



Cellular Phone Text Communication in English Language Among Educated Nigerian Youths: Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Considering the place of English in Nigeria, pupils and students are enjoined to use it constantly in their activities including phone calls. In view of the significant roles that cellular phones play in the lives of youths, and sustainable development of the economy, this paper looks into Nigerian youths' cellular phone text communication in English Language. The aim is to determine whether Nigerian youths still conduct their cellular phone text communication in English after graduation, and if so, what linguistic bottle necks stand in their way, and its implications for sustainable development in Nigeria. This study used a questionnaire that sought responses to selected research questions administered on a total 300 members of the July, 2011 Batch "B" National Youth Service Corps posted to Abia State. The analysis of data collected was carried out through simple percentage followed by discussion of the findings made, and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

Experts are yet to agree on the most appropriate method of achieving proficiency in a second language. Different schools of thought such as the sociolinguists, the behaviourist, and the cognitive have diverse opinions. For instance, the sociolinguist theorists believe that the person-to-person communication that exists among people while they work, play or spend time together is the most important factor that determines proficiency in a particular language. To achieve this, new and different ways and strategies of ensuring that the learner understands and speaks the target language must be applied.

This school of thought also encourages the idea of immersion. This means that for every second language learner to become proficient, they have to become part and parcel of the culture of the language. The behaviorists believe that success or otherwise in acquiring a target language depends largely on the behaviour of the learner, that is, on their readiness to copy the speech habits of the native speakers of the target language. They are the proponents of the audio-lingual system of language acquisition that was popular in the 1950s and 60s. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the pattern practice remains the most effective strategy in this regard.

To the cognitive theorists, language skill acquisition is contingent upon natural mental endowments of the individual language learner. According to Chomsky, the ability to learn a language depends on what he calls Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This means that it is a person's ingenuity, creativity and other in-born traits that enhance his ability to learn a language, and not necessarily environmental and social factors (Chomsky, 1980, p. 188).

None of the three views expressed above can be said to be all-encompassing in satisfying the conditions needed for quick proficiency in a second language. In order to be properly guided by the sociolinguistic principles that aid the understanding of and the speaking of a second language, the learners must be exposed to suitable social interaction with other speakers of the target language. This is in tandem with Krashen's opinion that "High levels of second language attainment from school use alone, even under optimal conditions take time to achieve" (19885, p.3). Therefore, interaction with others in the second language being learned outside formal school situation (or even after graduation) doubles the chances of success.

Concentrating on problems and errors spotted during social interaction outside the formal schools setting as a means of finding lasting solutions and ways of implementing them for improved second language usage is very important. Igbokwe (2007) observes that even on graduation, the proficiency level of the average Nigerian user of Standard English is so low that one might be tempted to doubt the ability of our teaching skills and instruction materials to achieve the intended results and sustainable development in Nigeria.

At this juncture, having shown that the social context is a great determinant in the acquisition of second language skills, it becomes pertinent to examine to what extent such social interaction in written English language takes place among Nigerian youths outside the formal classroom (school or university) setting and the hiccups such interlocutors face. This paper uses as its sample population the 2011 Batch 'B' N.Y.S.C. posted to Abia State. To this end, responses to the underlisted research questions were sought:

1. Which indigenous language do the respondents use?
2. What language(s) or variety of English do N.Y.S.C. members most often use for cellular phone text messages in the camp?

3. What informs their choice of a particular language or variety?
4. What stumbling blocks do N.Y.S.C. members face as they use the English language for cellular phone text communication?

METHODOLOGY

Sampled Population

A total of 300 respondents selected by random sampling out of 450 volunteers constituted the sampled population.

Instrumentation and Technique

A four-item questionnaire was used for this study. For details, see research questions above. After assembling and collating the data, the answers were changed into simple percentages in readiness for analysis and discussion on findings.

Validity and Reliability of Instrument

The development and validation of the questionnaire was with strict adherence to language and tele-communication experts' guidance. A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered to only volunteers. In the end, a total of 300 copies were recovered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Showing Respondent's Indigenous Language.

Language	Number of Respondents	% Percentage of Respondents
Igbo	55	18.33%
Hausa	50	16.66%
Yoruba	45	15.0%
Efik/Ibibio	30	10.0%
Itshekiri	30	10.0%
Ikwerre	30	10.0%
Ijaw	20	6.66%
Igala	15	5.0%
Nipe	15	5.0%
Ffulde	10	3.33%
Total	300	100%

Cellular Phone Text in English Among Educated Nigerian Youths

Table 1 shows that the three major ethnic language groups in Nigeria have the highest number of respondents. These are followed by respondents belonging to Itshekiri, Ikwerre, Igala, Nupe, Ijaw, Efik/Ibibio with 30%, 30%, 15%, 15%, 20% and 30% respectively.

It should be noted that the gap between the number of respondents that speak the minor languages and the major ones is not very significant. It could be attributed to even and equitable distribution and posting of corps members by the N.Y.S. C. authorities. It could also be that the educational and literacy gap is narrowing considerably. The conclusion is that there is even representation of most of the language groups in the N.Y.S.C. camp. It becomes very expedient to find out how much of these acquired second language skills in English that are put into use during cellular phone text communication outside the formal school setting.

Table 2: Showing which Language/Variety most often used for Cellular Phone Text Messages.

Language	Number of Respondents	% Percentage of Respondents
Contractions/personal codes	205	68.33%
Standard English	65	21.66%
Pidgin	30	10.0%
Igbo	0	0%
Hausa	0	0%
Yoruba	0	0%
Others	0	0%
Total	300	99.98%

Table 2 indicates that 68% accepted using contractions/ personal codes. 21% indicated using Standard English while 10% indicated using pidgin for phone text message. The unexpected part of this result is that in spite of the fact that lectures are delivered in Standard English, text books are written in Standard English, and all other academic activities are conducted in Standard English, majority of the respondents still indicated using contractions. This result also shows that 10% indicated using pidgin for phone text interaction. This result is significant considering the fact that pidgin is the language of commerce and other social interactions.

Table 3 shows the numbers and percentage of the respondent that shared a specific reason. Those corps members who said that they use contractions/ personal codes for cellular phone text message because it saved space, and that is saved time had the highest percentage of 14.63 for each group. In descending order, the other groups are: it helps to avoid spelling embarrassment (11.70%); it has become trendy (11.70%); it saves cost (11.21%); it economizes energy (9.75%); it aids in maintaining secrecy (9.75%); their friends love it (8.78%); and it gives their reasons a personal touch. In all, most of the reasons given by the respondents fall under convenience, apart from the group that gave their reasons as the avoidance of

spelling embarrassment. All the reasons expose the kind of motivation that influences their preference for contractions/ personal codes in cellular phone text communications.

Table 3: Respondents Reasons for Using Contractions or personal Codes for Cellular Phone Text Communication.

	Language	Number of Respondents	(%) Percentage of Respondents
1	It saves space	30	14.63
2	It saves time	30	14.63
3	It helps me to avoid spelling embarrassment	24	11.70
4	It has become trendy	24	11.70
5	It saves cost	23	11.21
6	It economizes energy	20	9.75
7	Maintains secrecy	20	9.75
8	My friends love it	18	8.78
9	It gives my message a personal touch	16	7.80
		205	99.96

Below is a list of the reasons with the number of respondents and percentage for each group.

Table 4: Respondents' Reasons for Using Standard English for Cellular Phone Text Communication.

	Reasons	Number of Respondents	(%) percentage
1	It is the official language	15	23.07
2	Most countries use English	12	18.46
3	Practicing it makes perfect	8	12.30
4	Enhances understanding	7	10.76
5	It is my best choice	6	9.23
6	Most books are in English	5	7.69
7	I was brought up with it	4	6.15
8	It makes me feel educated	3	4.61
9	I was taught in English	3	4.61
10	All my friends love it.	2	3.07
		65	99.97

From table 4, 23.07% uses Standard English because it is the official language in Nigeria. This is closely related to the 18.46%, 7.69%, 4.61%, 3.07%, and so on the table. The various reasons given for using Standard English for cellular phone text communications point to obvious facts. The first is that up to 78% chose Standard English for reasons of legislative impositions of English on the world and Nigerians as their official language.

Cellular Phone Text in English Among Educated Nigerian Youths

In this same group are those who use Standard English because of its general acceptability and the status it accords them in the society. Only 13.33% and 11.66% of the respondents do so because it makes them perfect, and enhances their understanding respectively.

Table 5: Respondents' Reasons for Using Pidgin for Cellular Phone Text Communications.

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
1 It is the easiest language to use	8	26.66
2 Everybody can use it	6	20.0
3 Not everybody can speak Standard English	5	16.66
4 Avoiding big grammar	5	16.66
5 Any spelling can go	2	6.66
	30	99.97

26.66% said they use Pidgin for text messages because it is the easiest language to use while 20.0% use it because everybody can use Pidgin. The two reasons are closely related to the 13.33% who do so because most of their friends use Pidgin. The implication is that the motivational factor here is accessibility to other interlocutors. 16.66% said it is because not everybody can speak Standard English, 16.66% said it helps them to avoid big grammar while 6.66% said that their reason is that any spelling can go. The implication is that it calls to questions the quality of teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigerian tertiary institutions. In all, accessibility to other users, and the avoidance of the perceived intricacies of using Standard English are motivational factors here.

The Stumbling Blocks Faced by Respondents in using Standard English for Cellular Phone Text Communication

The responses have been organized into the following four groups:

- A. Psychological Factors:** (i) Error phobia (ii) Embarrassment from friends (iii) low self-concept.
- B. Morphological Factors:** (i) Incorrect spellings (ii) Misuse of homonyms and homophones (malapropism) (iii) Needless repetition of words (tautology) (iv) Groping for appropriate words
- C. Grammatical Factors:** (i) Faulty arrangement of words in sentences (ii) Wrong use of concord (iii) Errors of reported sentences (iv) Misapplication of question tags (v) Wrong use of tenses (vi) Sentence fragments (vii) Run-on sentences.

- D. Mechanical Factors:** (i) Insertion of unnecessary punctuation signs
(ii) Omission of necessary punctuation marks (iii) Non-punctuation of sentences (iv) Poor capitalization.

The above bottle necks were spotted by 93.33% of the sampled population of 300. The respondents were at liberty to identify as many as they wished covering areas such as: Psychological, morphological, grammatical and mechanical aspects of English.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined cellular phone text interaction in English language among educated Nigerian youths. It was carried out using a four-item questionnaire copies which were administered on 300 2011 Batch “B” N.Y.S.C. members posted to Abia State. Findings in this study revealed the multilingual nature of the Nigerian society as proved by the different language groups of respondents on Table A. The findings also show that while 21.66% of the respondents use Standard English for phone text communication, a whopping 68.33% and 10.0% of the respondents prefer contractions and personal codes such as ‘luv’ for ‘love’, ‘b/w’ for ‘between’, and so on, and Pidgin English. This finding puts a very big question mark on the quality of teaching, teachers, and the instruction facilities for the teaching of English language as a second language in Nigeria. This further means that the quality of language used for instruction and learner has an overall effect on the learner’s ability to assimilate knowledge in other areas. And so, a situation in which graduates of tertiary institutions in Nigeria shy away from the language (Standard English) used to educate them implies that it did not satisfactorily perform its role as the vehicle for conveying knowledge from teacher to learners. Another finding is that the respondents are variously motivated in their choice of the medium for cellular phone text communication. A total of 78% of the respondents said they chose English for reasons of official imposition as the lingua franca, and for social compulsion as a status symbol. Only very few chose English for what it is worth. A situation in which majority of the respondents preferred contractions and personal codes, and Pidgin English for reasons bordering on accessibility to other users, easy learnability, and absence of undue intricacies makes one doubt the suitability of English as a lingua franca for Nigeria in the near future since the subjects for this study are Nigerian youths – the leaders of tomorrow.

Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria

No nation can develop economically and politically without an official language that sustains development. No acceptable lingua franca can develop

Cellular Phone Text in English Among Educated Nigerian Youths

without a sound educational system. Ukeje (1986) is of the view that the most effective tool for the sustenance of development in any country is education. The most significant role of education is human, and then, societal development. This is, of course, contingent upon the quality of education obtained. According to Ebong (2006, p.110):

...education is an investment on human capital. It entails direct and indirect costs through which private and social benefits are derived. Expenditure on education is a form of investment from which benefits accrue for future use both for the individual and for the society.

A situation in which majority of the graduates shy away from their language of education and official transaction (Standard English) presupposes that the educational system is not functional as to equip the beneficiaries with effective communication skills that encourage meaningful interaction that, in turn, leads to sustainable development. Nigerian educational system must, therefore, be redesigned to meet the communication and developmental needs of the beneficiaries.

The following are recommended:

1. The quality of English language teachers and instruction materials should be improved to ensure that, even after school, Nigeria youths would still find communication in Standard English for such activities as phone text messages very attractive. This would also improve the quality of graduates from such institutions.
2. Since it has been revealed that most Nigerian youths prefer contractions/personal codes and even pidgin for daily communication, efforts should be made to standardise them for improved communication.
3. The bottlenecks which stand in the way of proper communication in Standard English should form grounds for further research and the provision of lasting solution.
4. Other researchers should carryout similar studies in other N.Y.S.C. camps in different parts of the country so that findings can be compared for more emphatic recommendations.

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