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Dr. Mrs. Foluso Okebukola

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**Goke Alamu**  
*Editor*

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## Sociolinguistic Correlates of Reading Achievement: Implications for Language Education

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### Abstract

*Reading instruction in a multilingual society like Nigeria is acknowledged to be so complex an act that to teach children to read with understanding, the variables that appear to directly influence the reading act should be given the necessary attention. The paper presents the report of a study aimed at investigating the influence of sociolinguistic variables such as ethnicity and home language on comprehension in English and the language of the immediate community (Yoruba). The findings of the study indicate that:*

- *The Igbo were better than the Hausa and Yoruba in English comprehension (mean = 4.75). Followed by the Yoruba (4.53) and Hausa (2.65).*
- *The Yoruba were better in Yoruba comprehension followed by the Igbo and the Hausa (mean = 3.47, 2.50 and 0.42 respectively).*
- *Students who speak English frequently at home recorded the highest mean score in English comprehension (5.77) followed by students who speak Yoruba frequently at home (3.94).*
- *Students who speak Yoruba frequently at home had the highest mean scores (4.65) in Yoruba comprehension while the students who speak Hausa at home had the least score (.043).*

*The implications of the findings for Language Education are discussed.*

### Introduction

Specialists and researchers in sociolinguistics and reading have for several decades been interested in the study of sociolinguistic problems in reading. The reason for this is not far fetched since literature suggests that there is a close relationship between the two disciplines and that reading it may be regarded as a sociolinguistic process since it is an aspect of communication.

Sociolinguistics is concerned with investigating the relationships between language and society with the goal of a better understanding of the structure of language and of how languages function in communication. The issue of reading is closely tied to the subject of language. Man is the only creature that uses language in terms of words. In using words, man adopts verbal and written forms. The written form must have to be read for comprehension hence the importance of reading in human communication.

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In the Anatomy of Language, Boulton (1978) identified the following uses of words for communication:

- facts
- commands or wishes
- emotions
- arguments
- enquiry

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Reading is an aspect of language that Boulton (1978) noted as being pivotal to the use of words by man. Formal education normally begins with the three 'R's – Reading, wRiting and aRithmetic. The inclusion of reading and its being listed first is probably indicative of its importance to learning especially language learning. As noted by McLuhan (1967), written language is more appropriate for study purposes. This is because it offers the individual the ability to interpret the message and thus make his personal judgment than does the spoken language. Consequently reading is one of the vital language skills that a child needs. It enables the child function well within the society.

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According to Trudgill (1974) sociolinguistics provide insights in certain kinds of work such as" speech acts, studies in ethnography of speaking, kinship systems, bilingualism, code-switching and diglossia and certain "practical" concerns such as various aspects of teaching language behavior in classrooms.

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Directly under the umbrella of socio-linguistics are also studies in which concern is shown for both linguistic and social matters. This category consists of studies, which have a linguistic intent. Studies of this type are based on empirical work on language as it is spoken; its social context and are therefore intended to answer questions and deal with topics of central interest to sociolinguistics. Labov (1981) included in this category, studies in variation theory and linguistic change, the relationship between language and social class, linguistic change, the nature of linguistic variability and the structure of linguistic systems. In Trudgill's view "all work in this category is aimed ultimately at improving linguistic theory and at developing our understanding of the nature of language (1974 p.11). This according to him is genuine sociolinguistics.

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Sociolinguistic correlates of reading achievement may therefore be regarded as those linguistic and social variables or factors, which impinge or enhance reading achievement. In other words, they are those problems partly linguistic and partly sociological in nature that may be discovered when cases of reading disability are investigated from the standpoint of sociolinguistic theories of what is involved in learning to read and in reading. It is the position of this paper that fostering the reading skill in children is a good beginning to solve our reading problems as a multilingual society.

The dictates of our National Policy on Education compel the Nigerian secondary school student to learn as many as five different languages in school. During the two years of preprimary period, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is the prescribed medium of instruction. At the junior secondary school, two Nigerian languages that is, one his mother tongue and another Nigerian language other than his mother tongue should be learned. At the senior secondary level, government also approved the teaching of French and Arabic apart from Nigerian languages. The Nigerian child is therefore expected to pick up educational reading skills through oblique contacts with the reading of passages in his English set text as well as in the indigenous languages.

Reading is acknowledged to be so complex an act that to teach children to read, the variables that appear to directly influence the reading act should be given the necessary attention. One class of such variables with which this study is concerned is the background knowledge and socio-cultural factors. In a nutshell, the study is aimed at investigating the influence of ethnicity and home language on students' comprehension in both English and the indigenous languages. Specifically the study tried to answer the following questions:

- a) Does the ethnic affiliation of the student influence achievement in English comprehension?
- b) Does the ethnic affiliation of the student influence achievement in Yoruba?
- c) Does the language spoken at home influence achievement in English comprehension?
- d) Does the language spoken at home influence achievement in Yoruba comprehension?

### **Methodology**

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 112 secondary school students drawn from four schools in Lagos State. These schools were selected using a stratified random sampling procedure. The stratum of interest was the cosmopolitan nature of the schools. All schools had students from the three ethnic groups of interest. Yoruba is the language of the immediate community.

#### **Instrumentation**

Two achievement tests were used as instruments – Test of comprehension in English (TOCE) and Test of comprehension in Yoruba (TOCY). The comprehension questions were based on the reading passages.

### Reliability of Instruments

A test – retest procedure was adopted for determining the reliability of the instruments. There was a gap of one week between test administrations. The scores of the students on each of the instruments on the two administrations were correlated using Pearson product moment correlation procedure. This yielded a value of 0.70 for the English test and 0.67 for the Yoruba test.

### Analysis

The scores were analyzed by determining the means, standard deviation and t-values on the achievement of students. The mean scores were then subjected to a one – way analysis of variance to test for the statistical significance of the observed differences.

### Results

The results obtained are hereby presented:

### Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the achievement of Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo students in English comprehension.

### Ethnic Affiliation and Achievement in English Comprehension

When compared by English comprehension scores, students with Igbo ethnic background had the highest mean score (4.75) followed by students with Yoruba ethnic background (4.53). Students with Hausa ethnic background recorded the least English comprehension score (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Means and S.D.s of English Comprehension Scores of students with Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa and Other Ethnic Backgrounds*

Ethnic Affiliation	N	Mean	S.D.
Yoruba	43	4.53	2.11
Igbo	28	4.75	2.06
Hausa	31	2.65	2.09
Others	10	3.65	1.94
			F (4.03)

When subjected to a one-way analysis of variance, the observed mean differences were found to be statistically significant. Hence the null hypothesis was rejected.

### **Hypothesis II**

There is no significant difference in the achievement of Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa students in Yoruba comprehension.

### **Ethnic Background and Achievement in Yoruba Comprehension**

Table 2 shows the mean scores in Yoruba comprehension of students from Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa (and other ethnic backgrounds).

**Table 2**

*Means and S.D.s of the comprehension scores in Yoruba of Students with Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa and other Ethnic Backgrounds*

Ethnic Affiliation	N	Mean	S.D.
Yoruba	43	3.47	1.54
Igbo	28	2.50	1.08
Hausa	31	0.42	0.92
Others	10	1.59	1.05
			F (28.777)

Table 2 shows that students with Yoruba ethnic background had the highest mean in Yoruba comprehension (3.47) followed by students with Igbo ethnic background (2.50). The Hausa students had the least mean score (0.42).

When subjected to a one-way analysis of variance, the observed mean differences were found to be statistically significant. The null hypothesis of no significant difference, i.e. hypothesis II was rejected.

### **Hypothesis III**

The language spoken at home does not have any significant influence on students' achievement in English comprehension.

### **Home Language and Achievement in English Comprehension**

The ANOVA table (3) and its follow-up multiple classification analysis shows that the language spoken at home has a significant influence on English comprehension.



Those students who speak English frequently at home recorded the highest mean score in English comprehension (5.77) followed by students who speak Yoruba frequently at home (3.94). With a mean of 2.47, students who speak Hausa frequently at home ranked least. The differences in means were found to be statistically significant, leading to the rejection of hypothesis III.

**Table 3**

\*\*\*ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE\*\*\*  
V7 ENGLISH COMPREHENSION SCORE  
BY V4 HOME LANG

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif of F
Mean Effects	171.114	4	42.778	6.483	.000
V4	171.114	4	42.778	6.483	.000
Explained	171.114	4	42.778	6.483	.000
<i>Residual</i>	<i>758.886</i>	<i>115</i>	<i>6.599</i>		
Total	930.000	119	7.815		

Table 3.1

\*\*\*MULTIPLE CLASSIFICATION ANALYSIS\*\*\*

V7 ENGLISH COMPREHENSION SCORE  
BY V4 HOME LANG

Grand Mean = 4.00

Variable + Category	N	Unadjusted Independents		Adjusted for Independents +Covariates	
		Dev'n Eta	Dev'n Beta		
V4					
1. Yoruba	34	.06	.06		
2. Igbo	17	.41	.41		
3. Hausa	30	1.53	1.53		
4. English	31	1.77	1.77		
5. Others	8	.00	.00		
Multiple R Squared				.43	.43
Multiple R				.64	.62

### Hypothesis IV

The language spoken at home does not have any significant influence on students' achievement in Yoruba comprehension.

### Home Language and Achievement in Yoruba Comprehension

Table 4 reports ANOVA on Yoruba comprehension scores. Statistically significant differences were found beyond .001 hence the null hypothesis was rejected. Those students who speak Yoruba frequently at home had the highest mean scores (4.65) while the Hausa students had the least (0.43).

**Table 4**

\*\*\*ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE \*\*\*  
V9 YORUBA COMPREHENSION SCORE  
BY V4 HOME LANG

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Signif. of F
Main Effects	453.496	4	113.374	24.670	.000
V4	453.496	4	113.374	24.670	.000
Explained	453.496	4	113.374	24.670	.000
Residual	528.496	115	4.596		
Total	981.992	119	8.252		

### Discussion

The study investigated the relative performance of Yoruba and non-Yoruba students in comprehension of English and Yoruba texts. The Igbos were better than the Hausas and Yoruba in English comprehension. This might not be unconnected with the use of Pidgin English as medium of communication among the Igbo people resident in Lagos. They (the Igbo) were also found to be better than Hausas, and second to the Yoruba in Yoruba comprehension. That the Yoruba students recorded the highest mean in Yoruba (3.47) is not an unexpected result because of the greater familiarity, which the Yoruba students have with the language being their L1. The superior performance of the Igbo over the Hausa could be due to their relatively longer stay in Lagos where they have had longer contact with the Yoruba-speaking people. Most of the Igbo students had their primary education in Lagos. Most of the Hausa in the sample recently moved to Lagos for their secondary education.

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The other research questions of the study were directed at finding out the influence of the language spoken at home on students' comprehension of English and Yoruba. The data in Table 3 – indicate that students who speak English most frequently at home had the highest score in English comprehension (7.45) followed by those who speak Yoruba at home (6.18). Those who speak Hausa had the least score (4.60). Previous studies have also shown that the language spoken at home affects comprehension (Aliyu, 1984; Unoh, 1991; Tehombe, 1991).

Those students who speak English frequently at home performed better than the others for obvious reasons. Language is habit forming. The language students speak more regularly would have become a habit and they would be able to read the language better than those languages, which are less practiced. This also explains why students who speak Yoruba frequently at home did better in Yoruba comprehension than others. They would have been more familiar with the Yoruba words. Consequently reading will be a lot easier.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This study was aimed at investigating the impact of sociolinguistic factors of ethnicity and home language on the comprehension of students in English and Yoruba texts. Information gathered indicates that students from the different ethnic groups perform differently in English and Yoruba comprehension tasks. It has also been revealed that the language spoken at home does influence achievement in the languages.

The finding of this study cannot be generalized beyond the sample because of certain limitations in population sample. It can be concluded that concerted efforts should be made to encourage students to read better and wider in English to catch up with the information explosion. Furthermore, a large amount of reading is required for purposes of self-education and the development and expansion of general knowledge.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have a number of implications for language education especially as far as reading in English is concerned. There is the need to apply techniques that will help to improve the English reading competency of students from different ethnic groups. There is also the need for parents to give students opportunities at home to familiarize themselves with English through different avenues.

Students should be encouraged to speak English at home. From all indications, non-Yoruba speakers who reside in Lagos are exposed to youths whose indigenous language is Yoruba, students should therefore be encouraged to speak the

indigenous languages but not to the detriment of English because of the position it occupies in the school curriculum. It is the core of other subjects and they all rely on good mastery of English to be able to do well in other subjects.

The teachers of indigenous languages should also pay attention to those elements in the students' native language that could create problems in English. Since they must also have passed English language to be qualified as teachers, they could help students by drawing inferences from the two languages especially by using methods that have proved effective in teaching first and second languages.

The school authority can also be instrumental to the proficiency of students in teaching prose materials by providing libraries that are rich in English novels and other prose materials. It should also be a rule that students speak English while at school.

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