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Nigerian English Development Strategies by Crèche Pupils

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Abstract: This study investigates how Nigerian crèche pupils (aged 1–3) contribute to the use of Nigerian English (NE) through everyday classroom interactions. Guided by Labov's (1972) variationist sociolinguistic theory, a qualitative approach was employed across twelve schools in South-West Nigeria, using participant observation and caregiver interviews. The findings reveal rich, systematic use of NE in pupils' speech. Onomatopoeic expressions such as *quack quack* for ducks, *muu* for cows, and *wee-wee* for urination helped children associate sounds with objects and actions, fostering both naming and social interaction. Lexico-semantic generalisations were common: *the speaker* referred to phones or radios, *and to pencil*s, crayons, and *pens; papa* described any older male. These flexible uses show children simplifying categories for ease of communication. Reduplication patterns such as *cry-cry, beggy-beggy,* and *small-small* functioned as intensifiers, emphasising behavioural traits, movement, or social evaluation. Pupils also coined original expressions such as *Mr Do-Good* (disciplinary cane) and *Big Daddy* (an older male figure), demonstrating their creative engagement with sociocultural norms. Language transfer was evident in the everyday use of Yoruba terms like *dodo* (fried plantain) and *ponmo* (cow skin), which were generalised to refer to various meats. Unique phonological strategies included substitution (*told for gold),* deletion (*apoo for apple),* and insertion *(bikitifor biscuit*), and syllable reduction *(dwink for drink),* while grammatical forms, such as *he say* and *off the light*, showed alignment with established NE patterns. These findings affirm that Nigerian crèche pupils are early adopters of a distinct variety of Nigerian English.

Keywords: Language development, World Englishes, Language development strategies, Crèche, Nigerian English

1. Introduction

Language acquisition in early childhood has long been acknowledged as foundational to cognitive and social development (Tomasello, 2003). Building on this understanding, recent studies on Nigerian English (NE) suggest that children's language development is shaped not only by formal instruction but also by the dynamics of everyday interactions and cultural expressions (Crystal, 2010; Hoff & Naigles, 2002). In this context, crèche pupils in Nigeria represent a particularly revealing group for examining how such influences play out in practice. Within these early educational settings, children do not simply reproduce language but actively reshape it by simplifying complex lexical items, extending meanings, and employing onomatopoeic and reduplicative forms drawn from both indigenous languages and NE (Motamedi *et al.,* 2021). A case in point is the use of expressions like *quack quack* for duck or *papa* for any adult male, which exemplify the role of phonological, semantic, and sociocultural patterns in early language use. These linguistic strategies offer insight into children's cognitive processes and early socialisation experiences (Berger, 2005; Bialystok, 2011). As such, their language behaviours are shaped by both internal developmental milestones and external inputs from caregivers and peers (Vygotsky, 1978; Tomasello & Bates, 2001). Despite this, the existing literature on children's language acquisition has largely focused on those in primary or secondary education (McIsaac *et al.,* 2023; 2014; Ejieh, 2006), with minimal attention to the unique communicative patterns found in crèche settings.

English language use among young children in Nigeria has been explored across various domains, particularly in relation to language development, literacy acquisition, and educational policy. However, empirical research specifically examining how Nigerian English (NE) is internalised, transformed, and localised by children within early

learning environments remains limited. Izang (2015), for instance, observed that in multilingual school settings, children tend to adopt English preferentially during play and peer interaction, suggesting an early alignment with socially dominant language norms. Adesoye (2021) further documented phonological processes, such as substitution and vowel modification, among children aged 4 to 6 in Lagos and Oyo States, offering insight into how NE patterns begin to take shape in early speech. Complementing this, Oladipupo & Akinjobi (2015) conducted a sociophonetic analysis of young Nigerian English speakers, illustrating how both segmental and suprasegmental features of their speech reflect evolving patterns of internalisation and phonological adaptation. Jiang (2025) examined phonological awareness strategies used in primary classrooms and demonstrated the influence of structured literacy activities on children's acquisition of English sounds. Collectively, these studies offer valuable but fragmentary insights into children's linguistic development in NE, thereby underscoring the pressing need for focused research that captures the dynamic, context-driven processes by which young learners engage with and reshape Nigerian English.

Therefore, this study explores the strategies employed by crèche pupils in using and contributing to a variety of English that is distinctive to the Nigerian context. This study adopts a qualitative adaptation of variationist principles, focusing on patterned usage rather than quantitative frequency counts.

1.1 The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What linguistic strategies do Nigerian crèche pupils employ in using Nigerian English?
2. In what ways do these child-driven linguistic practices contribute to the distinctive character of Nigerian English?

1.2 Nigerian English

Nigerian English (NE) refers to the variety of English spoken and adapted by Nigerians. It is a distinctive variety that reflects Nigeria's multilingual setting (Babatunde & Toluwalase, 2025). This localised form of English has been extensively discussed in sociolinguistic literature, with Jowitt (2019) describing it as English as used by Nigerians, highlighting its adaptation across linguistic levels to meet daily communicative needs. Based on Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model, NigE is currently at the late stage of nativisation (stage 3) and is on the verge of entering the stage of endonormative stabilisation (stage 4) (Unuabonah *et al.,* 2022, p. 178).NE has been the subject of studies focusing on its phonological features (Bobda, 2000; Ufomata, 1996), lexico-semantic features (Adegbija, 1989; Bamiro, 1994), syntactic features (Christiana-Oluremi, 2013), and discourse patterns.

The phonological characteristics of NE include a syllable-timed rhythm, in which each syllable receives equal stress, and a tendency to stress the final syllable, leading to variations such as *fireWOOD* instead of *FIREwood* (Jowitt, 1991). Phonological interference from indigenous languages also contributes to features such as over- and under-differentiation, reinterpretation, and sound substitution (Bala & Muhammad, 2024). In the realm of lexico-semantics, NE exhibits a rich array of lexical innovations driven by the need to express sociocultural concepts unique to the Nigerian context. Processes such as transfer, analogy, acronyms, semantic shift or extension, coinages, reduplication, ellipsis, conversion, clipping, hybridisation, and affixation have been identified as mechanisms for creating new lexical items (Adegbija, 1989; Bamiro, 1994). For instance, words like *go-slow* (traffic jam) and *half-current* (low voltage) illustrate how existing English words are repurposed to convey localised meanings (Ekundayo & Balogun, 2013).

The expansion of NE's lexicon is also influenced by the incorporation of indigenous language elements, resulting in hybrid forms such as *akara-ball* and *adire-cloth* (Researchwap, n.d.). These lexical items not only fill communicative gaps but also reflect the cultural realities and experiences of Nigerian speakers. Obasi (2022) notes that such innovations are often motivated by the need to express concepts for which Standard British/American English lacks direct equivalents, leading to the creation of new words or the adaptation of existing ones through processes like semantic extension and direct borrowing. The quest for a standardised variety of NE has been a topic of interest among linguists, with some advocating for the recognition of a Standard Nigerian English (SNE) that encapsulates the unique features of NE while maintaining mutual intelligibility with other English varieties (Akujobi & Onyia, 2022). However, the dominance of British English norms continues to influence language attitudes and preferences in Nigeria, often overshadowing indigenous innovations (Oyebola & Gut, 2021).

The variationist theory proposed by Labov (1972) provides a framework for understanding the linguistic variations observed in Nigerian English (NE). This theory posits that social factors such as age, exposure, and communicative context influence how individuals acquire and use language. In the Nigerian context, these variables contribute to observable differences in lexical choice, pragmatic expression, and usage patterns across regions and social groups (Grondelaers *et al.,* 2012). In the present study, this framework helps explain how crèche pupils develop strategies for using Nigerian English forms through daily interactions with caregivers, teachers, and peers. At this formative stage, children are exposed to multiple linguistic inputs ranging from Standard British English norms to localised Nigerian varieties, resulting in early patterns of lexical, phonological, and pragmatic variation. Such variation reflects the natural process of language acquisition and adaptation within a multilingual environment. While this study is qualitative in design, Labov's (1972) variationist sociolinguistic theory is applied at an interpretive level to explain how linguistic variation emerges within specific social contexts. The analysis does not follow a strictly quantitative variationist model; rather, it draws on the core principle that interaction, environment, and patterns of exposure shape language use. In this study, variation is observed in the differing forms pupils use across classroom activities, peer interaction, and routine communication. These variations are interpreted as early evidence of socially conditioned language use, in which pupils' linguistic choices reflect the influence of their immediate educational and sociocultural environments. Thus, the framework guides the explanation of variation in usage patterns, rather than statistical distribution. Figure 1 illustrates the broad categories of lexical variation in Nigerian English.

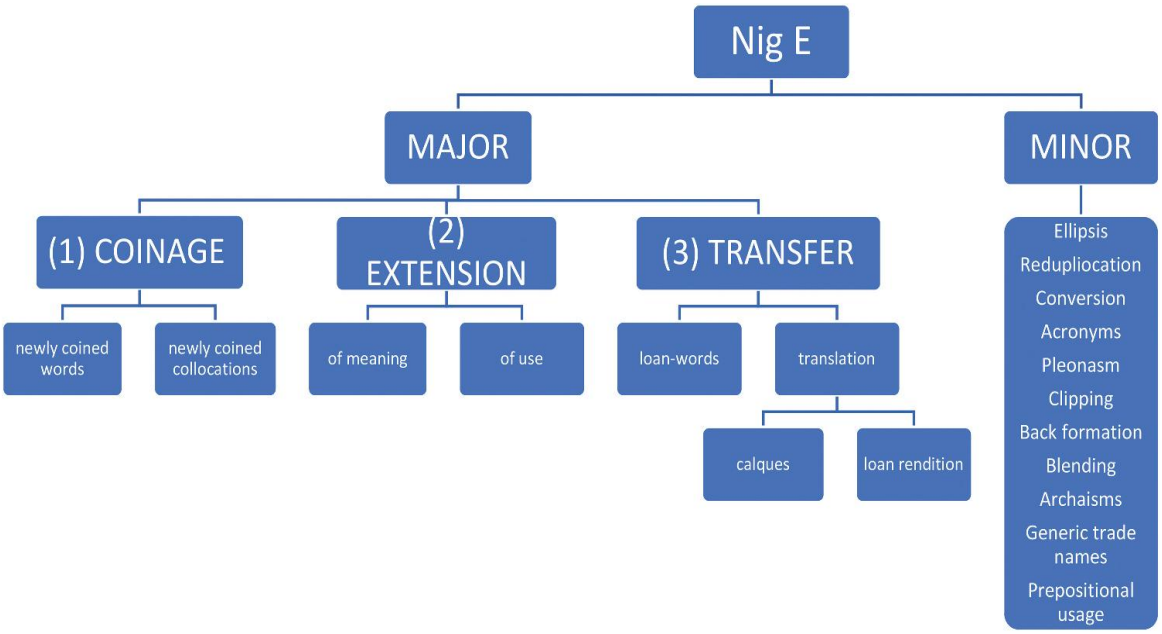

Figure 1. Broad categories of lexical variation in Nigerian English.

The diagram classifies variations into *major* and *minor* processes. The major processes include coinage, extension, and transfer, which account for newly coined words and collocations, extensions of meaning or use, and lexical transfer through borrowing and translation. The minor processes involve reduplication, conversion, acronyms, pleonasm, clipping, blending, and other creative word formations that reflect the dynamic nature of NE.

3.1 Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative observational approach to explore how crèche pupils engage Nigerian English (NE) during early language learning. The research was conducted in 12 schools across the six states of Nigeria's South-West region: Lagos, Oyo, Ogun, Osun, Ondo, and Ekiti. To ensure balanced representation, two schools were selected from each state, with consideration given to both urban and semi-urban settings and to linguistic and social diversity.

The selection of schools was guided by convenience sampling, based on factors such as accessibility, administrative approval, and willingness to participate. This strategy enabled smooth access to the study sites and the opportunity to engage with schools willing to collaborate. A total of 300 pupils aged 1 to 3 years participated in the study, with 25 pupils from each school. Although the term *pupil* is often reserved for primary school learners, it is used here to describe children enrolled in formal early childhood education (crèche), as is common in many Nigerian

schools. Participants were identified with the assistance of class teachers using three simple criteria: regular school attendance, active verbal participation in class, and parental or guardian consent. The sample included 152 girls and 148 boys, providing a fairly balanced gender distribution.

Data collection took place over a period of four months, during which the pupils were observed in their natural school environments across classroom interactions, free play, and structured learning sessions. Both participant and non-participant observation methods were employed to capture spontaneous language use without disrupting the classroom's normal flow. To encourage children's verbal engagement, the study incorporated familiar activities such as storytelling, nursery rhymes, music, and picture-based tasks. These served as gentle prompts for communication and helped document the children's everyday linguistic creativity.

In addition to classroom observation, the study included semi-structured interviews with 50 caregivers from across the six states. These conversations provided context on the children's home-language use, media exposure, and the kinds of English- or indigenous-language interactions common in their daily lives. Caregivers offered insight into how children mix, simplify, or create words based on their surroundings.

To ensure analytical transparency, the observation process was systematically structured across the twelve schools. A total of approximately 192 observation hours were conducted over the four months, averaging 4 hours per week per school. These sessions covered classroom instruction, playtime, and routine interactions to capture pupils' natural speech in varied contexts. Language samples were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on clearly audible and contextually meaningful utterances produced during interaction. Only expressions that were repeated or shared across pupils and settings were retained for analysis, while isolated or unclear productions were excluded to ensure reliability.

Recurring linguistic forms were identified through repeated review of audio and video recordings alongside field notes. They were coded based on observable linguistic features, including onomatopoeia, reduplication, lexico-semantic generalisation, coinage, borrowing, and grammatical simplification. The coding process was iterative, allowing categories to be refined as consistent patterns emerged across the dataset. Thematic categories were established inductively, guided by frequency, functional relevance, and cross-contextual consistency. To strengthen validity, data triangulation was employed: audio recordings provided phonological detail, video recordings captured interactional context and non-verbal cues, and field notes documented situational insights. These sources were cross-checked during analysis to ensure the accuracy and consistency of the identified linguistic patterns.

Although this study focuses on pupils' use of Nigerian English, it is important to clarify that the 1–3 age range covers different developmental stages. In practice, most of the analysable speech data was produced by pupils aged 2–3 years, who demonstrated more consistent verbal expression. Younger pupils contributed more limited forms. Therefore, the linguistic features discussed in this study primarily reflect the observable speech patterns of the older children within the crèche setting, while still representing early-stage use of Nigerian English among pupils.

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant education authorities and from parents or guardians through signed forms. The purpose of the study was explained to the children in age-appropriate language to seek their assent. To maintain confidentiality, all identifying details were removed from transcripts and reports.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Onomatopoeia and Lexico-Semantics

This section explores how onomatopoeia and lexico-semantic expressions used in Nigerian crèches and crèche schools are not merely tools for facilitating language learning but also evidence of early use of NE. The observations suggest that crèche pupils are not just acquiring English; they are actively using a variety of Nigerian English (NE) through context-specific coinages and sound-symbol associations grounded in their environment.

4.2 Quack Quack (Ducks)

In the observed settings, the expression *quack quack* was commonly used to refer to ducks. While this onomatopoeic usage might seem universal, its significance lies in how it is reinforced and localised within Nigerian classrooms. Teachers actively encouraged this expression during song time and animal recognition games, thereby

embedding the sound into routine communicative exchanges. The repeated use of this expression within a culturally specific learning environment reflects not only auditory mimicry but also the beginnings of a patterned linguistic system that aligns with local norms.

4.3 Mehh (Goats) and Muu (Cows)

Building on this, expressions such as *mehh* and *muu*were also widely used to refer to goats and cows. These terms were integrated into songs, role-play, and classroom dialogues, often in contexts that reflected the pupils' rural or semi-urban environments where such animals are familiar. The recurring usage of these expressions in both instructional and informal interactions suggests an active lexical choice by children, shaped by their immediate surroundings.

4.4 Wee-Wee (Urination)

Beyond animal references, onomatopoeia was extended to biological functions, with terms such as *'wee-wee'* for urination. This expression, while phonetically imitative, served a pragmatic purpose by easing communication around sensitive topics. Teachers reported that its usage helped children express personal needs without shame or confusion. Here, the term functions not simply as baby talk but as an emerging lexical item adapted to fit both emotional and cultural comfort. It also subtly reflects how Nigerian English accommodates social norms by simplifying and modifying English to suit context-specific needs.

4.5 Poo Poo (Defecation)

Similarly, *"poo-poo"* used to describe defecation follows the same model of repetition and simplification. While such expressions exist globally, what distinguishes them in this context is their consistent pedagogical reinforcement in Nigerian settings and their role in establishing early semantic categories for children. These expressions are neither Standard British English nor fully localised indigenous terms; they represent a middle ground, a creative adaptation that defines the child's first variety of NE.

What emerged from the field observations was not just the presence of child-directed speech, but also evidence that Nigerian children employ similar developmental strategies and processes to those of other children when acquiring Nigerian English. The sounds are not arbitrary; they are chosen, reinforced, and adapted in context-specific ways. In line with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the learners' exposure to these expressions within meaningful social settings enhances internalisation and production. More importantly, these expressions signal a shift from simple imitation to the early formation of a context-bound variety of Nigerian English, in which pupils adapt English not only for learning but also for navigating their sociocultural realities. In this light, what developmental markers point to linguistic creativity and to environment-driven development?

4.2 Generalisation of Lexico-Semantics

This section examines how crèche pupils in Nigerian crèches and schools display early signs of NE use through semantic generalisation. These generalisations reflect not just cognitive strategies for simplifying language use.

4.2.1 Speaker (Phone)

One of the most revealing examples was the widespread use of the word *'speaker'* to refer to any device that produces sound, especially mobile phones. Originally, the term speaker referred either to a person who speaks or to a specific audio device. However, the children's usage extended this meaning to include phones and other sound-emitting devices. This semantic broadening reflects a localised communicative logic in which children associate function (sound output) with form and label accordingly, suggesting that, like their peers elsewhere, they adapt existing terms to describe new items within their local environment.

The consistency of this usage across different schools highlights its emerging stability as a feature of NE among young speakers.

4.2.2 Papa (Older Male Figure)

This semantic flexibility also appeared in social categorisation. The word *papa* was used not only for biological fathers but also for uncles, grandfathers, and other older male figures. This usage reflects Nigerian cultural norms, in which familial terms are often used to express respect, familiarity, or status. Children thus internalise and reproduce these extensions in ways that reflect typical language acquisition processes, showing how social and cultural context shapes their early use of Nigerian English. The term becomes more than a name; it functions as a relational index, grounding English usage in Nigerian modes of kinship and social respect.

4.2.3 Pencil (Any Writing Material)

Another recurring observation was the use of the term *pencil* to refer to any writing tool, including pens, crayons, and markers. This generalisation is pragmatic and shows how children prioritise function over formal categorisation. While this is an oversimplification from a Standard English perspective, it reveals how children manipulate language to meet practical classroom demands. This functional naming strategy is a form of cognitive economy that simplifies communication without impairing understanding or action. As this use was shared and understood among both children and teachers, it suggests the development of a shared lexico-semantic code within the NE variety spoken in early educational settings.

Across these examples, a clear pattern emerges: children are not simply acquiring English, but adapting it to fit the world they inhabit. The observed lexical usages, such as calling a phone a *speaker,* referring to any older man as *papa*, or labelling all writing tools as *pencil,* show semantic generalisation shaped by the children's interactional and environmental experiences. These practices are grounded in both cognitive strategies and cultural logic, reflecting Tomasello's (2003) assertion that children construct language through active, situated learning.

In the Nigerian context, this means that English is not adopted in a vacuum it is indigenised at the earliest stages of use, even among crèche pupils. These linguistic choices, though emergent, point toward a living, evolving variety of Nigerian English, marked by terms and usages born out of practical needs and social realities. The generalisation patterns noted here do not represent errors but rather systematic uses that reflect the dynamic interplay between cognition, culture, and communication in the early formation of NE.

4.3 Reduplication of Words

Reduplication, as a morphological process, plays a central role in the use of English among crèche pupils in Nigerian educational contexts. While reduplication occurs across various English varieties, field observations suggest that its use among Nigerian children reflects not only early linguistic creativity but also a culturally embedded strategy for expanding meaning and reinforcing expression. These forms, though often seen as childlike simplifications, are in fact evidence of the pupils' ability to coin, adapt, and stabilise features that contribute to the evolving variety of Nigerian English (NE).

4.3.1 Cry-Cry (Someone Who Cries Often)

In many of the observed classrooms, children used *cry-cry* to describe someone who cries often. This reduplicated form serves not merely as repetition but as an intensifier, expressing frequency and emotional tone. Teachers noted that children used this expression regularly during peer descriptions, signalling its functional status within their communicative repertoire. Far from being a spontaneous or random construction, *cry-cry* mirrors a larger pattern in NE, where repetition is used for emphasis, clarity, and rhythm. Its usage reflects the strategies children employ to promote forms that are both expressive and socially meaningful, aligning with the linguistic tendencies already present in adult NE speakers.

4.3.2 Small-Small (Gently or Slowly)

Closely related is the expression *small-small,* which children used to mean *'gently' or 'slowly'.* Here, reduplication combines with semantic extension to create an adverbial form that is widely intelligible in Nigerian classrooms. Teachers were observed using this expression to instruct children to act cautiously or to reduce the

intensity of their tasks (e.g., "wash your hands small-small"). This form, while not part of Standard British English, functions effectively within this context, suggesting that the children are internalising the lexico-semantic norms of NE. The use lies not in imitation, but in the productive use of reduplication as a communicative tool shaped by local discourse practices.

4.3.3 Beggy-Beggy (Someone Who Begs Often)

A more complex example is *beggy-beggy,* which combines reduplication with morphological coinage. By adding the pseudo-suffix *-gy* to *beg,* children form a playful yet socially descriptive term for someone who often begs, especially for food or toys. The term was commonly used during play and snack times, and its recurrence across different groups of children suggests that it is not isolated or idiosyncratic. Instead, it signals early sociolinguistic awareness, as pupils label behaviours and establish peer norms through language. *Beggy-beggy* is thus more than a linguistic shortcut; it draws on the structure of NE, demonstrating how even young speakers participate in the use of variety through everyday interaction. The expression *beggy-beggy* was mainly produced by older crèche pupils (approximately 2.5–3 years), who showed the ability to label recurring behaviours among peers. Its use reflects early evaluative language and reduplication as an intensifying strategy. While younger pupils occasionally repeated the term, its more consistent and context-appropriate use was observed among children closer to 3 years, suggesting emerging pragmatic awareness rather than random imitation.

The consistent use of reduplication shows that Nigerian crèche pupils use existing lexical items as strategies for promoting Nigerian English. Reduplication in these contexts serves multiple functions: it simplifies form, intensifies meaning, and encodes socially shared knowledge. These patterns echo broader features of NE, in which reduplication is used in adult speech for emphasis (*hot-hot, quick-quick*) and for categorical description (*chop-chop*).

Thus, what is seen in the classrooms is not only linguistic acquisition but also early indications of variety formation, as children reflect culturally grounded items that connect with the growing corpus of Nigerian English. Rather than interpreting these patterns as indicators of cognitive immaturity, they should be recognised as evidence of the use of NE among the participants, regularisation, and local adaptation, key processes in the evolution of any World Englishes variety.

4.4 Coinages, grammatical structure, and Borrowing

Table 1 shows that the linguistic practices of Nigerian crèches schools reveal structured patterns of NE. These include coinages, borrowing, hybrid forms, and grammatical reconfigurations. Rather than viewing these features as deviations from Standard British English, they should be understood as part of a developing system of Nigerian English (NE), reflecting the interplay between children's linguistic environment, socialisation practices, and early creative agency. The following examples illustrate how children acquire, internalise, and reproduce these features in their everyday communication.

Table 1. Coinages, grammatical structure, and Borrowing

Linguistic Strategy	Sample	Description	Field Observation Discussion
Coinages	Mr Do-Good	A newly coined term referring to a cane used for disciplining children. The name suggests that children will *do well after being disciplined.*	The term *Mr Do-Good* effectively prompted compliance among children, demonstrating how language can be used as a behavioural tool in a culturally sensitive manner.
	Big Daddy	A term used instead of *"uncle*" to address older male relatives, reflecting affection and respect.	Children who used *Big Daddy* often showed a stronger emotional bond with the addressed male figures, highlighting how language adapts to express respect and closeness in social interactions.

Borrowing	Dodo (Fried Plantain)	A loanword from Yoruba, commonly used by children to refer to fried plantain.	The term *dodo* was more engaging for children during mealtimes, indicating that culturally resonant terms enhance communicative confidence and social interaction.
	Ponmo (Cow Skin)	A loanword from Yoruba is used to refer to cow skin, a popular food item in Nigeria.	Children found *ponmo* easier to pronounce and more culturally meaningful than *cow skin,* suggesting that loanwords help maintain a strong connection to cultural identity.
Hybridisation	Bobo (Boy/Brother)	A term from Yoruba and Igbo used by children instead of boy or brother, reflecting cultural influence.	Children *who used Bobo* exhibited strong camaraderie and cultural identity, demonstrating that hybridisation enables them to navigate their bilingual environment effectively.
Grammatical Structures	He Say (He Said)	Children use *'he say'* instead of *'he said,'* reflecting a simplified structure common in Nigerian English.	The phrase *he say* was more intuitive for children and widely understood, showing how they adapt language to fit their linguistic environment while maintaining effective communication.
	Off the Light (Put off the Light)	A simplified phrase where children omit the verb *put,* using *off the light* instead.	*Off the light* was frequently used by children, indicating a preference for brevity and directness in language, aligning with everyday speech patterns in Nigerian English.

4.5 Coinages

4.5.1 Mr Do-Good (Cane for Discipline)

The expression *Mr Do-Good*, used to refer to a cane employed for disciplinary purposes, reflects a culturally resonant form of language that connects function with social consequence, implying that after discipline, the child will *do good*. While this term may not originate with very young children, it was observed to be used consistently across classrooms by children in interactions with peers and educators. Its circulation stems from teacher-led usage or influence from older peers, with younger children absorbing and reusing the term through frequent exposure. Rather than being passive repetition, this reflects children's participation in a classroom-based discourse system, where coined expressions like *Mr Do-Good serve* both disciplinary and linguistic functions. The expression *Mr Do-Good* was predominantly observed among older crèche pupils (approximately 2.5–3 years), who demonstrated the ability to reproduce socially meaningful labels. Its usage among younger pupils was limited and largely imitative.

4.5.2 Big Daddy (Older Male Figure)

Another example of coinage is the phrase *Big Daddy*, commonly used by children to refer to older male figures such as uncles, male teachers, or grandfathers. This term signals both endearment and status, extending beyond formal kinship titles. Children use it to encode respect and affection, reflecting a culturally grounded semantic. In the Nigerian linguistic context, size metaphors like *big* often index authority or seniority. The term thus reveals a localised linguistic logic through which children contribute to the pragmatics of NE by infusing English with indigenous social values. The expression *'Big Daddy'* was primarily used by older crèche pupils, aged around 3.

4.5.3 Borrowing

Dodo (Fried Plantain)

Dodo, a Yoruba loanword for fried plantain, was the preferred term used by children during mealtime conversations. Rather than using *plantain* or fried *banana*, children naturally opted for *dodo,* which aligns with cultural familiarity and ease of pronunciation. The use of this term demonstrates that language transfer from indigenous languages into English is not merely transitional but forms part of a stable lexicon within NE. The integration of *dodo* into classroom discourse exemplifies how local linguistic resources enhance expressivity and reduce communicative friction.

Ponmo (Cow Skin)

Similarly, the term *ponmo,* also from Yoruba, was consistently used to describe cow skin. Despite its non-English origin, it was understood across different school settings, highlighting its entrenchment in children's active vocabulary. The preference for *ponmo*over, the English equivalent *of cow skin*, suggests that transfer enhances semantic precision in culturally rooted contexts. These observations underscore how pupils internalise linguistic forms that align more closely with their socio-cultural environment, thereby expanding the reach and relevance of NE.

4.5.4 Hybridisation

Bobo (Boy/Brother)

The use of *the bobo* lexical item, with roots in Yoruba and Igbo, illustrates hybridisation in children's speech. Instead of *'boy' or 'brother,*' children often use *'bobo*to' to refer to male peers or siblings. This hybrid form preserves indigenous linguistic identity while functioning effectively in English-based discourse. Its use signals the emergence of a bilingual communicative code, in which children merge lexical forms across languages to construct a socially coherent and locally intelligible variety of NE.

4.5.5 Grammatical Structures

He Say (He Said)

Children frequently used *he say* instead of the standard past tense *he said.* While this form may initially appear as an error, its widespread use indicates a pattern of verb regularisation typical of NE. This form reflects a simplified grammatical structure that nonetheless retains communicative clarity. Rather than being random or unsystematic, such forms illustrate how children are reconfiguring English grammar in ways that align with NE usage norms, especially within oral, peer-based interactions. The construction *he say* was most frequently observed among pupils aged 2.5–3 years, who were beginning to form short narrative or reporting structures. While the form aligns with known Nigerian English usage, its presence in pupil speech reflects early-stage reproduction and pattern extension, in which children apply simplified tense marking in line with the input they are regularly exposed to, rather than fully developed control of grammatical tense.

Off the Light (Put off the Light)

The phrase *off the light* omits the auxiliary verb *put*, yet remains a grammatically stable imperative within NE. It reflects a preference for brevity, directness, and efficiency in communicative exchange. Children used this form consistently, especially during classroom transitions or routines, suggesting that such expressions are both familiar and socially reinforced. The simplification process here does not compromise meaning but rather represents a legitimate reordering of English structure, mirroring NE speech across age groups. The structure *off the light* was predominantly reproduced by pupils aged around 3 years, who demonstrated the ability to use simplified imperative constructions in routine classroom contexts.

The linguistic strategies observed among these crèche pupils show early evidence of systematic use of NE and sociolinguistic patterning. Whether through culturally embedded coinages like *Big Daddy*, transferred items like *ponmo*, or grammar shifts such as *he say*, children are not passively acquiring English; rather, they reflect their

cultural world, peer interactions, and communicative needs. These expressions are not merely indicative of developmental stages; they form part of a growing system of NE, distinguished by its sensitivity to context, economy of structure, and cultural specificity. Through repetition, adoption, and playful reconfiguration of language, pupils internalise classroom norms that codify a distinct variety of English grounded in Nigerian realities and expressive of local identities. As such, the linguistic features identified in this section provide compelling evidence that NE is being constructed and transmitted at the earliest stages of formal education.

4.5 Phonological Features

Table 2. Phonological Features.

Linguistic Element	Sample Pronunciation	Phonological Analysis	Lexico-Semantic Aspect	Field Observation Discussion
Baby	Tata	Simplified pronunciation by children between 2-3 years, where *baby* is pronounced as *tata*.	Refers to an infant, also used as a pet name among adults.	The shift from *tata* to *baby* as children grow highlights their phonological development and acquisition of standard pronunciation patterns.
My	Meme	Children between 2 and 3 years old pronounce *my* as " *me* ", showing an early stage of language acquisition where sounds are simplified.	Indicates possession.	The use of memereflects children's cognitive strategies to express ownership, simplifying more complex sounds.
See	Ti	The word *see* is pronounced as/*ti*/ by children, indicating a simplified phonological structure that is easier for young speakers to produce.	Used to draw attention, e.g., *Aunty see.*	/*ti*/represents an early phonological development stage where children opt for simpler sound structures, making communication more accessible.
Apple	Apoo	*Apple* is pronounced as /*apoo*/ by children, with the final /le/sound omitted, reflecting a common pattern in early language acquisition.	Refers to the fruit, often simplified in pronunciation by children.	The omission of the /*le*/sound illustrates how children streamline complex words, focusing on the most prominent sounds for easier articulation.
Thank you	Tenkku	*Thank you* is pronounced as /*tenkku,*/ showing a common phonological adjustment in	A phrase expressing gratitude.	The phrase /*tenkku*/ reflects a phonological feature common among young children, making the expression easier to pronounce while retaining

		Nigerian English where sounds are simplified.		its social function of expressing appreciation.
Sorry	Soyi	*Sorry* is pronounced *soyi,* illustrating a typical phonological alteration in which complex consonant clusters are simplified.	A way of apologising.	The pronunciation *soyi* demonstrates how children adapt language to align with their developing phonological capabilities, simplifying more complex words.
Ice Cream	I kwim	*Ice cream* is pronounced/I/ kwim, showing the typical truncation and simplification in early childhood speech patterns.	Refers to the frozen dessert.	The truncation to /I / *kwim* reflects a cognitive strategy where children retain key sounds while omitting others, making the word easier to manage in speech.
Gold	Told	*Gold*s is pronounced as *told* by young children, reflecting a common substitution where /g/ sounds are replaced with /t/sounds.	Refers to the metal or a person's name in Nigerian English.	The substitution of /g/ with /t/ demonstrates how children navigate phonological development, using familiar sounds to replace more challenging ones.
Write	Lite	*Write* is pronounced as /*lite/,* showing a common phonological feature where the initial consonant is softened.	Refers to the action of making marks on paper.	The simplification from *write to lite* highlights how children reduce phonological complexity, choosing sounds that are easier to produce while still conveying the intended meaning.
Drink	Dwink	*The word 'drink'* is pronounced/dwink/ , illustrating a common child-speech pattern in which initial consonants are blended into a simpler form.	Refers to consuming liquids.	The pronunciation /*dwink/* reflects a typical early stage of language development, when children simplify consonant clusters to make words easier to pronounce.
Please	Pwis	*Please*is pronounced as /*pwis/,* showing a phonological shift where /l/ sounds are replaced with *w*sounds, a	A word used to indicate politeness or a request.	The shift from *please* to /pwis/ illustrates how children modify sounds that are more difficult to produce, adapting the word to their phonological abilities while retaining its social function.

		common feature in early speech.		
Rice	Rite	*Rice* is pronounced as *rite*, reflecting a common phonological adjustment where complex vowel sounds are simplified.	Refers to the staple food grain.	The adjustment from *rice*to /rite/ demonstrates how children simplify vowel sounds in line with their developing speech patterns, making words easier to pronounce while still conveying the intended meaning.
Yes	Yet	*Yes* is pronounced as *yet*, showing a phonological adaptation in which/s/sounds are replaced with /t/ sounds, a typical feature of early child speech.	Used to express agreement or acknowledgement.	The substitution of /s/ with /t/ in *ye*t highlights how children adapt words to fit their phonological capabilities, ensuring that they can still participate in conversations and express agreement effectively.
Biscuit	Bikiti	*Biscuit* is pronounced/bikiti/, showing a phonological pattern in which consonant clusters are broken down into simpler syllables.	Refers to a baked snack, known as a *cookie* in American English.	The pronunciation /bikiti/ reflects how children simplify consonant clusters and add syllables to words, making them easier to articulate and more accessible for early language learners.
Daddy	Dada	*Daddy* is pronounced 'dada,' a common phonological pattern in early child speech in which syllables are repeated.	Refers to a father or paternal figure.	The repetition of *da* in dadahighlights a typical early speech pattern where children use reduplication to simplify words and make them easier to pronounce, reflecting early language acquisition stages.
Boy	Bobo	*Boy* is pronounced as *bobo*, showing a phonological pattern where simple, repetitive sounds are preferred by young children.	Refers to a male child or young male.	The use of *bobo* reflects how children adapt more complex words to simpler, repetitive forms, making them easier to pronounce and aiding their language development.
Water	Wawa	*Water*		

Table 2. Shows the phonological features observed among crèche pupils across Nigerian schools, illustrating systematic, socially functional, and linguistically strategic modifications. These include syllable reduplication, segment substitution, consonant cluster reduction, vowel insertion, sound deletion, and diphthong flattening, all of which are integrated into a coherent system of early NE.

One of the most prominent strategies is reduplication, which not only facilitates rhythmic regularity but also embeds semantic emphasis. For instance, *baby* is rendered as *tata,* daddy as *dada*, and *boy* as *bobo*. In these cases, children double the initial syllables of the target words, producing more rhythmically predictable and articulatorily manageable forms. This phonological use is not arbitrary it reflects a cultural and linguistic preference for repetition in Nigerian English and functions as a socially recognisable pattern of speech.

Another dominant feature of the process is segment substitution, particularly of less accessible consonants. In this regard, *my* is realised as a *meme*, replacing the diphthong and final semivowel with bilabial nasals. Similarly, *see* becomes /*ti/,* where the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ is replaced by the voiceless plosive /t/. *Gold* is realised as *told,* involving a substitution of the voiced velar plosive /g/ with its voiceless alveolar counterpart /t/. These consistent shifts show a preference for plosives and nasals, which are phonetically simpler and more frequent in local language structures.

Cluster reduction is another recurrent feature, especially in multisyllabic words. In *biscuit* becoming *bikiti*, and *drink* becoming *dwink*, children restructure the word by either breaking down consonant clusters (as in biscuit) or blending them into more accessible forms (as in *dwink).* In *please*, the lateral /l/ is replaced with a glide /w/, simplifying the articulation while preserving recognisability. These strategies demonstrate an orientation toward open syllables, which are favoured in both early child speech and Nigerian English phonotactics.

Vowel insertion also plays a significant role in shaping pronunciation. In *bikiti*, the additional vowel segments inserted between consonant clusters reflect a restructuring process aimed at achieving phonological balance and ease of articulation. Similarly, in *apple* becoming *apoo,* and *ice cream* as *I kwim,* there is a truncation of complex clusters and an insertion of simpler, more sonorous syllables.

Diphthong flattening and vowel reduction are also widely observed. *Rice* becomes /*rite/*, *thank you* is rendered as *tenkku*, and *sorry* becomes /*soyi/.* In each case, diphthongs are simplified to monophthongs or reinterpreted using high-frequency local phonemes. In *thank you*, /θ/ is replaced with /t/, mirroring not only ease of articulation but also a known feature of adult NE pronunciation. The shift from *yes* to *yet* also reflects fricative-plosive substitution /s/ to /t/ a patterned strategy that increases articulatory efficiency.

is evident in items like *apple* becoming *apoo*, where the final /l/ is dropped, and in *write* becoming *lite*, where the silent /w/ is omitted, and /r/ is softened to a lateral variant. These deletions maintain lexical identity while simplifying production. The word *ice cream*, as *I kwim* exhibits truncation with retention of dominant consonantal markers, again showing that children extract and preserve salient phonological cues while omitting less accessible segments.

Across all samples, these are neither random nor temporary; rather, they are rule-governed, socially reinforced, and reflective of broader trends in Nigerian English. These strategies demonstrate how children participate in the use of NE by selecting phonological forms that prioritise economy, rhythmic balance, and functional clarity. The systematic nature of these processes shows that a unique phonological feature among Nigerian crèche pupils is best interpreted not as developmental delay, but as a linguistic pattern that aligns with the structural patterning of NE.

Thus, phonological features become a defining feature of NE's localisation at the foundational stage. The observed forms rooted in substitution, insertion, reduplication, and deletion are functional, intelligible, and culturally meaningful, reinforcing the status of Nigerian English as a linguistically autonomous and socially embedded variety.

5. Discussion

This section discusses how Nigerian crèche pupils use (NE) in their daily classroom speech. The linguistic behaviours observed, such as onomatopoeia, semantic extension, reduplication, coinage, transfer, phonological restructuring, and grammatical variation, are not random deviations but are socially shaped by the Nigerian sociolinguistic environment. The use of onomatopoeic expressions like *'wee-wee'* and *'poo-poo'* served as intuitive cues, enabling young children to connect sounds with meanings in contexts such as bodily functions. These expressions functioned effectively in classroom communication and social interaction. Lexico-semantic generalisation was another pattern frequently observed. Pupils used *a speaker* for all sound-producing devices and a *pencil* for

various writing tools such as markers and crayons. Similarly, the word *papa* was used broadly to refer to male elders, not just biological fathers. These extensions demonstrate a functional use of vocabulary, grounded in social experience. Bamiro (2006) argues that such semantic expansions are central to the development of Nigerianisms, in which speakers creatively reinterpret the English lexicon to match local social realities. Reduplication also played a significant role in pupils' speech, with expressions like *cry-cry,small-small*, and *beggy-beggy* frequently heard during peer interaction. These forms simplified pronunciation while providing rhythm and emphasis. Ogban & Imoh Ugot (2022) explain that reduplication in Nigerian English is both a stylistic and a communicative tool, commonly used by both adults and children. Their findings confirm that reduplication is not merely a stage in child language acquisition but a lasting feature of NE, aiding in clarity, repetition, and expressiveness.

Coinages and borrowings further revealed the use of NE in pupils' English. Terms such as *Mr Do-Good* for a disciplinary cane and *Big Daddy* for respected male elders exemplified how children invent or adopt expressions that reflect social norms and authority structures. The frequent use of Yoruba-derived terms such as *dodo* and *ponmo* also illustrates the transfer of terms from indigenous languages into English. Adegbija (2004) describes such practices as key outcomes of Nigeria's multilingual context, where language users blend codes to enhance communicative efficiency and cultural relevance. These findings show that even at an early age, children participate in the linguistic creativity that defines Nigerian English.

A unique phonological feature was evident in several forms. Examples include *pwis* for *please, bikiti* for *biscuit,* and *tata* for *baby.* These simplified forms reflect the articulatory strategies young learners use to manage complex syllables or clusters. Udofot (2022) notes that such phonological patterns, including vowel epenthesis, cluster reduction, and segment substitution, are not exclusive to children but are widely observed across Nigerian English speakers. Her analysis confirms that these are not errors but phonological adjustments, shaped by the phonetic structure of indigenous languages that influence English articulation. Grammatical variation was also prominent. Constructions, as he *says, such as 'he sa*id' instead of *'he said'* and *'off the light'* instead of *'put off the light'* show a tendency towards simplified syntax. These expressions are common in NE and reflect a localised grammar influenced by the mother tongue. Bamiro (2006) acknowledges that such structures form part of the syntactic use in Nigerian English, where contextual intelligibility takes precedence over imported rules. These patterns show that children are not only absorbing local speech forms but also internalising the broader grammatical structures of Nigerian English.

Together, these findings suggest that Nigerian crèche pupils use Nigerian English (NE). Their speech reflects features already recognised in adult NE, such as lexical creativity, cultural borrowing, phonological adjustment, and structural simplification, showing that these processes begin in early childhood and are reinforced through social interaction, cultural exposure, and functional use. The linguistic behaviours of Nigerian crèche pupils offer strong evidence for their role in the internal development of Nigerian English. From onomatopoeia and generalisation to reduplication, coinage, and phonological and grammatical restructuring, these patterns are consistent, meaningful, and culturally grounded.

The work of Udondata & Offiong (2021) confirms that children's speech is shaped by cultural exposure and peer interaction in early learning settings. Bamiro (2006) & Adegbija (2004) both highlight that the adaptive nature of Nigerian English reflects the sociocultural contexts in which it is used, including its semantic expansions and structural modifications. Uwen and Ugot (2022) demonstrate that reduplication is a valid and enduring stylistic feature of Nigerian English, while Udofot (2003) provides linguistic evidence that the phonological forms observed in children's speech are consistent with the systemic features of NE rather than temporary child-language errors.

6. Conclusion

In light of these findings, it becomes clear that the classroom is a fertile ground for NE among Nigerian Crèche Pupils. Educators and language policymakers should view pupils' speech patterns as assets that reflect linguistic competence within the Nigerian English variety. Recognizing and incorporating these features into early childhood education can help validate children's language experiences and promote inclusive and meaningful learning. Future research could explore how Nigerian English observed in early childhood persists, evolves, or transforms across primary and secondary school levels. The findings should be interpreted with caution. The linguistic forms observed do not indicate that children are shaping or codifying Nigerian English. Rather, they reflect early

acquisition and use of patterns already established in the speech community, reproduced and adapted through interaction with caregivers and teachers.

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