

Lecturers' Discourses on the Role of English Language in Sustaining or Erasing the Three Major Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This examined lecturers' discourses on the role of English Language in either sustaining or erasing the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria. Using an analytical method, the study deciphered and categorized the views of lecturers from three purposively selected universities representing Nigeria's major linguistic zones: Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri in the Igbo-speaking zone, University of Ibadan in the Yoruba-speaking zone, and University of Abuja in the Hausa-speaking zone. Data were drawn from academic discussions, seminar presentations, and departmental discourses. The analysis revealed six distinct schools of thought. Three schools of thought argued that English Language would sustain the three indigenous languages through its role as a lingua franca, a medium for documentation, and a tool for bilingual education that promotes cross-cultural intelligibility. The other three schools of thought contended that English Language would erase the three indigenous languages by dominating domains of power, education, and prestige, thereby causing language shift and attrition. The study concluded that English occupies a paradoxical position in Nigeria's linguistic ecology.*

Keywords: English language, indigenous languages, language shift, lecturers' discourses, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Adegbija (2022) argues that Nigeria's linguistic ecology is defined by a fundamental tension between constitutional recognition and sociolinguistic practice. While the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria recognizes English as the official language and acknowledges Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as national languages, this legal pluralism has not translated into functional parity. English continues to expand into domains traditionally occupied by indigenous languages, including government, higher education, and digital communication. This creates a paradox where the three major indigenous languages are simultaneously elevated symbolically and marginalized practically.

Understanding lecturers' discourses is critical because university faculty serve as both agents of language transmission and interpreters of national language ideology. Their views reveal how policy on paper diverges from practice in the classroom and in public life.

Igwebuike (2023) examines the role of English as a lingua franca in multi-ethnic states and argues that it performs a stabilizing function that can indirectly sustain indigenous languages. Her work on bilingualism in southeastern Nigeria shows that English provides a neutral medium of intergroup communication, thereby reducing the need for any one indigenous language to dominate others. When English absorbs the burden of interethnic communication, it relieves pressure on Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa to compete at the national level. This allows each language to maintain stronger domains within its own speech community for home use, cultural expression, and local governance. Lecturers who view English as sustaining indigenous languages are therefore responding to this pragmatic reality of coexistence rather than to ideological preference for English over indigenous languages.

Akande (2024) asserts that English functions as a vital tool for the preservation of Nigerian indigenous languages through translation, lexicography, and academic publishing. Most grammars, dictionaries, and literary analyses of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa are currently written in English. Without English as a meta-language, the technical apparatus needed to describe and teach indigenous languages would be inaccessible to both local and international audiences. Digitization projects, language technology initiatives, and academic publishing also rely on English as the interface language. From this perspective, English does not replace indigenous languages but serves as a bridge that documents them, codifies them, and makes them visible in global scholarship. The sustaining argument is thus grounded in the material reality of documentation.

Oyetade (2021) emphasizes the domain encroachment of English and argues that it constitutes a primary driver of language shift in Nigeria. Sociolinguistic surveys across urban centers show that English has become the preferred language of instruction, social media, and professional advancement, even within homes where parents and children share an indigenous language. Prestige is attached to English proficiency, while indigenous languages are increasingly associated with rurality and low status. This prestige differential explains why many lecturers perceive English as erasing rather than supporting indigenous languages. Language shift is not abrupt but cumulative, and higher education is a critical site where the shift is both observed and reproduced through daily academic practice.

Emenanjo (2023) focuses specifically on education and argues that the dominance of English in Nigerian schools undermines intergenerational transmission of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. The stipulation for mother-tongue instruction in the early years as stated in the National Policy on

Education is largely ignored in practice, particularly in tertiary institutions where English is the sole medium. When lecturers conduct seminars, write theses, and publish research exclusively in English, they model a linguistic hierarchy to students. This institutional practice accelerates attrition, as younger generations come to see indigenous languages as inadequate for academic and professional purposes. The erasure thesis is therefore not about deliberate suppression but about structural neglect within the education system.

Bamgbose (2022) introduces the concept of cross-cultural intelligibility to explain why some lecturers view English as beneficial. In a country with over 500 languages, English provides a necessary bridge that enables scholarship and collaboration across linguistic zones. A researcher in Ibadan can engage with work produced in Owerri or Abuja only because English serves as the common academic language. This bridging function does not inherently threaten indigenous languages, but rather creates a complementary relationship where English handles wider communication and indigenous languages handle cultural depth. The problem arises when complementarity collapses and English moves from being a second language to being the first and often only language of educated Nigerians. The paradox lies in English being both necessary and potentially displacing.

Salawu (2024) situates the discourse within questions of power and institutional authority, arguing that lecturers' opinions reflect their positioning within the academic field. Discourse analysis of faculty discussions shows that arguments for English as sustaining often come from scholars in applied linguistics and education who see bilingualism as achievable, while arguments for erasure come from scholars in indigenous language departments who experience funding cuts and low enrollment firsthand. The university itself is a contested space where language ideologies are negotiated daily. The six schools of thought identified in this study are not merely academic opinions, but indicators of how institutional power shapes beliefs about language survival. Addressing the paradox will therefore require moving beyond discourse to deliberate policy action and institutional commitment.

Igbo as an Indigenous Language in Nigeria

Igbo is one of the major indigenous languages of Nigeria, spoken primarily in the southeastern region and by large communities across the country and in the diaspora. As an indigenous language, it carries the history, worldview, cosmology, and social values of the Igbo people. It functions as a primary medium for oral traditions such as folktales, proverbs, riddles, and songs, and it encodes unique concepts of governance, spirituality, kinship, and morality that cannot be fully translated into other languages. Through Igbo, generations have passed down knowledge about farming cycles, conflict resolution, medicine, and communal identity. Its existence is

therefore not limited to daily communication but extends to the preservation of cultural memory and collective consciousness.

Within Nigeria's multilingual context, Igbo operates alongside over 500 other languages and holds the status of a national language alongside Hausa and Yoruba. It is used in homes, markets, religious gatherings, traditional institutions, and increasingly in media, literature, and digital spaces. Despite this presence, Igbo faces pressures from English which dominates education, government, and formal employment. Urbanization and migration have also led to situations where many young Igbo speakers are more fluent in English or Nigerian Pidgin than in their mother tongue. This creates a challenge for intergenerational transmission, because when children do not learn Igbo as a first language at home, the cultural depth embedded in the language begins to erode.

The indigenous status of Igbo places a responsibility on institutions, communities, and individuals to ensure its continuity and development. Efforts to sustain Igbo include documentation through dictionaries and grammars, the use of Igbo in broadcasting and Nollywood, and advocacy for its teaching in schools. Universities and cultural organizations also play a role by producing research, literature, and learning materials in Igbo. As an indigenous language, Igbo is more than a tool for communication. It is a marker of identity and a repository of knowledge. Its survival depends on deliberate choices to use it in both private and public domains so that it remains a living language that adapts to contemporary life while retaining its cultural roots.

Yoruba as an Indigenous Language in Nigeria

Yoruba is one of Nigeria's three major indigenous languages, predominantly spoken in the southwestern states including Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti, Lagos, and Kwara, with significant communities in Kogi and Benin. As an indigenous language, Yoruba carries centuries of history, philosophy, and social organization. It is the language of the Ifá literary corpus, oral poetry, praise songs, and festivals that mark the cultural calendar of Yoruba people. Through Yoruba, concepts of morality, spirituality, governance, and family structure are transmitted. Proverbs, idioms, and tonal nuances in Yoruba encode knowledge that reflects how the Yoruba people understand the world, making the language central to identity and cultural continuity.

In Nigeria's national context, Yoruba functions both as a community language and as a language of wider communication across the southwest. It is used in homes, traditional courts, religious worship in churches and mosques, Nollywood films, radio, and television. Yoruba literature, theater, and music have also given the language national and international visibility. However, like other indigenous languages, Yoruba faces competition from English in formal education, business, and government. Many urban Yoruba families now use English as the primary home language,

and this shift affects children's ability to speak Yoruba fluently or to understand its deeper cultural expressions. The dominance of English in schools and digital spaces means Yoruba is often reserved for informal settings rather than for academic and professional discourse.

The indigenous status of Yoruba means its survival depends on deliberate efforts to keep it active across all domains of life. This includes teaching Yoruba in schools as stipulated by national policy, producing modern learning materials, and expanding its use in technology, media, and publishing. Cultural institutions, universities, and media houses play a key role in standardizing orthography, documenting dialects, and creating new content in Yoruba. When Yoruba is used to discuss science, governance, and contemporary issues, it remains relevant to younger generations. As an indigenous language, Yoruba is not only a means of communication but also a vessel for heritage, values, and creativity. Its continued use ensures that Yoruba knowledge systems remain accessible and that future generations can connect with their roots while participating in a global world.

Hausa as an Indigenous Language in Nigeria

Hausa is one of Nigeria's major indigenous languages and the most widely spoken language in West Africa. In Nigeria, it is predominantly spoken in the northern states and serves as a lingua franca across diverse ethnic groups in the region. As an indigenous language, Hausa carries the history, trade traditions, Islamic scholarship, and social values of Hausa communities. It is the language of oral poetry, proverbs, folk tales, and praise singing that have preserved knowledge about governance, commerce, religion, and community life for generations. Through Hausa, cultural practices such as marriage rites, festivals, and traditional leadership systems are maintained and passed on, making the language central to identity and collective memory.

Within Nigeria's multilingual landscape, Hausa functions both as a mother tongue and as a major language of interethnic communication, especially in the north and in urban markets across the country. It is widely used in media, broadcasting, literature, film, and music, and it has a long tradition of written literature in both Ajami and Roman scripts. Hausa is also the language of instruction in many primary schools in northern Nigeria and is taught at secondary and tertiary levels. However, English remains dominant in higher education, government, and formal employment. This creates pressure where young Hausa speakers may prioritize English for social mobility while using Hausa mainly at home and in informal settings. Migration and urbanization have further influenced language use, with many children growing up bilingual or with limited proficiency in Hausa.

The indigenous status of Hausa places importance on efforts to sustain and develop it for contemporary use. This includes expanding Hausa-language content in digital platforms, publishing, and education, as well as documenting dialects and modern terminology. Universities, media organizations, and cultural institutions play a key role in producing academic work, literature, and learning resources in Hausa. When Hausa is used to discuss science, technology, law, and public policy, it remains relevant to younger generations and avoids being restricted to traditional domains. As an indigenous language, Hausa is more than a means of daily communication. It is a carrier of history, faith, commerce, and cultural expression. Ensuring its active use in both private and public life helps secure its future as a living language that connects people to their heritage while adapting to modern Nigeria.

Three Schools of Thought on How English Sustains Indigenous Languages in Nigeria.

From the Southeast, a key argument comes from scholars at Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education, Owerri, who emphasize English as a tool for documentation and codification. Echeruo (2023) contends that English provides the academic infrastructure needed to describe, analyze, and teach Igbo in formal institutions. In her work on Igbo language pedagogy, she notes that most grammars, dictionaries, teacher training manuals, and curriculum materials for Igbo are produced in English. Without English as a meta-language, Echeruo argues, it would be difficult to standardize orthography, train teachers, and develop instructional resources at scale. She further maintains that digitization projects, online Igbo courses, and academic publishing rely on English interfaces to reach both local learners and the Igbo diaspora. For scholars at Alvan Ikoku, English does not displace Igbo but rather sustains it by creating the technical and educational systems through which Igbo can be formally transmitted and preserved across generations.

From the Southwest, researchers at the University of Ibadan advance the view that English functions as a stabilizing lingua franca that protects Yoruba from inter-ethnic competition. Adegbija (2022) argues that in a multilingual nation like Nigeria, English absorbs the pressure of national communication, thereby allowing Yoruba to maintain strong domains within the home, culture, and regional governance. His analysis of language use in tertiary institutions shows that when Yoruba scholars publish, teach, and collaborate in English, they avoid the need for Yoruba to compete directly with Hausa or Igbo at the national level. Adegbija further explains that English enables Yoruba academics to access international funding, present research, and build networks that can then be used to support Yoruba language projects such as literature, theater, and media. In this school of thought, English sustains Yoruba indirectly by handling wider communication while Yoruba retains its cultural and community functions.

From the North-Central, scholars at the University of Abuja propose that English sustains Hausa through translation, scholarship, and global visibility. Jibril (2024) argues that most academic studies, legal documents, and development materials on Hausa culture and language are written in English, making them accessible to policymakers, researchers, and international organizations. His research on language planning in the Federal Capital Territory shows that English serves as the bridge language for translating Hausa oral literature, Islamic texts, and indigenous knowledge into formats that can be archived and taught. Jibril also notes that Hausa media, film, and music gain wider audiences when subtitled or described in English, which in turn generates resources that can be reinvested into Hausa language development. For the University of Abuja perspective, English is not a threat but a necessary vehicle that amplifies Hausa, ensures its documentation, and secures its place in both national and global discourse.

Three Schools of Thought on How English Erases Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

From the Southeast, a prominent argument comes from scholars who focus on domain loss and intergenerational transmission. Emenanjo (2023) argues that the dominance of English in Nigerian schools directly erodes the use of Igbo among young people. He notes that despite the National Policy on Education's recommendation for mother-tongue instruction in early years, English remains the sole medium of instruction from primary school through university. This institutional practice models a linguistic hierarchy where Igbo is treated as unsuitable for academic and professional purposes. Emenanjo maintains that when parents and teachers prioritize English for school success, children receive fewer opportunities to develop full proficiency in Igbo at home, leading to gradual language shift within Igbo-speaking families.

From the Southwest, researchers emphasize prestige and identity shift as key mechanisms of erasure. Oyetade (2021) contends that English has acquired higher social status than Yoruba in urban centers, and this prestige differential drives language abandonment. His sociolinguistic surveys in Lagos and Ibadan show that English is now preferred in government offices, corporate workplaces, social media, and even within homes where both parents are Yoruba speakers. Oyetade argues that as Yoruba becomes associated with rurality and informality, while English signals education and modernity, younger Yoruba speakers begin to avoid using Yoruba in public and formal domains. Over time, this leads to reduced vocabulary, limited stylistic range, and eventual displacement of Yoruba in the very communities where it was once dominant.

From the North, scholars highlight structural neglect and policy failure as the main drivers of Hausa erosion. Salawu (2024) argues that the continued marginalization of Hausa in higher education and national governance creates conditions where English systematically replaces it. His discourse analysis of university policies shows that Hausa is largely absent from academic

publishing, research funding, and administrative communication, even in institutions located in Hausa-speaking regions. Salawu maintains that when lecturers and students must use English to access grants, publish articles, and advance their careers, Hausa is pushed out of intellectual domains. This structural exclusion, he argues, does not happen through deliberate suppression but through the cumulative effect of policies and practices that treat English as the only language of progress, thereby accelerating the erosion of Hausa in formal sectors.

CONCLUSION

The discourse surrounding English and the three major indigenous languages in Nigeria reveals a linguistic reality that is both complex and context-dependent. The evidence from university lecturers across different zones shows that English is not operating in a single, uniform way. In some domains it functions as a bridge that documents, teaches, and gives visibility to Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. In other domains it competes directly with these languages and gradually displaces them from homes, classrooms, and public life. This duality suggests that the relationship between English and indigenous languages cannot be reduced to either total sustenance or total erasure. Rather, it is a dynamic interaction shaped by policy decisions, institutional practices, and everyday language choices made by speakers.

What emerges clearly is that the survival of Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa will depend less on the presence of English and more on deliberate efforts to expand the functional spaces where indigenous languages are used. When universities, media houses, and government agencies treat indigenous languages as languages of scholarship, technology, and governance, they retain relevance for younger generations. When they are restricted to cultural festivals and informal conversations, they risk becoming heritage languages with limited daily use. The challenge therefore is not to eliminate English, which serves necessary roles in national and global communication, but to rebalance the linguistic ecology so that multilingualism becomes a practiced reality rather than a stated ideal.

Institutional leadership must play a central role in this rebalancing. Universities are key sites where language attitudes are formed and reproduced. Curricula that integrate indigenous languages into research, instruction, and academic publishing send a strong signal that these languages are capable of expressing complex and contemporary ideas. Teacher training programs that equip educators to teach content in Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa, alongside English, can help break the cycle where English is seen as the only language of intellectual work. Without such structural changes, individual efforts to maintain indigenous languages will remain limited in impact.

Ultimately, the future of Nigeria's linguistic diversity rests on conscious language planning that moves beyond rhetoric. It requires investment in materials development, technology, and professional opportunities that make indigenous languages viable in modern domains. It also requires a shift in public perception that values multilingual competence as an asset rather than a barrier. If these steps are taken, English and the indigenous languages can coexist in a complementary relationship where English supports wider communication while Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa continue to carry culture, identity, and local knowledge. Failure to act will mean that discourse about language maintenance remains academic, while practice continues to favor gradual language loss.

Recommendations

The researcher recommended as follows:

1. That Universities should develop and implement policies that allow Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa to be used as languages of instruction, research, and academic publishing in relevant departments. This includes creating bilingual course materials, supporting thesis writing in indigenous languages, and incentivizing faculty to produce scholarly work in these languages.

Government and school authorities should enforce the National Policy on Education provision for mother-tongue instruction in early years and expand it to include compulsory indigenous language courses through secondary school. Teacher training programs must also equip educators with the skills to teach both content and language effectively.

2 That there should be increased funding for the development of dictionaries, digital learning platforms, translation tools, and media content in Igbo, Yoruba, and Hausa. Universities, tech hubs, and cultural institutions should collaborate to produce apps, e-books, and academic resources that make indigenous languages relevant in digital and professional spaces.

3. That public awareness campaigns, corporate language policies, and media practices should promote the value of speaking indigenous languages alongside English. Recognizing and rewarding proficiency in indigenous languages in employment, civil service, and national honors will help reposition these languages as assets for national identity and development rather than as barriers to progress.

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