

The Language Factor in the Education of the Nigerian Child

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Abstract: Language is a key factor and a critical resource in all human engagements especially in the teaching-learning process. Language is functional in the preservation of a people's cultural heritage, a community's vehicle of verbal communication and medium of instruction among others. This study discusses the danger of using foreign language as medium of instruction for the Nigerian child too early and weaning them on the mother tongue too early. Such a situation will tantamount to alienating the Nigerian child from his mother tongue and the indigenous culture. The study therefore argues on why Nigerian indigenous languages should be compulsorily made the media of instruction in the primary school and other levels of education.

Key words: Language factor, mother tongue, functional verbal communication, medium of instruction

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a multilingual and multiethnic state. A large number of indigenous languages exist and the number has been put differently as follows: Hansford (1976) put it as 395, Banjo (1975) in Ayilara and Oyedeji (2000) gave 500 and Bamgbose (1992) 513.

Language is a crucial factor in teaching and learning. According to Araromi (2005) it is the vehicle of communication per excellence and that without it (language) homo sapiens will find it problematic to exist. Communication can only be total when an individual is capable of sending a message across to another both verbal and through the script symbols. These two broad areas of language use can only be acquired effectively in the formal school setting. Osagie (1985) notes that language as a key vehicle of expression is crucial to all forms of transmission of knowledge and values, and also, to socialization processes. Besides, the values of language as a medium of expression or the effective transfer of accumulated knowledge, ideas, value and skills to the up-coming generations cannot be disputed. It is also functional in acculturating children by the adult members of the society.

One of the key factors of expressing an individual's cultural identity, cultural preservation as well as developing the culture lexically is the effective use of mother tongue. According to Bolorunduro (1994) the acquisition and use of language is considered to be one of the most important keys to the storehouse of human achievements. Unoh (1989) in Onochie (2002) also notes that language is crucial to rational learning, considerable and indispensable to associational or rote and equally useful in motor or psychomotor learning.

One of the crucial reasons advanced for the integration of the major Nigerian languages in the National Policy on Education (NPE) is the preservation of peoples culture. This is in realisation of the fact that language is one of the key factors in expressing a people's cultural identity and autonomy. No foreign language will be adequate and effective in preserving Nigerian cultural heritage. In spite of the provisions in the NPE as regards the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction at the pre-primary and primary schools, it is unfortunate that the Nigerian child is denied this opportunity as most of them are taught in the English language medium. Consequently, this has resulted in stunted intellectual growth, as an average primary school product is insufficiently literate in either his mother tongue or English language.

It is therefore essential that a child be taught in a language he knows well, that is a language in which he has the highest linguistic resources for effective communication. A child who receives education in his or her mother tongue will obtain deeper insights into his or her traditional and cultural life; learning would also be made less cumbersome. For a child to function effectively in his or her community, Ayodele (1985) notes that he or she is compelled to acquire his Mother Tongue (MT) or the Language of his Immediate Environment (LIE) early in life. Onochie (2002) observes that at the age of six, a child would have possessed an extensive knowledge of his first language as it were in his head. Having acquired such a degree of oracy skills in his or her MT, the child is then easily introduced to literacy skills in other subjects in that language than in a foreign language (Alfesimama, 1995).

The Ife Six-Year Primary Project is an attestation to the fact that teaching a child in his or her mother tongue helps such a child to learn better (Fafunwa *et al.*, 1989). Other research findings using Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba show that children who were taught different subjects in those languages performed significantly better than those who were taught using English language (Okonkwo, 1979; Ala, 1983; Ande, 1990; Olanrewaju and Jimoh, 1995; Akinbote, 1996 and; Umaru, 1983 in Akinbote *et al.*, 2003). Onochie (2002) believes that when a child is taught in a language he understands, the benefits are immense and he agrees with Carol (1985) that a child must be taught reading in the language he speaks. When a child is taught in a familiar language, the subjects will not only be easily understood, the child will equally be able to take active part in the teaching-learning process and his performance will also be enhanced. Not only that the child becomes automatically literate thereby achieving the main objectives of primary education which is the inculcation of “permanent literacy and numeracy; and ability to communicate effectively (NPE, 2004).

It is therefore unfortunate to note that in spite of the available empirical and universally agreed fact that the child learns best in his or her mother tongue, most Nigerians especially among the elites, still prefer that their children be taught in the primary schools using the English language. This situation has therefore prompted this researcher to revisit the language factor in the education of the Nigeria child.

Education according to Lockhead and Verspoor (1991) in Federal Ministry of Education (2000) is a cornerstone of economic and social development having primary education as its foundation completed primary education helps alleviate poverty and advance economic and social development. This definition is in consonance with that of Fafunwa (2003) that education is the engine of economic, social and political growth and development of any nation. He also defines it as:

- The aggregates of all processes by means of which a person develops ability, aptitude and other forms of behavior of positive value in the society in which he lives.

In other words, education is a process that develops the whole man physically and spiritually and empowers him or her to function effectively in any society he finds himself. It is apparent therefore that education is not only beneficial to the individual but also to the society at large. Education focuses on the cultivation of literate

individuals who can participate effectively in promoting cultural, political and socioeconomic development. This no doubt is not achievable without language. Language is the cornerstone of any academic success. Language plays an indispensable role in education and this is captured in this view of Lalope (1981) cited in Onoyovwi (2004) who describes a literate person as:

- A person who in a language that he speaks can read and understand everything he would have understood if it has been spoken to him and can write so that it can be read, anything he can say”

From the foregoing, it could be seen that there is a strong relationship between education and language. Furthermore, Osagie (1985) opines that an effective language of education in our schools is that which inculcates in the learners the real value of education, which includes the needed skill for finding solution to problems encountered in one’s geographical and social environments. According to him, a child who has grown and acquired proficiency in his mother tongue has along with such acquisition imbibed and internalized the society’s concept of the world.

Language issues influence national policy on education:

The National Policy on Education was first published in 1977 and revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004, respectively. The 2004 edition is used in this paper. In section 1, number 10 under the subject matter of the importance of language it is stated thus:

- Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. Thus every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is experiment that every child shall be require to learn one of the three Nigerian languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Added to the above is the French language’s ascendancy into the National Policy on Education as the second official language (English being the first official language) in Nigeria and for smooth interaction with neighbours.

The Table 1 shows MT and LIC to be the medium of instruction. Language of Environment shall be the medium of instruction. It also shows the english and a major Nigerian language taught as core-subject.

Table 1: The language provisions for each level of education

Level of education	Language provisions
Pre-primary education	Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of Immediate Community (LIC) to be the medium of instruction. Orthographies of many Nigerian languages (Nls) to be developed. Textbooks in Nls to be produced.
Primary education	Language of Environment (LIE) shall be the medium of instruction (First 3 Years) English to be taught as a subject. English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction. LIE and French to be taught as subjects
Junior secondary school	LIC to be taught as L ₁ One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment to be taught as L ₂ English and French to be taught as subjects. Arabic to be taught as a non-prevocational elective
Senior secondary school	English and a major Nigerian language taught as core-subjects French and any Nigerian language (having orthography and literature) as non-vocational electives.

Source: NPE, (2004:12 and 13, 16, 19, 20-22)

Critical examination of the language provisions of the NPE

Importance of English in Nigeria life: English no doubt occupies a dominant position in the socio-political affairs of Nigeria and this results from its imposition upon Nigerians by the colonial administration ordinances and certification (Onochie, 2002). It is pertinent to note that the certification syndrome is still in force as a credit pass in English is a condition for gaining an admission into most disciplines in the university and other tertiary institutions. English language is also used as the medium of instruction from upper primary to the tertiary level.

However, Oderinde (2005) notes that the overplay of the importance of English in Nigeria especially in the educational system has led to the erroneous disposition among some people that English is Nigeria’s lingua franca. Unfortunately, English like many other European languages in Africa is mostly popular among the elites who represent a minority. Alamu (2004) while agreeing to it that English seems to dominate other languages in Nigeria in many domains of use, however express his reservation on the situation in that in Nigeria of today, the indigenous languages remain the medium of intimate communication among family members, kinsmen, in the market, for cultural life and local politics.

Fafunwa *et al.* (1989) did not advocate for a neglect of the English language in the Ife Six-Year Primary Yoruba project but rather the laying of a solid foundation for the effective teaching and learning of English through the provision of highly trained teachers. English language is no doubt still relevant in the education of the Nigerian child but it has to be effectively taught by teachers adequately qualified in all our schools.

French as the second official language: The popularity of French language in Nigeria dates back to the early sixties especially as a result of the recommendation of the Yaounde Conference of language experts in 1961 that a second European language should be introduced into schools after pupils must have mastered skills in the official languages of the concerned countries. In this regard, English was expected to be introduced to the Francophone African countries while French was expected to be introduced into the Anglophone African counties, including Nigeria (Araromi, 2005).

The Nigerian government realizes the usefulness of French especially in our relationship with the Francophone neighbours and therefore has it entrenched in the NPE (1998) and (2004) as Nigeria’s second official language. The issue at stake now according to Obanya (2002) is the effective implementation of a French language policy especially at the basic education level. As of now the available number of teachers of French are far from being adequate. No official statement is even made on the production of textbooks and other instructional materials.

Nigerian languages in schools: The provision for language teaching and learning in the NPE is no doubt laudable and according to Emenanjo (2004), the prospects are rich and nurturing for democracy. In terms of implementation however, little seems to have been done (Oderinde, 2005)

The teaching of Nigerian languages either as L₁ or L₂ has its curriculum implications. Emenanjo (2004) notes the following as facts on the ground:

- Not more than 120 Nigerian languages have the sociolinguistic vitality to operate as languages of proper mass communication, literacy and numeracy even in the primary school level.
- Dearth of teachers even for the major Nigerian languages as L₁, let alone as L₂.
- The National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba is still to start doing what it has been set up to do by its enabling statute.

It is pertinent to observe that in most of our schools, the use of MT or LIE as medium of instruction is not complied with as most elites do not see any good in the idea of teaching in the local languages. The most unfortunate situation is that captured by Obanya (2002) as he notes that even in the upper primary level, English as medium of instruction is never implemented as English is just used as language of telling rather than language of instruction.

The deprivation of the Nigerian child of the privilege of learning in the language of his soul has been traced to the debilitating absence of political will on the part of the government, Emenanjo (2002). Onoyovwi (2004) quotes Stanford (1981) who captured the predicament of the Nigerian child thus:

- A person who is simultaneously learning to speak, read, write, learn and think in a language with which he is not familiar labours under a much higher, handicap than one who is learning in a language which he can already speak and in which he is in the habit of thinking

The point being emphasized here is that of understanding and no other language does it better than the mother tongue. Onochie (2002) notes that it is better not to communicate at all, than to communicate what is misunderstood. From the foregoing, it can be said that Nigeria has been footdragging about the use of the MT or LIC as medium of instruction. For instance, a country like India has 14 major languages of instruction, 11 of which are regional, two are non-regional while one is foreign (English). Apart from English language, eight other languages in India are used as language of instruction in her universities. Some of her urban schools retain other foreign languages like Persian, Portuguese and French as media of instruction (Emenyonu, 1997) in Oderinde (2005). This is a bold step taken by India a more polarized nation than Nigeria in managing her plurilingual or multilingual situation without a total suppression of indigenous languages for forcing languages. Nigeria needs such a bold step in the implementation of all the language provisions enshrined in the NPE. Iwara (1988) observes that language is the single most characteristic element of any culture, and that it is an unmitigated disaster for any society to be unable to work in its own indigenous language form. Every Nigerian child should be privileged to receive basic education in his or her MT or in the LIC.

Arabic language teaching: Arabic language is mostly seen as the language of Islamic religion. In the NPE it is categorized as a non-vocational elective. Oderinde (2005) frowns at this situation noting that Arabic is a language of a people with great literary history, one of the five indigenous languages of the United Nations (TIN) and one of the three of Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU) as well as the language of a section of Nigerians, i.e. the Shua Arabs in Maiduguri among others. He is of the pinion that Arabic language should be made to enjoy an equal if not higher status in the school curriculum as French. If Arabic language is the

mother tongue or indigenous language of a section of Nigerians, they should be made to receive basic education in Arabic language.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that multilingual dilemma in education poses a very serious problem for multicultural societies. However, various countries have responded to the situation in their own way. The following recommendations are therefore made given the Nigerian context:

- Parents should be educated and given orientation on the importance and potency of the mother tongue in enhancing effective learning.
- A referendum should be organised to determine which of the indigenous languages should be the medium of instruction at the local, state government levels in the pre-primary and primary schools.
- This writer agrees with Araromi (2005) that where indigenous languages are being used as media of instruction for the lower primary education, such language should be used to include upper classes to primary six.
- The three Nigerian languages should be introduced as language of instruction from Junior Secondary to the tertiary levels where such languages are the languages of Wider Communication (LWC). Such languages could also be used as media of instruction at the tertiary levels.
- Institutions responsible for the training and recruiting of teachers should be adequately funded by the government in order to train the needed manpower for the various languages.
- Fund should equally be made available to relevant bodies to conduct indigenous research into the teaching methods of the languages (Oderinde, 2005).
- Every undeveloped Nigerian language should be developed and speakers should be allowed to exercise their linguistic rights in their local languages.
- Basic education is very crucial to any meaningful endeavour towards national development. Since the principal function of language is the communication of meaning while education on the other hand can only be realized through language, efforts should be geared towards ensuring that the language of education is that in which both the learners and teachers are sufficiently proficient. The language factor should be properly addressed in order to ensure that a solid foundation is laid for educating the Nigerian child.

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