ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

By

VERO-EKPRIS GLADSTONE URUJZIAN
Centre for General Entrepreneurial Studies
Akwa Ibom State University,
Ikot Akpaden.

Abstract

English language plays a vital role in educational, human resources development and acquisition of knowledge. African continent is a vast region with huge resources, both material and human (cultural and linguistic). However, it is one of the neglected regions in the world. Even in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) one do not hear about as much activity in Africa as in other regions of the world. David Graddol, whose influential books address diverse ELT contexts (Graddol, 1997, 2006), says almost nothing on English in Africa. This paper therefore takes an African (insider) look at the role of English Language in human resources development in Africa. The paper equally highlighted the importance of English Language as an official language of the African Union (AU); and concludes that despite challenges from other languages, English remains the most popular or desired language in Africa because of its role in human resources development.

Language is central to learning and life itself. It is the life wire in human existence. Education be it formal or informal is the function of human development. English language by extension has a lot to do with the prospect of any meaningful development in an individual and the nation at large. Educators and many researchers all agreed that language acquisition can not be separated from the acquisition of knowledge. This simply means that the success in language learning will definitely lead to success in education generally. Indeed, the fallen standard of education in the country is not unconnected with the poor acquisition and learning of the instructional language in the classrooms or school system. The reason is that there is a close link between competence in English language and education improvement in academic work of the individual. Really, English language is an indispensable tool and catalyst for the promotion of international peace and solidarity. In fact, it is a key for self-fulfillment and meaningful interaction.

Concept Analysis

From the topic of this paper, the main concepts are: Language, and Human Resources Development.
The Concept of Language

The word ‘Language’ is derived from Latin word ‘Lingua” translated into English as ‘tongue’. According to Webster’s International Encyclopedia, “Language is a means by which human beings of the same ethnic region express themselves vocally and communicate with others”. Ayodele (2004) sees language as “a purely human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, knowledge and desires by means of voluntary produced symbols”. While linguists define language as an arbitrary system of signs and symbols used for the purpose of human communication; it is indeed the most significant means by which people of the same linguistic society or community interact for co-existence.

The bulk of human knowledge is stored in language and the same is transferred from one person to the other by way of communication. Communication, on the other hand, is a skill of its own which uses language either in its verbal or written form. A language instruction is also language that can be used as a tool for teaching indigenous languages. Therefore, academic language occupies a unique position in a given curriculum of any level of education system ranging from primary to tertiary level. The National Policy on Education (2004) among other functions stated that the language of education should serve as the medium of instruction and as well studied as a core course in schools and colleges. Other functions of such language (Language of Instruction) as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004) include:

a. To promote social interaction
b. Preserve culture
c. Enhance national cohesion and
d. Facilitate interaction across the boarders.

Nigeria as a multilingual nation adopted English language from her colonial administrators (British) during the early missionaries and traders in 18th Century who introduced English language for the purpose of interaction with the indigenes. Be it as it may, Nigeria as a multilingual nation accepted it to be part and parcel of the nation. Therefore, English language serves as her official language, language of law, business and a unifying factor for the diversified ethnic groups in the country. Because of these indispensable functions of English language in Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (2004) specifically tagged it the language of instruction and states that:

1. It should serve as the language of education from upper primary (primary 4) to tertiary of educational system.
2. That it should be included as core course of study in the academic curriculum.
For these reasons, English language should be carefully taught in the classrooms for proper understanding, because the success in any academic study depends to a large extent on the efficiencies in the four skills of the language medium which are Listening, speaking, Reading, and writing competences.

It is necessary to point out that the reason why the study of any academic subject often poses problems for students is that they lack good knowledge of English Language which is the language of instruction. It is also a compulsory course of study.

**Human Resource Development**

1. Human Resource Development relates to long range development of Semi Skilled and Skilled manpower according to the requirements of economy and to plan educational priority and investment in human.

2. Human Resource is the most important and vital factor of Economic Development or it can be said that humans are the agents of development. Some of the importance of Human Resource or Human Capital:

3. **Country Develops if the Human Resource is Developed:** To enhance economic development the state constructs roads, buildings bridges, dams, power houses, hospitals, etc. to run these units doctors, engineers, scientists, teachers, are required. So if the state invests in a human resource it pays divided in response.

4. **Increase in Productivity:** The better education, improved skills, and provision of healthy atmosphere will result in proper and most efficient use of resources (non-natural & natural) which will result in increase in economic production.

5. **Eradication of Social and Economic Backwardness:** Human Resource development has an ample effect on the backwardness of economy and society. The provision of education will increase literacy which will produce.

6. **Entrepreneurship Increase:** Education, clean environment, good health, investment on the human resource, will all have its positive effects. Job opportunities would be created in the country. And even business environment will flourish in the state which creates man job opportunities.

7. **Social Revolution:** because of Human Resource development the socio economic life of the peoples of a country changes drastically, over all look
Arrival of English Language in Africa

The continent of Africa has a population of about 460 million who speak more than 2,000 languages (Lodhi, 1993). English was introduced to Africa with the arrival of Europeans as slave traders and colonizers. Despite the departure of Europeans after independence, English has remained in the continent and today it is used as one of the official or working languages in the African Union (AU). It is used for different communicative purposes in 52 African countries (possibly 53 when Southern Sudan becomes independent), depending on the language and education policy of each country. Of these, six countries are listed by Gradol (1997:10) as territories where English is used as the L1 but where there is greater L2 use or significant use of another language. About 20 sub-Saharan countries, usually known as Anglophone, use English as an official language exclusively (for example Ghana, Nigeria, Namibia and Zambia) or with another African language (Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe). In the Lusophone (Portuguese speaking) and francophone (French speaking) countries and in Ethiopia – none of which were British colonies – the status of English is also very high. In Ethiopia, for example, English was introduced in the 1940s as a language of science and education and to facilitate knowledge and technology transfer from the developed West (Haile-Michael, 1993, Bogale, 2009, Negash, 2005).

Importance of English Language

As an official language of the African Union (AU) and an international language, English is important for the continent. The question then is what concrete roles does English have in development in Africa? Is it a character or a contributor to Africa’s development endeavours?

Coleman (2010) addressed a similar question by reviewing the functions of English in development. He identified four areas where English has often been given a role to play:

a. for employability
b. for international mobility
c. for unlocking development opportunities and accessing information
d. as an impartial language.

Because of its association with colonization, English is often stigmatized as the language of imperialism or oppression (Philipson, 1992). Many writers on language policy e.g. Quane and Glanz (2010) lament that the emphasis on foreign languages like English has led to Africa making an insignificant contribution to knowledge production and creative writing because this has led to a dependency syndrome among educated people, (Groddol 2006, Batido 2007). However, it is not rational to blame every ailment in Africa (political, economic, and educational) on these foreign languages. After all, as
Philipson (1996) observed, after independence it was African leaders, such as those in Nigeria, who were responsible for the choice of English over local languages. This was done with the intention ‘to de-emphasize ethnicity and build up a sense of nationhood’ (Philipson, 1996:162).

In spite of their historical association with colonial rule and the fact that they have limited the development of indigenous languages, the former colonial languages are useful now in several ways.

**Roles of English Language in Human Resource Development in Africa**

English is a major international language with multiple functions and roles for Africans within Africa and in interaction with the people of other continents. It plays a critical role in entertainment and the media, in diplomacy, in commerce and tourism, in migration and in education. In fulfilling these roles, English creates development opportunities for individuals and communities in Africa. This paper will look at each of these aspects individually below:

**English in Entertainment and Media:** one of the areas where English is most accessible in Africa is probably entertainment and the media. Video films produced in Hollywood have inundated African urban areas. Football is another popular social event to which Africans have access through English, the English Premier League being the most famous programme. Television has played a significant role in captivating Africans’ attention. Despite some countries’ unwillingness to privatize their state-owned television companies (Shinn 2008), or expand the range of their broadcasts, many international news and entertainment programmes are available for free or fee through private satellite dishes.

During the Cold War, many Africans countries were aligned with either the West or the Soviet Union; the citizens of countries in the communist bloc were denied access to information from inside or outside. As relatively more liberal regimes have come to power, the use of English in the print media has grown rapidly in Africa.

In Ethiopia, print media appeared for the first time in the period of Emperor Menelik. For example, Aimero was published in Amharic between 1902 and 1903 and Le Semeur d’Ethiopie in Frech from 1905 to 1911 (Bekele 2003:14). Television and radio broadcast – Amharic – began during the rule of Haile-Selassie. By the 1990s English was still rarely used in the media: there was only one official newspaper, *The Ethiopian Herald*, one television programme and one radio broadcast in English (which was limited to one hour per day). Today, radio broadcasts have still not changed much, apart from FM stations transmitting music in English. But we now have far more English language newspapers than ever before. The total number of newspapers has
increased dramatically from three to more than 15. They are published in Amharic, other indigenous languages and English, despite having a somewhat uneasy relationship with the government. A simple internet search generates the list of current print and online English newspapers and magazines shown in Box 1. Some of these publications are pro-government, others are independent.

**Table 1: English Language Media in Ethiopia**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English Language Media in Ethiopia (World-Newspapers 2010)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Addis Fortune:</strong> Quality business newspaper</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Addis Tribune:</strong> Private weekly newspaper from the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>allAfrica.com:</strong> Ethiopia: Daily news articles related to Ethiopia from African sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BBC Country Profile:</strong> Ethiopia: Features country overview, news, key facts and events, timelines and leader profile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Capital:</strong> Newspaper striving to promote free enterprise in Ethiopia and inform the public at large about economic events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethiopian Commentator:</strong> Opinion-based online magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethiopian Observer:</strong> Provides news and commentaries regarding current issues on Ethiopia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethiopia Reporter:</strong> Daily newspaper based in Addis Ababa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethiopian Review:</strong> News site publishing wide range of dissident views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Helm:</strong> Ethiopian fashion and entertainment magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jimma Times:</strong> independent online newspaper run by reporters both in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian Diaspora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nazret.com:</strong> US-based news portal with headlines from various sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tadias:</strong> lifestyle and business publication devoted exclusively to the Ethiopian American communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Walta Information Centre:</strong> Government affiliated site providing daily news in Amharic and English from all regions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Furthermore, in public libraries we can now find foreign magazines such as the Economist, Newsweek, Focus on Africa, NewsAfrica and so on.

Internet-based communication has also grown rapidly over recent years, thanks to the expansion of IT facilities. In the past Africa had difficulty accessing newspapers published in the west because they were banned, due to ideological differences during the cold war. Now anyone can access online international news outlets, the BBC and CNN. Despite the relatively small number of citizens who are literate in English, it is amazing to observe the eagerness of many – especially young people - to chat in
English. Several websites are available (including BBC opinion columns) where Africans can debate politics, economics and so on.

**English as the Language of Diplomacy**

African countries use English as the major working languages at AU meetings, seminars and conferences. The leaders, policy makers and experts meet in different cities in Africa to debate multifaceted issues, mostly using English. For instance, AU parliamentary meetings are often conducted in English with parallel translations into other international working languages such as Arabic, French or Portuguese. Similar to the way that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) works, African leaders come together to debate development issues (such as climate negotiations) using English. In October, 2007 the writer attended an African Parliamentary meeting in Addis Ababa which was chaired by Ethiopia; the language of discussion was English. Agendas for AU meetings are also prepared in English.

University professors who participated in the 5th International conference on Federalism, held in Ethiopia in December 2010, reported that – although participants came from many countries where languages other than English are spoken – all the sessions were conducted in English.

**English for Commerce and Tourism**

Though it is not well developed and its potential has not been fully exploited, tourism is an attractive sector for Africa’s development. In its own ways, Africa’s tourism industry has already grown significantly:

Africa attracted just about four per cent of total international tourism and received two percent of international tourist expenditure in 2001. However, tourist arrivals in Africa increased from 15 million in 1990 to 29.1 million in 2002 (Naude and Saayman 2005:367).

Today, African countries formerly known for civil war, such as Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Ethiopia, are growing to be tourist destinations. As the tourism sector continues to expand, which it definitely will, there will be many African industries, airlines, hotels, handicraft manufacturers, tour operators and travel agencies that will reap dividends. This sector creates job opportunities for many people, even for the low-skilled ones. However, its success in packaging and selling of products and services for tourist depends on competence in one of the international languages. English is an important tool of communication between Africans and visitors from all parts of the globe. The importance of English will therefore increase as African countries gear up to
attract the growing tourist numbers from Asia (especially from China). For example, a report from the Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China (English Xinhua.net 2010) indicates that in 2009 alone about 381,000 Chinese tourists travelled to Africa and about the same number of Africans (401,000) visited China.

The demand for English does not arise from language policy only. It arises also from outward-looking economic development strategies; for example, through attracting foreign investors and tourists or selling products abroad. To bring their citizens out of poverty, African governments encourage their citizens to produce goods and crops for foreign markets. Navuri (2010) gives the example of Tanzanian farmers being challenged to produce cotton to export to the hungry textile industries of Turkey. The cash crops which Africans export include coffee from Ethiopia and Kenya, cotton and sugar from West and Central Africa and cocoa from West Africa. These are produced by a mix of large and small-scale farming operations (mainly the latter).

The security of millions of African farmers depends on the negotiation and marketing skills—including their command of English—possessed by the leaders and exporters who represent them. The extent to which developing countries representatives possess these skills determines the effectiveness or otherwise of their participation in multilateral and bilateral negotiations, such as the 2006–2008 dispute between Ethiopia and the American company Starbucks regarding the branding of Ethiopian specialty coffees in the States. A biodiversity academic who has participated in many negotiations and conferences in Africa, Europe and Asia expressed the importance of English as follows:

We feel the importance of English when we participate in international negotiations that involve people from Africa and other regions. Usually the ones from English-speaking countries express their ideas very clearly and dominate debates. I remember one negotiation event in Nagoya, Japan, on biodiversity. We spent an unnecessarily long time on understanding the word ‘eminent’. In our debriefing after the event, we talked about lack of mastery of English as the main challenge. We concluded that our children should learn English properly for us to make our contributions and take our rights. (Interview/DM/December 2010).
Migration is not a new phenomenon for Africa. Africa has perhaps been the region of the world which has been most affected by migration, both negatively and positively. The phenomenon of African migration has various forms and causes, including forced migration due to conflicts arising from ideological differences. Economic migration due to poor working conditions and remuneration, and legal migration for study purposes. There is a commonly held belief that people migrate only from developing to developed countries. In fact, the largest numbers of migrants are found in internal displacement (within the same country) caused by wars or disasters and in ‘low HDI to low HDI’ migration between neighbouring countries (UNDP 2009). That means internal and intraregional movements far outnumber migration from the developing to the developed world.

Another important aspect of African migration is the movement of skilled workers and professionals from their home countries to other African countries, the West (Europe and North America) and Asia. Traditionally, Europe and North America have been the major destinations for skilled and professional African migrants. In 2005 the BBC (BBC 2005) carried a story from the institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) on African’s success in the UK which noted that ‘African-born immigrants are doing better than many other migrants’. The IPPR report stated that the employment rate of South Africans in the UK was 81 percent, Zimbabweans 73 percent and Nigerians 61 percent but only 12 percent of skilled Somalis were in employment. Although we cannot be sure whether the same situation applies today following the economic crisis. We can deduce from these figures that English language competence almost certainly plays an important part in African professionals’ ability to find employment in the UK.

Conclusion

Although it is often argued that English is the language of the African elite, it actually has many roles in development in Africa, the effects of which can trickle down to the masses. With good language planning, English is going to be the major international language for some time to come, which will help Africa and Africans to get connected within and beyond their national and regional boundaries.

However, since development is increasingly associated with using the L1 as a language of education, there seems to be an unhelpful labeling of foreign languages like English as languages of imperialism (Philipson 1996). This ignores the pragmatic, sociolinguistic, economic and political realities in Africa and beyond. If an L1 is used ineffectively, this cannot be blamed entirely on the dominance of foreign languages; there have also been failures in the management of multilingualism, in the teaching of the mother tongues and in the teaching methods adopted for ESL and EFL. The negative associations attached to English may also have arisen from the use of an inappropriate
teaching approach and materials that give the impression that the culture of native speakers of English is in some way superior to the cultures of the countries where English is taught and used as a second or foreign language (Canagarajah 1999).

It is definitely unhelpful for Africa to continue viewing English or any other international language as the language of colonization or imperialism. Africans need to go beyond this and see the usefulness of English without it dominating or deterring the development of our indigenous cultures and languages.

What Africa needs is an optimization of linguistic resources (including national, local and international languages), in the continent as a whole and in each individual country, (Batibo 2007). This requires an effective language policy to manage multilingualism and the competition for resources and status between the indigenous language themselves and between English and the indigenous languages or other international languages. There also needs to be some solid research on Africans’ perceptions of the value of English, so that the debate on languages planning can move beyond the whim of the elites.

English is going to be even more important as Africa, its member states and its citizens engage with the rest of the world more meaningfully. As governments and people become more confident to have their say in global economic, social and political matters, the demand for English will increase.

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