

LANGUAGE EDUCATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PEACE, UNITY AND STABILITY IN NIGERIA



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Abstract

Language is a distinguishing characteristic of man. It is an essential tool for communication and interaction. To this end, educational programmes incorporate language dimensions in order to equip the learner with this basic survival tool. Nigeria, however, is a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic nation with more than three hundred and fifty (350) distinct languages. She adopted English Language as her official language and later the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) in the interest of national unity. It is in light of this that this paper examines language education as an instrument of peace, unity and stability in Nigeria.

One of the greatest blessing to man is the gift of language. For the individual, language allows, in various degrees, the possibilities of self expressions. The great importance of language is its communication process in all its moral ramifications. People may want to communicate their aesthetic feelings, their philosophies, their moral, social and religious, cultural and their views and values to others and vice-versa. The acquisition of language-biologically, for man was the basic requirement for man's survival as a specie.

In Nigeria today and in other parts of the world, there are many reasons for the growing interest in the field of language. In some degree, language may reflect certain aspects of the society in which it is used. Language reflects the interest, needs, experiences as well as environment of the users. Again, it indicates how the society is structured. No doubt, Nigeria is a multi-lingual/multi-cultural country. The multi-lingual nature of the country has, therefore shown that two or more languages are in contact. This issue of language in contact between either indigenous languages, a foreign and indigenous language has created what Weinreich (1974) in Ogunsiji, (1994) called 'deviation'. This deviation, according to him, brings out interference phenomenon. Because Nigeria is full of different linguistic backgrounds, she can only live as a united entity with a unifying language.

Language, according to Waddowson (1973:3) is defined as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols, which permits all people who have learned the system of that culture to communicate or interact. In view of this, language helps to identify each

other's problems and find solution to them. Language is a vehicle for academic achievements. It is also an instrument for the achievement of peace, and unity in a society and wherever peace and unity exist, there is also stability. Without language, communication becomes impaired when a speaker is unable to make his listeners understand or feel something he wants them to do. To Crystal (1987: 78) language is a means by which human relate themselves to the world; to each other and to the community of which they are members. As regard to this definition, language is communication and at the same time life itself. It is a system of units, realizable in some sensory medium and hardly can any nation prosper in terms of peace, unity and stability without this priceless possession called "language" because it is language that binds people together in a society. The role of language in our national lives is therefore unassessable.

Language Education in Nigeria

The Main importance of education according to Adirika (1998), is to transmit culture. Culture embodies the way of life of a people, including their language. Education is therefore basically a human tool aimed at helping the members of a society to fit into the society effectively and properly. Neither the economist nor the psychometric news of education can be divorced from this ethical and human dimension emphasizing the broadening of the minds of youths. In a country that is multi-tribalistic with its attendant suspicion; greed and intolerance, the need to forge strong unity amongst the different peoples cannot be relegated in educational efforts. Language is an essential instrument for communication, it facilitate interaction and understanding amongst men, it behooves Nigeria, therefore, make adequate efforts to bring her people together in whatever ways that would help broaden even their political reality and academic objectivity particularly at a very early stage of their development, so as to sow the seed for early interaction and understanding which will enhance trust and ensure group development.

The government of Nigeria therefore, stated categorically in quest of national unity in the National Policy on Education (1981) that one of the objectives of education is to inculcate "national consciousness and national unity." This is amplified in the fact that the government as expressed in the National Policy on Education (1981) states that: In addition to 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 in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major 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.

At the pre-primary educational level, the medium of instruction is expected to be "principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" At

the primary school level, section 3:4 of the policy in addition says that: Government will ensure that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage English.

At the secondary school level, the government's stand on language policy is: To project Nigerian culture, art and language as well as the world's cultural heritage.

In addition to the above, it intends to "foster Nigerian unity with an emphasis on common ties that unite us in our diversity." In respect of this, it recommended the study of two Nigerian languages at this level, "subject to availability of teachers."

Victoria (1997) writing on language and national integration, stated that the above statement is the prescribed curriculum. The one (language) that actually operates in the four walls of the classroom is the achieved and therefore the actual language curriculum. According to her, the government did not actually match statements with appropriate action; the problem of using the indigenous languages to unite the entire country has become an illusion. The government, she stresses, must use what it already possessed to achieve what it needs.

It is a known fact, that national unity is fostered when people hear and understand themselves. Language is the key to the heart of the people and if such a key is lost, the people are lost as well. On the other hand, when we treasure the key and secure it, it unlocks the door to untold riches. Our languages embody our culture, our values and our future.

As a nation, we cannot afford to miss out our own values in our educational efforts otherwise the contents may be irrelevant. Our indigenous Languages are important and relevant to our values, aspiration and desires. When we learnt the languages of others within the Nigerian nation, we are enabled to resolve ethnic and social animosity amongst them more easily due to enhanced communication. Once Nigerians become socially accommodating, inter-ethnic, inter-tribal and inter-religious wars would be greatly minimized. Youths are the ones often used to fight these wars - when they are better adjusted socially, our problems in that regard would decrease to peace, unity and stability. Language, thus constitutes integrative force for achieving unity, peace and Stability amongst members of the multi-cultural and multi-linguistic peoples of the world. Much as English has become accepted as the lingua franca of Nigeria, it is only one international language.

The Unique Role of English in Nigeria

Language is a crucial factor in any educational programme. Nationally and internally, English plays a vital role in Nigeria. According to Adekunle (1995) in Ezema (2001), English is the most important language of foreign relations because it provides access to trade and technical cooperation in almost all the regions of the

world. Similarly, Adama (1989) is of the view that, given the wave of communication revolution and advance in communication technology, English is the passport to international or universal cultural uniformity and cohesion. He identifies English as the language of knowledge, one with which research and publications are carried out. Stressing the universal nature of the language, Brunfit (1995) cited by the same writer, observes as follows:

“Certainly it is now true that the English language is no longer the ownership of speakers of English as mother tongue or first language. The ownership of English rests with the people who use it, whoever they are; however multilingual they are or however monolingual they are”.

In Nigeria, right from the colonial period to this day English has been playing a leading role. The Europeans introduced English in Nigeria during the commercialization, evangelization and colonialization period. English was introduced for the main purpose of teaching the three R's-Reading, Writing and Arithmetic to Nigerians so that the British trading companies could have Nigerians to employ as Clerks for their commercial activities.

Since then English has been adopted in Nigeria as her official language. It can therefore, be asserted that English language in Nigeria is as old as the country itself.

English has been playing a leading communication role in Nigeria since her birth despite the multilingual nature of the nation. The domains, in which English plays dominant role, as several scholars have highlighted, include official transactions, education, science and technology, the media, the legislature and the judiciary. Stressing the unique role of English in Nigeria, Adekunle (1995:86) observed that: ...in terms of the realities of language need, practice and behaviour, in spite of the absence of a firm national language policy, the English language has carved for itself an important role in the communications network of this country. It is an active medium of communication in so many sectors of the national life and has established itself as a vehicle carrying goodwill to all the corners of the earth.

It can therefore, be deduced from the above role of English in Nigeria that English is the language used for communication by the majority of the Nigerians in all spheres of life. It can be seen as the language that binds the people of the country together and as such, it fosters peace and stability.

Conclusion

English was and still remains the only uniting factor in this country as exemplified by Hertzler in Victoria (1997). Although other languages exist, none of them has been acceptable as English. It may be the white men's language but on the long run, it has brought more blessing than curses. It is the language of politics,

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religion and economy, health, administration and so on. It is the language, which has, enabled the Nigerians from all works of life, to operate on a common front and therefore, the government should give it all the backing it deserves.

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