

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT: A LINGUISTIC STRATEGY FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Education in Nigeria and anywhere in the world is an instrument “par excellence” for effecting national development. To achieve this, English language education was introduced into Nigeria’s school curriculum to help in the production of responsible citizens who will eschew some of the vices of our nation, thereby promoting youth empowerment in their society. Empowerment is the process whereby people are endowed or given the power and the opportunity to improve themselves in order to empower themselves economically in terms of employment. Thus, this paper therefore aims at exploring the values of English language education for effecting youth empowerment in the society. The paper discusses concept of youth, the concept of national development, empowering the youth through English language education, National Policy on English language education, the role of English language education in national development. Recommendation and conclusion were made.

Empowerment is defined as the process whereby people are endowed or given the power and the opportunity to improve themselves in order to contribute to positive change (Olaoye, 2005). Uluocha, (2006) defined it as a process of challenging the dominant power structures that may inhibit or hinder one’s personal growth and advancement in the society, in order to gain recognition, control, and power. Empowerment takes many and varied dimensions, which include activities like individual self-assertion, self-improvement, collective bargaining or resistance, in order to challenge existing power relations.

Self-empowerment takes varied forms, such as education for social upliftment, apprenticeship for job or occupational advancement, usurpation through domination and force. Our concern is how the youth can be empowered in order to be able to contribute to community and national development. But who are the people described as the youths? The youths are those who fall between the age bracket of the adolescents and the aged that is from teenage up to the forties.

Attributes of the Youth

What are the attributes or characteristics of the youth? The youths, whether male or female, form the most formidable, energetic work force of any nation; hence they are regarded as the life-wire of the economy of any country. They also form a large percentage of the students in our tertiary institutions. The youths constitute a big percentage of teaching workforce and the National Youth Service Corp members in Nigeria. The youths serve a nation in many capacities, for instance, as teachers, guidance and counsellors, factory hands, farm hands, tradesmen and women, professionals in various fields, social workers, office workers or civil servants, politicians, spiritual leaders, military men and women, private sector engines of growth, media practitioners and vanguards of democracy, and unfortunately as armed robbers, cultists, prostitutes, drug addicts, examinations malpractice culprits, religious bigots, 419ners, economic saboteurs, and so

forth. It is really unfortunate because these negative attributes are the consequences of the many years of neglect of the youths by successive governments which have failed to sufficiently empower the youths (Emanenjo 2004).

Conceptualizing National Development

It is generally agreed that the word “development” refers to ‘a state of change that leads to progress. Development is often said to be multi - dimensional in nature as it can be economic, social, educational, political, cultural, technological, human, national or sustainable. Basically, national development connotes the collective and individual impacts of development in all its various dimensions – educational, economic, social and political within a nation (Popoola, Apata & Adebayo, 2008).

As Sebiomo (2005) wrote national development implies that whatever kind of development is witnessed in the various aspects of the society such as politics, education etc should have a positive influence (i.e. impact) on the people in the nation. When talking of education and national development, it must be clearly stated the aspect of development one is interested and the kind of education that can contribute to such development. In this regard, English language education is identified as a potent instrument that can engineer youth empowerment by helping to produce responsible citizens who will maximally contribute to the building of a useful society (Enu & Effiom, 2012).

Empowering the Youth through English Language Education

Njoku, (2004) is of the opinion that Education is the most fundamental and important tool for youth empowerment, which in turn is a catalyst for social justice, equity, individual growth and national development. Education is a weapon for the upliftment of the under-privileged, the marginalized, the un-informed and

the oppressed in the society. The culture of reform initiated by the previous and present administration is to engender sustainable change in the society. This change is to be engineered by our educational institutions through various reforms by the successive government such as National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) at the federal level, and the State Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (SEEDS) at the state level. These reforms are to be carried out through education (UNESCO 2005). Different types of education programmes for the empowerment of the youths have been designed. We have citizenship education, human rights education, peace education, vocational or entrepreneurship education, computer education and language education.

The objective of education in general is the improvement of the intellectual capabilities of the beneficiaries or the acquisition of some essential skills, and a further elevation of the persons from the position of low value or status to one of higher value and recognition. The various fields under general education will further empower the youth become well exposed, rational in thought and action, critical, sensible and responsible (Lassa, 1996).

National Policy on English Language Education

Since education is given or delivered through language, either in the Mother Tongue (MT) or in English Language, or whatever, the role of English language in youth empowerment cannot be over-emphasized. English Language is the vehicle through which knowledge is imparted; and knowledge is power. One of the cardinal points in (NEEDS) is education, and English language education is a key tool and a bridge to the future. Mother Tongue education is a weapon for the empowerment of the child and the youth.

Through MT the youths are introduced to their culture. It is a mark of identity. English Language in general is a tool for national and global integration and sustainable democracy. It is a tool for actualizing human ingenuity and creativity (Ajah 1996).

English Language education is as old as formal (Western) education in Nigeria. The 1926 Colonial Education Ordinance (CLO) can be said to be the first milestone in English language education. It was however the 1952 and 1954 primary school syllabus for the Eastern and Western Regions of Nigeria that really emphasized the study of Nigerian Languages. Provisions were then made in the syllabi for Igbo and Efik in the Eastern Region, while Yoruba was for the Western Region, and Hausa for the Northern Region. These syllabi formed the foundation upon which the 1998 and the 2004 revised National Policy on Education was laid.

The multilingual and historical experience of colonialism has had a major impact on English language education policy in West Africa, particularly Nigeria. In most part of Africa, a persistent theme of national education meetings has often resulted in the utilization of African (Nigerian) languages as media of instruction in schools. The advantage derivable from this fact is that African Languages and tradition constitute the indispensable foundation of any educational and cultural advancement in Africa (Azide 2007).

The principle of Mother Tongue education is closely tied to the education objective of cognitive development, and this is another millennium development goal for the youth. MT education has been strongly recommended by UNESCO, to the effect that every effort should be made to provide education in the MT. The role and importance of indigenous languages in Nigeria's education system cannot be over-emphasized. In other climes, children from developed countries explore their own natural environments, and communicate in their

native languages, thus acquiring, at a very early stage, self-confidence, resourcefulness, creative reasoning and adaptability skills necessary for further physical, emotional and intellectual development. Teaching both the pupils and the youth three main Nigerian languages will also enable them to know their cultures, and to respect other people's ideas and opinions, people's values and beliefs. Since indigenous languages transmit and preserve the people's culture, education given through MT is bound to produce children and youth with moral finesse, a sense of responsibility and the right attitude to life, thus making children and the youths shun ethnocentrism or cultural stereotypes and biases (UNESCO 2005).

The linguistic equivalent of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. These rights, according to Anikweze, (2005) are the right:

- to be recognized as a member of a language community
- to use one's language, both in private and in public.
- to the use of one's own name
- to associate with one's language community
- to maintain and develop one's own culture.
- to own their languages and cultures and for these to be taught.
- to have access to cultural services

These rights have conferred on all Nigerian citizens, through their indigenous languages, the right and opportunity to participate in party politics, express their feelings and emotions through the media (Ogunranti, 2000), and get involved in cultural shows, drama and exhibition of works of arts.

This truism is supported by Njoku (2004) who believes that Nigerian languages are important instruments in the socio-political lives of all Nigerians. It is in recognition of the primacy of indigenous language that the

Federal Government recommended in chapter 5, part 1, Article 55 of the 1999 constitution that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The constitution as well as the NPE are fundamental documents that promote multilingualism. Linguistic competence, indeed competence and performance in the indigenous languages can empower the youth to understand the constitution better and thus making the youths participate fully in democratic politics.

Roles of English Language Education in National Development

The general aim of English language education is to make learners become patriotic, socially responsible and good citizens by understanding the language milieu they are operating from (Azide, 2007). The values which the discipline inculcates in the learners according to Hymes (2002) cited by Azide (2007) include an appreciation of the diversity of Nigeria, positive thinking, cooperation and honesty. It could therefore be seen that English Language has the capacity of inculcating appropriate values for the development of the Nigerian Nation.

English Language is a subject designed and evolved to foster in learners a better understanding of the ethical values and principles that guides the interactions of people with various elements in their environment. It has been described by Idowu (2008) as the most suitable subject to inculcate in the young learners appropriate way of communication and standards that will bring about a sustainable development to Nigerian.

Quoting the National Policy on Education (2004), Edinyang and Usang (2012) submitted that “the philosophy and goals of Nigerian education for English Language is the acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competencies both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live and contribute to the development of the society”.

Indeed, Alberta (2000) submitted that English Language is the subjects that assist students to acquire basic knowledge, skills and positive attitudes needed to be responsible citizens and contributing members of the society. That is why Imogie (2011) cited by Enu & Effiom (2012) sees education as a basic force for the socio-economic and political transformation of the society. He added that as a force for societal transformation and national development, the building of responsible citizenship is one of the cardinal mandates. This content elasticity is a unique characteristic of English Language that other disciplines are lacking.

Equally, English Language as a value free and value laden subject has the capacity to build sound interactive medium in all facets of the society, it serves as an aid to changing the value system of the people and as a means of re-appraising undue practices which invariably promote national transformation. In this regard, English Language aims at inculcating national consciousness and national unity, imbibing the right type of values and attitudes for self and national survival, the acquisition of necessary skills, abilities and competencies which individuals need to be able to contribute to national development (Whorf 2002).

Based on the forgoing discussion, it becomes clear that the values ingredient in English Language education cannot be over emphasized for ensuring national development. Thus, responsible citizenship remains a major catalyst to national development. This is why the young ones must be properly equipped with the right attitudes and values to contribute meaningfully to the socio-economic development of the society. Indeed, when the young ones are properly brought up, they will develop what Fairbrothers (2003) called “critical patriotism”. This virtue will enhance their capacity to love their country, develop an understanding of the culture which is dynamic and ever changing for the promotion of a

nation's cultural heritage. This remains a critical element of national development.

Conclusion

The author concludes that, based on the valued and cherished English language education programmes in Nigeria schools, English Language Education, is a veritable tool for youth empowerment, and is capable of reducing youth unemployment in the society. It was found that the Nigerian Education Policy, particularly the National Language Policy, is a very good document which is capable of empowering the youth if well implemented. Education for All (EFA) goals can be achieved if English language education is religiously pursued. The youth are to take up life challenges and provides opportunities which are a veritable tool for achieving social security for the youth. Empowerment through English language education ensures that the youth escapes from intellectual and economic poverty and oppression. English language education is therefore capable of rebranding the youth thus preparing them for the future task of rebuilding the nation, and contributing meaningfully to the development of their society.

Recommendations

For the youths who are out of school and who had no training in English language studies, the Federal Government should establish language learning programmes in both the Teachers' Corps (a two-year capacity- building internship) and the NYSC scheme. This will afford the teacher-interns and the Youth Corp Members the opportunity to become bilingual or multilingual, and hence become more empowered. A form of language immersion programme can be organized to achieve this goal. The Teachers Registration Council (TRC) of Nigeria also has a role to play. Teachers' capacity building programmes should include the teaching and learning of English and Nigerian languages.

Mother tongue should be incorporated into the curriculum so as to accord the child the right to interact and relate with his peer within the society.

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