THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS ON CHILD LANGUAGE: THE NIGERIAN SITUATION

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ABSTRACT
Nigeria is one of the countries in the world with a high rate of illiteracy and poverty. These factors are detrimental to a child language development. The upper class, middle class and working class all prefer speaking English to their children as a first language than their indigenous languages. Studies reveal that for a child to acquire language, environmental influence and innate capacity must come to bear. A child mimics or imitates the language behaviour exhibited by his parents. In modern societies, a variety of media of communication are playing an ever increasing role in the development of a child language. However, a child's access to these depends largely on his parental socio - economic status. This work is an attempt to investigate how a family's socio- economic status affects a child language development. It also seeks to examine some assumptions on the influence of parental socio - economic background on the acquisition of English as L1 or L2 [First Language or Second Language] by some Nigerian children in cities. The paper attempts to expose the extent to which wrong modelling inhibits proper development of English Language in the Nigerian child and also proffer suggestions.

Keywords: Upper Class, Middle Class, Middle Class, Working Class, Lower Class.

INTRODUCTION
English Language is the language of globalization. It serves as a unifying medium of communication. Also it functions as language of commerce, business, diplomacy and education. English is the medium of instruction in schools: lessons are taught and textbooks are written in it. Thus it is the language of prestige. Because of its importance in the Nigerian environment a lot of parents now try to see that their children achieve proficiency in it as early as possible. This is done by speaking English to the child rather than an indigenous language.

Despite the complexity of learning a language, every normal child learns to speak and understand language in the first few years of its life without formal tutoring or instruction. A unique and inborn capacity in the child to extract words, meanings, sentence structures and grammatical rules from the complex stream of sound he hears (Chomsky:1964) and the environment which includes all social variables present (Fromkin and Rodman: 1998) combine to bring about language. Thus a
systematic orchestrated enabling environment stimulates to language (English) rich start in a child.

**STAGES OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

Children learn language and speech by listening to the language around them and practising what they hear, thereby figuring out the rules of the language. This learning is in stages and it starts at birth.

From birth, a child is aware of the sounds in his environment and responds by crying, waking up from his sleep, being still and startled depending on the sound. By the time he is three months, he coos and laughs when content and differentiates his cries in different situations - hunger, pain, discomfort, and so on (cries differentiates).

Between the fourth and sixth month the child responds to changes in the tone of one's voice and is able to decipher speech from other sounds. Toys that make noise, music and rhythm take his fancy. Babbling starts in this age range as he produces sounds which may be likened to talking.

A child begins to obviously listen to speech and respond (for instance, he turns or answers when called by his/her name between the seventh and twelfth month. His babbling at this stage includes consonants and vowels. He does not depend only on crying to communicate; he uses speech and other sounds. Also, he recognizes familiar objects and responds to request and questions. This is when his first word is likely to emerge i.e. the tail end of babbling called echolalia.

Following the pre-word or pre linguistic stage (i.e. cries, babbling, cooing, lalling and echolalia) is the holophrastic speech, a stage when the child uses one - word in place of adult sentences. His one - word utterances accompanied by gestures and other paralinguistic features make meaning only within the context of situation (Halliday, 1975).

The first under stable words of a child are often reduplicated syllables like mama, papa or single consonant - vowel syllables like ba, ta, (De villers and De Villers: 1979).

Pointing to pictures and naming them occur between the First and Second years of the life of a child. He now enjoys listening to simple stories, songs and rhymes. He obeys simple commands, responds to simple questions and asks two - word questions as he acquires more words. For instance a child is able to make demands example, "give me" at the two - word stage otherwise called Pivot Grammar.

In the second and third years, a child has a variety of vocabulary, having a word for almost everything within his experience. He understands contrasting concepts like hot/cold. Come or stoop/go, sweet/bitter, good/naughty or bad. He also has the ability to understand commands involving two stages - Pick up your spoon and put it on the table.

He becomes more expressive at age three. He now understands simple who, what and where questions and can respond in a combination of three, four or more words that is, telegraphic speech. Between the fourth and sixth year, the child understands everything said
to him. He can now construct long (detailed) and short sentence variations. The child now speaks clearly and fluently and his language is close to that of an adult. Observation and imitation are essential in a child's language development (learning). This is because he learns from his own experiences and that of others. According to Skinner (1957), cited in Shaffer (2002), influential theory of imitation, learning through observation follows the sequence of attention, retention, reproduction and motivation. A learner must first pay attention to the crucial details of the model's behaviour and must retain or store all the relevant information in his memory until he is in need of it. At the point of need the learner reproduces the model's behaviour, which is often enhanced by some form of reinforcement (Skinner: 1957). However, reproduction in language development is imaginative and creative; it is the highest aspect of abstract intelligences. It is far beyond mere imitation of speech. In other words, in addition to imitation, practice and reinforcement, the child use or understand language in ways which portray him/her as in natural possession of some language acquisition device (Chomsky, 1964; Lenneberg, 1967).

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCE ON LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

The child's environment (socio - cultural and physical) is made up of human and non-human elements, which serve as models in his language development. The human elements include parents, siblings, peers and other members of the family while the human non-elements include the media (T.V, radio etc) computers, games, and toys and so on. Exposure to these depends largely on the child's parental socio - economic background. These include parent level of education, enlightenment, occupation, level of income, religious and moral values, culture and geographical location. Nigeria being heterogeneous society intermarriage is inevitable. Thus several languages and cultures coexist. Where a couple comes from different linguistic backgrounds (example, Tiv and Efik) a language choice of English is made, sometimes because either party or both do not speak the others language or just as a form of agreement. Also prestige is attached to ability to speak or communicate in English. As a result most Nigerian parents especially in urban areas crave for early acquisition of English Language by their children.

In Nigeria, like other African countries, proficiency in English is synonyms with formal education. In acquiring English as a first Language, education is important for the child's parents especially the mother, because of the natural bond that exists between the mother and the child. Although activities such as reading to the child, playing rhyming games, singing songs, talking about letters and sounds and taking the child to the library are more vital than a mothers educational qualification, carrying them out depend on the mother's educational qualification. The educated and the rich are often found in good residential areas (clean, quiet) in some cases residential quarters are made available for staff according to their ranks in organizations and establishments. Children in such areas are more likely to come in contact with good English. Even when either or both parents are not educated with a high level of income parents are able to provide sophisticated
media and toys, which facilitate high-level cognitive and linguistic development. Such parents are also able to sponsor their children to attend elitist schools. The non-educated and low income earners however dominate ghetto areas where slang's and Pidgin English are predominant. Such environments are detrimental to a child who is in the process of acquiring English as his first Language, he finds it difficult to decipher between the varieties (Languages).

The television and radio are significant agents of socialization, which are today found in most homes. However not all programmes transmitted by these media are instrumental to a child language development. The level of education, enlightenment, religious and moral values of parents determine which programmes he is likely to be exposed to and If a child has parents who belong to denomination that is against watching television programmes such a child may not be exposed to this media. Although there are negative sides to media programmes, there is also a positive side of it. Children educational programmes such as "Sesame Street" give children the opportunity to learn letters of the alphabet, words, numbers, songs, rhymes and social skills. This is however, appropriate with parental guidance.

Despite the edge the child of the educated may have over that of the uneducated, if his parents do not spend quality time with him as a result of being away to work, he may not be helped positively in his language acquisition.

**CONCLUSION**

Technology enhances learning and general child development, but a child cannot be left on his own to develop especially his language. Children are able to form concepts based on their experiences. They also rely on other people's experiences through which they are able to figure out the language. However, where a model does not even know the rules, the child is at the risk of imitating wrongly.

**SUGGESTIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD**

According to UNESCO study, the aim of education is the physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical interaction of a person into a complete human being. One of the objectives of education is to transform children from different social classes into humans committed to work for mankind. To acquire attributes such as: kindness, honesty, love, fellowship, freedom, accepting others without prejudices, children are to be moulded only by teaching them the importance of these human values.

In most societies, people are divided into four social classes namely: upper class, middle class, working class and the lower class. This is the social ladder in which people are grouped on the basis of esteem, prestige through education or wealth etcetera. The lower class is the last in the social ladder, so the lower class families suffer from the difficulties associated with it. One of the problems affecting the members of the lower class is inadequate exposure to Standard English.
English language occupies a very strategic position in almost all the aspects of human endeavour in the world. This means the children from the lower class would be excluded from all the benefits that come with English usage. To narrow the gap between the children from poor families and their rich counterparts, solutions must be provided to solve this problem of substandard English. The following are some of the suggestions the researcher think can tackle this problem:

**Donations:** The government, Non Governmental organization and philanthropists should provide grants, loans with low interest rate, to low income earners. This will help them buy basic educational materials for their children. Having instructional materials will help breach the gap between poor and rich pupils. This is so because the children from poor families now have access to modern gadgets that enhance their abilities to acquire Standard English. They should also assist the lower class families with finance so that they can enroll their children in kindergarten. At preschool, the pupils will be exposed to standard English as well as mingle with children from the privilege families. Mingling with the children of the rich will enable less privilege group acquire general knowledge, hence total development?

**LISTENING SKILL**
Pupils especially those from poor backgrounds, should be encourage to listen attentively in order to understand the lessons. Findings from studies show that, in child language development acquisition, a child hears and imitates the sounds of adults around him. A pupil from lower class status who is always in academic environment will acquire good spoken English. Listening attentively would also help the learners see connection or patterns in language.

**PROVISION OF AUDIO/VISUAL AIDS**
The teacher should make use of audio-visual aids to facilitate understanding of his lessons. Audio-visual aids make learning easier, real, concrete and dynamic. These gadgets stimulate not only the sense of sight and hearing but also the other senses. These devices make learning fun.

**ESTABLISHMENT OF LIBRARIES**
Government should establish libraries in areas where low income earners live. Libraries situated closer to their homes would stimulate the children’s interest to study. Apart from books, the libraries should contain modern educational facilities that will aid the pupils acquire the target language (English Language).

**MOTIVATION**
This is an important factor in the learning process, when a pupil is commended, he wants to try harder. There are different ways of appreciating pupils such as: little gifts, applaud, etcetera. This would trigger them to improve. Even pupils with poor spoken or written English should also be encourage, their efforts, appreciated. The personality of the teacher can also be a sort of
motivation for the pupils, if the teacher (English teacher) gives his lesson fluently and accurately, it would arouse the interest of the pupils. The pupils would want to imitate him especially his pronunciation.

GOOD RAPORT
Good cordial relationship between the teacher and the students keep the pupils in the best mood. The teacher should talk to the pupils about their communicative skills and try to find solution to the problem. Apart from having a good sense of humour, the lesson should be lively; the teacher should create conducive atmosphere for learning. Learning should be fun. The teacher should not show preferential treatment to some pupils and ignore others especially the vulnerable (low income earners children). Ignoring the vulnerable could hinder their language development; hence the teacher’s effort will be wasted.

LANGUAGE SKILLS
The teacher should provide opportunities for the pupils to practise and make use of the four language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Concepts should be revise always, homework should be given to the students to practice pronunciation, spelling, writing and reading. Enough time should be allotted to language use. The instructor should follow the traditional method after lessons; students should be given assignment related to the lesson taught.

PROVISION OF HEALTH CARE, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT
Providing health care facilities, social and emotional support for the lower class and their children would enable them concentrate on improving themselves educational instead of thinking of how to get their basic needs.

The government should organize programmes that will enlighten parents in the lower class. If possible some of the parents should be encouraged to enrol in adult educational programmes. Educating parents in this group will be of benefit to their children, hence reduction in some of the problems associated with illiteracy. Parents should be made to understand that the government wants to help them alleviate poverty. On the other hand, curriculum designers should study the language planning policies of other countries and examine the advantages of these policies that would promote acquisition of Standard English at the pre-school stage. This is an important stage where children mimic sounds. Effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) research indicated that early spoken language is the foundation for better reading and writing skills. It is thus advised that a viable home learning environment should be made possible for the child. If English Language cannot be appropriately acquired in the home environment, children should be exposed to indigenous languages and be later left to acquire English as a second language. Also parents should learn to read to their children and play word games and rhymes with them, where it is affordable a teacher may be employed.
Also, talking would be more appropriate, parents should make talking fun for the children whatever language they may acquire first. Workshops, Seminars and conferences should be organized for teachers on a regular basis to acquaint them with skills and innovations that would improve their teaching methods. Above all, teachers should be tolerant, kind and patient with their learners especially those from low income class. They should be dedicated to their noble profession.

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