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Linguistic Identity, Drive, and Scholastic Performance: An Investigation into the Cognitive-Affective Determinants of Second-Language Acquisition among Yorùbá-Speaking Learners

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Abstract

The relationship between how learners see themselves as speakers of their mother tongue and how well they go on to acquire a second language remains one of the more contested questions in applied linguistics. This paper takes up that question in the specific context of Yorùbá-speaking learners of English in southwestern Nigeria, a population whose bilingual experience has rarely been theorised on its own terms rather than borrowed wholesale from Western second-language acquisition (SLA) literature. Rather than reporting new empirical data, the paper builds a conceptual argument: it draws together three strands of theory — sociolinguistic identity, motivational psychology, and models of academic achievement — and proposes an integrated framework for understanding why some Yorùbá-speaking students thrive at English while others, despite comparable schooling, do not. The paper argues that linguistic identity and motivation do not operate on parallel tracks but interact, with a learner's sense of ethnolinguistic belonging shaping the kind of motivation that becomes available to them, which in turn shapes classroom engagement and, ultimately, measurable achievement. A testable model is proposed, together with a methodological blueprint — instruments, sampling logic, and analytic strategy — for the empirical study that would be required to validate it. The paper closes by considering what such a study would mean for language-in-education policy in Nigeria, where English remains the official medium of instruction despite competing, often unresolved, loyalties to indigenous languages.

Keywords: Linguistic Identity, L2 Motivation, Second-Language Acquisition, Yorùbá, Academic Achievement, Nigeria, Bilingual Education

1. Introduction

English occupies an unusual position in Nigerian life. It is not, for the overwhelming majority of Yorùbá children, a language encountered first at home; it is a language put on, layer by layer, once schooling begins, and yet it is the language in which that same schooling is conducted, examined, and certified. A child who cannot perform competently in English by the upper years of primary school is, in a very direct sense, a child at risk of academic failure, regardless of how articulate, intelligent, or verbally skilled that child may be in Yorùbá. This asymmetry — between the language of thought and home and the language of assessment and advancement — has generated a large descriptive literature on Nigerian English, on code-switching, and on language attitudes, but comparatively little work has asked a more psychological question: what is actually happening, cognitively and affectively, inside the learner who must straddle these two linguistic worlds, and how does that internal experience translate into the achievement gap that teachers observe every year?

This paper argues that two constructs, usually studied in isolation, need to be brought together to answer that question. The

first is linguistic identity — the sense a speaker has of who they are by virtue of the language or languages they speak, and the value they attach to each (Norton, 2000; Block, 2007) [14, 2]. The second is motivation, understood not as a single trait but as a dynamic, socially embedded process that determines how much effort a learner is willing to sustain in the face of a task as demanding as acquiring an additional language (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Gardner, 1985) [5, 6, 10]. Neither construct, on its own, has proven sufficient to explain the variability in L2 outcomes among Yorùbá-speaking learners. Attitude-and-motivation surveys conducted in Nigerian secondary schools consistently find that most students report favourable attitudes toward English and recognise its instrumental value for examinations and employment, and yet proficiency outcomes, as reflected in public examination results, remain uneven and in many respects worrying (see, for example, discussions of West African Examinations Council performance trends in Yorùbá-English bilingual settings). A purely motivational account struggles to explain this gap. What appears to be missing is an account of how a learner's prior, and often unresolved, relationship to their first language conditions the way that stated motivation is converted into sustained classroom behaviour.

The central claim advanced here is that linguistic identity functions as a kind of gatekeeper for motivation. Two students may report identical levels of instrumental motivation to learn English — both want to pass their examinations and both understand that English opens doors — yet perform very differently if one experiences their Yorùbá identity as being in competition with English proficiency, while the other experiences the two as complementary, additive parts of a single bilingual self. This paper is an attempt to make that claim theoretically precise, to locate it within the wider SLA literature, and to propose a way of testing it that a future empirical study could carry out with real Yorùbá-speaking student populations.

2. Literature Review

The literature relevant to this paper falls into three overlapping bodies of work: theories of linguistic and ethnolinguistic identity; models of second-language motivation; and the smaller, more scattered body of research specifically concerned with Yorùbá-English bilingualism and academic outcomes in Nigeria. Each is reviewed in turn before the paper attempts to draw them together.

2.1 Linguistic Identity and the Bilingual Self

Identity has not always been central to SLA theory. Early behaviourist and cognitivist accounts of language learning treated the learner largely as an information-processing system, with little regard for who that learner understood themselves to be (Ellis, 1994) [8]. The turn toward identity, associated most influentially with Norton's (2000) [14] concept of investment, reframed the learner as a social being whose willingness to engage with a target language is bound up with the social identities available to them and the power relations in which those identities are embedded. Norton's insight — that a learner may be highly motivated in the abstract yet withhold investment in classroom participation because the identity on offer feels unwelcoming or subtractive — has obvious relevance to postcolonial multilingual settings such as Nigeria, where English carries colonial history alongside its present-day instrumental value.

Bourdieu's (1991) [1] notion of linguistic capital supplies a complementary vocabulary: languages are not neutral tools but resources whose value is set by the social field in which they circulate. Within the Nigerian field, English functions as the dominant capital in formal, examinable domains, while Yorùbá retains high symbolic value in domains of kinship, religion, and cultural belonging (Fishman, 1991 [9], on the general dynamics of domain-specific language allegiance applies well here). A learner's identity work, in this sense, is the ongoing negotiation of which capital to invest in, and how much, across different domains of life — and school is precisely the domain where the two currencies are forced into direct competition.

Subtractive versus additive bilingualism (Lambert, 1975) [12] offers a further useful distinction. In additive bilingual development, a second language is acquired without threat to the first, and the learner's sense of self expands to include both. In subtractive bilingual development, competence in the second language is gained partly at the expense of the first, and identification with the first language, or with the ethnic group associated with it, may weaken. Existing sociolinguistic work on Yorùbá suggests that a subtractive dynamic is, in places, already under way: intergenerational transmission of Yorùbá is reported to be declining in urban, English-dominant households, and educated Yorùbá speakers increasingly favour English even in domains — broadcast media, for instance — that were until recently the preserve of the indigenous language. If a subtractive dynamic is indeed operating for a portion of the Yorùbá-speaking student population, then the psychological experience of learning English for those students is not simply the addition of a skill; it is bound up, however faintly, with a sense of loss, and that affective undertow deserves a place in any model of L2 motivation applied to this population.

2.2 Motivational Frameworks in Second-Language Acquisition

Gardner's (1985) [10] socio-educational model remains the reference point against which nearly all subsequent motivation research defines itself. Gardner distinguished integrative motivation — a genuine interest in, and positive disposition toward, the target-language community — from instrumental motivation, oriented toward practical rewards such as examination success or employment. For decades this distinction organised the field, but it was developed with reference to relatively stable, geographically bounded language communities (notably Anglophone Canada), an assumption that maps awkwardly onto a setting like Nigeria, where English is not tied to a single identifiable community of native speakers but functions instead as a delocalised, globally circulating language of opportunity.

Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) [5, 6] L2 Motivational Self System addresses this mismatch by relocating motivation inside the learner's own self-concept rather than in an external target community. Three components are proposed: the ideal L2 self, the person the learner would like to become as a speaker of the language; the ought-to L2 self, the person the learner feels obliged to become, given external pressures and expectations; and the L2 learning experience, the learner's situated, moment-to-moment experience of the learning process itself. This framework travels well to Nigeria: an ideal L2 self might be a Yorùbá student who imagines themselves as an internationally mobile, English-

fluent professional, while the ought-to self is shaped by the very concrete pressure of examinations that gatekeep further education. Crucially, Dörnyei's model leaves room for a third construct — the learner's sense of their own linguistic identity — to shape how vividly the ideal L2 self can be imagined in the first place. A learner whose Yorùbá identity feels devalued in the school environment may find it harder to construct a positive, achievable ideal L2 self, since the self doing the imagining is already carrying an ambivalent relationship to language.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) [3, 4], though not developed specifically for SLA, contributes the distinction between autonomous and controlled motivation. Applied here, a Yorùbá-speaking learner who experiences English study as externally imposed — a requirement for passing examinations, set by a curriculum that offers little space for the home language — is, in self-determination terms, operating under controlled motivation, which tends to produce shallower engagement and is more easily eroded by setbacks. A learner who experiences English as an addition to an already-valued linguistic repertoire, rather than a replacement for it, is closer to autonomous motivation, and would be predicted to sustain effort more consistently, particularly through the plateaus and frustrations that accompany any real language-learning trajectory.

Willingness to communicate (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998) [13] supplies the final piece of the motivational picture, since motivation that never translates into actual language use inside or outside the classroom cannot, by definition, produce proficiency gains. Anxiety, self-confidence, and perceived competence all feed into willingness to communicate, and all three are plausibly linked back to linguistic identity: a learner anxious about being judged for a Yorùbá-accented English, for instance, may possess strong underlying motivation yet still avoid the very communicative practice that motivation is supposed to produce.

2.3 The Yorùbá-English Bilingual Context

Nigeria's language-in-education policy has, since the National Policy on Education, formally endorsed instruction in the learner's mother tongue or a language of the immediate community for the earliest years of primary school, with a transition to English thereafter. In practice, the transition is frequently abrupt, under-resourced, and inconsistently implemented, particularly in private and urban schools where English-only instruction from the earliest grades is often treated, by parents and proprietors alike, as a marker of educational quality. The consequence is a bilingual population whose actual exposure to structured Yorùbá literacy varies enormously even within the same ethnic group, which in turn means that Yorùbá-speaking students cannot be treated as a homogeneous population for research purposes: home language practices, parental attitudes, and school policy interact to produce quite different individual trajectories toward English.

The available sociolinguistic evidence on Yorùbá language attitudes is, on the surface, reassuring: several studies report continued strong affective attachment to Yorùbá as a marker of ethnic identity, even among educated, English-dominant speakers, with English favoured for formal and occupational domains and Yorùbá retained for domains of kinship, ceremony, and cultural expression. Ethnic categorisation studies of Nigerian English varieties similarly suggest that a distinct, recognisable Yorùbá-accented English continues to be produced and perceived even among fluent speakers, which points to an English that is spoken from within a Yorùbá identity rather than one that has displaced it. Taken together, this literature suggests that outright subtractive bilingualism is not yet the norm across the Yorùbá-speaking population, but that a meaningful subgroup — plausibly the least academically successful in English — may be the group in which identity conflict, rather than simple lack of exposure or aptitude, is doing the most damage. This is precisely the subgroup that a motivation-only or an identity-only account would fail to identify, and precisely the reason an integrated model is needed.

3. Conceptual Framework

Bringing the two literatures together, this paper proposes a conceptual framework in which linguistic identity is treated not as a background variable to be controlled for, but as a proximal determinant of the type and strength of L2 motivation a learner is able to sustain, which in turn predicts classroom engagement and, downstream, academic achievement in English.

3.1 Proposed Model

The model proposes four constructs and three directional relationships, summarised as follows.

Linguistic Identity Orientation (LIO): The degree to which a learner experiences their Yorùbá identity and their developing English competence as additive (mutually reinforcing) versus subtractive (competing) — operationalised along a continuum rather than as a binary category.

L2 Motivational Self-System strength (MSS): The vividness and attainability of the learner's ideal L2 self, the pressure exerted by the ought-to L2 self, and the valence of the immediate learning experience.

Classroom Engagement and Willingness to Communicate (WTC): Observable and self-reported behavioural investment — participation, voluntary language use, persistence after error correction.

Academic Achievement in English (ACH): Performance on standardised measures — continuous assessment scores, mock and public examination results (e.g., WAEC English Language).

The central hypothesis is that LIO predicts MSS (an additive identity orientation permits a more vivid and attainable ideal L2 self and supports autonomous rather than controlled motivation), that MSS predicts WTC, and that WTC predicts ACH — with WTC functioning as the mediating mechanism through which motivation is converted into measurable skill. A secondary hypothesis holds that LIO also has a direct effect on WTC independent of motivation, since identity-related anxiety (for example, self-consciousness about a Yorùbá-accented English) can suppress communicative behaviour even when underlying motivation is high. This is consistent with the anxiety and self-confidence components already established in the willingness-to-communicate literature (MacIntyre *et al*., 1998) [13], extended here to a specific, ethnolinguistically grounded source of anxiety rather than a generalised communication apprehension.

A plausible moderating variable is home language environment: the amount of structured Yorùbá literacy exposure and the language attitudes modelled by parents and

caregivers. Learners from homes with strong, positively framed Yorùbá literacy practices are predicted to show more additive LIO scores than learners from homes where Yorùbá is spoken but actively discouraged in favour of English, even controlling for socioeconomic status. School type (public versus private, and the age at which English-medium instruction begins) is proposed as a second moderator, on the grounds that abrupt, early immersion without mother-tongue scaffolding is more likely to produce subtractive identity dynamics than a gradual, additive transition.

4. Proposed Methodology

4.1 Design

A cross-sectional, quantitative survey design with a correlational and structural modelling component is proposed as the most efficient way to test the framework above, since the central claims concern relationships and mediation among continuous constructs rather than group comparison alone. A convergent parallel mixed-methods extension — brief semi-structured interviews with a purposive subsample — is recommended to give texture to what a purely numerical linguistic identity score cannot capture, particularly around the lived experience of code-switching and identity ambivalence.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

The target population is Yorùbá first-language speakers in the upper years of junior and senior secondary school (JSS3–SS2) across at least two Yorùbá-majority states (for example, Oyo and Lagos), chosen to capture variation in urbanicity and school type. A stratified random sample drawn across public and private schools, with strata also reflecting rural and urban catchment, is preferable to convenience sampling, given the moderating role school type is hypothesised to play. A minimum sample of 350–400 students is suggested to give adequate power for the structural equation model proposed below, allowing for anticipated attrition and incomplete responses.

4.3 Instruments

Linguistic Identity Orientation could be measured with an adapted version of a bilingual identity or subtractive/additive bilingualism scale, reworded for the specific Yorùbá-English context and piloted for face validity with a small group of teachers and students before full deployment; existing instruments from the bilingual identity literature would need careful cultural adaptation rather than direct translation. Motivational Self-System strength is well served by an adapted Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985) [10] supplemented with items specifically measuring ideal and ought-to L2 self constructs, following the approach used in Dörnyei-tradition motivation research. Willingness to Communicate can draw on the MacIntyre *et al*. (1998) [13] WTC scale, adapted to Nigerian classroom contexts (for example, including items on willingness to speak English outside school, with peers, and in religious or family settings where Yorùbá typically dominates). Academic Achievement in English would be operationalised using students' most recent continuous assessment and, where available, standardised examination scores (WAEC or NECO English Language results), rather than a bespoke proficiency test, in order to align the outcome measure with the real-world stakes that motivate the whole inquiry.

4.4 Analytic Strategy

Structural equation modelling (SEM) is the natural fit for testing the proposed mediation chain (LIO → MSS → WTC → ACH) and the hypothesised direct path from LIO to WTC, since SEM allows simultaneous estimation of multiple regression paths along with measurement error. Multi-group SEM, comparing public versus private school subsamples, would test the moderating role of school type. Hierarchical regression, entering home language environment as a moderator, would test whether the LIO–MSS relationship strengthens or weakens depending on the richness of home Yorùbá literacy exposure. The qualitative interview data would be analysed thematically, primarily to enrich interpretation of unexpected or weak quantitative paths rather than to stand as an independent, freestanding study.

5. Implications for Practice and Policy

If the proposed model were supported empirically, it would carry several practical implications. First, motivation-boosting interventions common in Nigerian English-language pedagogy — extrinsic rewards, examination-focused coaching — would be predicted to have limited effect on the subgroup of learners for whom the underlying obstacle is identity conflict rather than a simple deficit of instrumental motivation; these learners would need interventions that explicitly frame English acquisition as additive to, rather than in competition with, their Yorùbá identity. Second, the model would offer empirical grounding for stronger implementation of mother-tongue-based early education, on the argument that a well-scaffolded, gradual transition into English-medium instruction protects against the subtractive identity dynamics that the model treats as damaging to long-run motivation and achievement. Third, teacher training could incorporate simple screening for identity-related communication anxiety, distinct from general shyness, allowing teachers to distinguish students who need confidence-building around Yorùbá-accented English from students who need more conventional motivational support.

The framework also has a theoretical contribution independent of any single empirical test: it argues, more generally, that SLA motivation research conducted in postcolonial multilingual settings needs an identity variable built in from the start, rather than treated as an optional add-on to models developed for majority-language, single-target-community contexts. Nigeria is far from unique in this respect, and a validated Yorùbá-English model could plausibly be adapted, with appropriate cultural sensitivity, to other Nigerian and West African bilingual populations facing structurally similar tensions between an indigenous first language and an official, examination-gatekeeping second language.

6. Limitations

As a conceptual paper, the present contribution has an obvious limitation: no data have yet been collected to test the proposed relationships, and until the study outlined in section 4 is carried out, the model remains a set of testable hypotheses rather than a demonstrated finding. A second limitation concerns generalisability even within the target population — Yorùbá speakers in Lagos, a highly cosmopolitan, multilingual city, may experience identity

dynamics quite differently from Yorùbá speakers in more linguistically homogeneous parts of Oyo or Osun State, and the two-state sampling strategy proposed above, while an improvement on single-site convenience sampling, would still under-represent this internal diversity. A third limitation is the reliance on self-report instruments for constructs — identity orientation and motivation — that are known to be sensitive to social desirability, particularly when administered by or in the presence of teachers; anonymised, independently administered data collection would be needed to mitigate this.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the achievement gap observed among Yorùbá-speaking learners of English cannot be fully explained by motivation alone, and has proposed a conceptual framework in which linguistic identity orientation shapes the strength and type of L2 motivation available to a learner, which in turn predicts communicative engagement and, ultimately, measurable achievement. The framework is deliberately built to be tested, not merely asserted, and a full methodological blueprint has been offered for the empirical study that would validate or revise it. Should such a study bear out the proposed relationships, the implications would extend beyond the immediate Yorùbá-English context to the broader question of how second-language pedagogy in postcolonial, multilingual settings ought to treat the learner's first-language identity — not as a variable to be neutralised on the way to English proficiency, but as a resource that, handled well, can be the very thing that makes proficiency attainable.

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