

The Challenges of Language Teaching in the 21st Century

Oluranti Ogunbiyi

Faculty of Education, Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria

Abstract: This study takes a look at some of the challenges of language teaching in our educational institutions. It highlights the place of language in the National Policy on Education and discusses the different categories of language taught in our schools. The study concludes that no education can take place effectively without the use of language; therefore, the language factor in educational system cannot be overemphasized. Despite the exciting possibilities the Internet offers for language teaching and the popularity of learner-focused approach, the teacher still remains an important figure in language teaching. Education is best given in the language of the people and to neglect the peoples language is to neglect the very essence of their existence.

Key words: Challenges, language teaching, educational institutions, national policy on education, categories of languages, internet

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria, a multilingual country, has a pluralistic approach to language teaching and learning.

Since Nigeria was colonized by the British, the English language has been adopted as our official language, the language of instruction in schools, language of law, language of commerce. As a matter of fact, the English language is regarded as the language of the Elites in Nigeria. Even though the Federal government has made some efforts in promoting the three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, none of the Nigerian languages can compete favourably with the English language.

The National Policy on Education (2004) states that in appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the government considers it to be of interest to national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of three major Nigerian languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (NPE, 2004).

Despite the government's position on the status of English language and the Nigerian languages, some schools still relegate Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English language and French language. Most Nigerian parents prefer to send their children to English speaking schools. Some parents even go to the extent of not allowing their children to watch films in Nigerian languages as that will

hinder their acquisition of English language (according to those parents). The same government who encourages the use of Nigerian languages also approves the condition that any candidate seeking admission into the University must have a credit in English language irrespective of his course of study. One can now see clearly why parents encourage their children to concentrate on the learning of English language and be contented with the little knowledge of Nigerian language they can learn 'out of school.

This situation has a lot of influence on language teaching in our secondary schools. Most of the students do not have a good knowledge of their mother tongue and are neither good in English language nor in French which is a foreign language.

In other countries unlike Nigeria, there is the fight for the survival of the native languages. They stressed the need for their native languages to be used in Education. A case in point is that of the Native Americans, who are now trying to revive their cultural heritage by employing their native languages in the education of their children.

Alain Ah-Vee (2003) wrote a letter titled "Children's right include their language rights" to the Ministry of Education in Mauritius. In his letter he emphasized the advantages of mother tongue based education in schools. Furthermore he reiterated that with mother tongue based education the cognitive progress of the children is faster and gets to a higher level throughout the rest of their lives.

In the same vein results of empirical studies carried out in the United States of America show evidence of the theory underlying native language instruction.

The following is recognized by a consensus of applied linguistic in the United States of America:

- Native language instruction does not retard the acquisition of English Language.
- Well-developed skills in the native language are associated with high level academic achievement.
- Bilingualism is a valuable skill for the individual and the country.

In line with the above, the Ife Six-year project sponsored by UNESCO, came out with the same positive result on the education of the child in the mother tongue.

LANGUAGE POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

In Nigeria the National Policy on Education gave two different functions to mother tongue education, as a subject of study; as a medium of instruction.

The policy statement is that the child shall be taught in his mother tongue for the first three years of the primary education so as to enable a smooth transition from the home to the school. This is only a policy statement, in reality, most schools starts with the English language even at the Pre-primary school level. A policy decision regarding language choice should be followed by firm, government commitment to development of the chosen languages and the creation of the necessary infrastructures for their development. Some of the factors that affect language policy implementation are:

- The socio-linguistics aspect of the language involved.
- The educational system of the country.
- The quality of the teachers, teaching materials, textbooks, number of periods given for that particular language and motivation (i.e. within the classroom).
- Teaching appointments, teacher training, textbook writing and incentives for second language teaching/learning are crucial in determining the effectiveness of second language learning.

INTERNET AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Despite the exciting possibilities the internet offers for language teaching and the popularity of learner-focused approach, the teacher still remains an important figure in language teaching. He acts as an intermediary between students and knowledge and his attitudes and beliefs are vital for the success of language acquisitions.

In considering the factors affecting the use of internet in language teaching; The following questions need to be answered:

- Are all language teachers optimistic about the new technology (the internet)?
- Are they able and willing to use it?
- How electronically literate are they?
- How readily available is electricity in Nigeria?

LANGUAGE TEACHING AND COMMUNICATION

In the past years, language teaching has been dominated by the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, lexis and structure and pronunciation. In recent time emphasis is laid on oracy before literacy in language teaching. Therefore much attention is now given to the communicative competence of students at the secondary school level.

Olaoye (2003) describes communication as a process by which information is passed between individuals, organizations by means of previously agreed symbols. In the same vein Soola (1998) defines communication as: a dynamic, interactive, on-going and recursive process of transmitting thought; of sharing and imparting information; of conveying and receiving ideas, facts, data, attitudes and feelings.

Language can be defined as a system of communication. There are different types of languages vise, artificial language e.g. the language of mathematics using signs (dy, dx, Πx^2 , r^2 , t, -, <, >), sign language: this type of language is used for the deaf and road signs, non human language e.g. language of the bees, apes, chimpanzees, dogs, dolphins and certain types of birds and human language: this is the major system, of communication used by a particular group within a particular society. Human social activities will be impossible without the ability to communicate with one another. Human language provides a set of symbols that makes it possible for a thorough catalogue of events, objects and processes in the human environment to be stored in the brain.

FUNCTIONS OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

The most important function of language is to communicate our ideas and facilitate our thoughts. It also helps to encode our ability to remember those things, we had met before. Some other functions of language are:

Expressive function: We use language to express our emotions. It helps us to get rid of our nervous energy when we are stressed.

Social interaction: Language enables us to interact with people in the same speech community. By relating with

each other, we try to reduce tension. People are more friendly when they can engage in discussions affecting their lives.

Expression of identity: It is through language that our political belief and ideologies are expressed.

Education: It is through language that knowledge is passed from one generation to another. For any child to be educated he needs to know the basic language skills. He should develop some level of competence in speaking, reading and writing. He should also know the grammar of the language in which he is being taught.

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR

Non-verbal behaviour (gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, use of space etc) is a crucial aspect of classroom interaction which is still absent in most language classrooms.

The Interactions identified from non-verbal behaviour are meaningful for:

- The process of language learning.
- The communication of emotions and attitudes.
- The group dynamics.

Daniela Sime (2002) said that the non-verbal aspects occur in the linguistic and social context. She is of the opinion that attention should be given to non-verbal behaviour of language teaching.

PROBLEMS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

The problems of language teaching can be grouped as follows;

- Large class size.
- Lack of qualified teachers.
- Lack of infrastructural materials.
- Lack of teaching aids.
- Lack of language laboratories.
- Inadequate material resources.

There are inadequacies in both human and non-human resources in language teaching. The language classes are too large for effective teaching. At the Secondary School level the students are within 60-80 in a class. This makes it difficult for the teacher to correct their assignment.

Most of the teachers are not qualified to teach language. In schools where teachers are available there are no teaching aids.

There are no language laboratories in most schools. In few schools where they exist, they are not of good standard and are not well equipped.

CONCLUSION

Since education is a necessity and the hub around which all other issues revolve, for the nation to be able to move forward and compete favourably with other developing countries, priority should be given to language teaching, knowing fully well, that language is the only weapon of communication among humans. The government should encourage language teachers by given them in service training. Study leave with pay should be given to language teachers at all cadres of our educational systems.

The language teachers have to be more creative in order to facilitate language teaching. The teachers should support and encourage their students so that language learning can be an enjoyable and worthwhile experience for them.

Local libraries should be established in different local government areas, to enhance the reading culture of students. This will also provide an academic meeting place for serious students to interact and exchange their views on issues bothering them.

To ensure the success of a meaningful language programme in our schools more concerted efforts should be made to improve the quality of our teachers. Teachers' state of mind in terms of how they see their jobs also determine to a large extent how they organise themselves and their classrooms in order to ensure effective teaching and learning.

The policy makers and the society as a whole should make it a point of duty to change their attitudes positively to how they see the teaching profession and create conditions that will encourage more people with interest to join the teaching profession.

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