

## Sustaining The Use of Indigenous Language at Home: A Case of Igbo and Yoruba Speakers in Yola, Adamawa State

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### Abstract

Maintaining an indigenous language in the language competitive environment is not a simple task, especially for Igbo and Yoruba residing in the Northern part of Nigeria where Hausa or Fulani is the main communication language of the society. This study examined the effectiveness of sustaining indigenous language amidst multi-lingual society through the adoption of indigenous language as a domestic communication medium by Igbo and Yoruba residing in Yola metropolis Adamawa State. The study intended to discover the indigenous language proficiency and passion of both Igbo and Yoruba households in the Yola metropolis. The study adopted a survey research design and purposively sampled 64 households comprised 32 Igbo and 32 Yoruba households respectively based on the number of years of residing in the study area. The study used a structured questionnaire for data collection and data were analyzed using percentage and t-tests. It was found that those households using indigenous language at their home, recorded better proficiency and passion in their indigenous languages compared to other households using non-indigenous language. It was concluded that adopting the indigenous language at the household level improved the proficiency and passion of Igbo and Yoruba households respectively in Yola metropolis. The study recommended for the Igbo and Yoruba households in Yola metropolis to encourage participation in their respective indigenous cultural functions and events. Also, the family could subscribe to digital television using their respective indigenous language for the programmes.

**Keywords:** Indigenous language, Igbo, Yoruba, Household, Passion and Proficiency

### Introduction

Igbo and Yoruba languages are two of the three major indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria namely Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. The two languages are predominately spoken by the people living in the South East and South West Zone of Nigeria and some speakers around the world. However, there are over 525 indigenous languages (Blench, 2014) spoken due to the multilingual nature of Nigeria as a country. In recent times, observations have revealed that there is a prevailing decline in the usage of both languages (Ajetomobi, 2023; Odinye & Odinye, 2010) and this could spell doom to the development of Igbo and Yoruba languages. UNESCO has identified intergenerational language transmission as one of the core factors to assess and understand the language situation of specific endangered languages which by implication connotes a level of communication of the language within and amongst the family and community (Nzeaka & Ehondor, 2021). Indigenous languages all across the world are disappearing as a result of the combined effects of different factors such as colonialism, globalization, and multilingualism.

Some scholars have asserted that the attitude of people in Nigeria to their language can best be described as nonchalant or negative (Balogun, 2013). Inherently, this has damaged the proficiency standards and passion for the language. Salawu (2015) reiterates that the onslaught of globalization on very many languages of the world is real and it is due to the fact of colonization. The author states that in most developing nations, communication in indigenous languages has been adversely affected due to the fact of their colonization.

Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation, indigenous peoples migrate to different zones of the country. By way of the focus of the study, in the North East zone of the country, there are many different indigenous language situations, apart from Hausa language which is the major indigenous language and is considered as the language of the environment as stated in the National Policy of Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2014), there are some other percentages of indigenous language population in the zone such as Fulfulde, Bura, Marghi, Bachama, Mandara, Higgi, Kilba, Bachama, Sayawa, Kanuri, Babur, Tangalawaja, Mumuye, (Nigerian Tribune, 2017), Tiv Kibaku, Mafa, and others. Nevertheless, Igbo and Yoruba, the other two major indigenous languages are also part of the indigenous language population with other minorities from other zones such as Edo, Ijaw, Igala, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Ibiria, and Ibibio.

Many have migrated there for economic, educational, religious, political, and cultural opportunities. However, some of these set of people tend to settle down permanently, some stay and establish businesses, some due to inter-tribal marriage, and some for-job placements. This situation sometimes yielded people losing touch with their people, leading to increased social fragmentation, a loss of identities, and the deterioration of language skills (United Nations, 2021) The extinction of a language results in the irrecoverable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries (Hunt, 2018) leaving its adherents rootless with no identity.

Unfortunately, the notion of using our indigenous languages especially in a multi-lingual environment as a home language and for learning may not be objective in home circles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because most parents usually start speaking English Language to their wards as early as possible. Also, the fact that those indigenous languages are used in rather restricted domains, where the Hausa language is the accepted language of the environment and where English language is the official language. Wardhaugh 1986 (cited in Fasya & Sari, 2021) state that the accuracy of language choice in a multilingual society is a complex task. When there are too many languages in a nation, it is usually very difficult to have a single working indigenous language as a national language (Odinye & Odinye, 2012). The degree of endangerment of the two languages as being endangered and unsafe has been confirmed by Ajetomobi (2023) and Odinye and Odinye (2010). The authors attest that in the next 20 to 50 years, the two languages may go into extinction, if necessary, efforts are not put in place

The adoption of English Language as a domestic means of communication in Igbo and Yoruba Homes is at an alarming rate. Amidst the multilingualism of Nigeria as a nation especially in the Northern part of the country, how do other indigenous languages be sustained, it is believed that speakers of many smaller, less dominant languages stop using their heritage language and begin using another (Nuwer, 2014 in Ikoba, & Jolayemi, 2021). This shift manifests in declining levels of intergenerational transmission of language ability from parent to child. When this shift continues, a language may become dormant or extinct, existing perhaps only in recordings and written records and transcriptions (Onyemelukwe, 2019). Languages which had not been adequately documented disappear completely, under such extreme circumstances. What is known is that the concept of the mother tongue provides a natural and effective way of communication, and closes the gap between the child's home and school (Cummins, 2001 in Abidogun, 2012).

Acknowledging the interconnectedness between the English language which is the national language, Hausa as the language of the immediate environment and other contact languages is a crucial factor in understanding the complexity of a multi-lingual society in Adamawa State, Nigeria. In essence, the survival of indigenous languages in a multi-lingual society can be challenging but is crucial to preserve the language, cultural diversity, and heritage in a foreign land. Based on this, this study examines how the use of Indigenous languages (Igbo and Yoruba) as home communication in a multilingual society such as Yola in Adamawa State, Nigeria may be a novel factor in sustaining and preserving indigenous languages.

### **Objectives of the Study**

- i. To determine the effect of using indigenous language for domestic communication on the level of proficiency among Igbo and Yoruba households residing in Yola metropolis, Adamawa State Nigeria
- ii. To determine the effect of using indigenous language for domestic communication on the level of language passion among Igbo and Yoruba households residing in Yola metropolis, Adamawa State Nigeria

### **Research Question**

1. What is the difference in the level of language proficiency for those Igbo and Yoruba households using their respective indigenous as domestic communication and those using non-indigenous language as domestic communication?
2. What is the difference in the level of language passion for those Igbo and Yoruba households using their respective indigenous as domestic communication and those using non-indigenous language as domestic communication?

### **Hypothesis**

H<sub>01</sub>: There is no significant difference in the level of language proficiency among Igbo and Yoruba households using their respective indigenous language as domestic communication and those using non-indigenous language as domestic communication

H<sub>02</sub>: There is no significant difference in the level of language passion for those Igbo and Yoruba households using their respective indigenous language as domestic communication and those using non-indigenous language as domestic communication

## Literature Review

### Language

Language is regarded as an important aspect of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group. Over 525 languages ((Blench, 2014) are spoken in Nigeria and each of them reflects a unique view of the people, pattern of thought, and culture. A mother tongue-based system therefore allows learners to articulate their heritage, helping them appreciate their history, culture, and tradition. Language is the channel through which we are socialised into our culture. The cultural heritage of the past is transmitted through language and transferred to the next generations (Tannenbaum & Berkovich, 2005). Therefore, culture is expressed in language and language communicates culture.

Skutnabb-Kangas 1981 (cited in Abidogun, 2012) explains that through language, human beings receive the cultural heritage of the past, and by language the cultural heritage is shaped anew, reworking, selecting, rejecting, and recreating it together with other people. Language is also used to pass on to a large extent this culture that has been received to our children and grandchildren, and those of others. Emphasizing further the importance of language to the preservation of cultural heritage, Skutnabb-Kangas (2017) argues that language binds us together, both in the historical perspective and in the present.

As for the role language plays in identity, scholars agree that language is essential to identity. Zhang 2006 (in Akintunde & Ohiare-udebu, 2021) maintains that human thought or ideology is an important component of culture because language is a medium to convey thought. This phenomenon seems prudent to acknowledge relating to the very notion of language conveying and affirming identity. Warschauer (2001) also acknowledges this stating:

Language has always played an important role in the formation and expression of identity. The role of language and dialect in identity construction is becoming even more central in the postmodern era, as other traditional markers of identity, including race, are being destabilized (p. 1).

A closer look at language and identity is necessary to see the significant role language plays in expressing our unique human identities.

### Indigenous Language

Indigenous language can be construed to mean a language spoken of belonging or connected with a particular place or area that one is talking about or with the place where one lives (Adedeji, 2015). This refers to people's native vernacular or tribal/ ethnic or local language that evolved in a particular location. This type of language is spoken, owned, and shared amongst a particular set of people or ethnicities. In Nigeria, there are various ethnic groups, each having their peculiar language and dialects spoken in different communities (Akinkulere and Adewumi, 2013). Abdul (2005) acknowledges this polarity and argues that the numerically and politically major ethnic groups are the composite Hausa-Fulani of the north, the Yoruba of the southwest, and the Igbo of the southeast. The Igbo and Yoruba languages are two of the three major indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria. Meanwhile, Ayeomoni (2012) insists that the Yoruba ethnic group makes up about 30% and Igbo 21% of over 400 languages in the population of Nigeria, making them the second and third biggest ethnic groups, among the three major groups.

Aside from these three major indigenous languages in Nigeria, other tribes still exist such as Fulani, Kanuri, Jaba, Bajju, Maguzawa, Gbagyi, Gwandara, Tiv, Idoma, Igala, Ebira, Yoruba, Nupe, Eggon, Nupe, Berom, Ibibio, Annang, Ijaw, Nembe, Efik, Ejagham, Igbo, Urhobo, Itsekiri, Bini, Esan, Ikwere, Ogoni, Bachama, Margi, Sayawa, Fulani, Babur, Tangalawaja, (Nigerian Tribune, 2017) and many others. Nevertheless, the importance of indigenous language can be viewed as the language through which in the process of socialization one acquires the norms and value systems of one's cultural group and that the language passes on the cultural tradition of the group thereby giving the individual an identity which ties her to the in-group, and at the same time sets her apart from other possible groups of reference (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2017)

### Survival of Indigenous Language in Multi-lingual Society

A multilingual society is a society which has more than one significant language group. According to Fasold 1984 (in Odinye & Odinye 2012), four different kinds of historical patterns can lead to societal multilingualism. These patterns are migration, imperialism, federation, and border area multilingualism. Multilingualism is a situation in which two or more languages operate within the same context (Ndimele, 2003 in Adetuyi, 2017). The author states factors such as political annexation, marital relation, economic transaction, cultural association, educational acquisition, and religious affiliation as factors that bring about multilingualism.

Researchers have concluded that in less than 100 years, almost half of the languages known today will be lost forever. According to United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, (UNESCO) (2008), findings and different reports from research, twenty-nine Nigerian minor languages have become extinct, while Yorùbá, Igbo, Ishekiri, and about 29 minor languages are in danger of extinction.

In Nigeria, the adoption of English Language as the lingua franca and also as a means of domestic communication by some parents in Igbo and Yoruba homes - intergenerational language transmission and local languages being sidelined from most Nigeria educational system curricula could be attributed to this loss. This confirms Olorunsola's (2002) finding that most parents usually frown at their children speaking the Yoruba language at home, this has become the attitude of Yoruba elites towards the use of indigenous language. Most parents in Nigeria would not support their children's learning in the mother tongue because there is this negative belief that instruction in the mother tongue is inferior to learning in English (Abidogun, 2012). Chidi-Ehiem and Ogbu (2017) and Udoye (2019) also observe that students cultivate a nonchalant attitude towards learning the Igbo language at the secondary school level. Most Igbo language students have a negative attitude towards the Igbo language, (Onwuka, in Udoye, 2019) and this attitude has affected their value system. There was a time when children were taught Yoruba proverbs, folktales/ folklores, various manners and modes of greetings, children gathered together for moonlight stories which were all embedded with African morals and values. Ironically, these cultural values, morals, and traditions are becoming foreign to children of the new dispensation in this 21<sup>st</sup> century (Ajetomobi, 2023). The attitudinal situation influences the children negatively hence, they do not have any regard for their mother tongue. In order to correct this linguistic and cultural loss, it is necessary to educate parents to teach their children the Yoruba languages in their homes, However, there is a need for more efforts that will adopt a practical approach to ensure that the Yoruba and Igbo language remains intact.

The crusade for indigenous languages' preservation through intergenerational transmission should be made pronounced at homes because Language forms a critical aspect of a person's and a community's identity. Dr. Pamela Serota (in Ajetomobi, 2023) discusses language loss and identity. Serota Cote acknowledges for a language to be revived, there has to be a population left to learn it, and a strong desire among the young people to revive that connection with their heritage. Though they may learn and speak other languages, the loss of their mother tongue is the loss of a personal connection to what and who came before them, and an inability to pass that heritage on to the next generation. Since language allows people to communicate and express themselves, it is a crucial component of any tribe or society. Balogun (2013) contends that the loss of any language by a people is the loss of their roots and the loss of their identity and when a language is lost, such people who experience the loss continue to live in the shadow of other people's identity and culture. In essence, when a language falls out of use, coming generations lose an essential cultural element that is required of them to fully comprehend society and their culture. Due to this, language is a vulnerable part of cultural heritage, and it must be protected.

### **Research Method**

The study adopts a descriptive survey research design. The targeted population is Igbo and Yoruba households residing in the Yola metropolis of Adamawa State, Nigeria. Using purposive sampling, the study sampled 64 households which comprised 32 Igbo and 32 Yoruba households respectively based on 10 years of residing in Yola, and families with children. The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire designed to gather data from households regarding their uses of indigenous language at their respective households level as well as determine the indigenous language passion and proficiency of their household members. Data were analysed using descriptive analytical tools for answering research questions present in simple bar charts while hypotheses were tested using t-test analysis at a 0.05 significance level.

## Results

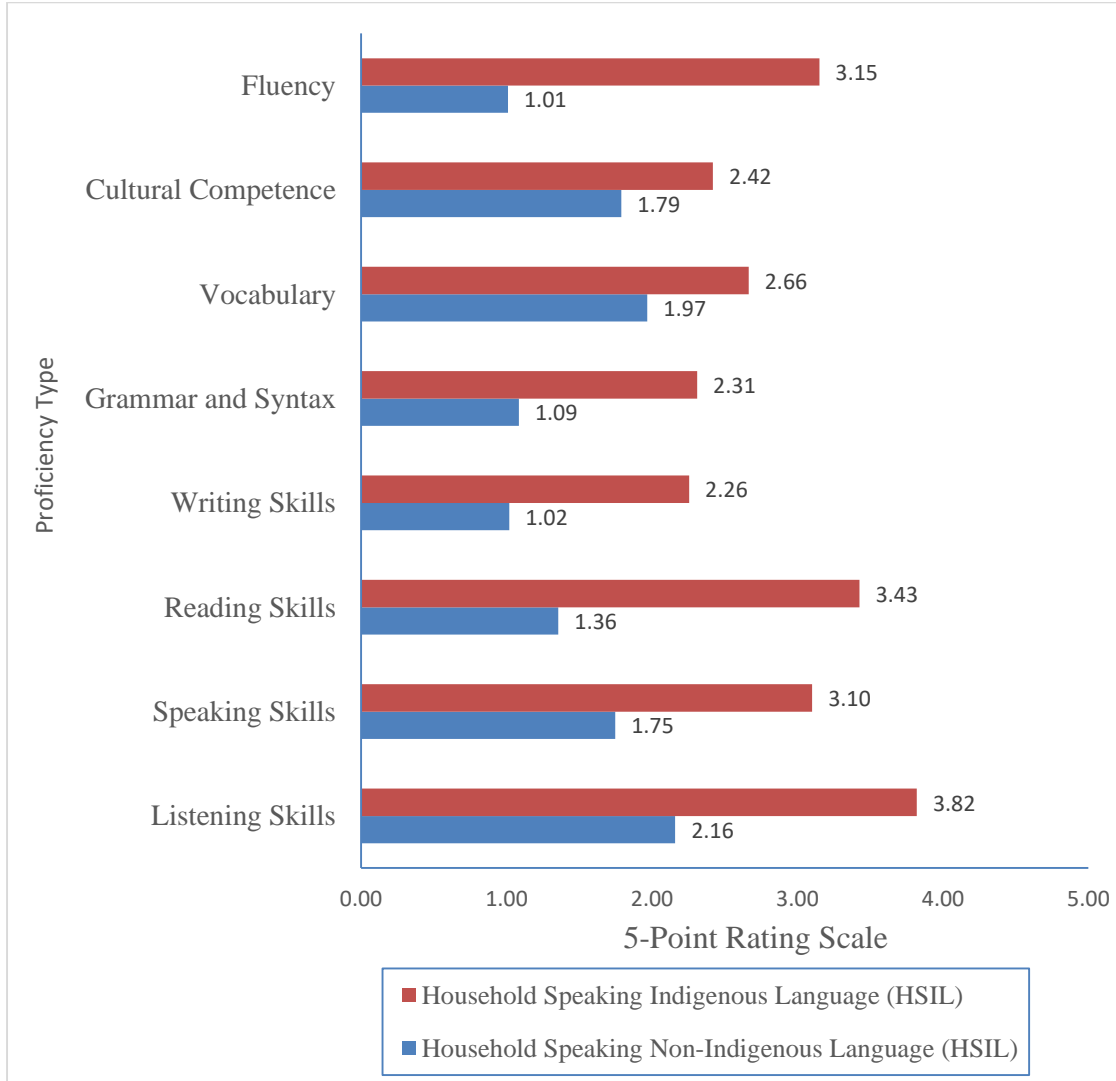


Figure 1: Level of Indigenous Language Proficiency among Igbo and Yoruba Households using their Mother Tongue and those using non-indigenous language for their Domestic Communication in Yola Metropolis, Adamawa

The result in Figure 1 is the outcome on the level of indigenous language proficiency among Igbo and Yoruba households using their mother tongue and those using another language in Yola metropolis in Adamawa State. The result shows that members of the household (Igbo and Yoruba) where indigenous language is being used for domestic communication recorded mean rating (mean rating > 3.0) across proficiency factors such as fluency, cultural competency, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, writing skills, reading skills, speaking skills, and listening skills. However, for those members of households where a non-indigenous language is being used for domestic communication, their proficiency in their respective indigenous languages (Igbo and Yoruba) was low.

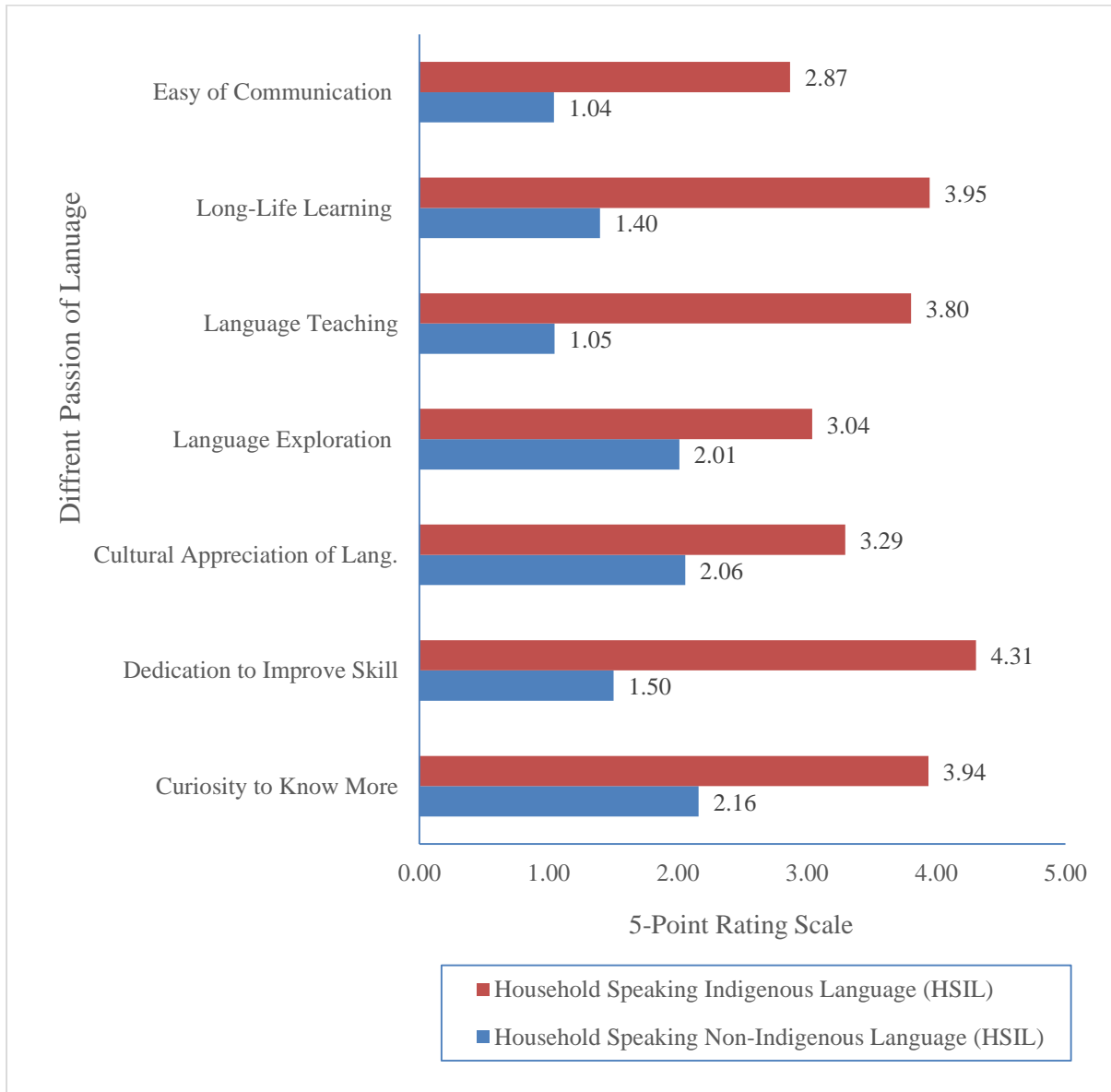


Figure 2: Level of Indigenous Language Passion among Igbo and Yoruba Households using their Mother Tongue and those using non-indigenous Language as Domestic Communication in Yola Metropolis, Adamawa

The result in Figure 2 is the outcome of analysis on the level of indigenous language passion among Igbo and Yoruba households using their mother tongue and those using other language in their respective home in Yola metropolis of Adamawa State. The result shows that members of the household (Igbo and Yoruba) where indigenous language is being used for domestic communication were rated above average (mean rating > 3.0) across language passion factors which include ease of communication, long life learning, language teaching, long life learning, language exploration, cultural appreciation of language, dedication to improving on indigenous language skills as well as curiosity to know more about indigenous language. Meanwhile, the results on language passion for members of households where non-indigenous language is being used for domestic communication were low.

**Hypothesis:**

**Table 1: T-test Analysis of Mean Rating difference on the Level of Indigenous Language Proficiency between Households Using Mother Tongue and Those Using Other Language for Domestic communication**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Household Speaking Non-Indigenous Language (HSNIL)	36	2.6222	.81875	.13646			
Household Speaking Indigenous Language (HSIL)	28	4.3464	1.21365	.22936	-6.776	62	.000

The results in Table 1 reveal the outcome of the t-test analysis on the mean rating difference between the level of indigenous language proficiency between households where the mother tongue is being used for domestic communication and those households using another language. The results reveal a t-test value of 6.776, at the degree of freedom of 62, p-value <0.05.

**Table 2: T-test Analysis of Mean Rating Difference on Level of Indigenous Language Passion between Households that used Mother Tongue and those using other Language for Domestic Communication**

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Household Speaking Non-Indigenous Language (HSNIL)	36	2.4944	.8559	.1427			
Household Speaking Indigenous Language (HSIL)	28	3.9679	1.1522	.2177	-5.872	62	.000

The results in Table 2 reveal the outcome of the t-test analysis on the mean rating difference between the level of indigenous language passion between households where the mother tongue is being used for domestic communication and those households using other languages. The results reveal a t-test value of 5.872, at the degree of freedom of 62, p-value <0.05

**Discussion of Findings**

The finding from this study shows that households where indigenous language (Igbo or Yoruba) is being used for domestic communication significantly recorded better language proficiency in Igbo or Yoruba compared to those Igbo and Yoruba households in Yola metropolis where non-indigenous languages are not being used for domestic communication. This shows that adopting an indigenous language at home by Igbo or Yoruba households in Yola promotes a better understanding of language among their family. The fact that indigenous language is being retained at the household level for communication despite being in a Hausa -Fulani dominated society implies that the family members will not be cut off from their mother tongues. Ikoba and Jolayemi, (2021) note one of the means to retain the language for individuals is through practice. Thus, language practices contribute to the development and enhancement of language proficiency. The reason why Ajetomobi (2023) claims that lack of parental encouragement at home affects proficiency in indigenous languages among 21<sup>st</sup>-century learners in Nigeria. Odinye and Odinye (2010) also claim that most Igbo parents do not take delight in transferring Igbo to their children. Regular use of a particular language in a multi-language society like the Yola metropolis could turn into a situation that fosters improved skills in both languages. Skutnabb-Kangas (2017) asserts that keeping a particular language in practice and using it frequently ensures some levels of proficiency which enables such individuals to engage in more complex language practices, such as writing, presentations, or nuanced discussions. It is possible that using an indigenous language such as Igbo or Yoruba back at despite being in Hausa and Fulani communities could influence children's understanding even if they are at some distance from their hometowns. Abidogun (2012) maintains that proficiency in the indigenous language is difficult if parents are not using the language at the household level.

Another finding from this study shows that using indigenous language at the household level for domestic communication influences passion for indigenous language. This proves that sharing the indigenous language

with children and other members of the household makes them more curious, dedicated, and culturally appreciated. This concurs with Ajetomobi (2023) that those who recognize indigenous language and identify with it, value its cultural practices such as dressing, dancing, weddings, naming, and fostering indigenous community. Ayodele (2017) and Odinye and Odinye (2010) submit that in order not to make the children dislike their background and history, parents and elders need to make use of indigenous language to ensure language passion among children and young ones. Once an individual has a passion for a language, such an individual will always prefer to communicate using the language. However, Akinyemi (2017) contends that social integration among people of different languages and cultures affects pristine cultural practices in most indigenous communities. This could be a situation for Igbo or Yoruba households residing in the northern part of Nigeria where multiple languages compete. Ikoba et al. (2021) express that developing passion through consistent uses and practices of indigenous language among people of the same tribe or members of households is among the best ways of sustaining the mother tongue in a multi-language society or region where particular language become a minor due to few members of such society speaking the language.

### Conclusion

Sustaining an indigenous language amid a multi-lingual society is a process that has to be deliberately planned and executed. This study through its findings has shown that people who settled within other societies or language complex society could retain their respective mother tongue simply through domestic use of such indigenous language at the household level as well as within the group of tribal people. It has been shown through the findings of this study that Igbo and Yoruba households where their respective indigenous language is being used for domestic communication are better in terms of indigenous language proficiency and passion for the indigenous language. Thus, adopting an indigenous language for home communication is not only sustaining the language but overall sustaining the lineage legacy, heritage, and preserving culture. Children in those households where indigenous language is being used for communication show willingness to know more about their culture as well as readiness to identify with their respective culture despite residing in cultural-integrated society such as Yola metropolis where peoples of languages not less than 30 settled with specific dominant of Hausa and Fulani language.

### Recommendations

1. The Igbo and Yoruba households in the Yola metropolis need to be attending cultural functions and events, Igbo or Yoruba dominated religion gathering with their entire household through which members of their respective households will interact with other people of their culture to further expose them to the better use of their language
2. Igbo and Yoruba households in the Yola metropolis could subscribe to the satellite television station using their respective indigenous language for programmes to further expose their household members to different values of their indigenous languages.

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