

Chinese Language Learning In Nigeria: Implication On Nigerian Languages

Prof Nkechinyere Anthonia Nwokoye, Dr Lucy Mgbengasha Apakama

Abstract

Language is the life wire of every individual and society and as a vehicle of communication, it aids in fostering relationship. In other words, a relationship can only exist where there is mutual intelligibility between the two parties. China and Nigeria have been enjoying a relationship which is made possible by the teaching and learning of Chinese language that invariably helps in their business enterprises. Chinese government has extensively spent so much in spreading Chinese language to most parts of the world. Nigeria is not an exception. The rate at which Chinese language is spreading today in some parts of Nigeria has shown that there is an emerging strong tie between the two nations. Businesses are growing fast among the two nations and language is the means through which exchange of goods and services are realizable. Chinese language is fast growing in Nigeria yet none of the Nigerian languages is being studied by the Chinese both in Nigeria and China. This paper is a descriptive study which used Confucius Institutes located in Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; University of Lagos; Enugu State College of Education Technical as areas of study. The study adopts the theory of social exchange as a theoretical framework. All relationships have give and take, although the balance of this exchange is not always equal. The study found out that although both languages are tonal languages yet the Nigerians learn Chinese language with enthusiasm whereas the Chinese people are not really eager to acquire proficiency in the use of Nigerian languages. The study found out that

there are many Nigerian students studying both Chinese and other disciplines in various Universities in different parts of China whereas only few Chinese counterparts are studying non-language base courses in Nigeria. This study therefore concludes that there should be equal interest in learning of the languages so as to increase and sustain the relationship among the two nations. There should not be much disparity between what Nigerians put into the relationship and what they get out of it and so balance has to be maintained.

1.0 Introduction

National unity is fostered when people communicate, hear and understand one another. Language is what makes us 'human' as well as makes us achieve unity and integration. Okediadi (2008:183) posits that language is the basis of whatever human development we can attain. Communication is the main goal of learning a living language, and it is through interaction subsequently engendered that friendly relations can be established. Language is the key to the heart of the people and when such a key is lost, the people are confused as well. On the other hand, when we treasure the key and secure it, it unlocks the door to untold riches.

Language is basically a tool for communication among and between individuals and groups. It must be able to communicate meaning to the speakers. It serves as a vehicle for expressing thoughts and feelings. Every nation has its own language. Language is the life wire of every

Prof Nkechinyere Anthonia Nwokoye
Dept of Igbo, African
& Asian Studies
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka

Dr Lucy Mgbengasha Apakama
Dept of Linguistics
& Nigerian Languages
Alvan Ikoku Federal
College of Education,
Owerri

Correspondence to
Prof Nkechinyere Anthonia Nwokoye
nkymes06@gmail.com

individual and society and as a vehicle of communication, it aids in fostering relationship. In other words, a relationship can only exist where there is mutual intelligibility between the two parties. China and Nigeria have been enjoying a relationship which is made possible by the teaching and learning of Chinese language that invariably helps in their business enterprises. Chinese government has extensively spent so much in spreading Chinese language to most parts of the world. Nigeria is not an exception. The rate at which Chinese language is spreading today in some parts of Nigeria has shown that there is an emerging strong tie between the two nations. Businesses are growing fast among the two nations and language is the means through which exchange of goods and services are realizable.

Chinese language like every other languages of the world {English, Igbo, Hausa, Russian, French, German, Swahili, Spanish, Yoruba, Efik, etc) has its origin or history as the case may be. Language has a spoken and written system and every language has a standard form and variant forms. The languages of the world borrow words from each other. The Chinese official language is Mandarin, but there are more than 80 different local languages and dialects existing in China. As one of the six official languages used in the United Nations, the Chinese language is made up of more than 80 different local languages and uses about 30 kinds of different characters. Chinese language is the common language of the Han nationality which makes up about 91.59% of the total population of China. This also makes it the common language of the whole Chinese Nation (*Nwokoye, 2017*). There are various Chinese language centres situated in places like Lagos, Anambra, Kano, Abuja, Enugu, etc. The advent of the Chinese in Africa in the Post-Colonial Era has called to question the place of African cultures and the role of the nation in the process of development and modernization. The bilateral relation

between Nigeria and China has expanded trade and strategic economic cooperation between the countries. China is considered as one of Nigeria's closest allies and partners. China is also one of Nigeria important trading, technology, etc partners.

According to *Odinye (2015)*, 85% of Nigerians view China influence positively, with only 10% expressing a negative view like the one shared by *Asumah (2011)* that China's development activities in Africa and the China Model for development are raising new questions about neo-benevolent cultural imperialism as well as disregard for African cultures. *Asumah (2011)* in his own opinion came up with a term he called Chinanization and says "...in the process of modernization and development, the convergence theory maintains that once African traditional cultures and nation states are exposed to forces of modernization, Chinanization and development, the marginal propensity of abandoning African cultures in the interest of Chinese is very high. This contributes to the bastardization of the role of the nation state in nation building and Sino-Africanization is gradually causing extinction of African traditional cultures. He cries out that unless Africans are able to navigate the dynamics of cultural imperialism, Chinanization, African development problems will continue to be irrepressible and insurmountable".

Among the African nations, Nigeria is the most Pro-Chinese nation in the world. However, Nigeria and China established formal diplomatic relation on February 10, 1971. Relation between the two nations grew stronger as a result of international isolation and western condemnation of Nigeria military rule (1970-1998). Nigeria has since become an important source of oil and petroleum for China's rapidly expanding economy and Nigeria is looking to China for help in achieving high economic growth. China has provided extensive economic, military and political support for Nigeria. In 2004 and 2006, Chinese President Hujintan made state visit to Nigeria and addressed a joint-session of national assembly of Nigeria.

Both nations signed memorandum of understanding on establishing strategic partnership (Odinye, 2015).

Another strategic cooperation between Nigeria and China was witnessed during the Niger Delta crisis when United States and other western nations were reluctant to support in providing military aid in fighting insurgency in the oil-rich Niger Delta to protect Nigeria's oil resources. In their usual cooperation, China supplied arms, equipment, training and technology to the Nigerian armed forces. Both nations also signed \$311 million USD agreement to develop cooperation in communication satellite (*Nigeria Comsat-1*) in 2007 to expand cellular and internet networks.

Nigeria is made up of hundreds of ethnic groups and so it is a multilingual nation. Okediadi (2007:379) says "the coming together of different ethnic groups with different linguistic backgrounds has thereby created problems of language diversity". Okonkwo (2002:4) as quoted by Odinye (2008:457) says "the amalgamation of the different language groups within the geopolity of Nigeria in 1914 created the potency for the conflicts within Nigeria today".

The teaching of foreign languages in Nigeria is deemed necessary for Nigeria to maintain diplomatic relations with foreign countries where these languages are spoken. It is dangerous for a country to use a single language and not be familiar with any other because it can create something similar to an implosive phenomenon, a tendency to constantly 'reduce'. Akudolu (2004:6) as cited by Okediadi (2008:186) agrees that "no country can afford to neglect teaching and learning at least one foreign language". People who speak different foreign languages have a wider horizon in their approach to issues, and development is faster in such countries than in those countries that do not encourage the learning of foreign languages. Though this has some serious truth in it but we should not forget that in ancient times things were very different. It is true that change is inevitable in every human, organizational or societal

developmental process. Obieze & Nkwocha (2017:307) buttress the assertion above by saying that change process is very flexible and malleable and so it can occur at any given moment of time, just as many factors, including the study of foreign languages, can be attributors or contributors to change management and process.

According to Nwokoye (2017:295), linguists often view Chinese as a language family, though owing to China's socio-political and cultural situation, and the fact that all spoken varieties use one common written system, it is customary to refer to these generally mutually unintelligible variants as "the Chinese language". Most Chinese and Chinese linguists refer to Chinese as a single language and its subdivisions dialects, while others call Chinese a language family and its subdivisions languages. Chinese itself has a term for its unified writing system, zhongwen (中文), while the closest equivalent used to describe its spoken variants would be Hanyu (汉语 /汉语, "spoken language[s] of the Han Chinese) – this term could be translated to either "language" or "languages" since Chinese possesses no grammatical numbers. In the Chinese language, there is much less need for a uniform speech-and-writing continuum, as indicated by two separate character morphemes 语 /语 yu and 文 wen. The characters of Chinese script were traditionally written down the page from right to left. Today they are commonly written horizontally and read left to right, using 2,000 simplified characters. A variant of the Roman alphabet has been introduced and is used in schools to help with pronunciation. This, called *Pinyin*, is prescribed for international use by the People's Republic of China for personal and place names (as in *Beijing* rather than *Peking*).

2.0 Theoretical framework

The theory adopted for this discourse is social exchange theory. This is a mathematical and logical type of

relationship that involves give and take. Put succinctly, how much effort is one putting into a relationship and how much effort the other is contributing, what one feels he deserves in that relationship. *Fournier (2018)* says "it should be noted that this balance-based theory is not only about romantic relationship some". He gives an example as follows: "According to social exchange theory, a person who feels that the cost of his or her romantic relationship outweighs its benefits will most likely leave the relationship" in other words, human weigh the costs against benefits while forming relationships. This theory was formally advanced by sociologist *George C. Homans* in the late 1950s and 1960s. He posits that as human we cherish our social relationships which are based on love, respect, and trust for each other. There should be costs and benefits. Costs represent the resources one has to contribute to maintain relationship. Benefits are the rewards obtained from a relationship one is involved in and can be material or immaterial things. People try to avoid risks and aspire for rewards. This framework suits the issue at hand since it concerns integration of a foreign language in a given nation in form of exchange with the other nation so that each nation will have what the other has and vice versa.

3.0 Language Situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is a democratic entity with about 400-500 indigenous languages which are grouped under major and minor languages. *Bamgbose (1992:73)* explains that Nigerian languages are often grouped into major languages and minority languages based on such factors as a number of speakers, status in education, acquisition as a second language, and availability of written materials. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the major languages. They are referred to as national languages. Section 55 of the 1999 constitution stipulates "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo(sic) and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been

made therefore, by this provision Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are referred to as national languages (*Obiamalu & Mbagwu, 2009,471*). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the few languages of Nigeria like Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have been developed to the level at which they could be taught as L1 and L2 while many others trail behind. The language provisions in Nigerian national Policy on Education, NPE (1977 revised 1981) stipulates that every child should be taught in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate community for the first three years. The provisions also stipulate that the mother tongue should be used in pre-primary education. Consequently, the Federal Government places emphasis on the teaching and learning of the three major Nigerian languages in National Policy on Education which states

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity...in this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p.9).

It should be borne in mind that by this policy, language has been used as a tool to promote inter-ethnic understanding to foster cultural unity and integration through facilitating communications among Nigerians from different geographical areas. It is argued that the various governments in Nigeria from 1960 till date have failed to accord language the importance it deserves in national integration simple because of the general fear that it will generate inter-ethnic unrest among the general populace (*Bamgbose, 1991:7*) *Obiamalu and Mbagwu (2009:471)* on the contrary say that it is erroneous to refer Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as national languages simply because all Nigerians do not speak the three languages and they are not the only languages in the country. It is therefore inappropriate to give constitutional attention to only three of them. Be that as it may, NPE 2000 edition has

a more liberal outlook. it gives attention to the three languages (which it refers as major languages) and other languages by recognising the language of immediate community. Particularly, the policy specifies as follows concerning the local languages:

use of the mother tongue(MT) or language of the immediate community (LIC) as a medium of instruction at the first three (3) years of primary education teaching of the native language as core subject at primary, junior and senior secondary levels.

learning any of the three(3) major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) by non-native speakers as second language L2 at JSS level

Considering the fact that languages which are not adequately developed can hardly be used for purposes of school instruction or be taught, it is clear that the NPE means to emphasize few languages. This is evident in Junaidu's report of the achievements of the National Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) through its Language Development Centre. The achievements include:

- development of 43 orthographies of Nigerian languages
- development of 9 meta-languages for Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (L1 and L2) as well as Efik, Ibibio, Izon, Edo and Epira as L1 at respective levels of primary and secondary education; plans for the development of Urhobo and Po Tangle have been completed.
- textbooks for the teaching of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as L2 at JSS level are now in press

Nigeria was a colony of Britain and the colonialists came with their English language. This language according to *Okodo (2008:198)* has done a lot of damage to the indigenous languages of Nigeria including the Igbo language. Just like colonialism affects all spheres of lives of the colonized, the language of the people also suffers dominion under the language of the colonizers. The French language, the English

language, the Portuguese language and the Arabic language that grew from the areas of their native speakers to other parts of the world were able to spread so widely because their native speakers carried them to places they conquered for the purposes of expansion. These languages displaced the indigenous languages of the areas and were respectively adopted as the second language. In those places they have taken the prestigious positions of the official language and lingua franca put together. This is in line with what Fashola said that 'whether we admit it or not, the Chinese are taking over the global economy and we are only preparing our pupils for the opportunities that the use of Chinese language as the possible language of the future might provide'. To *Odinye (2015)* 'the partnership of Nigerian government and its institutions with China on the study of Mandarin and the spread of the language is a noble one. Novelty demands that this relationship remain mutual'. *Asumah (2011)* in a similar vein says "Chinanization has contributed to the dissipation of indigenous languages and cultures of Africa".

Odinye (2008) remarks that apart from the local languages, there also exist non-indigenous languages like English which now serves as language of education, administration at different levels, commerce and journalism. It now serves as official language in the country, but there is yet no national language for Nigeria. *Igboanusi (2002:108)* comments that in principle, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are seen as Nigerian national languages. The call for the adoption or retention of English may also be due to the growing status of English both nationally and internationally. He concludes with this ***English is the language in use in most formal situations in Nigeria***. *Odinye, p.458* points out the fact about the potency of English language in Nigeria's education. A lot of people question the undue emphasis given to the language at pre-primary and primary schools levels. They see it as a great impediment to Nigerian education as it has ruined the careers of many Nigerians who

happened not to be proficient in the language. This is because English has become a compulsory course for admission into Nigerian universities, even when a candidate wants to study Nigerian languages. We should avoid linguistic imperialism. *Onwudiwe (2009)* affirms that linguistic imperialism may appear a remote factor to problems in the Nigerian democratic system. It has to be noted that language is identity. If this is so, it means that whenever one's language is tampered with one's identity and indeed one's existence is also tampered with as asserted by *Harley (2000)* what this can lead to is subjugation and the resultant unpatriotism. It also brings about retrogression. The introduction of foreign languages in Nigerian society at various developmental stages has also various impacts on development and change process and management. The foreign languages such as English, German, Spanish, Arabic, French and presently Chinese were all introduced as a result of the need for a change or modifications, to solve a given problem, to queue in for national development, and to identify with the general global socio-economic realities of the contemporary world (*Obieze & Nkwocha, 2017:311*).

4.0 Chinese Language in Nigeria

There is no record anywhere that Nigeria has been colonized by China yet Chinese language is gradually creeping into the nation. The reasons being political, economic and technological.您好 Nin hao (Hello) Chinese is spoken by one-fifth of the world's population. That means one out of every five persons on earth speaks Chinese. With its dynamic economy and changing society, China plays an important role on the international stage, and studying this wonderful and fascinating country and its language will repay the effort. To borrow a leaf from *Asumah (2011)*, "Africans (Nigeria) must begin to interrogate the forces of Chainanization as imperative for redefining African cultures in recent times and should

not just accept China's position as a benevolent neo-imperialist as given. This is not the time for Africans (Nigeria) to surrender again, after their experiences with colonialism which stifled their efforts towards development. The relationship between Nigeria and China is growing on daily basis and there are commendable institutions like Forum on China-Africa Corporation and China-Africa Development Fund. The learning of Chinese language in Nigeria is necessary because China has become the new destination for economic growth and technological development. According to *Oladunjoye in Aboderin (2012)* 'the knowledge of Chinese language will help students further their studies in China and carry out research in various human endeavour as China has become a success story in the world economy'. *Onanuga in Aboderin (2012)* notes that 'as much as the Chinese language invades the Nigerian territory, the Chinese culture is bound to be imbibed as well'. He maintains that the culture of a people represents almost everything about them/their history, way of life, belief system, literature, art, customs, music, social organization, traditions and so on. Language cultural integration entails what makes any particular community a total and unique group, when it is not observed or jettisoned, the people frown or react to show their objection. Alao in Aboderin remarks that 'those who are objecting the introduction and expansion of Chinese language in Nigeria do not have a global mind; probably they think language will affect our culture, but it cannot. *Odinye (2015)* maintains "that it is high time we started broadening our reasoning. For instance, schools in Europe have more languages to offer. This goes to show that who wants to thrive ahead must think global and urbane in their thought. China is now the most leading economy and it would be for our good if we learn their language'. The status of the Nigerian languages at present is under a serious siege.

Chinese language classes are located in Lagos, Kano, Abuja, Enugu, PH etc. There are

various Confucius Institutes in some parts of the world. There are 54 Confucius Institutes/Classrooms in various parts of the world like Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Angola, Malawi, Egypt, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Cape Verde. Confucius Institute is overseen by Hanbanan office of Chinese Language Council International. *Ikeakor(2018)* affirms that Confucius Institute helps in strengthening Chinese growing influence in Nigeria. The first Nigerian Confucius Institute was established in Nnamdi Azikiwe University in 2008 and subsequently in University of Lagos in 2009. Asumah opines "across the continent, Confucius institutes are mushrooming faster than African cultural centres. China continues to develop these institutes in order to make contact centres for the rest of the world in general and Africa in particular...opportunity for self-development and advancement have made learning Chinese language and culture attractive for young Africans who want to better themselves at the expense of their own cultures".

4.1 Confucius Institute at Nnamdi Azikiwe University

The first Confucius Institute is at NnamdiAzikiwe University, Awka in 2008. This Confucius Institute is affiliated with the Xiamen University in China and it receives yearly scholarships from the University. The sole aim is to boost the relationship between Africa and China. To encourage Nigerian students to study in China, the Chinese government has emphasized China's cultural diversity. The Institute encourages Nigerian students to study in China thereby enhancing the cultural diversity. Its success was acknowledged in June 29, 2018 when the Chinese embassy in Abuja announced the establishment of Nigeria's first Chinese Cultural Research Centre. The embassy pledged to create an Igbo language institute in China to encourage Chinese university

graduates to work for Chinese companies in Nigeria. The question now is 'to what extent has this been realised? Does it exist at all? We stand boldly to say that they are all a mirage or a dream yet to be realised. It is true that the Chinese volunteer teachers send to the various Institutes in Nigeria bear names according to the environment where they are but none of them takes a part time study in any of the Nigerian languages. One of them took up a PhD programme in the Department of History and International Relations but he is doing his programme in English. Who is cheating who? There should be exchange for sustainability and mutual cooperation.

The Confucius Institute gave birth to the Department of Chinese Studies whose goal is geared towards providing students with a comprehensive training in the Chinese language. The department helps students learn and understand the Chinese language, culture and literature. The students are offered a full curriculum in Chinese language, culture, literature, economy, politics etc. thereby preparing them for twenty-first century with a solid foundation in Chinese language and culture. The programme through in-depth courses leads students not only to China's past and present but also to her future.

The BA in Chinese Studies at Nnamdi Azikiwe University will provide the students with extensive abilities in modern Chinese language, culture and literature. Students will experience an exceptional challenge that will equip them for rewarding careers in international organizations, multinational corporations, media, tourism, NGOs, education, and government. Students can also take advantage of the University's exchange programme agreements and study at some of the best Chinese universities even on scholarship. In Summary, the objectives are as follows:

- a. To develop and enhance the students' awareness of the values, contributions and potentialities of their own social and cultural environment.
- b. To empower the students to

contribute meaningfully towards the attainment of required goals.

- c. To help students in developing and utilizing the spirit of self-reliance and self-actualization.
- d. To equip the students with the necessary tools and values which will enable them to contribute meaningfully towards socio-political and economic development of the society, building a virile, strong and united country and ensuring national and international peace, cooperation, understanding and progress.
- e. To promote and preserve Chinese life, philosophy, world-view and rich anthropological past through the study, research-oriented development and documentation of languages, literatures and cultures.
- f. To expose the students to different aspects of Chinese language, literature and cultures so as to help them achieve greater competence and sophistication in their understanding and appreciation of the values inherent in these aspects.
- g. To train them to be able to apply the knowledge so acquired for the advancement of their society.
- h. To prepare them for further studies in the discipline and for relevant careers.

Looking at the above objectives, one is left to ask what is the state of our indigenous languages in a nation that has embraced a foreign language only on the receiving end.

There are other institutes as mentioned earlier. Abuja centre helps business men and other interested persons learn Chinese language. This also promote business for indigenous African companies intending to partner with Chinese companies. This strengthens socio-economic and cultural ties with China. There are volunteer teachers for the language as well as some Nigerians who are graduates of the Language. The language has been introduced into primary and secondary schools in some parts of Anambra State and Kano State. Beijing's strategy of

expanding students exchange programs and educating more Chinese students in the Igbo language could play an instrumental role in reducing ethnic tensions over time. If these efforts prove successful in Nigeria, China could attempt to make similar overtures toward countries with more pervasive anti/Chinese sentiments, like Ethiopia and Zambia, to consolidate stronger strategic partnerships (Ramani, 2016).

5.0 Conclusion

The strong tie between Nigeria and China is inevitable but the indigenous languages of the nation are entrapped. Nigerians are in many universities in China learning Chinese language, culture, economy, politics, agriculture, medicine etc but how many Chinese people are in Nigeria learning anything from the nation. Chinese are in Nigeria draining our resources only in exchange of their language. There should be a give and take relationship among both nations. If this is not realised, then exploitation, marginalization would be facing Nigeria in the near future. So, this paper advocates for equal rights and benefits among the two nations. Nigerian languages especially the three major ones should be taught in some affiliated universities in China.

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