Nigerian Cultural Diversity and the Place of Pidgin Language: A Study of LASUSTECH Students

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Abstract

This paper examines Nigerian cultural diversity and the place of pidgin language within it. The study was conducted at Lagos State University of Science and Technology, (LASUSTECH), Ikorodu, Nigeria. Anchored on social identity theory, the study employed qualitative methodology with data collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) as approaches to gain an insight into the cultural diversity and the roles of Pidgin English in Nigeria. Out of 56 participants interviewed, the results showed that the majority of the students identified themselves as belonging to the Yoruba ethnic group. In addition, the majority of them believed that pidgin was an important part of their culture. The study also revealed that there was considerable variation between different student groups, with some using Pidgin extensively, while others only relied on it in certain situations. The findings of the study suggest that there is a strong relationship between Nigerian cultural diversity and the role of pidgin language. The paper suggests that further research be conducted to further explore this dynamic relationship.

Keywords: Culture, Diversity, Nigeria, Pidgin, Student

Introduction

When individuals who speak different languages need to communicate but lack a common language, a pidgin language may develop (Sahabi, 2018). A pidgin's vocabulary typically originates from one language, referred to as the 'plexiform', and is often learned as a secondary language for communication purposes. Nigerian Pidgin English is an example of a pidgin language that blends indigenous languages and English, commonly spoken in western and southern Nigeria. It has grown in popularity among younger Nigerians, creating competition among the three principal languages for the status of the super-official national language, which English has long held. This increased growth and the spread of Nigerian Pidgin English among the younger generation of Nigerians shows a high level of democratization of the language in Nigeria. This is slowly creating an inconsistent competition among the contending three principal languages for the status of super-official national language in Nigeria.

In Nigeria, Pidgin English has become a common social medium of communication, particularly as many tourists worldwide are eager to understand a simplified Nigerian English to keep their dealings comfortable and rewarding in commercial cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt, and Benin City, the Niger Delta regions, where a significant number of foreign workers reside (Research Clue, 2020: para 8). Nigerians from different ethnic backgrounds may use pidgin to communicate because it is a shared language among the members of their

social group. Pidgin also promotes greater understanding between speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds, as it does not require extensive knowledge of any particular language.

Considering the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) potentials and its necessity within the Nigerian social and economic contexts, this study aims to explore how pidgin communication shapes interactions among Nigerian university students and how the use of pidgin communication influence identity formation among LASUSTECH students, given the potential and necessity of Nigerian Pidgin English within Nigerian social and economic contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a psychological framework that explores how individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from their membership in social groups. It was developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination (Turner, 1982). The theory suggests that a person has several selves that correspond to different circles of group membership, and different social contexts can trigger an individual to think, feel, and act based on their personal, family, or national "level of self" (Hogg & Vaughan, 2002). Additionally, individuals have multiple "social identities", which are derived from perceived membership in social groups. This perception of group membership creates in-group/self-categorization and enhancement, which favours the in-group at the expense of the out-group. Therefore, the individual self-concept is reinforced or altered within a group construct by processing social cues and input from others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986:7).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was developed to explain a process by which a person develops their identity by observing others, mimicking rewarded social behaviours, and receiving social feedback in an attempt to increase self-esteem and status among the group (Worley, 2021:1). SIT provides a model for self-categorization and social mobility that helps understand how individuals classify themselves compared to others, which is inherent to military culture. For instance, SIT aids the understanding that women veterans go from being in-group members of the military to out-group members from one day to the next, which disrupts their social identities in individualized ways (Worley, 2021:3).

Similarly, social identity switching occurs in distinct settings when activating different dimensions of the self in response to dynamic social and environmental factors (Zinn et al., 2022). In the SIT, a person has not one, "personal self", but rather several selves that correspond to widening circles of group membership. Different social contexts may trigger an individual to think, feel and act on basis of his personal, family or national "level of self" (Turner, 1982:15).

SIT explains that part of a person's concept of self comes from the groups to which that the individual belongs. An individual does not just have a personal self-hood, but multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups. A person might act differently in varying social contexts according to the groups they belong, which might include a sports team the individual supports, family, country of nationality, and the neighbourhood, among many other possibilities. Apart from the 'level of self', an individual has multiple 'social identities'. Social identity is the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of social groups (Chen & Mengel, 2016:1). In other words, it is an individual-based perception of what defines the 'us' associated with any *internalized group membership*. This can be distinguished from the notion of personal identity which refers to self-knowledge that derives from the individual's unique attributes. SIT asserts that group membership creates in-

group self-categorization and enhancement in ways that favour the in-group at the expense of the out-group.

In this context, SIT is highly relevant to studying Nigerian cultural diversity and the use of Pidgin among LASUSTECH students as it sheds light on various aspects of identity, communication, and cultural dynamics. The theory argues that students will identify with their respective ethnic backgrounds while also identifying as LASUSTECH students, leading to a complex interplay of identities. Furthermore, the theory suggests that people tend to favour their in-groups over their out-groups, which could influence how LASUSTECH students perceive and interact with each other based on their ethnic backgrounds.

The theory also explains how LASUSTECH students might use Pidgin communication as a way to identify with a broader Nigerian identity while maintaining their unique ethnic identities. Pidgin can serve as a communication tool that bridges linguistic and cultural gaps, fostering a sense of unity among students. It also serves as a way for students to level the playing field linguistically and interact on more equal terms. SIT addresses the dynamics of intergroup conflict and cooperation, and its consideration in this study could explore whether the use of Pidgin English communication contributes to improved intergroup relations or whether it inadvertently reinforces existing intergroup tensions based on cultural differences. Overall, the SIT provides a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of identity, communication, and culture among LASUSTECH students.

Literature Review on Nigerian Pidgin

In a study conducted by Ummulkairi, the academic performance of students was examined. Despite the fact that many students in Nigeria are taught English as a second language, the use of Nigerian Pidgin seemed to hinder their language acquisition and performance more than their native tongues (Ummulkairi, 2015:5). Onjewu and Okpe investigated the reasons why students preferred Pidgin English and aimed to develop strategies to minimize or eliminate these factors. The study found that the majority of students come from backgrounds where Pidgin English is dominant and that the limited time allocated to teaching English in schools was also a contributing factor (Onjewu and Okpe, 2015:737). The researchers noted that these factors are beyond the control of learning institutions since students are often non-residents and communication outside the classroom cannot be regulated. However, the problem should still be addressed.

Ankrah attempted to explore Pidgin interference errors of students in selected English language in Senior High School in Ghana (Ankrah, 2015:1). The study area was Ejura Anglican Senior High, Ejura Islamic Senior High and Sekyeredumase Senior High in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. From the study, it was concluded that the impact of pidgin is more negative than positive (Ankrah, 2015:1). The study identified that the pidgin interference error committed in the writing of English were transliteration, Pidgin induced spelling errors, omission errors, wrong pronoun use, and wrong word use. The study also identified that the most frequently committed interference error was transliterated, followed by omission errors, spelling errors wrong pronoun use and wrong word use in that order. The study recommends that English language teachers should create a classroom environment which will motivate learners to practice new skills and structures learned (Ankrah, 2015:1). Such classroom environment should be devoid of intimidation so that students can take risks and test hypothesis of structures learned.

In another study conducted by Amakiri and Igani, the influence of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), also known as "Brokin", on the teaching and learning of Standard English was examined (Amakiri and Igani 2015:122). The study explored the origins and features of Pidgin

English and compared its semantics with Standard English. The research concluded that teachers should be trained in the pedagogy of English language and that a concerted effort should be made to provide such training (Amakiri and Igani 2015:122). Improving the skills of teachers in this area would positively impact students at all academic levels. In a related development, Nwoda examined the use, perception, and recognition of NPE by Nigerian students at Coventry University (CU) in the UK. To determine the perspectives and attitudes of selected students regarding the language, an online questionnaire and a focus group interview were administered. The findings revealed that, in general, participants held a negative attitude towards Nigerian Pidgin English (Nwoda, 2023:46). The prejudices against the Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) continue to exist, having its roots in the colonial era, when the NPE was perceived as a low and corrupted language.

John-Sini bridged the gap between Wazobia radio presenters and their audience, establishing a relationship between the two (John-Sini, 2016:5). It was interesting to note that effective communication could occur even if the language used was not structured as grammarians would suggest. Osoba explained that Nigerian Pidgin (NP) speakers, belonging to the same class, socio-political and economic levels, linguistic level, and living in the same place, demonstrated an unequal power dynamic in their verbal interactions (Osoba 2018:2). This study clearly demonstrated the power dynamics present in the way Nigerians interacted among themselves as NP speakers.

Allege investigated the nature of face work in Nigerian Pidgin radio discourse to gather valid data and explanations for the dynamics of its operation (Allege, 2018:78). According to him, politeness extends beyond linguistic strategies to include culturally motivated manifestations of politeness. His findings revealed that politeness in radio discourse consists of both normative and strategic devices (Allege, 2018:78). The topic/domain of discourse and its socio-cultural perception are vital elements in establishing politeness in context, along with the formality of the speech event, audience presence, and degree of liking between participants.

Oyebola and Ugwuanyi investigated the attitudes of Nigerian respondents towards the emergence of BBC Pidgin and their perception of Nigerian Pidgin, using the interview-questionnaire approach (Oyebola and Ugwuanyi, 2023:78). The findings showed that respondents have positive attitudes towards Nigerian Pidgin and BBC Pidgin. However, their attitudes towards considering using either of the two varieties for official purposes in Nigeria were generally negative, claiming that BBC Pidgin differs from the pidgin variety they use, especially with regard to its orthography and vocabulary (Oyebola and Ugwuanyi, 2023:78).

Balogun defended Nigerian Pidgin as a fully developed language with its own rich lexico-semantics and syntax (Balogun, 2013:90). His study pointed out that Nigerian Pidgin is not an inferior or plague-ridden linguistic system compared to other well-described languages in the world (Balogun, 2013:90). Instead, it serves a broad spectrum of Nigerian inhabitants across ethnic, religious, and class boundaries. Balogun suggested that Nigerian Pidgin should be given official recognition (Balogun, 2013:90).

In another instance, Osoba and Alebiosu examined the roles of English and Nigerian Pidgin in the gradual decline of the population of speakers and the endangerment of some Nigerian languages like Efik, Ibibio, Igbo, Yoruba, and others (Osoba and Alebiosu, 2016:111). They found that most young Nigerians cannot speak their mother tongue well enough because their parents and schools discourage speaking indigenous languages at home and school, where they are referred to as 'vernaculars' (Osoba and Alebiosu, 2016:111). This points to the displacement, endangerment, and possible extinction of indigenous languages.

In the defence of Nigerian Pidgin, Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi briefly explored the evolution of Nigerian Pidgin over the years (Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi, 2015:208). They noted that any living language tends to adapt to the environment in which it operates, whether it is spoken as a first or second language (Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi, 2015:208). They further stated that the English language has served Nigeria in many capacities, such as education, commerce, politics, and administration. They concluded that when two speech communities without a common language come together for a certain purpose, a means of communication emerges (Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi, 2015:208).

Eze investigated the effects of Nigerian Pidgin English (NP) on the acquisition, learning and mastery of Igbo (other Nigerian) and English languages in Nigeria (Eze, 2023:23). Specifically, this research was interested in how Nigerians regard the Nigerian Pidgin and if they are favourably disposed to use it in their daily conversational exchanges as any other indigenous tongues. The research employed a survey research design and the population for the study was drawn from native speakers of the Igbo language as well as other ethnic nationalities residing within the South-East and North-Central geo-political zones of Nigeria. The instruments employed for data collection were questionnaires, interviews, and both participant and non-participant observations. It was observed that many Nigerians within the areas of our linguistic investigation are favourably disposed towards the Nigerian Pidgin English. It was equally observed that the prescriptions of the NPE were not altogether being implemented. Fundamentally, all the advantages which the Nigerian Pidgin enjoys in both formal (school system) and informal settings have been impacting negatively on the continued acquisition, learning and mastery of English language, Igbo, and other Nigerian languages.

However, Iwuchukwu and Okafor compared the developmental studies of the Nigerian Pidgin in the late 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century (Iwuchukwu and Okafor, 2017:107). The scholar analysed the research interest in some aspects of Nigerian Pidgin and efforts made by organizations for the promotion of Nigerian Pidgin as well as factors that tend to work against further growth of the Nigerian Pidgin. In the final analysis both scholars concluded that government policy consciousness was occasioned by the need to avoid language death or extinction (Iwuchukwu and Okafor, 2017:107).

In his work on the *Nigerian Pidgin English: Multi-preposition functionality of (fo) among Nigerian staff of Ces in Manchester*, Ibrahim in 2016 examined how the preposition "for" (English "for") functions differently in various contexts, and what inherent meaning it has that explains its semantic versatility (Ibrahim, 2016:1). This study further revealed that "fo" in NPE is used to specify the mood and attitude of the speaker. With the findings from this study, it is obvious that "fo" is mutable in every sense of its use (Ibrahim, 2016).

Endong, presented the content analysis of randomly selected print advertising copies partially written in Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE) and used for the promotion of services and products made in Nigeria (Endong, 2015:1). He showed how effective the use of NPE may be in catching the attention of readers and argued that while the use of pidgin may be relatively unnoticed in cases where its users are not dominant in the body of the advertising copy, the language has the potential of triggering the curiosity and interest of the consumer to know more about the product. It equally has the potential to create fun and increase the entertaining qualities of the print advert. He stated that these characteristics may motivate consumers to go for the product or service being promoted (Endong, 2015:1). From the extracts studies reviewed by other researchers, it can be deduced that there have been scarce studies that treated the contribution of Pidgin English as a means of communication in unifying students. Hence, this study tries to fill that gap as unity is expedient among students for a better flow of the educational process.

Research Methodology

The study adopts qualitative research method to examine how pidgin communication shapes the interactions among Nigerian university students, and explore how the use of pidgin communication influence the formation of LASUSTECH students' identities. A focus group discussion (FGD) with FGD guide as instrument was held with 56 participants with diverse ethnic and cultural background which cut across seven out of nine departments under the College of Applied and Social Sciences (CASS). These departments include Accounting, Actuarial Science, Banking and Finance, Business Studies, Marketing, Mass Communication and Hotel Management. These 56 students, eight from each department were divided into seven coded FGD groups - **FGD 1 -** Accounting, **FGD 2 -** Actuarial Science, **FGD 3 -** Banking and Finance, **FGD 4 -** Business Studies, **FGD 5 -** Marketing, **FGD 6** - Mass Communication and **FGD 7 -** Hotel Management. Representative codes were used to illustrate which focus groupings of the participants. The FGD lasted between 30 and 45 minutes for each group and the discussion was done with one of the authors as the moderator after consent was given by the students. A recording midget was used for the recording.

Population and Sample

This cross-sectional and qualitative study was conducted at the Lagos State University of Science and Technology (LASUSTECH) in Nigeria, owned and operated by the Lagos State government. LASUSTECH is located at Ikorodu in Lagos State, Nigeria. It is one of the oldest public and first Lagos State-owned tertiary institution in Nigeria, established with the promulgation of the Lagos State Edict No.1 of 1978 which gave the institution its legal existence with retroactive effect from June 1977 with academic activities starting in January, 1978 (LASUSTECH, 2023). The University reflects the city's dynamic mix of populations with a wide variety of interests, ages and backgrounds. ***The population of this study was 753 registered students during the 2022/2023 academic session*** across the seven departments under the College of Applied and Social Sciences (CASS) ***of*** LASUSTECH***, Ikorodu which include*** Accounting, Actuarial Science, Banking and Finance, Business Studies, Marketing, Mass Communication and Hotel Management***.***

The sampling of participants was done using purposeful sampling by requesting at least eight volunteers ***that are mostly influenced by Pidgin English and with good strength of communication*** across the seven out of nine departments under the College of Applied and Social Sciences (CASS). No selection was drawn from the department of General Studies because all the existing students' population made up the department. More so, Tourism and Hospitality department was left out because there was no registered student in the department as at 2022/2023 academic session that this study was conducted. Purposeful sampling is the process of identifying a population of interest and developing a systematic way of selecting cases not based on advanced knowledge of how the outcomes would appear. The aim of this type of selection according is to increase credibility and not to promote representativeness (Abayomi and Daniels, 2021:371).

FGD involves gathering data from a select group of individuals to gain a comprehensive understanding of a research question (Abayomi & Daniels, 2021; Ochieng et al., 2018). It utilizes group interaction to generate information, and the moderator encourages active participation from all participants to obtain detailed information (Abayomi & Daniels, 2021; Hom, 2018). ***In addition, choosing a sample size to be studied outside the entire obtained population saved more time unlike analysing data from the entire population, which is time consuming.***

Discussions

Category 1: Examination of how pidgin communication shapes the interactions among LASUSTECH students.

Most of the participants in **FGD 1, FGD 3, FGD 4, FGD 5,** and **FGD 7** believed and affirmed that pidgin communication has really helped in shaping their interactions among their colleagues irrespective of the tribe. They also concluded that not being able to communicate freely in the language that colleagues will understand makes them feel inferior, and threaten relationship with others. One of the students in **FGD 3** stated, *"Not being able to communicate properly with my friends or classmate put me in a tight position, especially when I'm in need of their assistance" (sic)*. Another student in **FGD 5** shared her experience, *"I was once embarrassed in my 100 level by a friend because I can't express myself correctly in English language and that singular act made me cut off our relationship because she really made me look inferior and caused me low self-esteem (sic). But overtime, when I find new friends that didn't mind speaking in pidgin, my confidence level was built back" (sic)*. This corroborated the responses from **FGD 1, FGD 4, FGD 5,** and **FGD 7** that the pidgin language encourages and smoothens relationships as everyone relate and understand one another without any form of restriction irrespective of individual tribal and cultural background.

Meanwhile, participants in **FGD 2** and **FGD 6** have divergent opinions. They posited that since English language is the official language in the country, there should be no barrier in relating with any of their colleagues. One of the students in **FGD 2** retorted, *"why should I speak in pidgin to relate? I can speak and understand English language fluently, and I don't think anyone in higher institution shouldn't be able to express him/herself in English language" (sic)*. Both **FGD 2** and **FGD 6** participants however agreed that they relied on pidgin language only in certain situations when those concerned (the receivers) could not comprehend easily or fast enough their messages spoken in English language.

Category 2: Influence of use of pidgin communication on the formation of LASUSTECH students' identities.

Findings showed that improving intergroup relations, identifying with a broader Nigerian identity, levelling the playing field linguistically and complex interplay of identities are major influences of use of pidgin communication on the formation of LASUSTECH students' identities. Participants **FGD 1** and **FGD 7** submitted that the use of pidgin communication help to identify with a broader Nigerian identity while maintaining their unique ethnic identities. It bridges linguistic and cultural gaps, fostering a sense of unity among students. **FGD 3 and FGD 5** maintained that use of pidgin communication help in creating a level playing field linguistically and interact on more equal terms as individuals engage in social comparison to enhance their self-esteem.

One participant from **FGD 4** said, *"the use of pidgin communication has helped tremendously in identifying with different ethnic backgrounds while also identifying as LASUSTECH student" (sic)*. This has led to a complex interplay of identities as summarized by **FGD 2** and **FGD 6**. Meanwhile, **FGD 6** participants believed that while pidgin communication has improved intergroup relations; it has also inadvertently reinforced existing intergroup tensions based on cultural differences.

Conclusion

This paper seeks to present an analysis of the role pidgin language plays in the Nigerian cultural context. The study sets out to examine how pidgin communication shapes the interactions among Nigerian university students, and explore how the use of pidgin

communication influence the formation of LASUSTECH students' identities. The researchers conducted interview among students through FGD, about their language preferences, usage, and how they view the role of pidgin in the Nigerian culture. The study found that pidgin is widely used among the students, with significant variation in usage depending on where they grew up. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers wish to draw the following conclusions that the use of Pidgin language spoken by students in LASUSTECH causes unifications among them and Pidgin communication among does not connote low proficiency of English Language among the LASUSTECH students. Hence, there is a strong relationship between Nigerian cultural diversity and the role of pidgin language. Therefore, English majors and scholars in Nigeria show work on developing pidgin languages to the point of standardization and intellectualization. This is important considering the fact that language is dynamic and changes over time.

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