stated by Joshua "for Hausa language, we offered it in the high school for 6 years. So, that was how I become literate in it". From the study, all the three major Nigerian languages are well documented (Adegbite, 2003; Akande & Salami, 2010) as against some of the minority languages. It can therefore be concluded that the participants acquired most of the languages from birth as they are spoken simultaneously in the home and the environment they live while the three major languages in

addition are thought in schools. This gave them an additional advantage over the minority languages. They get institutional support (Holmes, 2013) and by that, they suppress the minority languages.

### *3.2 Attitudes towards Languages*

Language is given value based on the speakers' attitudes towards the language and sometimes based on what the speakers derive from the language (see Holmes, 2013). Their attitudes towards their native languages and the English language was expressed based on the value they accord the languages as well as their preference for usage. The participants have more positive attitudes towards their native languages as compared to the English language. For instance, as Pam says,

I value speaking in my native language because it's my own language that I was born into it. So, I value it most. As I told you, English language is only when the need arises that I speak it.

Based on his professional background according to Ken, his language matters a lot to him; it has cultural and traditional values, which is in line with Holmes (2013), and Gürsoy and Kunt (2018) that language and culture are much related, and are inseparable. He says, "I value my native language because as an anthropologist, I believe so much in culture". They value their native languages because they reserve their culture and tradition. Meanwhile, Joshua sounds neutral, yet values his language more. He says,

I value both. I don't think I will say I value one. However, I will prefer talking to someone in my language. I think English is more or less a universal language, so, I would prefer using my native language in as far as everybody understands it.

Just like Joshua, Zainab values both languages because she believes each has its purposes, that is, they seem to have neutral attitudes to the two languages but on the silent side, their attitudes towards their native languages is more positive. The participants generally accommodate English because of its universality, and its global relevance as it is used for universal purposes, unlike the native languages that have limited users. Nevertheless, majority of the participants value their native languages more than the English language.

The participants have so much passion and feelings for their native languages as most of them said that they value their native languages more. English language is to serve a particular purpose. One reason they value their native languages is that, they use it as their symbol of identity and for solidarity. They also want their native languages to go global like English, French and other developed world languages. English is used because it is given some importance because it links different interlocutors from different backgrounds globally (Zavala, 2018; Lasagabaster, 2017; Steyaert, Ostendrop, & Gaibrois, 2011). English language is used for global media, technology and trade. This, the native languages lack.

Concerning their attitudes as to which language they would have preferred for communication, the participants made their choice based on certain issues. Some believe that communicating in their languages will promote their languages. When they are with their tribal people, they prefer to communicate in their native languages because they want to promote their native languages. They see



their native languages and culture as unique, and need to keep them alive by speaking them. On the other hand, they prefer to communicate in English with those who do not understand their languages. The participants use English with people who are not their tribal people; largely, they generally have positive attitudes towards their native languages. They mainly use their native languages for socialization among themselves while English is for official matters and academics.

Every language is expected to convey an intended message effectively if expressed properly. One's proficiency in a language is a criterion for effectiveness in conveyance of message. Therefore, the participants consider their proficiency in their various languages before choosing which language to use for communication. They generally believe that their native languages will convey their information much more effectively than the English language, "I believe that my native language will convey the message more effectively than English because there are some words and expressions in my native language that have no equivalence in English" says Ken.

On the contrary, Joshua believes that English conveys his message much better. Though earlier during the discussion and informal chats, he admitted not to be very fluent in his native language, but still loves and appreciates it. Meanwhile, Zainab agrees with Joshua; she says, "English will convey my message effectively. I want to believe so". Though, the participants have different feelings towards which language can convey their messages more effectively, majority believe their native languages will convey their messages more effectively because they can easily manipulate the language as against English language which they have to consider so many things and their proficiency level. However, few participants state that English conveys their message more as against the majority who believe their native languages convey messages better. This shows low attitudes towards English and very positive attitudes towards the native languages.

### *3.3 Common Practices in Language Use*

Regarding their common language practices/uses, the participants use their native languages within their enclave, that is, with their family members, friends and members of the society that belong to the same language as well as any other person who understands the language (see Bichani, 2015). The participants generally agreed that they prefer using their native languages. Just like others, Daniel says, "I speak my native language in the house, during community gathering (meeting) and when I meet people who are of the same language with me". They generally use their native languages with their close associates; invariably, as a common practice, they speak their languages more often than English, because they use the languages as code to cover secret discussions. They consider the native languages as their heritage, their pride, and therefore, are used for solidarity, and as means of ethnic identity. This is in line with Akande and Salami's (2010) that language is a people's symbol of identity. The English language is their official language, which is used for academics and any official activities. For instance, Ken says, "I use English language in the classroom for teaching or when in the market with those who cannot speak my native language". English language is an official medium of instructions in schools in Nigeria (Adegbite, 2003). It is a common practice that the native languages in

the Nigerian context are given or are reserved a place in the society for communication to reserve the languages, used as an identity and for solidarity, while the English language as stated by Lasagabaster (2017) is given importance because it occupies an official position as the country's second language.

The multicultural and multilingual nature of the country also tempers with the native language usage because if one is together with people from different linguistic backgrounds and they do not understand each other's native language and do not share any Nigerian language, then, English language or Nigerian pidgin English is used. The official position been occupied by English gives it advantage. Just as Daniel says, "because of less interaction with my people, the English language is more dominant than my native language, and with modernity, English language is like trying to subdue our own native languages, sometimes even at home". The categories of interlocutors determine the language use (Holmes, 2013).

Another common practice of language usage is during the religious rites. In Nigeria, there are three main religions: Christianity, Islam and Traditional African religion. Each of these religions is aligned to a particular language. Christianity is aligned to English language, Islam to Arabic language and the traditional African religion to African languages. But as it is now, it cannot be said that these are the only languages that these religions use for worship or to teach their doctrines; may be the traditional African religion which the priests use the African languages for incantations. Christianity and Islam have developed different religious literatures in different Nigerian languages in abet to get messages across to their followers. The participants during discussions expressed different attitudes and practices towards the use of language during prayer and meditations.

For instance, Audu recites the Qur'anic verses in Arabic and then do his meditation in his native language; while Salau uses his native language throughout the prayer session. He says, "I use my native language for prayer because that is how I can express myself better". Zainab on the other hand reads her prayer in English from books but meditates in Hausa, one of the major Nigerian languages commonly spoken in northern Nigeria. Her issue is unique; she meditates in a different language from her native language, though she is fluent in it. Meanwhile, she loves her native language so much yet, she does not mediate in it but she uses it for communication.

As the English language is been aligned to Christianity; some of the participants use it according to contexts. "Depending on the context. In most places, I use English, may be where I find myself at that particular moment, otherwise, I use my native language to pray. I prefer my native language," says Ken. While some feel, they can express themselves better during religious exercises using English; this is for the fact that most church teachings are done in English. More so, some attend English church services, as they do not have Church services in their local languages.

They only use English because they are not so much familiar with saying prayer in their languages. Joshua equally concurs, saying, "I prefer the English language because school and the church we attend all have influenced the use of English". The Church therefore, has serious influence on the use of language as gathered from the informal chats and personal stories. The new generation Churches most

a times use English during Church services and most youths attend such services. Even when there are services in other Nigerian languages, some youths prefer the English service.

It is understood that, there are other motives for using English in prayer, such as creating a class of elites or getting status. Trying to show that, they are good at speaking English and can even use it for prayers. Others pray in English because they are deficient in using their native languages for prayer. From the study, 70% of the participants use their native languages for prayers and meditation.

#### **4. Conclusion**

“Language of the group in power, became the dominating paradigm for communication with and within the state guaranteeing that specific groups dominating the language of the nation state formation could take control of the state’s governance structures” (Marácz, 2014, p. 46); this is not far from what happened in the selection of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba as Nigerian’s major national languages and English as a second language. Most Nigerian leaders come from these three tribes, especially when the country was at her infancy. English was able to notch a space for herself in the linguistic formation of Nigeria, as there was no single local language that was made the country’s official language.

From the study, the participants acquired different languages at the early age as such languages are used in the environment where they might have lived for some time. The parents, the siblings and religion have contributed to their language acquisition and learning. The three major languages and lately, few minority languages, enjoy institutional support as they are taught in schools. 80% of the participants speak two or three different Nigerian languages, while 100% of the participants speak English and at least one major Nigerian language. Invariably, 100% of the participants are multilinguals; confirming Nigeria as a multilingual and multicultural state (Adegbite, 2003). English is used mainly for official purposes, therefore, experiences low attitudes while the native languages enjoy positive attitudes from the participants. The positive attitudes is because they consider their native languages as sign of identity, used for solidarity, as preservation for cultural heritage and as secret code for communication. Finally, about 70% of the participants in their practice use their native languages for prayers with the believe that God understands all languages; even though, religion has influence on language use. Therefore, the local languages need to be protected by documenting and teaching them in schools, especially in the localities as prescript by the National Policy on Education (Federal Ministry of Education, 1977) to avoid them going into extinction and over ran by the English language which is the country’s second language and language instruction in schools (Adegbite, 2003; Akande & Salami, 2010). That is the most important means of saving the languages.

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