

Bilingualism Problems in Nigeria: Implications for ESL Pedagogy

B.F. Ovu¹ and Q.E. Anyanwu²

¹Department of English Language and Literature, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri

²Teaching Practice Department, Alvan Ikoku Federal College of Education, Owerri.

Abstract

*In this paper, we discuss some of the conceptual and ontological problems that bilingualism raises for ESL pedagogy in Nigeria. We critically review the various classifications of bilingualism which have accumulated in the literature over the years, taking note of the implications of each classification for second language pedagogy particularly within the Nigerian linguistic environment. Specifically, we x-ray the theoretical and empirical challenges that bilingualism holds for a generative theory of second language acquisition with special reference to the nature of bilingual competence. We also discuss the pattern and reality of bilingual language attrition using data from twenty Igbo children whose proficiency in English is relatively high even though some of them can hardly speak a word of Igbo. In analysing the results, we were guided by four variables: **Language Facility (LF)**, where we assessed each member of the population based on whether he or she speaks more than one language; **Degree of Proficiency (DP)**, where we grouped the research subjects based on different levels of proficiency in the languages spoken with emphasis on both productive and receptive language skills as well as their mode of using the languages (i.e. whether or not they can write and speak them); **Parental Background (PB)**, where we concentrated on knowing whether there would be any significant difference between children whose parents are literate and those whose parents are illiterate in the use of the languages, and **Attitude and Value Attached to the Language (AVL)**, where we assessed the social-economic variables that may affect their proficiency or general ability to use the languages. After these, we discuss the results and draw our conclusion.*

Key Words: bilingualism, language attrition, minimalism, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

One of the operational definitions of bilingualism is that it is “the natural consequence of the human language faculty realising its full potential to acquire more than one language on the basis of input from the linguistic environment” (Ovu, 2017, p.46). Thus, human beings have either actual or potential capacity to acquire more than one language depending on the linguistic input available to them (Cook & Newson, 2007 p.220). Generally, bilingualism should be considered as the rule rather than the exception. For instance, it is estimated that two-third of world children grow up in bilingual environments (Bhatia & Ritchie 2006 p.1). Secondly, about 440 million out of the estimated 760 million users of English worldwide do so with at least one other language while about half of the Nigerian population uses English with at least one indigenous language (Crystal, 2005).

Consequently, a large body of research has discussed diverse issues around bilingualism such as the development of bilingual competence

in children (Francis, 2012); cognitive aspects of bilingualism (Kecskes & Albertazzi, 2007); research methodologies in bilingualism (Wei & Moyer, 2008); bilingualism and learning modelling (Schmid & Lowe, 2011); bilingualism and psycholinguistic variables (Kroll & de Groot, 2005); bilingualism and bilingual literacy development (Leiken, Schwartz & Tobin, 2012); bilingualism and language attrition (Chin & Wigglesworth, 2007); bilingual competence in youths and young adults (Potowski & Rothman, 2011); bilingualism psychometrics and evaluation (Menken, 2008); bilingualism and metrolinguistic (Pennycook & Otsuji, 2015); emotive aspects of bilingualism (Pavlenko, 2006), bilingualism and language contacts (Appel & Muysken, 2005). These works reveal the multidisciplinary, multi-factored and multidimensional nature of bilingualism.

However, none of them has done much in terms of looking at the problems that bilingualism poses to language teaching and learning in Nigeria. This paper is, therefore, a modest



attempt to address some bilingualism problems within the Nigerian linguistic landscape. The paper is divided into five sections. Section two discusses the conceptual and ontological issues involved in characterising individual or group bilingualism, which for the purpose of the present discussion also subsumes multilingualism. Section three provides the theoretical and analytical framework for measuring bilingual competence. Section four presents a case study report of bilingual language attrition in Amakohia, Owerri North L.G.A., Imo State while sections five and six discuss the findings of the case study and conclusion respectively.

2. Bilingualism in Nigeria: Some Conceptual and Ontological Problems

The first problem of bilingualism in Nigeria may be described as both conceptual and ontological. For instance, there is a polarity of camps holding divergent opinions as to what should be emphasised when discussing bilingual individuals. This ranges from those who emphasise minimal competence (e.g. Haugen 1953) to those who emphasise native-like competence in the languages (e.g. Bloomfield, 1935). However, the general tendency is to discuss bilingualism and bilingual competence using specific descriptors such as degree of use, context of acquisition, age of acquisition, domain of use and social orientation (cf. Beardsmore, 1991).

In terms of degree of use, bilingual individuals are classified into functional and dormant bilinguals (Grosjean, 1982) as well as balanced and dominant bilinguals (Peal & Lambert, 1962). In Nigeria, functional bilinguals include school children and adults who can reasonably and consistently use English with at least one Nigerian language. However, there is yet to be any demographic and linguistic data to establish the bilingual profiles of the citizens. Thus, the number of individuals who fall under functional and dormant bilinguals in Nigeria is not clear. Secondly, there is no yardstick for measuring the extent of functionality in the language for one to pass as a dormant or functional bilingual except for the fact that

functional bilinguals are in the main those who make use of their bilingual repertoires on regular bases while dormant bilinguals are those who no longer use their bilingual skills owing to relocation to a new environment or other factors that make it impossible for them to still use both languages. One may then ask if a person who studied French in the secondary school as part of fulfilling the requirements of the Nigerian National Policy on Education qualifies as a functional or dormant bilingual.

Another issue is the pattern of organising meaning in the languages. Weinreich (1953) has used this criterion to distinguish three types of bilingual individuals viz: compound, coordinate and subordinate bilinguals. Compound bilinguals are said to store two sets of linguistic codes as one meaning unit while coordinate bilinguals store them as separate meaning units and finally subordinate bilinguals interpret linguistic codes in their second or additional language through their L1. Thus, whereas the compound bilinguals have two sets of linguistic codes that are stored as one meaning unit, coordinate bilinguals have two sets of linguistic codes stored and accessed separately as two different meaning units, subordinate bilinguals store theirs as one meaning unit which can only be accessed through the first language (Ovu, 2017, p.49). While these distinctions are conceptually relevant, they still remain difficult to establish in practical terms. For instance, there are those whom English is not just their primary language but also their first language such that they possess full productive competence in the language with marginal perceptive competence in one or more indigenous languages. There is a case of 28 year old Mirabel who simply replied that her mother told her she is from Abia State. Mirabel has only visited her hometown four times and she bears an Igbo name. Though she understands many Igbo expressions, she can hardly make a sentence in Igbo and her accent sounds very funny. To Mirabel, Igbo is nothing but a heritage language with English as her primary language. Yet, should Mirabel travel outside the shores of Nigeria she will face a hard time coping with spoken British or American



English. Her vocabulary is limited to what is available in her environment. For instance, Mirabel does not know the meaning of 'jaywalking' and a host of other English idioms.

Consequently, one major problem that comes with any attempt to relate Weinreich (1953)'s classification to the Nigerian linguistic experience is that even a language like English which plays several significant roles in our national and everyday lives is not infused with all the cultural nuances found in a typical native speaker setting. Yet many people have English as their first or most dominant language but without the cultural nuances that come with using English in a native speaker setting. Thus, balanced bilingualism in English and one Nigerian language is not possible. What exist are coordinate and subordinate bilinguals. However, the primary source of data for measuring bilingual competence in Nigeria is usually test instruments from examination bodies like WAEC, JAMB, etc which are in most cases not reliable. There is little or no sociolinguistic field research to support most of the assumptions found in textbooks.

In the case of early and late bilinguals, the major considerations are age, language usage and cultural identity. Looking at age of acquisition, one may draw a distinction between early and late bilinguals (Genesee, Hamers, Lambert, Mononen, Seitz & Starck, 1978). Early bilinguals are common in urban areas especially Lagos where children can easily acquire both Yoruba and the Nigerian pidgin. But due to parental attitude most children lose this ability in later life. For instance, most parents of Igbo origin accuse their children of speaking *ngbati ngbati*. As a Yoruba expression, *ngbati* is often used with reference to time. But in the present context, it is used as a derogatorily to describe those Igbo children who speak mainly Yoruba but know little to nothing of her own language. These people are often seen as traitors who have chosen to adopt other people's language instead of mastering their native Igbo language. This makes it difficult for the children to eventually develop healthy bilingual repertoires in adulthood.

Generally, there is a marked difference in the pattern of acquisition of bilingual competence across the country. Although the majority of the population acquired a first language before going on to acquire a second and third language typically in a school environment thereby earning themselves the label sequential bilinguals, there are a number of others who acquired their bilingual repertoires simultaneously (See Amadi, Anyanwu & Izuagba, 2001). A typical example is found in some parts of Owerri where parents use both English and Igbo to talk with their children and these children later grow up to use the two languages interchangeably although with disproportionate proficiency. Furthermore, social pressures especially from the major languages upon the minority languages have given rise to folk and elite bilingualism (Fishman, 1977) as well as circumstantial and elective bilingualism in Nigeria (Figueroa, 1994). Folk bilingualism refers to what is found among minority language groups and the latter refers to those who speak the dominant language with the use of another language giving them an additional value. For example, in Adamawa State almost all the people are bilingual in Hausa and one other minority language. Similarly, in Bayelsa and River states, most people are bilingual in the Nigerian Pidgin and one indigenous language (see also Obikudo, 2008). In other words, folk bilinguals are under serious social pressures to learn the dominant language such that they have little or no choice in acquiring the other language in addition to theirs. In terms of attitudes, the only motivating factor is survival on the side of folk bilinguals while solidarity and finesse play a big role in determining elite bilingualism. This has informed the classification of bilingual individuals into circumstantial and elective bilinguals respectively (Butler & Hakuta, 2006 p.118).

The effect of acquiring an additional language on the existing language brings about the distinction between additive and subtractive bilinguals. Additive bilinguals refer to those who can enhance their L2 without losing their L1 and the latter refers to those whose knowledge of their L1 diminishes with increased proficiency in



the L2. What is not clear, however, is the role which age plays in enhancing the retention or loss of one's L1 as a result of learning an L2 as well as what aspect of the L1 is usually mostly affected such as whether the individual loses productive skills in the L1 faster than receptive skills and vice versa or where the L1 has both written and spoken forms the one that is mostly affected. While additive bilingualism is hard to establish in Nigeria, most studies on the effects of bilingualism have been somewhat subtractive. Among the Igbo speaking populace for instance, functional ability relative to the four language skills is greatly diminishing. Most speakers of Igbo language have mainly productive and receptive oral skills but lack the general literacy skills in the language. This has led Amadi, Anyanwu and Izuagba (2001) to group Igbo children into incipient, receptive and productive bilinguals.

In summary, for one to approach bilingualism problems in Nigeria, one must know that bilingualism or bilingual competence is a relative term, and its meaning as well as theoretical relevance depends on some social, psychological, neurological and environmental variables (Butler & Hakuta, 2006 p.115). These things are, however, very hard to establish because of limited funding, expertise and research skills on the part of the investigators. Bilingual competence is different from monolingual competence in that while monolingual competence is uniform among individuals who share the same linguistic codes; bilingual competence varies between individuals in that they function with different degrees of proficiency in the various linguistic domains regardless of their bilingual repertoire.

3. Bilingual Competence: Theoretical and Analytical Considerations

The problem of bilingualism in Nigeria is such that can be approached from different linguistic perspectives. One of such perspectives is the generative linguistic especially minimalism. Minimalism takes a generative perspective to bilingual competence by

considering the roles of lexical features in the two languages while holding cross-linguistic variations to be sensitive to the grammatical properties of the lexical items, articulated in terms of feature strength. Thus, most bilinguals already have knowledge of a specific language (usually the L1) at the point when they begin to acquire some measure of proficiency in the additional language, and probably have made all of the parametric choices in the first language which they clearly transfer to the new language. This position is particularly true of sequential bilinguals but exactly which features may be transferred and to what extent they are transferred is still open to debate (Francis, 2012). However, it appears that only the functional features are transferable and the extent in which they can be transferred depends on the relationship between both languages (Saville-Troike, 2014 p.50). Thus, to determine how bilingual individuals eventually arrive at their different bilingual states, one has to consider the different hypotheses relating to the role of UG from the initial to the final state of bilingual development so as to predict what constitutes the nature of interlanguage competence of bilingual individuals such as:

- No Access Hypothesis;
- Full Access Hypothesis;
- Full Transfer Hypothesis;
- Full Access Hypothesis
- Partial Access Hypothesis.

The above hypotheses show that the development of bilingual competence takes the form of intermediate language developmental states formalised as follows: $IL_1 \dots IL_n$, where IL refers to the various interlanguage grammars constituting individual bilingual repertoire. The argument, therefore, is that if some part of UG is accessible during the acquisition of an additional language then the process of bilingual development is essentially that of "resetting parameters on the basis of input in the new language" (Saville-Troike, 2012 p.52). The foregoing discussions are summarised in Table 1 below.



Table 1: UG Accessibility Hypotheses in Bilinguals

S/N	Hypothesis	L1 Ss Involved	UG Involved	Initial State Constitution
1	No UG Access	√	X	L1
2	Full Access	X	√	All UG
3	Full Transfer/Full Access	√	√	UG plus L1 Ss
4	Partial Access			
	(a) Minimal Trees	X	√	L1 minus functional categories
	(b) Valueless Features	χ	√	L1 minus features strength
	(c) Failed Functional Features	√	X	UG principles and L1 minus parameters setting

Adapted from Cook & Newson, 2007 p.238)

From the UG-accessibility stand point, parameter resetting in individual bilingual language development is usually done unconsciously under the influence of data from the new language. This implies that if there is access to UG, it will also ensure that learners of the new language limit their choices in such a way that certain errors in the new language are practically impossible (Sadeghi, 2006 p.47). Thus, if the learning principles constituting part of FL are also available to L2 learners, then there should be sufficient information for them to make the required changes that will conform to the L2 data in the form of positive evidence based on natural discovery or from formal instructions while negative evidence by means of explicit corrections may also help in the resetting process. Individual bilingual development is essentially “the progressive mastery of L2 vocabulary along with the morphological features...that are part of lexical knowledge” (Saville-Troike, 2012 p.52).

Taking into consideration the fact that Minimalism advocates the progressive easing of the burden on FL and locates parametric variations among languages to the lexicon (judging them as a function of the feature inventory of the individual lexical items of the languages in question), it is can be argued that while the general principles and parameters that constrain UG may not need to be learnt by say the sequential bilinguals. For instance, morphological features must be consciously learnt and practised by the individual to attain high proficiency in both languages since

inflectional errors have been considered a regular feature in most bilingual individuals’ linguistic performance (White, 2003 p.194); Slabakova, 2013, 2014). According to Spradin, Tod and Fuertes (2003), lexical items usually have feature compositions which account for their derivation such that where the bilingual individuals fail to match these features appropriately, the derivation crashes (29). Thus, Minimalism holds that while formal features are deleted before they reach the interface systems, phonological and semantic features are available to the interfaces. Hence, the argument is that failure to reach a state of full feature specification in the lexicon is one of the primary reasons why bilingual individuals fail to attain native-like competence in the two languages (Slabakova, 2016). In this case, the existence of balanced bilingual individuals is held to be rare if not impossible (Beardsmore, 1991 p.130); Butler & Hakuta, 2006 p.122).

4. Bilingual Language Situations in Amakohia in Owerri-North

This section provides a preliminary case study report of bilingual language situations in Amakohia, Owerri North. The choice of Amakohia is predicated on the fact that the researchers have a very extensive knowledge of the area and have spent a considerable number of times studying the bilingualism situation there. The section is divided into the following subsections: method of data collection; population of the study; sample techniques and data analysis.



4.1. Method of Data Collection

The paper adopts a qualitative research method which relies on both primary and secondary sources. Evidence of language attrition resulting from bilingualism is established based on data collected using a self-administered instrument.

4.2. Population of the Study

The population comprised mainly Igbo children between the ages of 4-10 some of whom were proficient in English but hardly speak a word of Igbo.

4.3. Instrument for Data Collection

The researchers conducted an oral interview where they asked the research subjects questions about how they communicate at home with their parents, in school with their teachers and mates, in churches and among their peers.

4.4. Sampling Technique

The researchers adopted a simple random technique which gives each member of the population equal opportunity of being selected with age as the only factor considered in accepting or rejecting each member. A population of twenty children was used as sample, selected from five families to find out the causes and patterns of bilingual language attrition.

4.5. Method of Data Analysis

Data collected were analysed under the following headings:

4.5.1. Language Facility (LF)

Here, each member of the population is assessed based on whether or not he or she speaks more than one language.

4.5.2. Degree of Proficiency (DP)

Table A: Degree of Igbo Language Proficiency

S/N	ITEMS	VH(4)	%	H (3)	%	L(2)	%	VL(1)	%
1.	Degree of proficiency	3	15	2	10	7	35	8	40
2.	Parental literacy level	8	40	7	35	2	10	3	15
3.	Language facility	2	10	1	5	8	40	9	45
4.	Positive attitude towards Igbo	3	15	2	10	7	35	8	40

Under this heading, the researchers grouped the research subjects based on different levels of proficiency in the languages spoken with emphasis on both productive and receptive language skills as well as their mode of using the languages (i.e. whether or not they can write and speak them).

4.5.3. Parental Background (PB)

Here, the researchers concentrated on knowing whether there would be any significant difference between children whose parents are literate and those whose parents are illiterate in the use of the languages. Added to this, is the consideration of both social economic variables that may affect their proficiency or general ability to use the languages.

4.5.4. Attitude and Value Attached to the Language (AVL)

The research subjects were divided into integrative and instrumental language users based on their attitudes towards the languages. Efforts were made by the researchers to ascertain how the subjects value the language as regards social interactions.

5. Discussion of Findings

In the course of this research, the researchers used a four point scale of very high (VH), High (H), Low (L) and very low (VL) and its percentage equivalents to analyse the data and write the findings. These have been presented in the tables below. Table A shows the degree of proficiency possessed by the research subjects in Igbo while Table B shows their degree of proficiency in English.

Table B: Degree of English Language Proficiency

S/N	ITEMS	VH (4)	%	H (3)	%	L (2)	%	VL (1)	%
1.	Degree of proficiency	8	40	7	35	3	15	2	10
2.	Parental literacy level	9	45	8	40	1	5	2	10
3.	Language facility	2	10	1	5	8	40	9	45
4.	Positive attitude towards English	8	40	35		1	5	2	10

The result in table (A) shows that the degree of proficiency in Igbo language among the children between the ages of 4-10 is just 25% which is rather poor. There is also another indication from the table that children from better homes, living in urban areas are not very familiar with Igbo language due to the type of exposure they have had where the mother tongue is often relegated. Because of their parental status, those who spent more time in the rural areas before moving into the city still hold to their mother tongue with very minimal proficiency in English. These situations tally with Hudson (1980, p.232)'s contention that in children's acquisition of language, they end up acquiring the language of their models i.e. their parents and teachers.

Relating the findings to the language facility, which deals with whether the children can speak one or two languages, the table shows that lower percentages of children speak English and Igbo language. This situation is facilitated by their attitude towards either of the two languages where those with low proficiency in Igbo also show poor attitude towards the language. In this case, their responses showed that they have been made to believe and practice what their parents and teachers do. Thus, a situation where one language is taken to be more prestigious than the other affects the attitude that one will have toward the less prestigious language. Table (B) presents the degree of proficiency of children in the English language and other variables. Results from the table reveal that the children have up to 75% degree of proficiency in English put together, which is promoted by certain variables

like parental literacy level and attitude towards the language. Also by measuring their language facility, the table shows that 85% of children within the population have English as their usual and only language of communication both in school and at home.

6. Conclusion

This paper set out to discuss the conceptual issues surrounding bilingualism in Nigeria and the number of problems that bilingualism raises for language research in Nigeria. From the review of available literature, it is obvious that there is no end to the classification of bilingualism and bilingual individuals. The paper has demonstrated that bilingualism is an inevitable consequence of languages in contact. Some of the issues the paper has raised are the existence of bilingual individuals who speak English as their primary or at least first language but yet lack the requisite or commensurate competence of monolingual native speakers. Secondly, the paper has shown that bilingual language attrition is real at least in Igbo land where children or younger generation of Igbo may end up using it merely a heritage language such that the language may not perform any special function beyond that of helping the individual users to establish ethnic and cultural identity. What this implies for ESL teaching and learning is that teachers should be mindful of the linguistic input being introduced to the learners in order not to lead to cases of semi-lingualism (i.e. a situation where an individual ends up not mastering any language at all due poor input from both first and second languages).

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