

LANGUAGE PLANNING IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR LATE EXIT TRANSITIONAL BILINGUAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The issue of academic underachievement in our schools is complex, involving a number of factors, several of which interact together to produce an effect. Baker (2001) cited socio-economic factors as one probable cause of underachievement and this must be investigated in the Nigerian situation. The Nigerian child is not doing well in school despite bilingual education because; beside other things, the child's foundation in the indigenous language is not well laid for transfer to the second language (L2). Saville-Troike (1988) asserted that learners can transfer from first language (L1) to L2 and other academic subjects when there is a pre-existing knowledge base for making inferences and predictions. This paper examines and recommends the reinforcement of Nigerian language use in schools as the medium of instruction by implementing the late-exit transitional bilingual education. To do this, however, there will be the need to do more in the areas of training highly motivated teachers, providing effective supervision, providing educational materials providing parental and community based involvement in education and formulating sound language and educational policies.

A child born into a society like Nigeria is naturally born into a multilingual environment and his education both informally and formally is essentially bilingual or multilingual. Language and Education issues are very complex in Africa because the continent is both multi-ethnic and multi-lingual (Ouedraogo, 2000). The situation is even more critical if the official language of the nation is not any of the indigenous languages of the society. In multi-

lingual states, there is always controversy surrounding the language of instruction in school especially at the lower primary school level. They however, seriously take into consideration the importance of concept formation at this level.

Fifty years after independence, Nigeria is still grappling with the problems of achieving its language objectives which in turn, has an effect on the general performances of learners. Lately, incidences of mass failure at the WASCE, GCE, NABTEB and NECO Examinations have been frequently recorded. The root cause of underachievement in schools can be attributed to the child's faulty academic foundation.

Therefore the language policy of the nation has to be re-examined. In the year 2004, language policy in Nigeria was revised but still maintains the use of Mother Tongue (MT) or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) as the medium of instruction at the formative level (section 2, para 14 and section 3 para 17 e & f) and English as the medium of instruction from the fourth level with the MT studies as a compulsory subject to the senior secondary school). This paper therefore looks briefly at the historical background of language policy in Nigeria, the effect of language acquisition on academic achievement and finally, proposes an amendment of the policy which is a late-exit transitional bilingual education program.

Historical Overview

The 15th plenary session of the Joint Consultative Committee on Education (JCCE) was held in June 1965 and it was agreed that a conference should be convened to define the objectives of Education in Nigeria. The

conference was held in September 1969 and its report was subsequently published as a book by Adaralegbe (Yoloye 2009).

In 1973, a national seminar was held to prepare the draft of a national policy on education based on the recommendations of the 1969 Curriculum conference. The result was the Federal Government white paper which was first published in 1977 and titled “National Policy on Education” (NPE). The second and revised edition came out of print in 1981. Subsequent editions were published in 1988 and 2004. In all these editions, statements on the educational language policy can be found scantily “running through” the documents (Ezenandu 2010 & Ige 2010) and not as a separate statement.

In the National Policy on Education (1977, Revised 1988) the language component of the educational policy provides for the followings:

- i. Use of the mother tongue (MT) and /or language of the Immediate Community (LIC) as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels and or adult and non-formal education.
- ii. Use of the three major (national) languages – Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba at second language (L2) level as the languages of national culture and integration.
- iii. Use of English as the official language, as the language of formal literacy, language of the bureaucracy, of secondary and higher education of the law courts etc.
- iv. Selected foreign languages especially French and Arabic as the languages of international communication and discourses. These are the languages for which language villages have been set up in terms of unstated policy.

So the NPE policy on languages:

- i. advocates multilingualism as the national goal,

- ii. recognizes English as the defacto official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of formal education.
- iii. treats Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as potential national languages which are to be developed and used as first language (L1) and L2 all through the formal educational system.
- iv. treats all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction in initial literacy and in life long and non-formal educational system.

The centrality of language to the teaching-learning process, the importance of Nigerian languages to the protection, preservation and promotion of Nigerian cultures and the enhancement of human dignity and the necessity of learning a major Nigerian language for purposes of promoting national unity and integration all have constitutional backing in the 1999 constitution of the Republic of Nigeria (Emenanjo, 1989). Myriads of problems have been encountered on the way to implementing the language provision of the NPE and several committees have been set up to counter these problems. Some of the committees earlier set up such as the 54th JCC plenary session at Owerri (1990), the 38th NCE in Calabar (1990), the 39th NCE in Ilorin (Mar 1991), the JCC References committee at Jos (May 1991), the Uyo Committee (June 1991) have between them made definitive decisions on and definite implementation strategies for the language aspect of the policy.

Among their recommendations are:

- i. A qualitative and quantitative increase in texts of all descriptions available in Nigerian languages, science and mathematics; books in the major Nigerian languages as well as in minority languages such as Kambari, Kamuku, Nupe (in Niger State) Edo Bini, Kanuri

etc.

- ii. Priority position given to the recruitment of language inspectors of Education
- iii. Recognition of the need to have specialized language teachers and educators etc

Theoretical Framework

The threshold theory predicts that there is a relationship between bilingual and cognitive development (Tomkomaa and Skuthabb-kangas 1977, Cummins 1991, Ricciardelli 1992). Thus, it states that there may be levels of linguistic proficiency which bilingual children must attain in order to avoid cognitive deficits and to allow the cognitive benefits. In threshold theory, explanation is given about why children who speak minority languages but taught only through the second language may fail in school and why children educated in development bilingual programs may have a cognitive advantage over monolingual students. (Baker and Jones 1998).

Research has shown that the low level of competence in both mother tongue and second language has negative or detrimental cognitive effect on the child (Baker 2001) but positive advantages are only to be achieved after the child crosses the first and second thresholds out of the three identifiable levels of distinct thresholds (Tomkomaa and Skuthabb-kangas 1977). The three levels identified by Baker and Jones (1998) are the levels of limited bilingual, less balanced bilingual (age appropriate competence in one language) and the balanced bilingual (age – appropriate competence in both languages (L1 & L2)).

Furthermore, research in second language (L2) acquisition also shows that the level of proficiency in the mother tongue has a direct influence on the development of proficiency in the L2 and that a disruption in first language (L1) development has been found in

some cases to inhibit second language proficiency and cognitive growth (Lewelling 1991, Benson 2000). This therefore, suggests that if the child is prematurely transitioned into the second language (L2), detrimental consequences may be experienced whereas a strong promotion of students' primary language literacy skill will not only develop a conceptual foundation for academic growth but will also communicate clearly to students, the value of the cultural and linguistic resources they bring to school. Suffice it to say then, that the Language of Immediate Community (LIC) or mother tongue is of paramount importance in education.

Then, the bilingual immersion and development programs which are regarded as late-exit programs by Cummins (1991), are said to aspire to develop students' first language literacy skills. The late-exit Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) allows for about 40% use of the mother tongue in teaching until the sixth year of schooling (Ramirez and Marino 1993, Thomas and Collier 2003). They found out that the greater the number of years of primary language, the greater the child's English achievement.

The late-exit programs try to develop students' first language literacy skills and it is therefore primarily these programs that will be expected to succeed in reversing the underachievement of bilingual students and the legacy of school failure.

As for the early-exit transition model, it is that in which the mother-tongue is used as a medium of instruction at the lower primary level and English is taught as a subject. With this model, English language becomes the medium of instruction from the fourth year of primary schooling (Owu-Ewie 2006)- a type of model adopted by the Nigerian government presently. It is an exact opposite of the gradual or late –exit transitional model because it pre-supposes that

the lesser the length of years of primary language, the lesser the child's cognitive and second language achievement.

There is an urgent need for Nigeria to critically and sincerely look into the issue of primary language as the language of instruction for primary education in order to positively effect a change in learners' academic achievement.

Effects of Language Acquisition on Academic Achievement

The use of the child's first language (L1) has been shown to enhance the academic, linguistic and cognitive achievement of learners (Isola 2010, Baker 2001, Lewelling 1991, Fafunwa 1989). Therefore, the issue of underachievement or low academic performance in Nigeria despite the use of the child's MT at the lower primary level needs to be examined. It should be noted that the mere use of the child's MT or LIC for education does not guarantee good performance, but rather depends on an effective and well planned program in which proficiency in the L1 is developed and attained. In support of this, Fafunwa (1989) posed the questions: if the MT or LIC is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of the child's culture (and the link between the home and the school), why should it be 'principal' and not solely used at this level as stated in the document? If the MT or LIC is considered a very important medium of achieving permanent literacy and numeracy, then why should it be used only 'initially' and not throughout the whole primary education.

It has been observed that the type of bilingual education model practised in Nigeria affects students' achievement despite starting their education in MT. Besides the teacher factor, the factors of lack of materials, lack of supervision and lack of adequate exposure to the target language, some other factors worked

against the model and this may explain why the Nigerian child is performing abysmally in English language in particular and in the academic subjects in general. The fact that learners were transitioned into the use of English as a medium of instruction at the fourth level makes the transitional process abrupt. This is why, Chumbow (1986) wanted to know why there should be a change over only after three years of MT at the primary level. He posited that there is the probability that the transition will create a psychological gap detrimental to all the cognitive maturation and intellectual development of the child.

Meanwhile, going back towards history lane, the Ife Six Year Primary Project (SYPP) in Nigeria and experimental MT project in Niger Republic have confirmed that those who have their total primary education in MT proved more resourceful than their counterparts from other schools when they met on the technical plane (Fafunwa 1989).

So, the use of the MT as a medium of instruction in the early-exit transitional model is said to be too short-term for children to understand the complex workings of their first language (L1) for them to transfer it effectively and efficiently to the L2 (Heugh 2006, Rubagamyia 2003, Macdonald 1993). At this stage, they have not crossed the threshold where level of competence in the L1 carries over to the L2.

The language policy in Nigeria produces children in this category of low level of competence both in L1 and L2 and this may help to explain the low academic performance among learners. There is therefore the need to embark on a late-exit transition model which will make learners 'balanced bilinguals' competent in both their mother-tongue and English; that means the child's progression towards a balanced

bilingualism will accord him a likely cognitive advantage.

There is the need to create a language policy model which will nurture the learners well into a high grade where they would have matured in age and in the first language. In a study of experimental bilingual programs in some states in West Africa, Hoven (2002) found that students in the bilingual programs had better school results especially in language subjects and he indicated that this is true when the L₂ (French) is not introduced too abruptly or too early. There are strong arguments for the introduction of the late-exit model of transitional bilingual situation.

In Owu-Ewie's (2006) opinion, one can say that the language policy which terminated the use of the MT at year three and resurrected the use of English in the fourth year was abrupt because provision has not been made for the "bridge" with which to cross-over. The Transitioning process has to be gradual. Krashen (1996) expressed the view that the gradual exit model is a way of organizing a bilingual program which ensures effective cognitive and academic achievement and proficiency in the L₂. It makes instruction in L₂ at later stages more comprehensible to learners. As a result, students in a late-exit (gradual exit) transitional bilingual program perform well in English Language achievement ahead of their early exit counterparts. Therefore, it will be of immense benefit if English is gradually introduced into the system as the medium of instruction from junior secondary one (JSS1) while mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction from primary one to primary six. Finally, English language becomes the medium of instruction from junior secondary one onwards. This means that from primary 1-6, English will be a subject of study while a Nigerian language will be the language of instruction. It will be studied as a core subject up to the end of the senior secondary school.

The assumption is that the Nigerian language is used as the medium of instruction until the sixth year because by then, it is anticipated that the child would have had enough background to help transfer gradually into English.

All other subjects like Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, etc are taught in the MT until primary six because they are abstract and need a familiar language for learners to understand and appreciate their value. From junior secondary one onwards, these other subjects are instructed in English because the learner has sufficient background experience from their community/culture.

Suggestions and Conclusion

Going by the assertion of UNESCO (1953) that the use of L1 in education is psychologically, sociological and educationally beneficial to learners and the recommendation that every effort should be made to provide education in the L1, one can rightly conclude that the poor academic performance of students at the senior secondary school certificate level especially in English language proficiency may be as a result of the early-exit transitional bilingual education (TBE) program which the government is currently running.

The implications of the threshold theory and the Ife SYPP maintain therefore that a late exit TBC model is a better option for the Nigerian child and the use of the MT in teaching-learning at least until the sixth year of schooling should be adopted.

However, it is believed that depending only on the suggestion that the MT should be solely used as a medium of instruction throughout the primary level for better academic performance will be an unfortunate solution to the problem (Owu –Ewie 2006). Other factors should be considered and trashed out. The Nigerian child is not doing well despite the

present type of bilingual education and despite the fact that the Nigerian child is gradually absorbing English as his first language. Besides other factors, factor of poorly motivated teachers, overcrowded classrooms, lack of provision of relevant and good educational materials, improper parental guidance impede the child's foundation laid for transfer to the second language, especially now that the child practically speaks English language from the cradle.

The government needs to look into the above stated issues and final lay lasting solutions to them. They have to find a way of:

1. motivating teachers and compensating them adequately. As the Yorùbás will say "Inú dídùn nii mórí yá". "Happiness leads to motivation".
2. building additional classrooms and employing more hands (teachers) to counter the problem of overcrowding and making teaching-learning more effective.
3. providing relevant and standard educational materials in the MT using the ETF fund.
4. discouraging parents from buying 'expo' for their children/wards and registering them at special examination centres.
5. encouraging parents to use the mother tongue more at home especially with their younger children as was done in the days of our parents.
6. making adequate provision for thorough supervision of schools by employing more education inspectors.

Moving the use of the mother tongue forward a bit by few years will do no harm but rather bring about definite improvement to the achievement of learners going by the encouraging results of experiments on the late – exit transitional programs.

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