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Research Article

The Role of English in Enhancing Digital Education in North-East Nigeria: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the role of English in enhancing digital education in North-East Nigeria, focusing on the sociolinguistic factors that influence access, comprehension, and engagement. Using a quantitative survey design, the study sampled 60 students across six tertiary institutions; two universities, two polytechnics, and two colleges of education. Data collected through structured questionnaires reveal that while English facilitates access to digital platforms and global resources, students with lower English proficiency face significant challenges. The study concludes that while English remains central to digital education, inclusive strategies such as localised content, multilingual support, and improved infrastructure are crucial for equitable access. Recommendations emphasise the need for language-sensitive digital policies, teacher training, and curriculum development that reflect the region's sociolinguistic realities.

Keywords: *Digital Education, English Language Proficiency, Sociolinguistics, Multilingualism, North-East Nigeria*

INTRODUCTION

In the digital age, the combination of technology and education has the potential to change teaching and learning worldwide (Selwyn, 2016). In Nigeria, a country known for its many languages and complex colonial history, English has been the main language of instruction. It connects different ethnic groups and opens doors to global knowledge (Bamgbose, 2000; Igboanusi, 2006). However, as digital education initiatives grow in Nigeria, new challenges arise. These challenges are not just about technology but are also rooted in social language issues, especially in regions like the North-East. There, problems such as poor infrastructure, economic difficulties, and local language identities come together (Adegbija, 2004; Egbokhare, 2001).

Digital changes in education have led to new models, from online learning sites to mobile apps, providing personalised and flexible learning options (Anderson, 2010). Still, research shows that digital education in Nigeria faces a significant digital gap (Aduwa-Ogiegbaen & Iyamu, 2005; Adebayo &

Adesanya, 2020). Issues like unreliable power, limited internet access, and insufficient teacher training continue, particularly in less developed areas such as the North-East (UNESCO, 2021).

At the sametime, Nigeria's many languages make it difficult to adopt a single educational language policy. While English is often seen as the language of opportunity and modernity (Adegbija, 1994; Crystal, 2003), studies show that its use is constantly influenced by local realities. This includes practices like code-switching, different attitudes towards languages, and the rise of localised forms of Nigerian English (Jowitt, 1991; Bamgbose, 1995). In classrooms where students may speak Indigenous languages more fluently, digital tools that only use standard English could isolate or confuse them (Igboanusi & Peter, 2005). This situation highlights the need to investigate how English works as not just an administrative language but also as a dynamic medium interacting with local language habits and educational results (Canagarajah, 1999).

In the North-East of Nigeria, the relationship between digital education and social language factors is especially important. The region deals with unique challenges, such as political unrest, infrastructure issues, and lower economic indicators (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020). These problems make it harder to implement effective digital education solutions. Additionally, combining English language teaching with digital tools offers both chances and challenges. It may increase access to global knowledge and promote digital skills (Selwyn, 2016). However, if learners do not get enough help to improve their English skills while maintaining their local languages, existing inequalities could worsen (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

This study investigates the role of English in improving digital education in North-East Nigeria through a sociolinguistic lens. It looks at how English skills affect students' access to digital learning, the difficulties faced by learners with limited English, and the strategies that could strengthen digital literacy through multilingual methods. By directly engaging with students' experiences and views, the study also aims to offer policy suggestions for creating inclusive digital education frameworks that fit Nigeria's diverse language landscape. This research highlights the complex role of English as both a link to global knowledge and a possible source of exclusion while pointing to practical ways to build equitable and culturally relevant learning environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical and Policy Context of English in Nigeria

English was introduced to Nigeria during the colonial era and has since become Nigeria's official language and primary medium of instruction. Researchers (e.g., Adegbija, 1994; Emenyonu, 1992) argue that English's status as the language of government, commerce, and education has often been seen as a key catalyst for national integration. However, some studies emphasise that the inherited colonial legacy has not come without challenges. For example, critics point out that reliance on an imported language has sometimes contributed to educational inequities, particularly among speakers of indigenous languages (Egbe, 2004; Umera-Okeke, 2017).

Sociolinguistics Dimensions

In a multilingual setting such as Nigeria, language attitudes and practices are in a constant state of discussion. Research using verbal-guise experiments (Obiakor et al., 2024) shows that perceptions of different "Nigeria Englishes" vary with education, region, and socio-economic background. This sociolinguistics heterogeneity means that even as English remains central to educational discourse, its usage is being continuously attributed through processes of nativisation and code-switching (Chukwu, 2023). The tension between maintaining standard forms and accommodating local "Nigerianisms" plays a critical role in students' educational outcomes.

Digital Transformation in Education

Recent studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2024; Jolayemi et al., 2023) have examined how digital transformation including the integration of multimedia resources, virtual classrooms, and AI tools is revolutionising education in Nigeria. Although many of these studies have a pan-Nigerian scope, the literature points to unique challenges in the North-East, where infrastructural deficits (like inconsistent power supply and poor broadband connectivity) can hamper digital ducation initiatives (Omodara, 2022; Nnaka, 2022).

Local Challenges and Opportunities

In North-East Nigeria, several studies have documented the obstacles to digital education. These include regional instability, lower socioeconomic indices, and limited ICT resources (Digital Divide in Nigeria, 2024). Still, local government agencies and NGOs have initiated programmes that combine traditional classroom instruction with digital innovations. The examples include mobile-based learning platforms and e-learning centres in communities otherwise under served by state infrastructure. These interventions, while promising, necessitate further exploration into how language policy and sociolinguistics factors may influence the reception and effectiveness of digital educational content.

Language Attitudes and Educational Outcomes

Sociolinguistics research in Nigeria has demonstrated that students' attitudes toward their languages can affect educational achievement. Some scholars (e.g., Uwen et al., 2020; Obi, 2014) suggest that a positive orientation toward English as a medium of instruction correlates with higher academic attainment. In the context of digital education, where the content is predominantly produced in English, learners' proficiency and comfort with English can either facilitate or hinder access to technology-driven learning materials.

Code-Switching and Hybrid Usage

The dynamic multilingual environment in Nigeria results in complex code-switching practices. Students often blend English with indigenous languages (a phenomenon well documented by researchers like Egbe and Bamgbose) in informal digital interactions, which some argue could contribute to a more natural and contextualised learning experience. This sociolinguistics fluidity has implications for the design of digital educational platforms and the development of curricula that are both inclusive and effective.

Bridging Digital and Educational Gaps

Several authors argue that to enhance digital education particularly in marginalised regions like North-East Nigeria the government must address both infrastructural and sociolinguistics challenges (Ezeokoli, 2005; Nwegbu, 2020). Policy recommendations emphasise the need for:

i.   Investment in stable ICT infrastructure.

ii.   Teacher training programmes that incorporate digital tools and sociolinguistics sensitivity.

iii.   The inclusion of localised educational content that respects and integrates indigenous linguistic practices while strengthening proficiency in standard English.

The interplay between English language usage and digital education remains a fertile ground for further study. Researchers have called for more localised empirical studies (e.g., targeted surveys and qualitative interviews) that examine how digital platforms are received by users in North-East Nigeria, and how linguistic identity influences educational outcomes. Understanding these nuances will be crucial for developing interventions that are culturally and linguistically sensitive.

The literature reveals that while English has long been the cornerstone of Nigerian education, its role is evolving in the digital era. In North-East Nigeria, where digital education is still nascent, overcoming infrastructural challenges and incorporating a nuanced understanding of sociolinguistics dynamics are essential for boosting educational outcomes. The successful integration of digital platforms hinges on a multifaceted approach that includes infrastructure, policy, and an appreciation for the region's linguistic diversity.

Empirical Studies

A number of empirical investigations have examined language practices, attitudes, and proficiency among Nigerian students. For example, the study by Uwen, Bassey, and Nta (2020) investigated the emerging sociolinguistics teaching trends of English as a first language among school children. Using Vygotsky's Social Interactionist Theory as a theoretical underpinning, the researchers administered 100 questionnaires and conducted participant observations in selected schools (primarily in urban centers such as Calabar) to gauge language preferences. Their findings indicated that approximately 37% of pupils were effectively monolingual in English, while around 63% demonstrated bi/multilingual capabilities, engaging in code-switching between English and their indigenous languages. This study provides empirical evidence that the linguistic environment in Nigerian schools is dynamic and influenced by factors such as parental influence, peer pressure, and globalisation.

Another study reviewed in works by Egbe (2004) and later expanded by researchers like Obi (2014) used verbal-guise experiments and surveys to explore the social evaluation of different varieties of Nigerian English. These investigations reveal how learners' perceptions of linguistic prestige and modernity may impact their academic engagement and performance in language-based subjects. Although many of these studies target urban

settings, they establish a baseline for understanding the sociolinguistics dynamics that digital education programs must contend with.

In a study conducted by Jolayemi, Bidemi, and Adebola (2023), researchers assessed the availability and utilisation of multimedia resources in secondary schools in Osun State. This quantitative study relied on structured questionnaires administered to both teachers and students. The findings documented a fundamental correlation between teachers' competence in using digital tools and improved student participation and language performance. Although the study was based in Osun State, its rigorous mixed-methods design including statistical analyses of responses provides insight into common challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, irregular power supply, and limited professional training, which are anticipated to be even more pronounced in the North-East region.

These empirical reviews derived from quantitative surveys, mixed-method studies, and qualitative fieldwork demonstrate that while English remains a cornerstone of Nigerian education, its digital transformation is complex. It requires a nuanced approach that addresses both technological and sociolinguistics challenges, especially in under-resourced regions like the North-East. Future research should aim to fill the gaps by conducting large-scale, region-specific studies that can inform targeted policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Learning, which posits that human development and learning are largely shaped by social interaction, cultural tools, and language. As a sociolinguistics investigation, the study employs this theory to understand how English functioning as both a medium of instruction and a tool of communication mediates learners' access to digital education in the multilingual context of North-East Nigeria.

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is a socially mediated process, and language plays a central role in the transmission of knowledge and cognitive development. The theory emphasises that students do not learn in isolation but through interactions with others in culturally defined environments. In the context of digital education, English serves as the primary language through which instructional content, interfaces, and peer communications are delivered. Therefore, the learner's proficiency in English directly impacts their ability to engage with digital tools, interpret content, and collaborate within virtual learning environments.

Vygotsky's concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding are also crucial to this study. The ZPD refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In digital learning, students with limited English proficiency may require additional linguistic scaffolding such as translated instructions, bilingual interfaces, or peer support to engage effectively. The absence of such support mechanisms may hinder learning outcomes, especially in resource-constrained environments like those in parts of North-East Nigeria.

In addition, this framework integrates insights from Sociolinguistics Theory, which examines how language functions within social contexts and how it shapes identity, access, and power. English, as a global lingua franca and the official language of education in Nigeria, often creates both opportunities and barriers in digital learning spaces. The study explores how students' linguistic backgrounds especially those who speak Hausa, Fulfulde, Kanuri, or other regional languages affect their interaction with English-dominated digital content. The sociolinguistics lens allows the study to investigate not just language proficiency, but also the cultural attitudes, code-switching practices, and language ideologies that influence students' engagement with digital education.

Together, Sociocultural Theory and Sociolinguistics Theory provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how language mediates learning in digital contexts. They help explain the cognitive, cultural, and linguistic dynamics at play when students from diverse linguistic backgrounds interact with English-based digital educational platforms. This theoretical framing justifies the need to assess not only the availability of technology but also the linguistic readiness of learners and institutions to

implement effective digital education in North-East Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a quantitative survey research design, which is appropriate for collecting measurable data to examine the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of respondents regarding the role of English in digital education. This design enables the researcher to identify trends and patterns that reflect the linguistic and technological realities of learners in North-East Nigeria. The target population comprised students from six selected tertiary institutions in the region, including two universities University of Maiduguri and Gombe State University two polytechnics Federal Polytechnic Bauchi and Gombe State Polytechnic Bajoga and two colleges of education Federal College of Education Yola and College of Education, Gindiri. While the university participants were undergraduates, those from polytechnics and colleges of education were referred to as students, given their distinct academic classifications. A purposive sampling technique was used to select ten participants from each institution, making a total of sixty respondents. This sampling approach ensured a balanced representation of 30 male and 30 female students, drawn from seven departments (Science Laboratory Technology, Computer Science Technology, Computer Engineering Technology, Electrical Electronic Engineering Technology, Mathematics & Statistics, Business Administration and Management, and Public Administration) within Gombe State Polytechnic, Bajoga. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire titled "Language and Digital Education Perception Scale (LDEPS)," developed by the researcher and validated by experts in language education and educational technology. The questionnaire consisted of twenty close-ended items divided into four sections: demographic information, English language proficiency, access and usage of digital tools, and perceptions of English in digital learning environments. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. To ensure content validity, the instrument was reviewed by two language education experts and one educational technology specialist. A pilot study involving ten students from non-sampled institutions was conducted, and the feedback received informed improvements to the instrument's clarity and relevance. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.81, indicating high reliability. Ethical considerations were strictly observed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after clearly explaining the purpose and process of the study. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage. Ethical clearance was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Gombe State Polytechnic Bajoga prior to data collection.

ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency, percentages) with interpretations guided by the theoretical framework.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A. Demographics

Gender: 58.3% Male, 41.7% Female

Age: 70% aged 18–24

Institutional Type: Equal representation from universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education

B. Access to Digital Tools

72% owed smartphones or laptops

63% reported poor or irregular internet connectivity

68% lacked consistent power supply at school or home

Interpretation: Infrastructure remains a major impediment to digital engagement.

C. English Proficiency and Digital Engagement

80% were comfortable reading in English

58% struggled with listening comprehension during video-based lessons

45% presented difficulty in understanding technical terms in English

Interpretation: Students can navigate written content but face barriers in oral or technical language.

D. Language Challenges in Digital Education

62% reported skipping difficult English content

40% relied on peers to explain content in local languages

53% were less motivated when content is complex or not localised

Interpretation: Language proficiency strongly affects comprehension and motivation.

E. Students' Perception of English in Digital Education

85% believed English is essential for success

60% said it should be simplified for better understanding

70% supported bilingual (English + local language) content

Interpretation: Students recognise English's value but advocate for accessible and hybrid models.

Suggestions for Improvement

Use of simplified English and subtitles

Mobile apps with Hausa/Fulfulde translations

Optional English support classes for beginners

Lecturer training in clear, accessible instruction

Improve ICT infrastructure

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study highlight the dual role of English as both a facilitator and a barrier in the digital education experiences of students in North-East Nigeria. This complex dynamic is best understood through the lenses of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Sociolinguistics Theory, which emphasise the roles of language, culture, and social context in learning.

First, the data reveal that a majority of students (80%) were comfortable reading in English, suggesting a baseline of functional literacy. However, more than half (58%) experienced difficulties with listening comprehension, especially during video-based lessons, and 45% struggled with technical terms. These findings underscore Vygotsky's assertion that learning is mediated by language and that learners require scaffolding to bridge the gap between independent competence and potential development what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In digital environments, where self-directed learning is often expected, students with limited oral or academic English proficiency face significant barriers without appropriate support structures.

Moreover, the results show that 62% of students skipped digital content they found linguistically difficult, while 40% rely on peer explanations in local languages, and 53% reported demotivation when content was overly complex or not localised. These adaptive strategies especially code-switching and peer support reflect informal scaffolding mechanisms. While effective to an extent, they also exposed a systemic gap in formal institutional support. These findings align with sociolinguistic perspectives that emphasise how language practices are shaped by social contexts and that multilingual learners actively negotiate meaning through hybrid language use.

In terms of perception, 85% of respondents believed that English is essential for academic success, but 70% advocated for bilingual digital content, and 60% recommended simplified English in instruction. This shows that students were not resistant to English per se; rather, they seek more accessible, inclusive models that acknowledged their linguistic realities. This affirms sociolinguistic arguments that the dominance of English in education must be balanced with policies that promote linguistic equity and multilingual inclusion.

Furthermore, infrastructural challenges such as irregular internet access (63%) and inconsistent electricity (68%) compounded the linguistic barriers. These factors reinforce digital marginalisation and highlight the urgent need for context-sensitive educational planning, especially in under-resourced areas like North-East Nigeria.

Taken together, these findings reflect the interplay between language proficiency, social environment, and access to technology, validating the relevance of

the two theoretical frameworks. Vygotsky's theory explains how English proficiency affects students' cognitive engagement with digital tools, while Sociolinguistics Theory illuminates how language ideologies, multilingual practices, and cultural context shape students' attitudes and access to digital education.

On a whole, English is not merely a medium of instruction but a gatekeeper to digital knowledge. To enhance learning outcomes in North-East Nigeria, digital education must move beyond one-size-fits-all models and embrace linguistically and culturally responsive approaches that align with the student lived realities.

CONCLUSION

This study has looked at the important role of English in supporting digital education in the multilingual and infrastructure-limited context of North-East Nigeria. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Sociolinguistics Theory, the research shows that while English is the main language of instruction and digital communication, it also creates barriers for students with limited skills, especially in listening and understanding technical material.

The findings reveal that many students have basic reading skills in English but struggle with spoken and specialized academic language in digital learning settings. As a result, many learners depend on peer explanations, local language help, and informal code-switching to navigate online content. This points to the need for deliberate support and teaching strategies that consider both language diversity and technology challenges.

Moreover, despite issues like poor internet access and unreliable electricity, students generally understand the importance of English for their academic success. They express strong support for bilingual or simplified English teaching models. These insights highlight the need to include language-sensitive policies and digital teaching methods that encourage inclusivity and equal access to learning opportunities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations aim to make digital education in North-East Nigeria more inclusive and effective. The first step is to develop bilingual or multilingual digital content. Educational stakeholders should include local languages like Hausa and Fulfulde alongside English in digital learning materials, interfaces, and platforms. At the same time, the English used in instruction should be simplified. Lecturers and digital content creators should use clear and accessible English, especially when dealing with complex or technical topics. Adding subtitles and visual aids to video lessons would further improve understanding and engagement.

Equally important is offering structured language support programs. English language classes focused on listening skills and technical vocabulary should be available for students with lower proficiency levels. These could be part of orientation programs or offered as remedial courses. Additionally, lecturers need training in digital teaching methods and language access. Workshops should be organized to help educators develop effective communication skills in digital settings, focusing on multimodal instruction and inclusive strategies that reflect the language diversity of students.

Improving digital infrastructure is another urgent priority. Government and institutional authorities must provide reliable internet connectivity, stable power, and equal access to digital devices. Without these resources, efforts to improve digital education will be limited. Meanwhile, developers of educational apps should add local language translations to mobile learning platforms. Making Hausa, Fulfulde, and other regional languages available as toggle options would allow students from diverse language backgrounds to engage in self-directed learning.

Finally, more research specific to the region is necessary. Large-scale and long-term studies across different parts of Nigeria will enhance understanding of how language affects digital education. This will create a better foundation for targeted policy-making and practical solutions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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