Language Acquisition and Ijaw Language Maintenance among Children in a Multilingual City

Richard Okiemute Ikolo, PhD, Eseoghene Aleh, PhD, Stephanie Emomotimi

Department of Languages and Linguistics, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.101000540

Received: 25 October 2026; Accepted: 30 October 2026; Published: 07 November 2026

ABSTRACT

Language acquisition is shaped not only by children's developing linguistic capacities but also by the social environments in which language is encountered, practised and valued. In multilingual urban communities, indigenous languages may compete with dominant languages that offer wider educational, economic and communicative functions. This study investigates the sociolinguistic factors influencing Ijaw language acquisition and maintenance among children in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey design and obtained data from 50 Ijaw parents and guardians of children aged 7–16 years through a structured questionnaire. Quantitative data were analysed using frequencies and percentages, while responses to open-ended questions were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings indicate that English and Nigerian Pidgin occupy a stronger position than Ijaw in the children's early linguistic experience. English was reported as the first language learned by 44% of the children, compared with 22% for Ijaw and 30% for Nigerian Pidgin. English was also reported as the language of first words for 42% of the children, while Ijaw accounted for 26% and Nigerian Pidgin 28%. During the 0–3-year period, English constituted the predominant language input for 38% of the children, compared with 30% for Ijaw and 26% for Nigerian Pidgin. Although 80% of the children reportedly understood Ijaw either very well or to some extent, only 36% understood it very well. The study further reveals substantial influence from home language practices, peers, school environments and wider multilingual contact. Institutional and material constraints are particularly pronounced: 90% of respondents reported that schools in Warri do not teach Ijaw, 88% identified inadequate Ijaw books and learning materials, and 84% reported limited child-oriented Ijaw media content. The study argues that the central challenge is not multilingualism itself but unequal opportunities for meaningful exposure to Ijaw. Sustained intergenerational use, school-based provision, child-oriented materials, media production and community support are therefore necessary for strengthening Ijaw acquisition and maintenance.

Keywords: Ijaw, language acquisition, language maintenance, multilingualism, Warri

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition takes place within social environments in which children encounter linguistic forms, communicative practices, identities and attitudes. Although children possess remarkable capacities for acquiring language, the particular languages they learn and the extent to which those languages become established in their repertoires are strongly influenced by the quantity, quality and distribution of linguistic input available to them. This is especially significant in multilingual societies where several languages compete for communicative space across the home, school, peer group and wider community.

The relationship between multilingual exposure and child language development has received substantial attention in contemporary research. Research on bilingual development has challenged the assumption that exposure to more than one language necessarily confuses children. Rather, children can develop competence in multiple languages when they receive meaningful and sustained exposure to those languages (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). The linguistic environment nevertheless matters because the amount and nature of exposure to each language influence children's opportunities for vocabulary development, comprehension, production and social use. Research on multilingual vocabulary development similarly demonstrates that

children's language outcomes are related to their sociolinguistic circumstances and patterns of exposure (MacLeod et al., 2019).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, therefore, children's language acquisition cannot be separated from the social distribution of languages. Languages have different levels of institutional support, prestige, functional range and communicative utility. A language that is regularly used by parents, siblings and grandparents may become strongly associated with the home and family, whereas another language may dominate school, commerce and interactions with peers. Children learn not only linguistic forms but also when, where and with whom particular languages are appropriate. Developmental sociolinguistics consequently emphasises children's gradual acquisition of socially meaningful patterns of language variation and language choice (Johnson & White, 2020).

This issue is particularly important in Nigeria, one of the world's highly multilingual countries. Indigenous languages coexist with English, the official language, and Nigerian Pidgin, which serves extensive interpersonal and interethnic communicative functions. In urban centres, multilingualism is intensified by migration, education, commerce, employment, media and contact among different ethnic groups. While multilingualism can expand children's communicative repertoires, it can also produce unequal patterns of language use in which an indigenous language receives less sustained exposure than socially dominant languages.

Warri in Delta State provides an important setting for examining these processes. The city is linguistically heterogeneous, with Ijaw occurring alongside English, Nigerian Pidgin, Urhobo, Itsekiri and other languages. For Ijaw families living in this environment, children may encounter Ijaw in the home or through extended family and community networks while encountering English in formal education and Nigerian Pidgin in peer and wider urban interactions. The resulting linguistic ecology may influence not only which language children learn first but also their relative competence, preferences, patterns of language switching and willingness to use Ijaw in different domains.

The situation raises an important distinction between multilingualism and language shift. Multilingualism itself is not necessarily a threat to indigenous language maintenance. The more significant issue is whether each language has sufficient opportunities for meaningful and sustained use. Where children are regularly exposed to English and Nigerian Pidgin but only occasionally exposed to Ijaw, the indigenous language may remain recognisable or comprehensible without becoming the child's dominant language. The present study is concerned with this relationship between exposure, social context and Ijaw language maintenance among children in Warri.

Existing research on bilingual and multilingual children provides important theoretical and empirical insights, but much of the established literature has examined European languages or other comparatively well-documented languages. Research focusing specifically on the sociolinguistic circumstances of indigenous Nigerian languages, and particularly Ijaw children in an urban Delta State environment, remains comparatively limited. The present study responds to this gap by examining how home language practices, early linguistic exposure, language attitudes, peer interaction, school practices and institutional support shape the acquisition and maintenance of Ijaw among children in Warri.

The study addresses five related questions:

1.What sociolinguistic factors influence Ijaw language acquisition among children in Warri?

2.What patterns of language use and switching occur across social contexts?

3. How do language attitudes and multilingualism affect Ijaw use?

4. How do home, school, peer and community domains shape language choice?

5. What challenges affect the acquisition and maintenance of Ijaw?

By addressing these questions through questionnaire data obtained from Ijaw parents and guardians, the study contributes empirical evidence to discussions of indigenous-language maintenance, child multilingualism and sociolinguistic development in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts

Language acquisition refers to the process through which children develop the capacity to understand and produce language through interaction with their linguistic environment. Traditional approaches to acquisition have often emphasised either children's internal linguistic capacities or the role of environmental input. Contemporary research increasingly recognises that these dimensions are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Chomsky's (1965) Innateness Theory provides one influential account of the biological foundations of language. The theory proposes that humans possess an innate capacity for language acquisition, allowing children to develop linguistic knowledge despite the limitations of the input available to them. The importance of this perspective to the present study lies in its recognition that children possess an inherent capacity for language learning. However, an innate capacity does not determine which particular language will become dominant in a child's repertoire. That question requires attention to the child's linguistic environment.

Sociocultural approaches provide a complementary perspective. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualised cognitive and linguistic development as processes mediated by social interaction and cultural participation. Children acquire knowledge through interaction with more knowledgeable members of their social environment, and language itself becomes a central tool through which experience is organised and transmitted. For indigenous-language acquisition, this perspective is especially useful because parents, grandparents, siblings, peers, teachers and community members constitute important sources of linguistic input.

The relevance of social interaction to bilingual development is also evident in contemporary research. Byers-Heinlein and Lew-Williams (2013) argue that bilingual development is compatible with successful early development and emphasise the importance of providing children with meaningful interaction in the languages available to them. Thus, parents do not necessarily need to avoid the use of multiple languages. Rather, children benefit when the languages they are expected to acquire receive sufficient and meaningful exposure.

For the Ijaw children examined in this study, the distinction between capacity and exposure is particularly important. The children may have the capacity to acquire Ijaw, English and Nigerian Pidgin, but the relative amount of exposure to each language is shaped by family decisions, schooling, peer networks and community practices. Consequently, differences in exposure can produce differences in language dominance without implying differences in children's underlying capacity for language learning.

Sociolinguistic Development and Language Choice

Children acquire more than vocabulary and grammatical structures. They also learn the social meanings associated with different linguistic choices. Sociolinguistic development involves learning how language varies according to interlocutor, setting, topic, purpose and social relationship. Johnson and White (2020) describe developmental sociolinguistics as an interdisciplinary area concerned with children's acquisition of language variation and its relationship to broader processes of language development.

In multilingual settings, children may therefore learn to associate particular languages with particular people or domains. A child may use an indigenous language with grandparents, English with teachers and Nigerian Pidgin with peers. Such differentiation is not necessarily evidence of linguistic confusion. Instead, it may represent developing sociolinguistic competence.

Research on bilingual children has also demonstrated that code-switching can emerge as a systematic feature of multilingual development. Smolak et al. (2020), examining Spanish–English and French–English bilingual

toddlers, found evidence of developing patterns of code-switching across languages. Such findings challenge interpretations of language alternation as simply a sign of inadequate language development.

The present study is concerned primarily with language choice and reported switching rather than with detailed structural analysis of code-switching. This distinction is important because the questionnaire measures parents' and guardians' perceptions of children's language behaviour across contexts rather than directly recording children's spontaneous speech. The findings should, therefore, be interpreted as reported patterns of language behaviour.

Multilingualism, Language Contact and Indigenous Language Maintenance

Multilingualism is a normal social condition in many African communities. In such settings, languages may coexist while serving different functions. However, coexistence does not necessarily imply equal vitality. A language can remain culturally important while experiencing reduced use among younger generations.

Language maintenance refers to the continued use of a language across generations, while language shift occurs when speakers increasingly use another language in domains previously occupied by their heritage language. Fishman (1991) places intergenerational transmission at the centre of language maintenance. When parents and other caregivers stop transmitting a language consistently to children, the language's long-term vitality may be weakened.

The home is consequently a crucial site of language maintenance. If children hear and use Ijaw regularly with parents, siblings and extended family, they have opportunities to develop both receptive and productive competence. If family communication increasingly shifts to English or Nigerian Pidgin, Ijaw may become restricted to particular ceremonial, cultural or interpersonal contexts.

This issue is reflected in research on indigenous Nigerian languages. Studies have reported situations in which English acquires increasing importance in children's linguistic development because of parental preferences, educational aspirations and its broader social prestige. Ayoola and Soneye (2017), for example, discuss mother-tongue eclipsing in a Nigerian context, highlighting the consequences of reduced parental transmission of indigenous languages. Similarly, research on bilingual children in Nigeria has demonstrated that contact with English can influence the lexical and structural development of indigenous languages.

These processes should not be interpreted as evidence that English or Nigerian Pidgin is inherently harmful. Rather, the sociolinguistic concern is the unequal distribution of communicative opportunities. If English dominates educational and future-oriented domains and Nigerian Pidgin dominates peer communication, Ijaw may be left with progressively fewer domains in which children need to use it.

The Ijaw Sociolinguistic Context

Ijaw is an indigenous language associated primarily with the Niger Delta region. The Ijaw linguistic environment is internally diverse, and speakers encounter varying degrees of contact with English, Nigerian Pidgin and other Nigerian languages. In urban settings such as Warri, this contact is intensified by migration, education, commerce and interethnic interaction.

The present study focuses on children from Ijaw families living in Warri and recognises the multilingual character of their environment. The data involve children associated with several Ijaw varieties, including Gbaramatu, Ogbe-Ijaw, Egbema, Isaba and Diebiri (Emomotimi, 2026). This variation is important because the study is not concerned with an abstract or homogeneous notion of "Ijaw" but with children whose linguistic experience is situated within particular families and communities.

The sociolinguistic circumstances of Ijaw children, therefore, involve two related processes. The first is multilingual acquisition, through which children encounter Ijaw alongside English and Nigerian Pidgin. The second is possible language shift, whereby the social and functional prominence of English and Nigerian Pidgin may reduce children's opportunities to use Ijaw. The central empirical issue is consequently not whether

children are exposed to several languages, but how the languages are distributed across the child's everyday social environment.

Research Gap

Three gaps motivate the present study. First, although bilingualism and multilingual child language development have received extensive scholarly attention, comparatively fewer studies examine indigenous Nigerian languages within urban multilingual environments from a sociolinguistic perspective. Second, available research on language shift in Nigeria frequently focuses on broad patterns of language choice or particular ethnic groups, leaving insufficient empirical attention to the specific circumstances of Ijaw children in Warri. Third, studies of language acquisition sometimes privilege psychological or structural dimensions of development without sufficiently examining the interaction between family language practices, school environments, peer networks and community attitudes.

The present study addresses these gaps by bringing together early language exposure, reported language choice, language attitudes, school and peer influences, and institutional constraints within a single analysis of Ijaw children in Warri. Its contribution lies particularly in connecting children's reported language acquisition with the broader sociolinguistic ecology in which acquisition takes place.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chomsky's Innateness Theory

Chomsky's Innateness Theory (Chomsky, 1965) proposes that humans possess an inherent capacity for language acquisition. The theory is relevant to the present study because children in multilingual settings are capable of acquiring more than one language. The fact that Ijaw children in Warri encounter Ijaw, English and Nigerian Pidgin does not in itself imply that their linguistic capacity is compromised.

The theory nevertheless provides only part of the explanation required by the present study. An innate capacity explains why children can acquire language, but it does not adequately explain why one language may become dominant over another in a multilingual environment. To understand differences in Ijaw acquisition, attention must therefore be given to the social distribution of linguistic input.

3.2 Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) provides a particularly relevant framework for examining the social dimension of Ijaw acquisition. The theory views learning and development as processes occurring through interaction with other people and through participation in culturally organised activities. Language is both a product and a mediator of such interaction.

Applied to the present study, the theory suggests that parents, siblings, peers, teachers and community members constitute important sources of linguistic experience. A child who regularly interacts with Ijaw-speaking caregivers has greater opportunity to develop Ijaw competence than a child whose caregivers primarily use English or Nigerian Pidgin. Similarly, participation in Ijaw cultural activities may provide communicative opportunities that formal schooling does not provide. The two theories are therefore complementary. Chomsky highlights children's linguistic capacity, while Vygotsky explains how that capacity is realised through social interaction. For the present study, the sociocultural perspective is especially useful because the empirical problem concerns the unequal social distribution of Ijaw, English and Nigerian Pidgin.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. This design was considered appropriate because the research sought to describe reported patterns of language exposure, language use, language choice, language attitudes

and challenges affecting Ijaw acquisition among children in Warri. The study did not attempt to experimentally determine causal relationships. Instead, it obtained information from parents and guardians concerning children's linguistic experiences.

The questionnaire combined closed-ended items with open-ended questions. The closed-ended items generated quantitative information that was summarised through frequencies and percentages, while the open-ended responses provided contextual explanations of the factors affecting Ijaw acquisition and maintenance.

Study Area and Participants

The study was conducted in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. Warri provides a relevant setting because of its multilingual urban character and the coexistence of Ijaw with English, Nigerian Pidgin, Urhobo, Itsekiri and other languages.

The participants were 50 Ijaw parents and guardians reporting on children aged 7–16 years. The children were distributed across three age groups: 7–9 years (16, 32%), 10–13 years (18, 36%) and 14–16 years (16, 32%). The Ijaw varieties represented in the sample were Gbaramatu (14, 28%), Ogbe-Ijaw (12, 24%), Egbema (9, 18%), Isaba (8, 16%) and Diebiri (7, 14%). (Emomotimi, 2026)

The study involved 50 purposively select Ijaw parents and guardians whose reports provided information about the language experiences of their children aged 7-16 years. Although this sample provided useful insights into the sociolinguistic experiences of the participating families, its relatively small size limits the extent to which the findings can be statistically generalised to wider Ijaw population in Warri. The study is, therefore, interpreted as a context-specific investigation that identifies relevant patterns and tendencies rather than as a representative survey of all Ijaw-speaking households in the city. A larger study involving a broader and more systematically stratified sample would be necessary to establish the extent to which the patterns identified here apply across the different Ijaw communities in Warri and its environs.

Instrument and Data Analysis

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained demographic questions, questions concerning early language acquisition and exposure, Likert-type statements relating to language use and sociolinguistic influences, and two open-ended questions concerning major challenges and possible interventions (Emomotimi, 2026).

Responses to closed-ended items were analysed using frequencies and percentages. The open-ended responses were examined thematically to identify recurring explanations concerning home language practices, parental choices, media exposure, school provision, learning materials and community support.

Because the data were obtained from parents and guardians rather than directly from children's recorded speech, the findings are interpreted as reported patterns of children's language behaviour. Claims concerning actual frequency or structural characteristics of children's spontaneous code-switching are, therefore, avoided.

It is important to clarify that the study relied on questionnaire responses supplied by parents and guardians rather than on direct observation, audio recordings or transcription of the children’s spontaneous speech. Consequently, the reported patterns of language choice and switching represents parental accounts of the children’s language practices across social contexts. They should not be interpreted as evidence from a naturalistic analysis of the phonological, syntactic or discourse structures of children’s code-switching. Direct observation and audio-recording of child interactions would provide additional evidence for examining the structural and interactional features of such switching.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and information obtained from respondents was treated confidentially. The study focused on parents' and guardians' reports rather than requiring children to disclose personal information.

Responses were treated anonymously in the presentation of findings.

RESULTS

Early Language Exposure and Acquisition

The first research question concerned the sociolinguistic factors influencing language acquisition among Ijaw children. Particular attention was given to children's first language, first words, language use during the first three years and comprehension of Ijaw.

Table 1. First Language Learned by the Children (N = 50)

First language learned	Frequency	Percentage
Ijaw	11	22
English	22	44
Nigerian Pidgin	15	30
Other	2	4
Total	50	100

English was reported as the first language learned by 44% of the children, followed by Nigerian Pidgin at 30%. Ijaw accounted for 22%, while 4% were reported to have first learned another language. The finding indicates that Ijaw does not occupy the dominant position in first-language acquisition for a substantial proportion of the sampled children (Emomotimi, 2026).

Table 2. Children's Early Linguistic Experience (N = 50)

Measure	Category	Frequency	Percentage
First words	Ijaw	13	26
	English	21	42
	Nigerian Pidgin	14	28
	Mix	2	4
Language mostly used at age 0–3	Ijaw	15	30
	English	19	38
	Nigerian Pidgin	13	26
	Equal mix	3	6
Understanding of Ijaw	Very well	18	36
	A little	22	44
	No	10	20

The pattern is consistent across the three measures. English was the reported language of first words for 42% of the children, compared with 26% for Ijaw and 28% for Nigerian Pidgin. During the 0–3-year period, English was the predominant language for 38% of the children, while Ijaw accounted for 30% and Nigerian Pidgin for 26%.

The findings concerning comprehension are particularly revealing. Eighty per cent of the children reportedly understood Ijaw either very well or to some extent, although only 36% understood it very well. Thus, Ijaw remains present within the linguistic environment of many children even where it does not constitute their principal early language. The difference between reported comprehension and earlier exposure suggests a

potentially important receptive dimension of Ijaw maintenance. Children may retain meaningful contact with Ijaw through family and community interaction even when English or Nigerian Pidgin occupies a stronger position in their everyday linguistic experience.

Home Language Use

The home represents a central site of intergenerational transmission. The study found that 70% of respondents agreed that English was spoken more frequently than Ijaw at home, while 30% disagreed. Only 40% agreed that parents spoke Ijaw frequently with the child, whereas 60% disagreed.

These findings demonstrate a substantial imbalance in home language exposure. Although the Ijaw language may remain symbolically important within families, its actual frequency of use may be insufficient to make it the dominant language of everyday interaction. The findings support the argument that language maintenance depends strongly on sustained intergenerational use rather than on positive attitudes alone.

Language Choice and Switching across Social Contexts

The second research question concerned language use and switching. The results indicate a high level of reported multilingual behaviour. Forty-one respondents (82%) agreed that children use different languages with parents, siblings, friends and teachers. Thirty-nine respondents (78%) reported that children switch between Ijaw, English and Nigerian Pidgin, while 37 (74%) indicated that children switch languages according to their interlocutor. In addition, 40 respondents (80%) reported that children prefer Nigerian Pidgin with peers.

These patterns demonstrate that children's language behaviour is strongly context-sensitive. The language selected in interaction is related to the identity and linguistic repertoire of the interlocutor. English is strongly associated with formal education and wider institutional communication, while Nigerian Pidgin provides a useful medium of peer interaction in a multilingual urban environment. Ijaw, by contrast, may have stronger associations with family and cultural interaction.

The findings are consistent with research showing that bilingual children can develop the ability to adjust language choice according to communicative context. Smolak et al. (2020), for example, found systematic patterns of code-switching among bilingual toddlers. The present study does not claim to establish the structural characteristics of such switching because the data are questionnaire-based. It nevertheless demonstrates that parents and guardians perceive language alternation as a regular feature of children's multilingual behaviour.

Language Attitudes and the Multilingual Environment

The third research question examined language attitudes and multilingual exposure. Twenty-nine respondents (58%) agreed that the community considers Ijaw important, while 36 (72%) agreed that English is more important for education and future opportunities. Forty-two respondents (84%) agreed that positive attitudes toward Ijaw encourage its use, whereas only 23 (46%) reported that families encourage children to speak Ijaw.

This combination is significant. It indicates that Ijaw can possess considerable cultural value without enjoying equivalent functional prestige. A language may be viewed positively as an expression of identity while simultaneously being regarded as less useful than English for educational and economic advancement.

The tension between cultural value and instrumental value is, therefore, central to understanding the present findings. Parents may value Ijaw but still use English with their children because they associate English with academic success. Children, in turn, may internalise these patterns and increasingly associate English with education and future mobility.

School and Peer Influence

School and peer interaction constitute important domains of language socialisation. Only 12 respondents

(24%) agreed that schools encourage Ijaw, while 38 (76%) disagreed. Forty respondents (80%) agreed that the language used in school affects children's use of Ijaw. Peer influence was even more pronounced: 43 respondents (86%) agreed that friends and peers influence children's language preferences, while 44 (88%) reported that children use English or Nigerian Pidgin more than Ijaw when interacting with friends.

These findings reveal the institutional and interpersonal dimensions of language shift. When Ijaw has little presence in school, children have limited opportunity to develop its use in formal educational contexts. At the same time, the dominance of English and Nigerian Pidgin among peers reinforces the use of these languages outside the classroom.

The result is a sociolinguistic division of labour. English has strong institutional and educational functions, Nigerian Pidgin has substantial peer and informal functions, while Ijaw risks being concentrated within narrower family and cultural domains. Such functional restriction may weaken the language's ability to compete for children's everyday communicative attention.

Challenges to Ijaw Acquisition and Maintenance

The fifth research question concerned the challenges affecting Ijaw acquisition and maintenance.

Table 3. Major Challenges to Ijaw Acquisition and Maintenance (N = 50)

Challenge	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)
Limited home Ijaw use makes acquisition difficult	37 (74.0)	13 (26.0)
Frequent English affects Ijaw acquisition/use	41 (82.0)	9 (18.0)
Frequent Nigerian Pidgin affects Ijaw acquisition/use	39 (78.0)	11 (22.0)
Friends/peers reduce interest in Ijaw	38 (76.0)	12 (24.0)
Lack of opportunities outside home makes maintenance difficult	040 (80.0)	10 (20.0)

The findings show that the challenges extend beyond individual preference. Seventy-four percent of respondents identified limited home use as a difficulty, while 82% identified frequent English use as affecting Ijaw acquisition and use. Similarly, 78% identified Nigerian Pidgin as an influence, 76% identified peer influence, and 80% identified inadequate opportunities to use Ijaw outside the home.

These results suggest that Ijaw maintenance cannot be achieved by placing responsibility solely on children. Children operate within linguistic environments structured by adults, institutions and peer networks. Where the surrounding environment provides few opportunities for Ijaw use, children's ability to maintain the language is constrained.

Institutional and Material Constraints

Table 4. Institutional and Material Challenges (N = 50)

Institutional/material factor	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)
Not enough Ijaw books/materials for children	44 (88.0)	6 (12.0)
Schools in Warri do not teach Ijaw	45 (90.0)	5 (10.0)
Few Ijaw media programmes for children	42 (84.0)	8 (16.0)
Community events rarely use Ijaw with children	38 (76.0)	12 (24.0)

The results reveal substantial institutional and material constraints. Ninety per cent of respondents reported that schools in Warri do not teach Ijaw, while 88% reported inadequate Ijaw books and learning materials. Eighty-four per cent identified a shortage of Ijaw media programmes for children, and 76% indicated that community events rarely use Ijaw with children.

The importance of these findings lies in their demonstration that language maintenance requires more than family commitment. Children need opportunities to encounter and use the language in educational, cultural and media environments. Without books, school programmes, child-oriented media and community activities, Ijaw is less likely to become a language of regular childhood experience.

Open-ended Responses

The open-ended responses reinforce the quantitative findings. Respondents repeatedly identified the dominance of English and Nigerian Pidgin in Warri as a major constraint. One respondent observed:

"The major factor is that in Warri everything is English and Pidgin. Even in the market children answer you in Pidgin." (Respondent 12)

Another respondent explicitly attributed the situation to parental language choices:

"We parents are to blame. We speak English to them from small so that they will be smart in school." (Respondent 7)

The responses also identified media scarcity as a problem. A respondent noted:

"There is no Ijaw cartoon or programme on TV. Children prefer what they see." (Respondent 33)

Institutional intervention was another recurring theme. One respondent recommended that government and community leaders should restore Ijaw in primary education, while another suggested regular Ijaw use at home and the introduction of Ijaw cultural days in schools.

The importance of learning materials was similarly emphasised.

"If there are Ijaw books and songs for children, they will learn faster. Right now, there are very few books." (Respondent 41)

The open-ended responses therefore converge with the quantitative results. Participants did not identify children's lack of capacity as the central problem. Rather, they pointed to the availability and distribution of linguistic opportunities. The major concerns were parental language practices, English and Nigerian Pidgin dominance, inadequate school provision, limited media content, insufficient learning materials and declining community use.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that Ijaw language acquisition among children in Warri is shaped by the interaction between early exposure and the broader sociolinguistic environment. The strongest pattern emerging from the data is the comparatively greater presence of English and Nigerian Pidgin in children's early linguistic experiences.

English was identified as the first language learned by 44% of the children, while only 22% were reported to have first learned Ijaw. The pattern was repeated in the data concerning first words and language use between birth and age three. These findings suggest that the displacement of Ijaw does not necessarily begin when children enter school. Rather, the process may begin much earlier within the family.

This finding is particularly important because the family is the first major site of language socialisation. When parents choose English because they associate it with educational success, they may unintentionally reduce the amount of Ijaw input available to children. The respondent who explained that parents use English "so that they will be smart in school" provides a clear illustration of the relationship between language ideology and family language policy.

At the same time, the finding that 80% of children understand Ijaw either very well or to some extent complicates a simple account of language loss. Ijaw has not disappeared from the children's linguistic environment. Rather, many children appear to retain some level of receptive access even where English and Nigerian Pidgin occupy stronger positions in early language use. This pattern suggests that the intergenerational transmission of Ijaw may be weakening without having completely collapsed.

The findings also demonstrate the importance of distinguishing language capacity from language opportunity. Chomsky's theoretical position provides a useful reminder that children possess the capacity to acquire language, but the present findings show that the social environment determines which linguistic resources receive sustained reinforcement. Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective is particularly illuminating because children's language development is embedded in interaction with parents, peers, teachers and community members.

The results concerning language switching further support a sociolinguistic interpretation. Eighty-two per cent of respondents reported that children use different languages with different interlocutors, while 74% reported switching according to interlocutor. This suggests that the children are developing an awareness of the social distribution of languages. Such behaviour should not automatically be regarded as evidence of confusion or deficient language development. Contemporary research on bilingual children demonstrates that language alternation can be systematic and context-sensitive (Smolak et al., 2020).

The findings on language switching should be interpreted in relation to the nature of the data collected. The percentages reported in this study reflect parents' and guardians' accounts of the languages their children use with different interlocutors and in different social settings. Although these reports provide useful sociolinguistic evidence about language choice and switching, they do not constitute direct linguistic evidence of the structural properties of children's code-switching. In particular, the study did not record or analyse the phonological, morphological, syntactic or discourse features of children's spontaneous speech. The findings, therefore, establish reported patterns of multilingual language practices rather than the precise linguistic mechanisms through which children alternate between Ijaw, English and Nigerian Pidgin.

The strong preference for Nigerian Pidgin among peers is also significant. Eighty per cent of respondents reported this preference, while 88% reported that children use English or Nigerian Pidgin more than Ijaw with friends. Peer networks, therefore, provide an important mechanism through which dominant languages are reproduced. Children are not passive recipients of language policy; they also adapt their linguistic behaviour to the communicative practices of their peers.

The findings on language attitudes reveal another important contradiction. Fifty-eight per cent of respondents considered Ijaw important at the community level, while 72% considered English more important for education and future opportunities. This distinction between cultural and instrumental value has important consequences for language maintenance. A language may be admired, respected and regarded as an important symbol of identity while still losing everyday communicative functions.

The school environment intensifies this tension. Seventy-six per cent of respondents reported that schools do not encourage Ijaw, and 80% indicated that school language affects children's Ijaw use. School, therefore, functions as an important mechanism of linguistic socialisation. When Ijaw is absent from the formal educational environment, children may learn to associate English with knowledge, achievement and institutional authority.

The institutional findings are, especially striking. Ninety per cent of respondents reported that schools in Warri do not teach Ijaw. Eighty-eight per cent identified inadequate books and learning materials, while 84% identified limited Ijaw media programmes for children. These findings demonstrate that language maintenance requires an ecology of support. Children cannot be expected to maintain a language solely through occasional household exposure when the language has little presence in school, print, media and public activities.

The findings, therefore, support a broader understanding of language maintenance. Intergenerational transmission is necessary but not sufficient. The language must also have opportunities for meaningful use. A

child who hears Ijaw from grandparents but encounters English in school, Nigerian Pidgin among peers and English-dominated media may develop an uneven repertoire in which Ijaw remains associated with particular people and situations rather than serving as a broadly functional language.

This does not imply that English or Nigerian Pidgin should be excluded. Such an approach would be unrealistic in Warri and would ignore the communicative advantages of multilingualism. Instead, the findings

point toward additive multilingualism in which strengthening Ijaw does not require weakening children's competence in English or Nigerian Pidgin. The goal should be to increase meaningful opportunities for Ijaw alongside the languages that children already use.

The study consequently supports the position that multilingualism itself is not the primary threat to Ijaw. The more significant threat is unequal linguistic opportunity. When three languages coexist but only one receives sustained family, educational, peer and media reinforcement, the languages are not competing on equal terms. Ijaw maintenance therefore requires deliberate efforts to expand the domains in which children encounter and use the language.

The findings of this study should be considered in the light of certain methodological limitations. First, the sample of 50 parents and guardians, although useful for identifying relevant sociolinguistic patterns, is relatively small in relation to the multilingual population of Warri. The findings should, therefore, not be taken as statistically representative of all Ijaw-speaking families in the city. Second, the study relied on parental questionnaire reports and did not involve direct observation or audio-recording of children's spontaneous speech. Consequently, the reported language-switching practices cannot provide detailed evidence of the structural features of children's code-switching. Third, although five Ijaw varieties were represented: Gbaramatu (14 respondents, 28%), Ogbe-Ijaw (12 respondents, 24%), Egbema (9 respondents, 18%), Isaba (8 respondents, 16%), and Diebiri (7 respondents, 14%), the study did not conduct a comparative analysis of language retention across the dialect groups. Although these varieties were represented in the sample, the analysis focused on the overall patterns of Ijaw language acquisition and maintenance rather than differences among the individual varieties. Consequently, the findings do not establish whether the children from particular Ijaw varieties demonstrate stronger or weaker patterns of language retention. These limitations do not invalidate the findings; rather, they define the scope within which the results should be interpreted and point to useful directions for further investigation. Future research could employ a larger, dialect-stratified sample, incorporate direct observation and recordings of child interactions, and compare language practices across different Ijaw-speaking communities in examining whether differences in home language practices across the varieties influence children's acquisition and maintenance of Ijaw.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the sociolinguistic factors influencing Ijaw language acquisition and maintenance among children in Warri, Delta State. The findings demonstrate that children's linguistic development is closely related to the language practices of their families, schools, peer groups and communities. English and Nigerian Pidgin occupy stronger positions than Ijaw in the children's early linguistic environment, while Ijaw remains present, particularly at the level of comprehension and family/community identity.

The evidence suggests that the major challenge is not children's inability to acquire Ijaw. Rather, the challenge is the limited and uneven distribution of opportunities to use the language. English has substantial educational and future-oriented value, while Nigerian Pidgin performs important peer and wider urban communicative functions. Ijaw, despite retaining cultural importance, has fewer institutional and social domains in which children are required or encouraged to use it.

The study, therefore, concludes that Ijaw language maintenance requires an ecological approach. Parents and caregivers remain central to intergenerational transmission, but their efforts must be reinforced by schools, community organisations, media producers and government institutions. The findings from the study show that positive attitudes alone are insufficient if children lack books, school programmes, media content and everyday opportunities to use Ijaw.

The study also contributes to the understanding of multilingualism in urban Nigeria by showing that multilingual exposure should not automatically be interpreted as a problem for children's language development. Rather, multilingualism becomes problematic for indigenous-language maintenance when languages have radically unequal social and institutional support. Strengthening Ijaw while maintaining children's access to English and Nigerian Pidgin is, therefore, a more realistic and sustainable approach than attempting to eliminate multilingualism.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings have several implications for Ijaw language maintenance.

First, parents and caregivers should increase regular Ijaw interaction in the home. The objective should not be to prohibit English or Nigerian Pidgin but to ensure that Ijaw receives sufficient sustained exposure for children to develop meaningful competence.

Second, schools serving Ijaw children should provide structured opportunities for Ijaw learning and use. The reported absence of Ijaw teaching in many schools represents a major institutional gap. Ijaw language activities, reading materials, cultural programmes and age-appropriate instruction could create additional domains of use.

Third, educational materials should be developed specifically for children. The reported shortage of Ijaw books indicates the need for storybooks, primers, songs, illustrated materials and other child-friendly resources. Such materials can make Ijaw visible and attractive within children's everyday experiences.

Fourth, Ijaw-language media should be expanded. Children's television programmes, cartoons, songs, radio programmes, online videos and digital educational resources can provide forms of exposure that the contemporary urban child readily engages with. The absence of such content leaves children overwhelmingly dependent on English and Nigerian Pidgin media.

Fifth, community organisations should incorporate Ijaw more consistently into cultural events and activities involving children. Festivals, storytelling, traditional ceremonies, youth programmes and community meetings can provide authentic communicative contexts in which children use Ijaw rather than simply hearing it described as an important heritage language.

Finally, language policy should recognise that effective indigenous-language promotion requires implementation rather than policy statements alone. Government agencies, schools and community leaders should work together to create practical opportunities for children to learn, read, hear and use Ijaw.

Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributes to scholarship in three principal ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the sociolinguistic circumstances of Ijaw children in an urban Nigerian environment, an area that remains comparatively under-researched. Second, it demonstrates the importance of examining early exposure, family language practice, school influence, peer interaction and institutional support together rather than treating language acquisition as an exclusively cognitive process. Third, it shows that Ijaw language maintenance should be understood in terms of linguistic opportunity. The findings suggest that the critical issue is not multilingualism itself but the unequal distribution of opportunities to use the indigenous language across the domains of children's everyday lives.

REFERENCES

1. Byers-Heinlein, K., & Lew-Williams, C. (2013). Bilingualism in the early years: What the science says. LEARNing Landscapes, 7(1), 95–112. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v7i1.632
2. Chomsky, N. (1965). Aspects of the theory of syntax. MIT Press.
3. De Houwer, A. (2009). Bilingual first language acquisition. Multilingual Matters.

4. Emomotimi, S. (2026). A sociolinguistic investigation of language acquisition among Ijaw children in Warri, Delta State, Nigeria. [Unpublished bachelor's dissertation]. Delta State University, Abraka
5. Fishman, J. A. (1991). Reversing language shift: Theoretical and empirical foundations of assistance to threatened languages. Multilingual Matters.
6. Genesee, F. (2006). Educating English language learners: A synthesis of research evidence. Cambridge University Press.
7. Hoff, E. (2006). How social contexts support and shape language development. Developmental Review, 26(1), 55–88. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2005.11.002
8. Johnson, E. K., & White, K. S. (2020). Developmental sociolinguistics: Children's acquisition of language variation. WIREs Cognitive Science, 11(1), e1515. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcs.1515
9. MacLeod, A. A. N., Castellanos-Ryan, N., Parent, S., & Séguin, J. R. (2019). Modelling vocabulary development among multilingual children prior to and following the transition to school entry. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 22(4), 473–492. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2016.1269718
10. McLeod, S., Verdon, S., & International Expert Panel on Multilingual Children's Speech. (2017). Tutorial: Speech assessment for multilingual children who do not speak the same language(s) as the speech-language pathologist. American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 26(3), 691–708. https://doi.org/10.1044/2017_AJSLP-15-0161
11. Nardy, A., Chevrot, J.-P., & Barbu, S. (2013). The acquisition of sociolinguistic variation: Looking back and thinking forward. Linguistics Vanguard, 1(1), 1–16.
12. Romaine, S. (1995). Bilingualism (2nd ed.). Blackwell.
13. Smolak, E., de Anda, S., Enriquez, B., Poulin-Dubois, D., & Friend, M. (2020). Code-switching in young bilingual toddlers: A longitudinal, cross-language investigation. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition, 23(3), 500–518. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728919000257
14. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Harvard University Press.
15. Wardhaugh, R., & Fuller, J. M. (2015). An introduction to sociolinguistics (7th ed.). Wiley Blackwell.
16. Zauche, L. H., Thul, T. A., Mahoney, A. E. D., & Stapel-Wax, J. L. (2016). Influence of the home literacy environment on children's language and literacy development: A systematic review. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 32(2), 147–169.