

English Language and Communication Barrier in Primary and Post Primary School: A Case Study of Yobe State Nigeria

Bahir Mohammed Salihu¹ Ahmed Saleh Jaji*²

¹ Department of Private and Public Law; Faculty of law, Yobe State University, Damaturu.

² Registry Department; Yobe State University, Damaturu Yobe State.

*corresponding author: Ahmed Saleh Jaji

Email: ahmedjaji@yahoo.com

Abstract

Introduction: In Nigeria, English remains the undisputed language of school instruction, governance, administration, legislation, judiciary, international relations, unification of the country's numerous ethnic constituents and social prestige. **Aim:** the study aimed at examining the role of local language in communication in primary and post primary schools within Yobe state, Nigeria. **Methodology:** Multi-stage random sampling techniques was adopted to select the respondent for the study. In the first stage, the state was divided into three zones in which two local governments were selected from each of the zones, giving six local government areas, in the third stage two communities were randomly selected from each of the local governments, making twelve communities. In the final stage, thirty respondents were selected from each of the selected communities making 360 respondents for the research. **Results:** 254(70.45%) of the participants were male while 106(29.55%) were female. The highest number of participants were in the 16-20 years' age group, while the least number were derived from age group of less than 10 years. In terms of gender, male represented most of the participants. Furthermore, more than half of the participant's averagely understand English language as means of teaching. English language was found to be a significant communication barrier for the students under study, with far-reaching implications for academic achievement and future educational outcomes. **Conclusion:** finding suggests that English language difficulty is not just a communication barrier but also a major academic barrier, influencing overall school performance and academic progression.

Keywords: *English; Language; Communication; Primary; Post primary; Yobe and Nigeria.*

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1. Introduction

Language is a component of culture along with other elements of values, beliefs and norms. In Nigeria, for instance, the language for education at the basic level has been an issue of debate among scholars for decades. As a multi-lingual nation with at least 400 indigenous languages, some scholars noted that only about 65 standardized orthographies and only three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have documented efforts of teacher education. One challenge is the lack of adequate vocabulary for most indigenous languages. The problem is accentuated with school subjects like mathematics, sciences and vocational education content areas where words in the local language will not exactly name concept except to describe them. The best education a child can get at the basic level is that given in the indigenous language. Children accordingly to Baker, absorb concept much easily in their own familiar languages and can gain a fundamental understanding of them. However, in a second language (L2) situation, in the case of English language in Nigeria, they simply became words that are learnt but not absorbed.

Baker also reiterates that psychologically, the proper development of the child bound with the uninterrupted use of the language in which he has acquired this first experiences in life, the one in which he dreams and thinks and in which he can effortlessly express his feelings and emotions. To ignore this familiar language and begin to teach him a foreign and unfamiliar language and as soon as he comes to school, is like taking the child away from his home and putting him among strangers.

Language is a spontaneous social activity expressing thoughts, moods and ideas. It is a hallmark of any group of people, community or society. In a multilingual situation as is the case with Nigeria, the challenge is therefore the identification, development and adoption of over 500 languages for the primary schools and junior secondary schools in the country. There will be the need for a thorough linguistic analysis of these languages in terms of their phonology and grammatical structures. There is the challenge of developing a body of science and

technological knowledge which is needed for the products of primary education in Nigeria to favourably compete with their counterparts within the continent of Africa.

The use of the child's primary language as medium of instruction in primary and post primary school levels as stated in the National Policy on Education is ideal. Concepts will easily be understood and children will gain competence in the use of the language, however, several factors are known to have contributed to the low achievement of the educating goals for primary and post primary school in Nigeria. Prominent among them is the large number of indigenous languages within the country and any attempt to compress similar languages to promote one that will represent a cultural area will meet with staff opposition and complaint about marginalization. Another challenge is the low turnout of trained teachers in the various indigenous languages. Yet others are the lack of teaching and learning materials and where they are available, they may not be equitably distributed to urban and rural areas.

Some educationist claims that the use of English language as medium of instruction at primary and post primary schools level in Nigeria is a big barrier to effective learning and the main course of poor academic performance by the student. This research assesses the role of local language as the most effective means of communication means in primary and post primary schools in Yobe State.

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Study Area

Yobe State formally came into being on August 27, 1991. It is situated in a semi-arid region located between latitudes 10.00°N to 11.30°E and longitude 12.00°N and 11.50°E. Yobe state is at 472.45 meters above sea level and bordered by Bauchi, Borno, Gombe and Jigawa State. It has a total land area of 45,502 square kilometers with estimated 1, 754, 200 hectares agricultural and over 70,000 hectares' forest vegetation and grazing land. The state is noted for its fairly stable climate with relatively minor changes in temperature and humidity (Stilwell, 2000). Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy involving at least 75% of the rural population. Important crops produced in the State include maize, beans, rice, corn and varieties of vegetables (Stilwell, 2000). It is characterized as one of the poorest state in Nigeria with majority of the population illiterate to western education.

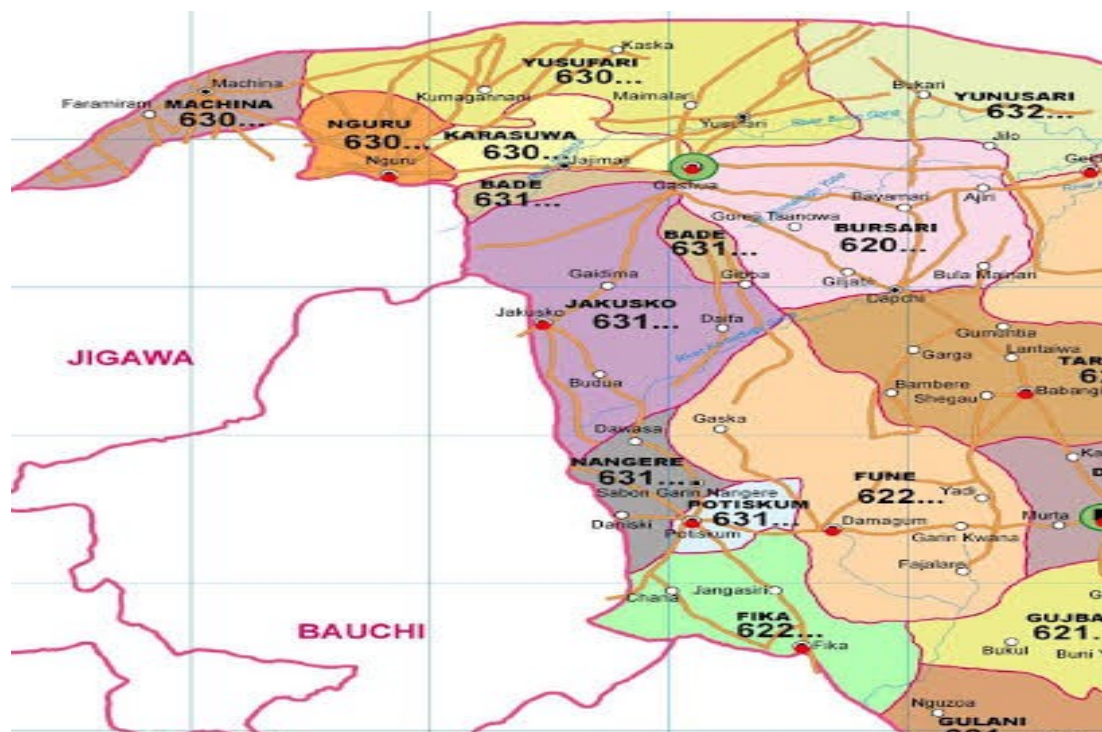


Figure 1: Map of Yobe State.

2.2 Sampling Techniques and Participants

Multi-stage random sampling techniques was adopted to select the respondent for the study. In the first stage, the state was divided into three zones in which two local governments were selected from each of the zones,

giving six local government areas, in the third stage two communities were randomly selected from each of the local governments, making twelve communities. In the final stage, thirty respondents were selected from each of the selected communities making 360 respondents for the research. Structured questionnaires were administered to the selected respondents aimed at getting information on effect of using English language as medium of communication in primary and post primary schools.

2.3 Inclusion criteria

The interview was conducted face to face with teachers and students of primary and post primary students who indigenes of the local area and are attending public schools within the selected local governments.

2.4 Exclusion criteria

People who had not been in the local governments and have not acquired formal education within the research local governments were not included in the study.

2.5 Procedures and Measures

All interviews were conducted face-to-face. Participants' age, educational level, family background and employment status of parents/guardian were obtained on a brief structured questionnaire (Appendix I and II). All interviewers were trained in the assessments used in the survey.

2.6 Statistical Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to report experiences and characteristics of the samples in each local government. Participant characteristics were compared between local governments using x2 tests and analyses of variance depending on the type of data. Correlation between second language and understanding will be reported with standard errors.

2.7 Consent to Participate

Participants were informed about the aim of the study, voluntary nature of participation, and their right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any point, and the potential benefit of participation in the study. Upon accepting the conditions and statements, participants were given the questionnaire.

3. Results

A total of 360 participants were recruited in the study, of which, 254(70.45%) were male while 106(29.55%) were female. The highest number of participants were in the 16-20 years' age group, while the least number were derived from age group of less than 10 years. In terms of gender, male represented most of the participants. Furthermore, more than half of the participant's averagely understand English language as means of teaching.

Table 1: sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

Variables	Total n (%)	English Language Understanding score			<i>P value</i>
		Inadequate	Average	Adequate	
		n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Gender					<0.05
Male	254(70.45)	80(31.5)	100(41.5)	69(27.0)	
Female	106(29.55)	36(34.2)	43(40.7)	27(25.1)	
Age group					<0.05
<10	55(15.4)	13(23.4)	30(54.2)	12(22.4)	
1–15	95(26.5)	33(35.1)	29(30.7)	33(34.2)	
16–20	142(39.3)	32(22.2)	58(40.5)	53(37.3)	
>20	68(19.1)	24(35.1)	33(47.8)	11(17.1)	
Education Level					<0.05
Secondary school	205(56.8)	95(46.4)	62(29.8)	48(23.8)	
Primary school	155(43.2)	89(57.5)	39(25.0)	27(17.5)	

Table 2 present participants' response to English as a communication barrier. the A very high proportion of students (79.5%: Agree + Strongly Agree) report that they often use their local languages when speaking English. This indicates strong mother-tongue interference, which is a major barrier to developing English fluency. Only a small minority (12.5%) disagree. A large majority (69.6%) of students *disagree* that their English teacher explains clearly in English. Only 5.1% *agree*. Most students (77.3%) disagree that there are enough English storybooks and learning materials in their classes. More than half of the participants (49.5%) find learning English "difficult and boring." Only 33% disagree. A significant majority (74%: **Agree + Strongly Agree**) indicate that poor English affects their performance in other subjects. Most participants (78%) agree it is hard to practice English outside school. A combined 43.5% agree that conflict situations make it harder to focus on learning English, while 34% neither agree nor disagree.

Table 2. Participants Response to Questionnaire on English Language as Communication Barrier

Variable	Statement	(%)
Mother Tongue Interference: I often use my local language (Hausa/Fulani/Kanuri) when speaking English	Strongly Disagree	07.5
	Disagree	05.0
	Neither agree nor disagree	08.0
	Agree	29.5
	Strongly Agree	50.0
Teacher Effectiveness: My English teacher explains things clearly in English	Strongly Disagree	08.0
	Disagree	61.6
	Neither agree nor disagree	25.0
	Agree	05.1
	Strongly Agree	00.0
Resources: "There are enough English storybooks and learning materials in my class	Strongly Disagree	62.0
	Disagree	15.3
	Neither agree nor disagree	13.5
	Agree	04.2
	Strongly Agree	05.0
Motivation: "I find learning English difficult and boring	Strongly Disagree	14.0
	Disagree	19.0
	Neither agree nor disagree	17.5
	Agree	35.5
	Strongly Agree	14.0
Academic Impact: "My poor English affects my performance in other subjects	Strongly Disagree	02.0
	Disagree	04.0
	Neither agree nor disagree	20.0
	Agree	35.0
	Strongly Agree	39.0
Environment: "It's hard to practice English outside of school in my community.	Strongly Disagree	(5)
	Disagree	07.0
	Neither agree nor disagree	10.0
	Agree	34.0
	Strongly Agree	44.0

Post-Conflict: "The conflict situation makes it harder to focus on learning English"	Strongly Disagree	09.0
	Disagree	13.5
	Neither agree nor disagree	34.0
	Agree	40.0
	Strongly Agree	03.5

4. Discussion

Nigeria is blessed with a multilingual societies ranging from the far northeast to south-south regions. These indigenous languages are localized within the communities and therefore serves as the cultural identity of the people: norms, values, folk, idioms and so on (Asekere and Asaolu 2020). The importance of indigenous language in communication delivery and teaching cannot be overemphasized as acknowledged by many scholars such as Igboanusi, Odoje and Ibrahim (2016), Oyesomi, *et al.*, (2020) and, Ogunyombo and Bello (2020).

Yobe State is located in northeastern Nigeria. The dominant linguistic and cultural force until the mid-20th century was Kanuri, but in recent decades, Hausa has become the universal lingua franca for all of northern Nigeria, including Yobe State. Nonetheless, numerous minority languages remain in active use. There are seven such indigenous languages: Bade, Bole, Duwai, Karekare, Maka, Ngamo, and Ngizim, these languages have substantial communities of first language speakers. Thus making Yobe state a multilingual state.

The results reveal that a large majority of students (79.5%) frequently rely on their local languages when attempting to communicate in English. This strong preference for mother-tongue usage indicates a major obstacle to acquiring English proficiency. The dominance of indigenous languages in the home and community reduces opportunities for English practice, reinforcing code-switching and limiting fluency. This finding aligns with sociolinguistic theories which suggest that learners in multilingual contexts often default to the language of wider communication in their community. Consequently, English remains largely restricted to the classroom environment, making language acquisition slower and less natural.

The study shows that 69.6% of the respondents disagree that their English teachers explain lessons clearly. This suggests significant instructional challenges within English teaching practices. Poor teacher clarity may result from limited teacher proficiency, inadequate training, or ineffective pedagogical methods. When teachers themselves struggle with clear communication, students receive limited input in correct English structures, pronunciation, and vocabulary. This ultimately contributes to persistent misunderstandings, low confidence, and poor performance in English-related tasks.

A striking 77.3% of respondents report insufficient English storybooks and learning materials in their classrooms. This scarcity of resources deprives learners of exposure to reading materials that could develop comprehension, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

Access to books is a critical factor in language acquisition. Without adequate learning materials, students have fewer opportunities to practice independently, reducing the effectiveness of classroom instruction. This finding highlights systemic challenges in educational provision, particularly in post-conflict or rural settings where resources are limited.

Almost half of the participants (49.5%) find learning English difficult and boring. This negative attitude suggests low motivation, which is known to significantly influence language acquisition. Motivational challenges may arise from various factors, including previous negative learning experiences, fear of making mistakes, or inadequate support from teachers and the school environment. When students are not motivated, they are less likely to actively participate in class, practice speaking English, or engage with reading materials.

A substantial percentage of the students (74%) acknowledge that their poor English performance affects their understanding of other school subjects. Since English is the medium of instruction for most subjects, limited proficiency restricts students' ability to comprehend textbooks, interpret questions, and express their knowledge in examinations.

The findings also indicate that 43.5% of respondents believe the conflict situation affects their ability to focus on learning English. Post-conflict environments are often characterized by instability, psychological stress, irregular schooling, and limited learning resources. These conditions compromise students' attention, attendance, and readiness to learn. Moreover, both teachers and learners may be coping with trauma, affecting the overall quality of teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

This finding suggests that English language difficulty is not just a communication barrier but also a **major academic barrier**, influencing overall school performance and academic progression. There is the need to develop a good language education programme for primary and post primary school level in Nigeria. This is because the effective functionality of the children in their educational or vocational pursuit is dependent on the solid foundation laid at the lower primary school. Teachers should jointly help the pupils to develop competence in the use of their language and that of the immediate environment of schooling. The government has to make adequate funds available for the provision of regular and intensive professional capacity development for classroom teachers in the Universal Basic Education

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Appendix I

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I am a staff of Yobe state university, Damaturu conducting a research titled: **“English Language and Communication Barrier in Primary and Post Primary School; A Case Study of Yobe State Nigeria”**. Please note that all information and findings will be treated with outmost confidentiality, even if the study happens to be reported in scientific literatures or gatherings, your anonymity will be maintained. Your participation is voluntary in the study and you are free to decline consent or withdraw at any stage of the study.

I have understood the study as explained to me and I am willing to participate.

Participant Name: -----

Participant Signature:-----

Date:-----

Appendix II

YOBE STATE UNIVERSITY, DAMATURU

Dear patients/ Guardians

This questionnaire is designed to assist the researcher to obtain relevant data on the topic. You are kindly requested to give the required information. All information provided will be treated with utmost confidentiality. Thank you.

Instruction: please tick as appropriate

Section A: PERSONAL DATA OF PARENTS/GAURDIAN

Sex: Male() female()

Local government

Employment status: Employed () Self-employed () Not employed ()

Educational qualification: Primary () Secondary () tertiary ()

Occupation: Civil servant () Self-employed () Not employed ()

Section B: Student Section

Likert Scale: (1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree)

- Current Educational status: Primary () Secondary ()
- I often use my local language (Hausa/Fulani/Kanuri) when speaking English:
- My English teacher explains things clearly in English:
- There are enough English storybooks and learning materials in my class:
- I find learning English difficult and boring:
- My poor English affects my performance in other subjects:
- It's hard to practice English outside of school in my community:
- The conflict situation makes it harder to focus on learning English:

Section C: Open-Ended Questions (For Both)

- What is the biggest problem you face when learning/teaching English?
- What specific solutions would help improve English communication in Yobe schools?
- How does using your mother tongue (e.g., Hausa, Fulani) affect your English learning/teaching?