THE PLACE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The target of every good government is to provide her citizenry with the basic amenities of life. Such has not been fully realized in Nigeria and cannot be realized at least for now, through her numerous vernaculars since none of them unites the nation. It is only a language which the peoples of Nigeria can use to relate with one another that can be used to build the nation. This role falls on the English language which is the nation’s official and second language, as well as her lingua franca. Consequently, this paper sought to highlight the roles the English language performs in the building of the Nigerian nation.

The English language developed from Germanic and Romance (Latinate) sources and is traced to the Indo-European language family. It is spoken as a native language in Britain, America, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Africa, Ireland, and the Caribbean and as a non-native language in many other nations of the world. In fact, Rogers (2000:17) stated that “English is spoken as a native language by over 377 million people around the world”. As a world language, and the world’s most widely used lingua franca, English is spoken by more than 75% of the world population today. Veghese (1989:1) affirmed that:

Of all the languages in the world today English deserves to be regarded as a world language. It is the world’s most widely spoken language. It is the common means of communication between the peoples of different nations. One person out of every four on earth can be reached through English.

This is in sharp contrast with the status of the language about four thousand years ago when it was but a dialect little known beyond Southern England. English is occupying a position close to that occupied by Latin in the western world before the fall of the Roman Empire. The language plays a major role in the development and unity of Nigeria.

The Implantation of English in Nigeria

History has it that there was no story of Europeans in Africa before the fifteenth century. When they eventually arrived, their agenda ab initio was not to colonize Africa, but for commercial purposes. Ogini noted that:

Several factors combined to stimulate this interest in trade. One of these was the European renaissance (‘the rebirth’ of learning) of the later middle ages which, among other things, had given rise to a spirit of adventure... the second factor was of a religious nature...the third factor was no less important. Europeans came to West Africa seeking wealth and fame through trade and adventure...finally; there was the desire among Europeans to find an alternative route to China and India. This became increasingly urgent in the fifteenth century when the Ottoman Turks sacked Constantinople (1453) and thereby closed the overland routes to the East, routes which Europeans...had been using for centuries in their trade in spices, sugar, silk and other oriental goods. (1973:152-155)

They, the Portuguese, Spanish, French, English and others, came to the coasts of West Africa with their manufactured goods which they exchanged with the coastal men for gold, ivory and pepper which they resold in Europe. This coastal trade was beneficial to the partners. From the sixteenth to
the early nineteenth century trans-Atlantic slave trade flourished among European powers. Ajayi, Buah and Davidson observed that:

As the years slid by, the two-sided benefit from this coastal trade became increasingly a one-sided benefit, with the Europeans gaining more and more, and Africans less and less. The trade developed away from the peaceful exchange of raw materials and manufactured goods, and towards a massive trade in captives and in slaves. (1967:194)

With the abolition of the illegitimate trade on humans legitimate trade took off. The slave trade was abolished for two main reasons:

The first is that the humanitarians … had condemned slave trading as inhuman and were determined to do something about it. The second reason for the abolition was that economic changes took place in Britain. By 1800 Britain was becoming a highly industrialized country so that her machines were turning out daily thousands of goods which had to be sold to the outside world. By that time too the thirteen American colonies of Britain, today known as the United States of America, had won their independence. These two events led to a change of attitude in Britain and to a dwindling of interest in the slave trade. In its place, there arose a new British interest; the securing of markets for the sale of her surplus manufactured goods and for the supply of raw materials for her manufacturing industries. (Ogini 1973: 179-180):

Being the era of industrial revolution and nation building, European countries needed market to sell their over produced goods, and also buy the basic raw materials like ivory, hides, gold, etc for their industries. This market was readily found in Africa. With time, the European powers: Britain, France, Portugal, Italy, Spain, and Germany needed to protect their business interest in Africa. This brought about the ‘scramble for Africa’: a term used to refer to “the hectic struggle of the European powers to partition Africa in the last years of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century” (Anene, Ayandele, Afigbo and Cokey 1966:13). The Berlin Conference of 1884-1885 was summoned at which the policy of effective occupation was adopted. Isichei (1977:168) confirmed that “in the 1880s, the nature of the British presence in southern Nigeria changed dramatically. In 1884-5 an international conference was held at Berlin, where it was decided that ‘effective occupation’ was necessary before claims to colonial territory in Africa could be recognized”. Effective occupation in this sense means that if any European power is interested in any territory, it should notify others of it and establish her government and invariably her language there. It happened that Nigeria came under British colonization and English became her lingua franca.

Meanwhile, before the coming of the colonial masters, British merchants and missionaries who arrived in Africa earlier had gone a long way to introduce the English language into the area that eventually became Nigeria. The merchants taught the middle men at the coastlines the English language so that they could keep simple records while the missionaries introduced the formal school system when they discovered their converts would be better if they can read and write. By the time they set to introduce their government, English was already in use by a small fraction of Nigerians. Moreover, The British invaders were not keen on learning African vernaculars. As far as they were concerned, African vernaculars are of no value. Little wonder Omolewa as cited by Eyisi and Ezeuko quoted Rev M. Sunter as stating that:

These languages...(are) only interesting to the comparative philologist and never likely to become of any practical use to civilization... The natives must and will know English in spite of all well-meaning but diseased notions; it is the language of commerce and the only education worth a moment’s consideration. (2008:196)

Consequently, the colonialists went ahead to promote the use of English especially as they needed to train the personnel like clerks, teachers, interpreters, etc who will help run the fledgling
government. Proficiency in English became a passport to securing the much cherished white collar
jobs and English became the official language of Nigeria. The contact between the European
languages spoken at the coastlines and Nigerian indigenous languages gave rise to the pidgin
language which is spoken as a *lingua franca* in some parts of Nigeria.

**Multiplicity of Languages in Nigeria**

There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria and other colonized nations have multiplicity of
languages because many small nations were merged indiscriminately to form the nations and
countries we have in Africa and elsewhere today. In other words, most colonized nations are made up
of various races, tribes, tongues or blood stocks. Nigeria has over four hundred (400) languages, each
confined to ethnic borders. The small nations, clans, tribes, tongues that constitute Nigeria were living
in organized societies and each had her culture, tradition, norms. Fodeh (1990:6) described her as a
‘conglomerate of nations’. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria
in 1914 created the problem of multiplicity of languages and particularly the problem of which of the
languages can unite all the tongues and tribes in Nigeria effectively. The Hausa language does it
effectively in the North, but there was neither a language that could do so in the South nor unite the
whole country. Meanwhile, putting a local language in this position is delicate especially as no tribe
would welcome the imposition of another vernacular on her.

The government of India, for instance, attempted to make Hindi (one of the country’s
indigenous languages) her sole official language in 1965 and it triggered off a bloody riot.
Immediately, it was agreed that English should continue to serve the nation as an associate official
language, and that has been the position till date.

In Nigeria, English performs and is likely to continue performing the function of language of
wider communication. Indeed, the existence of Nigeria as an entity is deeply rooted in the English
language since it acts as a “cultural, political and linguistic bridge between the cultural North and the
cultural South of the country” (Emenanjo 1990: 32).

**English Language and Development in Nigeria**

African, Asian and South American countries are called developing, underdeveloped or third
world countries. They are characterized by hunger, diseases, poverty, and a high death rate. In other
words, there is a poor condition of living in such countries. The target of every responsible
government is to improve the living condition of the citizenry by providing basic amenities. A country
that has these amenities put in place is called a developed country. The United States of America,
Europe, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand are said to be developed. According to
Hutchinson Encyclopedia:

> Developed world or first world or the North are the countries that have a money economy and
> a highly developed industrial sector. They generally also have a high degree of urbanization,
> a complex communication network, high GDP per person, low birth and death rates, high
> energy consumption, and a large proportion of the work force employed in manufacturing or
> service industries. (311)

**Assessing Nigeria Based on These Criteria Shows that She is Underdeveloped.**

Development is closely tied to language since it is through language that the developmental
policies of government are articulated and executed. In fact, language influences all aspects of human
endeavours. Given the multilingual, multicultural and multiethnic nature of Nigeria, the only
language that can foster her even development is English. Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009:49) affirmed that
“the English language will continue to be at the centre of the Nigerian development because there is
no immediate alternative among the various indigenous languages”. English performs the following
major roles in Nigeria:
Language of Instruction in School:

Education, especially higher education is an agent of development. It is on record that developed countries have evolved a successful educational system. It is in recognition of this that “the Federal Government of Nigeria has adopted education as an instrument par excellence for effecting national development” (NPE 1981: 1). Still on the value of education to nation building NPE observes that:

*Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change as a fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution.*

Akpata (2000:158) noted that “education constitutes an important ingredient of development and therefore a crucial factor for even development within a nation such as Nigeria”. The language of education in Nigerian schools is the English language, though government recognizes the need for Nigerian students to be taught their own vernaculars as it is through them that what is good in their culture is preserved. In line with this assertion, NPE espouses that

*In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people' 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.*

The fact that the English language is the language of education in Nigerian schools shows that the language is indispensable to the building of the Nigerian nation. It is an important tool for the development of Nigeria. It is in recognition of this that (NPE: 13) maintains that “government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother tongue or the language of immediate community, and at a later stage, English”.

In addition to being the language of instruction in Nigerian schools, English is taught as a core school subject at the pre-primary, primary and secondary school levels. It is also taught to first year students of Nigerian tertiary institutions as Use of English. A credit pass in English is a major requirement for admission into Nigerian institutions of higher learning. Above all, it is a passport to prestigious employment.

Language of Unity

English is the only language in which the numerous tribes that constitute Nigeria are united. Unity of purpose in any given country fosters progress and development and Nigeria being a diverse and heterogeneous population with numerous languages and tribes needs a language that unifies her population for her to achieve national growth. The English language is the only language that fosters unity in Nigeria in spite of her great diversity. Taking cognizance of this fact, Afolayan as cited by Onuigbo and Eyisi stated that:

*It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language...it has been the language for the creation of the political entity itself, and also the language of its politics, economic unification and administration...Furthermore, the fact that it is now functioning as the language of Nigerian nationalism cannot be denied.* (2009:47)

Also, Ike (2001:103) noted that the language serves as “a unifying force among Nigeria’s over 500 ethnic groups each of which speaks and understands no other ethnic language than theirs”. English is the common medium of communication open to Nigeria, its foreign status notwithstanding. Were it not for the unifying role of English in the country, her numerous languages would have created communication barrier thereby, making political, economic and social unity difficult.
Language of Administration

English is the official language of Nigeria used at the federal, state, and local government levels. It is used extensively in the deliberations of the executive, legislative and judicial arms of government. The language provisions that raise the English language to this status are enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. For instance, section 51 of 1979 and 1989 constitution and section 55 of the amended 2011 constitution stipulate that “the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof”. Also, section 91 of 1979 and 1989 constitution as well as section 97 of the amended 2011 constitution stipulate that:

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\text{The business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the house may in addition to English conduct the business of the house in one or more other languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.}
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The inclusion of Nigerian vernaculars in the language provisions has been of little value since no visible effort has been made to actualize their use. This establishes that English is the sole language for conducting government businesses. In fact, politics and politicking in Nigeria would have been almost impossible in Nigeria were it not for the use of the colonial language. Akindele and Adegbite acknowledge that:

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\text{English is used as a matter of political expediency. It is retained so as to bring about political stability in the country. The choice of one of the indigenous languages may create some problems. Thus in order to allay the fear of domination, there is the need for a neutral language that will serve official purposes. (2005:60)}
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Most of the developmental and other policies of the government are articulated in the English language since the citizenry are from different tribes, and needed to understand them. The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the grund norm of the laws of the land, is written in the English language to make its provisions open to her citizens. It is also the language of Nigerian law courts.

Language of Technological Transfer

English is the language of science and technology. Many literatures in the field of science and technology are written in the English language. Also current issues and discoveries are given English names instantly since the language is highly productive. In other words, access to the many literatures in the sciences is gained through the language. Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincers noted as follows:

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\text{Apart from political and historical considerations, English language has continued to develop because it is the language of Science and Technology. In fact, half the world scientific literature is written in English. By comparison, languages like Arabic, Italian, Yoruba have been little equipped to handle the concepts and terms of modern Sciences and Technology. (1978:2)}
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So the key to the wealth of knowledge of modern sciences and technology lies in the English Language. An adequate knowledge of the language is needed by every one who does not want to be left out of the scientific breakthroughs of this era of technological advancement as the theories, concepts, gadgets, and ideas used in modern Sciences are mirrored in it. In fact, scientific knowledge, the world over, is transferred through the English Language. Veghese consented that:

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\text{A very important reason for regarding English as a world language is that the world’s knowledge is enshrined in English. Countries in Asia and Africa that were till recently under the British rule get their scientific knowledge and technological know-how from English books. It is knowledge of English that helps these countries maintain the high level of their intellectual and scientific training and achievement. (1989:2)}
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It is through the medium of English that technologists learnt to use locally produced raw materials to create new things. For instance, two Nigerians recently produced state of the art armoured vehicles using locally produced raw materials. This was made possible through the scientific knowledge they acquired. Knowledge of English has also given us access to the numerous findings of genetic engineers and their importance in the production of improved varieties of crops and animals.

Window on the World

There is no area of life in Nigeria that English has not permeated. It is her window on the world. English is a world language. It is one of the major languages in which the affairs of the United Nations and its numerous agencies are conducted. It is the language of the world media. World media giants like the Voice of America (VOA), Cable News Network (CNN), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), etc. all broadcast in English. Through English Language, Nigeria joins other countries in world trade. Commenting on this, Broughton et al pointed out that:

*Besides being a major vehicle of debate at the United Nations, and the language of command for NATO. It is the official language of International Aviation, and unofficially is the first language of International sports and pop scene. Russian propaganda to the Far East is broadcast in English as are Chinese radio programmes designed to win friends among listeners in East Africa. Indeed more than 60 percent of the world’s radio programmes are broadcast in English and it is also the language of 70 percent of the world mail. (1978:1)*

With all these numerous roles of English both at the national and international levels, one could say comfortably that Nigeria is fortunate to have the language as her official, second language, and Lingua franca.

It is evident from the above that the only language which can foster nation building in Nigeria today is the English language. But caution has to be applied if the process of development would be successful. It should be realized that the majority of Nigerians especially the grass root are illiterate citizens. These illiterates need to participate effectively in the process of development. They need to understand the policies of the government and partake in the process of executing them out. The only language these illiterate folks understand is their own local language, and they can only be reached through it. So, in addition to the use of the English language in which the whole nation is united for pursuing development, local languages should be used to address the illiterate folks.

Conclusion

Nigeria’s indigenous languages are many but are confined to ethnic borders. Thus, as her official language, English serves outstanding roles in the development of the nation. Ichidi as cited by Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009:48) affirmed that “the English language is very essential for national affairs, schooling, science and technology, the mass media, literature, culture, human empowerment (politics). All these form the backbone of modern development which our society yearns for”. Nigeria’s unity, growth and development is rooted in English which is the official language used to carry out government businesses. Since the target and hallmark of every responsible government is to promote national unity and development, the medium through which the nation aspires to achieve these is of great importance. The English language is at present the only road to achieving development in Nigeria.
The Place of English Language in the Development of Nigeria

References


