

## **The Status, Prospects and Challenges of Using Nigerian Pidgin as Medium of Instruction in Nigerian Schools for Equalisation of Educational Opportunities**

**Eke, Regina Akudo**

**and**

**Ochuba, Onyinye Okezie PhD**

### **Abstract**

Nigerian Pidgin is a hybrid language that emerges as a result of prolonged contact between different groups of people. It is an English-based pidgin spoken to facilitate communication among Nigerians who have no common or unifying language. Nigerian Pidgin is a simplified language which is used within certain context of interaction and it is meant to serve a specific communication purpose like trade, politics. Pidgin language has no native speakers, it has restricted vocabularies, it is usually syntactically simple and it has a limited range of functions like trade, marriage negotiation, land disputes etc. The paper proposed that Nigerian Pidgin can effectively be used in schools, especially to solve linguistic problems and to equalize the educational opportunities since National Policy on Education (2013) encouraged the use of the language of the immediate environment. Observation shows that in Rivers and Bayelsa States, ‘teachers resort to the use of Nigerian Pidgin for explanatory purposes, especially in the early stages of pre-primary education, since there is no other common language among the pupils. To deprive them of the use of Nigerian pidgin at this early stage means making way for inequality of educational opportunities for people in rural areas. There is need to incorporate Nigerian pidgin into language of instruction at the pre-primary level of education for equalization of educational opportunities. Recommending Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction may enhance national unity among the diverse ethnic groups and equal opportunities of education. It was suggested that Nigerian Pidgin should be offered as a subject in secondary schools and as a course of study in tertiary institutions. Teaching National Policy on Education as a subject will enable Nigerians to draw a line between pidgin and Standard Nigerian English.

**Keywords:** Pidgin, Status, Attitude, Orthography.

### **Introduction**

Pidgin is language that developed out of a need for language of communication among people who do not share a common language. Pidgin is a hybrid language that emerges as a result of prolonged contact between different groups of people. These tend to occur in situations where one language (Superstrate) dominates amidst the other two or more languages (Substrate) that

exist. Therefore, Nigerian Pidgin (NP) is an English-based pidgin spoken by Nigerians, which emerged to facilitate communication among Nigerians who have no common or unifying language. Nigerian Pidgin is a simplified language which is used within certain context of interaction and it is meant to serve a specific communication purpose like trade, politics. Umera-Okeke, and Ahaotu, (2021) posit that Pidgin is indeed a simplified language which evolved as a necessity, after extended contact between groups without a single common language formed from numerous languages and influence. Nigerian Pidgin English is seen as a version of English and native Nigerian languages spoken as a kind of Lingua Franca across the country especially among students to bridge the gap between educated and uneducated. It is true that where two or more speech communities come in contact, a lingua franca or common language of communication tends to emerge (Stockwell, 2007). That is the case with NP.

Against this backdrop, the prospects of integrating Nigerian Pidgin into the educational system are explored. The potential benefits of utilizing Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction are weighed against the backdrop of existing language policies and educational practices. By assessing empirical studies and comparative analyses from other countries, this research seeks to uncover insights into how the adoption of Nigerian Pidgin might contribute to enhancing educational access and reducing disparities among students from different linguistic backgrounds.

### **Status of Nigerian Pidgin**

Research has shown that Nigerian Pidgin is now the language with the highest population of users, and also a first language in some minority groups in Nigeria (Igboanus, 2008). The most striking change in status is its prominent use in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, which has also resulted in the modification of Nigerian Pidgin in different levels of language use (phonology, morphology, syntax etc).

Nigerian Pidgin gradually became a language of trade and spread all over the coastal region of Nigeria. The language is simple and easy to learn coupled with the fact that most of the coastal areas in Nigeria are multilingual; the people began to embrace pidgin more as it served as a bridge between the different languages spoken within the environment. Several years later, Pidgin has gained more acceptability and has become the native language of a lot of people living in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria especially Delta, Rivers, Bayelsa and Edo. In some parts of these areas, some speakers of pidgin use it as their first language, while others speak it as a second language. Pidgin has developed into a Creole language because we have people that use it as their first language in Nigeria. Ithemere (2006) explains that Nigerian Pidgin has creolized into the native language of about 3 to 5 million Nigerians and a second language for at least 75million people.

Following the spread of Pidgin among the Nigerian natives, different varieties of it have also emerged. Nigerian Pidgin like other Pidgin language in the world is made up of the substrate and superstrates. This entails that English is the superstrate language while the native languages are

the substrate. Just as Nigeria as a nation is made up of different languages, so also we have different varieties of pidgin spoken in different areas such as, Lagos, Ogoja, Calabar, Rivers, Edo, Delta and Bayelsa etc.

Students have shown that among the reasons why they communicate with Nigerian Pidgin are as follows:

3. They are products of their environment. Incorporating Nigerian Pidgin can make education more culturally relevant and relatable, fostering a sense of identity and pride among students.
4. It is an easier form of communication among them.
5. To bridge the gap between the literate and illiterate students living within a particular community. Embracing Nigerian Pidgin could also help to bridge the gap between students from different linguistic backgrounds, potentially leading to greater inclusivity and equalization of educational opportunities.
6. Nigerian Pidgin is used not as a communicative need but as a means of expressing group solidarity and intimacy with peers.
7. It may serve as an identity in opposition to non-group members, especially teachers and adults. (Akujobi & Chukwu, 2005; Elugbe, 2005; Elugbe & Omamur, 1991).

Nigerian Pidgin is widely spoken and understood across various ethnic and linguistic groups in Nigeria. Using it as a medium of instruction could enhance understanding and communication, especially for students whose first language is not English.

Nigerian pidgin is not only spoken in Nigeria. The wide and fast spread of Nigerian pidgin has moved beyond Nigeria to Diaspora. The Nigerian Diaspora communities in America, England, Luxembourg etc use Nigerian pidgin as a means of communication among themselves, (Esizimotor, 2010). The use of pidgin makes them feel at home and to express their Nigerian-ness. It makes them unique among other people living in Diaspora. Many language scholars have called for NP to serve as an official lingua franca in the Federation. Okeh (2010) gave reason for this call, that it is the only language in Nigeria that has the capacity to unify a multi-lingual nation as Nigeria. Ehonder, (2020) affirms the calls for Nigeria Pidgin English to be adopted as lingua franca in Nigeria and virtually the language of National communication to facilitate effective communication and unity among Nigerians. This view point was supported by Ifediche and Ifediche (2015) by stating that, Nigeria pidgin English should be promoted as the national and unifying language since it is a neutral code, more so the English language has never been our mother tongue nor first language of any of the over 200 ethnic groups in Nigeria. Ehonder (2020) went further to affirm that no nobody owns the NP, rather it is owned by all therefore should be used as an indigenous and national language in Nigeria. The use of Nigerian Pidgin English can also function, in some contexts, as an act of identity when speakers need to stress their

'Nigerianness', as opposed to their ethnic group identity. In other words, Nigerian Pidgin English can express a belonging to Nigeria, which English, the language of the ex-colonial power, cannot.

### **The Prospects of Using Nigerian pidgin as Medium of Instruction in Nigerian Schools**

Nigerian Pidgin has become so popular that it is now recognized as one of the four commonly spoken languages in Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin competes with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – the country's national languages (Emananjo, 2010). It now operates as a bridge between social classes and ethnicities even when it lacks a standard orthography. The reality is that Nigerian Pidgin, which was considered to be a debased, bastardized, jargonized and intellectually inferior language in Nigeria, is gradually growing to the status of language of wider communication.

There is a general belief among students that Pidgin English serves as a variety of English that facilitates communication though it is a deviation from the norm. The above assumption provided the basis for the use of Pidgin especially among students. The use of Pidgin goes beyond verbal communication and has become more of a verbal behavior as its expression has moved from the boundaries of informal conversation to formal situations. Scholars have called for the urgent consideration and pronouncement of Nigeria Pidgin as co-official language with English, (Amao, 2012; Elugbe & Omamor, 1991). According to Amao, (2012), Nigerian Pidgin plays a very important role in communication in Nigeria. If it will be recognized as a co-official language with English, it will enhance the participation of all citizens in the economic, social and political development of the country as well as equalizing educational opportunities. Supporting this assertion, Elugbe and Omamur (1991) proposed the use of Pidgin in the classroom especially in Edo and Delta states where virtually everybody speaks the language with proficiency.

Officially, the NP has no status in the educational development of Nigeria as a nation since it is not mentioned in the National Policy on Education. The FRN (2004) states thus:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the best of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one or three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three (3) major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (pg. 10)

Some have argued that the document above, stripped the Nigerian Pidgin of the educational importance, and did not take into cognizance the importance of Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction or as a lingua franca. In the revised edition of the same National Policy on Education, 6<sup>th</sup> edition each child was encouraged to learn any of the Nigerian languages with no mentioning of any of the Nigerian languages since Nigeria is a multilingual nation, yet pidgin was not

recognized (FRN, 2013). According to GaniIkilama (1990), ‘a philosophy of education, which places importance not only on the development of man, but also on man in relation to society, cannot afford to ignore the importance of a lingua franca like Pidgin’. For GaniIkilama, Nigerian Pidgin can effectively be used in schools, especially to solve linguistic problems and problems of socialization to school life in the initial years of primary education.

In affirmation to the assertion in FRN (2013) which states that ‘the medium of instruction in the pre-primary school is initially the mother tongue or language of the immediate community, and at a later stage English’, this study holds the fact that Nigerian Pidgin could be used as a language of instruction in pre-primary schools to equalize the educational opportunities since NP is a language of the immediate environment for some people. Ndimele (2003) observes that in Rivers and Bayelsa States, ‘teachers resort to the use of Nigerian Pidgin for explanatory purposes, especially in the early stages of pre-primary education, since there is no other common language among the pupils’. To deprive them of the use of Nigerian pidgin at this early stage means making way for inequality of educational opportunities for people of these areas. Since the language of their immediate environment as stipulated by NPE is pidgin, there is need to incorporate Nigerian pidgin into language of instruction at the pre-primary level of education for equalization of educational opportunities. Recommending Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction may enhance national unity among the diverse ethnic groups and equal opportunities of education.

There are different forms of written and spoken pidgin depending on the part of the country the speaker is speaking from. Each tribe and area adds words from the local languages and dialects of the immediate environment into Pidgin English. This makes pidgin more understandable to the people and to everyone. It makes it also more interesting. Linguistic scholars are making serious move for Nigeria pidgin to be recognized as an official language and language of education as it is highly used by the masses; high school, undergraduates and postgraduates, politicians and business people. Nigerian pidgin is being offered as a course of study in the department of English and Drama, Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) Zaria, at all levels of study (undergraduate and postgraduate) levels.

### **The Challenges of Using Nigerian pidgin as Medium of Instruction in Nigerian Schools**

Although there are strong arguments in support of the use of Nigerian Pidgin in early primary education, Deuber’s view must be taken seriously: Deuber (2005) states that in a situation in which education in English is highly valued for reasons of social advancement and prestige, and education in any other language usually rank low, it is clear that not all of those concerned will be easily convinced of the advantages of teaching in Nigerian Pidgin. In as much as NP is becoming more acceptable even among the elites and gaining more global recognition, there are still a lot of challenges which have negative effect on the prospects of NP. Some of these major challenges are discussed below:

### **Negative Attitudes towards the Language**

NP is still perceived by some factions as a gutter language meant for touts, uneducated and unexposed fellows in the society. Many parents cannot stand their children conversing in pidgin or being taught pidgin in school because they feel it is a second-class language and would corrupt their children's ability to speak English fluently, which they consider a more prestigious language. Pidgin language is still unacceptable to a lot of people because of its origin which has to do with local people using a foreign language like English, then modifying it to adopt it to their own language and way of speaking. It is regarded as a corruption of a language so people would prefer to speak a proper developed language such as English or French rather than their Pidgin version. The negative attitude towards NP may follow the manner through which it has developed, that is, as a contact language between European traders and their Nigerian counterparts. This is also true of many pidgins and creoles in West Africa and other parts of the world (Siegel, 2004; & Todd, 1990).

### **Lack of economic value**

The first challenge relates to its perceived lack of economic value. Consequently, it suffers from low social prestige (Mann, 1996; & Adegbija, 1994), and from prejudices (Deuber, 2005). Many people pick interest in learning a language due to its economic benefits. NP is poorly promoted because of its perceived lack of economic value. Some may perceive Nigerian Pidgin as a "lesser" language, potentially leading to negative attitudes towards its use in education.

**Teacher Training and Lack of Learning Materials:** Teachers would need specialized training to effectively use Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction, ensuring quality education is delivered. Adequate textbooks and learning resources in Nigerian Pidgin might be lacking, making it difficult to maintain consistent education standards.

### **Fear of adverse effect on indigenous languages.**

The second challenge is the fear that any expansion of NP will have adverse effects on indigenous language development. This fear may continue to prevent speakers of the major languages and several minority languages from supporting this prospect. This point also relates to patterns of language politics in Nigeria. The fact that speakers of the major languages do not really need NP, as well as the perceived competition for the choice of a national language, may continue to undermine any efforts at promoting NP. Speakers of major languages may perceive the inclusion of NP in the struggle for supremacy as a threat (Igboanusi, & Peter, 2005).

### **The perceived effect of NP on English language proficiency.**

The third challenge is the perceived effect of NP on English language proficiency. As has been reported in some previous studies e.g. (Simo, 2006; Alobwede, 1998; & Mbufong, 2001), many people believed that West African Pidgin English (WAPE) has a negative influence on the use of English. Proficiency in English is essential for global communication and higher education.



Overemphasis on Nigerian Pidgin might risk compromising English language skills. It is well known that languages in contact usually influence each other (Weinreich, 1953). For example, children who are exposed to NP before learning English are sometimes found alternating between the NP structure and the English structure.

**I no know and I don't know.**

**I no understand it and I don't understand it.**

Such children are also often heard pronouncing,

**belly** as [b`el'e],

**money** as [mɔn'ɪ],

**body** as [bɔd'ɪ], etc.

The last three examples are pronounced with low-high tones as a result of incorrect stress placement. Such influences or interference may facilitate or impede learning of another language (Peter & Wolf, 2007). Onachukwu in her work refused vehemently the use of NP in the classroom setting so as not to mar the proficient use of English language. She went further to recommend that there should be constant monitoring and evaluation of language use in teaching and learning in Nigerian schools in order to check the trend of usage of Pidgin. Hence, teachers should always caution students each time they use Pidgin in formal school settings (Onachukwu, 2015). The fact is that students might face challenges in the job market if their English proficiency is compromised due to an excessive focus on Nigerian Pidgin.

### **Lack of Standard Orthography**

Compounding the problems discussed above is the lack of uniformity of NP orthography. NP has no standard or generally accepted writing system. Nigerian Pidgin lacks standardized grammar and vocabulary, which could hinder consistent teaching and assessment. Developing a standardized form for education would be crucial. While some scholars for example (Elugbe & Omamor, 1991) proposed a separate orthography similar to the writing system of Nigeria's indigenous languages, others for example (Egbokhare, 2001) proposed an English-based spelling system for the language. These and more are unresolved problems concerning the use of NP. What this means is that, as with many English-based pidgins and creoles, users are left to their own devices when it comes to writing NP (Deuber & Hinrichs, 2007). Different scholars have also suggested different writing forms. However, there is still no standard orthography for NP. Individuals still write in their own style. For example, 'I dey come' can also be written as Ah de kom, the word 'you' can be spelt the same way in Pidgin by some persons while others may spell it as 'yu'. All of these disparities in writing NP are part of the reasons why it is considered a non-standard language and cannot be used to carry out some official functions such as international diplomacy.

In summary, Ndimele (2003) identifies significant problems facing Nigerian speakers of Pidgin English. These problems range from the fact that it is educationally disadvantaged to the fact that it has no standard orthography, it lacks cultural attachment/affiliation. Nigerian Pidgin has acquired native speakerships/association speech community in the Niger Delta Region (Warri, Sapele, Port Harcourt, Benin etc), but none of these linguistic groups can claim ownership because it actually belongs to no group of speakers. All these put together affect its social acceptability. One of the obstacles to standardization is the perception of Nigerian Pidgin English as a variety of English, rather than a separate language; Nigerians often refer to Nigerian Pidgin English as 'broken English.

### **Conclusion.**

This study represents a significant contribution to the ongoing discourse on educational equality in Nigeria. The study outlined the challenges and barriers that may hinder the effective implementation of Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction, such as language standardization, teacher training, curriculum development, and societal perceptions. Using Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools has the potential to enhance inclusivity and cultural relevance, but challenges mentioned need to be carefully addressed to ensure that educational quality and opportunities are not compromised.

By examining the status, prospects, and challenges of using Nigerian Pidgin as a medium of instruction, it aims to offer valuable insights into how language can serve as a tool for leveling the playing field and providing equal access to educational opportunities for all Nigerian students, irrespective of their linguistic backgrounds. The study proposed strategies and recommendations for successfully integrating Nigerian Pidgin into the educational system to bridge educational disparities and enhance equal access to learning opportunities.

### **Suggestions**

1. To deal with such problems raised, Deuber (2005) suggested that NP should be offered as a subject in secondary schools and as a course of study in tertiary institutions. Teaching NP as a subject will enable Nigerians to draw a line between pidgin and Standard Nigerian English.
2. A contrastive analysis of Standard English and NP should be adopted in the teaching of NP (as a subject in secondary schools) in order to identify areas of interference as well as to be able to separate the two. This method is likely to reduce the fear of parents that using pidgin will affect the performance of their children in English.
3. In order to support the implementation of the teaching of NP, the government should encourage the design of syllabuses for the language, as well as to encourage the development of teaching materials and textbooks in the language.
4. There is need to remove disparities and to equalize educational opportunities by attending to the needs of the learners at the lower level of education. Equalization of educational



- opportunities implies the provision of free, universal education, a common school system and a common curriculum for all children irrespective of background, region or tribe.
5. The attitudes of stakeholders, including educators, students, parents, and policymakers, towards using Nigerian Pidgin in schools should be changed to positive to ensure equalization of educational opportunities across different linguistic socio-economic backgrounds.
  6. To empower NP may be a tall order though may take a very long time to fulfill. But the sooner serious efforts at promoting NP begin, the better it will be for its future in Nigeria.

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