



Gen z learners and the decline of formal English usage in Nigeria: challenges and educational implications

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ABSTRACT

The increasing influence of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed language use among Generation Z learners in Nigeria. Social media platforms, instant messaging applications, online entertainment, and artificial intelligence tools have reshaped the patterns of English language learning and usage among young Nigerians. While these technologies promote communication, creativity, and global interaction, they have also contributed to the decline of formal English usage, particularly in academic and professional contexts. This paper examines the factors responsible for the declining use of formal English among Nigerian Generation Z learners and explores the educational implications of this linguistic shift. The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach using existing literature on digital communication, sociolinguistics, English language education, and Generation Z learning culture. Findings reveal that excessive dependence on social media slang, abbreviations, code-switching, Nigerian Pidgin, and AI-assisted communication has negatively affected learners' writing, spelling, grammar, and formal communication competence. The paper concludes that although digital technology has expanded opportunities for English language learning, there is a need for balanced pedagogical strategies that integrate digital literacy with formal language instruction. Recommendations include improved digital literacy education, increased reading culture, teacher retraining, and responsible integration of technology in English language teaching and learning.

1. Introduction

English language occupies a central position in Nigeria's educational, political, administrative, and socioeconomic systems. As the official language and the medium of instruction in schools, English serves as a major instrument for national integration and global communication (Bamgbose, 2014). Competence in formal English usage is therefore essential for academic achievement, employability, and professional interaction in Nigeria. In recent time, developments in digital communication and social media culture have altered the language practices of younger generations, especially Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z refers to individuals born approximately between the mid-1990s and early 2010s who grew up within the digital age characterized by internet connectivity, smartphones, social media, and instant messaging technologies (Alruthaya et al., 2021). Nigerian Gen Z learners increasingly engage with English through informal digital platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter).

The rise of digital communication has introduced new linguistic practices involving abbreviations, emojis, internet slang, acronyms, memes, and code-switching between English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages. Expressions such as "LOL," "u," "brb," "omo," "wahala," and other shortened forms have become common in the communication patterns of Nigerian youths. While such practices encourage linguistic creativity and fast communication, educators and researchers argue that they negatively influence students' mastery of formal

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English grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, and sentence construction (Crystal, 2011). In many Nigerian secondary schools and tertiary institutions, teachers increasingly complain about students transferring informal digital expressions into academic essays, examination scripts, and professional communication. The growing influence of artificial intelligence tools and predictive text applications has also contributed to declining independent writing abilities among students (Chan & Lee, 2023). Consequently, concerns have emerged regarding the future of formal English competence among Nigerian Gen Z learners. This paper therefore examines the causes of the decline in formal English usage among Generation Z learners in Nigeria and discusses the implications for English language teaching and learning.

Conceptual Clarification

Gen Z (Generation Z)

Different scholars and researchers have defined Generation Z (Gen Z) based on birth years, technological exposure, and socio-cultural experiences Gen Z a short form for Generation Z refers to the cohort born roughly between 1995 and 2012. This generation is often described as “digital natives” because they grew up with constant exposure to internet technologies, mobile devices, and social media platforms (Prensky, 2001). According to Britannica 2026, Generation Z refers to individuals born between 1997 and 2012, following the Millennial generation. They are regarded as the first true digital-native generation because they grew up with the internet, smart phones, and social media , while Ryzhkova and Rychkova (2025) refer to Generation Z as the “digital generation,” emphasizing their immersion in information technology and online communication from childhood. Jayatissa (2023) describes Generation Z as individuals born after 1995 who are characterized by digital nativism, technological proficiency, social consciousness, and entrepreneurial tendencies. Jayatissa (2023) describes Generation Z as individuals born after 1995 who are characterized by digital nativism, technological proficiency, social consciousness, and entrepreneurial tendencies. Tan, Wanganoo, and Mathur (2023) describe Generation Z as the emerging generation of adults whose sustainability orientation, technological awareness, and global outlook shape modern educational and workplace systems.

Formal English Usage

Formal English refers to standard language usage characterized by correct grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, and sentence structure suitable for academic, professional, and official communication. Formal English avoids slang, contractions, emojis, and excessively casual expressions. Geoffrey Leech and Svartvik (2002) define formal English as a variety of language used in serious or official communication where speakers or writers follow established grammatical and stylistic conventions. This type of English is commonly found in academic writing, business correspondence, legal documents, and public speeches. Formal English usage involves the observance of standard grammatical rules and the selection of vocabulary suitable for educated discourse. They note that formal usage promotes clarity, coherence, and professionalism in communication (Rodney Huddleston and Pullum 2005). Joan Cutting (2008) further explains that formal English is context-dependent and is often employed in situations involving authority, institutional interaction, or social hierarchy. The level of formality chosen by a speaker or writer depends on audience, purpose, and setting. For example In the Nigerian context, formal English usage is particularly important in education, governance, media, and workplace communication.

Digital Communication

Digital communication involves the exchange of information through internet-enabled platforms such as social media, instant messaging, online forums, emails, and digital applications. Digital communication is usually fast, interactive, multimodal, and highly informal. Different scholars and organizations have defined the concept from various

perspectives. Digital communication is the interaction that occurs through digital devices and online environments, influencing human relationships and social behaviour (Turkle, 2015). It involves the transmission of messages using electronic devices and digital platforms that facilitate interaction across distances (Seiler & Beall, 2018). According to Jan Van Dijk (2020) digital communication is the communication mediated by digital technologies where information is encoded into binary formats and transmitted electronically across networks, while The International Telecommunication Union (2021) describes digital communication as the electronic transfer of data, voice, video, and text through digital devices and telecommunication systems.

Causes of the Decline of Formal English Usage among Nigerian Gen Z Learners

There are many causes of decline of formal usage of English language amongst Nigerian Gen Z learners but only five are discussed in this paper and they are;

1. Influence of Social Media

Social media platforms constitute one of the strongest influences on Gen Z language behavior. Nigerian youths spend significant amounts of time interacting on WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and X. These platforms encourage brevity, speed, and entertainment-oriented communication styles.

Research shows that social media communication promotes abbreviations, slang, emojis, and nonstandard spellings that often interfere with students' formal writing competence (Crystal, 2011). Many Nigerian students unconsciously transfer expressions such as "u," "d," "pls," and "LOL" into academic assignments and examinations. While viral internet culture encourages simplified grammar and unconventional expressions, thereby weakening adherence to formal language rules.

2. Excessive Use of Nigerian Pidgin and Code-Switching

Another major factor contributing to declining formal English usage is the increasing popularity of Nigerian Pidgin among youths. Nigerian Gen Z learners frequently alternate between Standard English, Nigerian Pidgin, and indigenous languages during conversations and online interactions.

Although code-switching reflects multilingual competence and cultural identity, excessive dependence on Pidgin may reduce students' exposure to standard grammatical structures and vocabulary. Obasi and Obasi (2024) observe that Nigerian Gen Z social media users frequently blend English and Pidgin expressions in ways that affect formal communication patterns.

3. Declining Reading Culture

The reading culture among many Nigerian youths has reduced significantly due to increased dependence on short-form digital content. Instead of reading textbooks, novels, newspapers, and academic materials, many Gen Z learners consume short videos, memes, and social media posts. Deep reading helps learners develop vocabulary, comprehension, spelling, and sentence construction skills. However, excessive exposure to brief and fragmented online content limits sustained concentration and critical reading abilities.

4. Influence of Artificial Intelligence Tools

Artificial intelligence applications such as grammar checkers, predictive text systems, translation software, and generative AI tools have transformed writing practices among students. While these technologies assist learning, excessive dependence on them may weaken independent thinking and writing competence.

Chan and Lee (2023) argue that many Gen Z learners increasingly rely on AI tools to generate essays, correct grammar, and complete assignments, thereby reducing personal engagement with language learning processes.

5. Poor Educational Infrastructure

Challenges within Nigeria's educational system also contribute to declining formal English competence. Many schools lack adequate libraries, instructional materials, language laboratories, and qualified English teachers. Overcrowded classrooms and poor funding further reduce effective language instruction. In some rural areas, students have limited exposure to quality English language education, thereby affecting their mastery of formal communication skills.

Educational Implications

Declining Academic Writing Skills

One major implication of informal digital communication is poor academic writing performance. Many students struggle with grammar, spelling, punctuation, paragraph development, and essay organization.

Teachers frequently report examination scripts containing texting abbreviations, emojis, and informal expressions unsuitable for academic writing.

Reduced Employability

Formal English competence remains essential in professional environments. Employers expect graduates to communicate effectively through reports, presentations, emails, and official correspondence. Poor command of formal English may therefore reduce employment opportunities for Nigerian youths in highly competitive labor markets.

Weakening of Critical Thinking Skills

Excessive reliance on short digital content and AI-generated responses may reduce learners' analytical and critical thinking abilities. Effective language learning requires reflection, reading, interpretation, and independent reasoning.

Challenges for English Language Teachers

Teachers now face the challenge of balancing digital learning opportunities with the preservation of formal language standards. English educators must address students' dependence on informal online communication while still integrating technology into classroom instruction.

Strategies for Improving Formal English Usage among Gen Z Learners

Promotion of Reading Culture

Schools should encourage extensive reading through literary clubs, library development, reading competitions, and digital academic resources.

Digital Literacy Education

Students should be taught the differences between informal online communication and formal academic writing. Digital literacy programs can help learners use technology responsibly.

Teacher Retraining

English language teachers require regular training on technology-based teaching methods and strategies for managing digital communication challenges.

Balanced Integration of Technology

Technology should complement rather than replace traditional language learning methods. Teachers should combine AI tools, multimedia learning, classroom interaction, and writing exercises effectively.

Encouraging Formal Writing Practice

Frequent essay writing, debates, presentations, and comprehension exercises can improve students' mastery of formal English structures.

Conclusion

The emergence of Generation Z and digital communication technologies has significantly transformed English language learning and usage in Nigeria. While social media, smart phones, and artificial intelligence tools provide opportunities for communication and learning, they have also contributed to the decline of formal English usage among many Nigerian youths. Informal expressions, abbreviations, code-switching, and excessive dependence on digital technologies increasingly affect students' grammar, spelling, vocabulary, and academic writing skills. The study therefore concludes that English language educators, policymakers, parents, and students must work collaboratively to balance technological innovation with formal language competence. Appropriate educational reforms, digital literacy programs, teacher training, and reading culture promotion are necessary to preserve effective formal English usage among Nigerian Gen Z learners.

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