

CHALLENGES IN EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY

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Abstract

Generally speaking language and communication is very vital in the acquisition of knowledge (be it scientific, technical, or vocational) in any given society. There is no meaningful discussion that can successfully take place without the use of language. Every social interaction recognizes the importance of language in the Nigerian society; the Nigerian Policy on Education gave language learning a top priority in its curriculum. Thus this paper aims at highlighting the provisions of the policy and x-raying some of the problems associated with its implementation and suggestions for positive results.

Language is an indispensable instrument in human communication and interaction. Without language, human interaction would be purposeless and meaningless. Indeed the importance of language is encapsulated in the Biblical story of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:9) where sequel to diversity in language, human effort was portrayed as not having achieved any useful purpose.

Nigeria is a multi-lingual society. It has been estimated that almost one quarter of the languages spoken in Africa are found in Nigeria (Agbedo, 2003). But although, the number of languages spoken in Nigeria is put at about 250, there are three officially recognized indigenous languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Because of Nigeria’s colonial heritage, English is accepted or recognized as the Lingua franca in the country. All official government businesses, instructions in schools etc are conducted in English language. French is also recognized as the second official language in the country. The importance attached to the French language arises from the fact that Nigeria is surrounded by French speaking countries. Several languages, therefore, compete for attention in the Nigerian educational curriculum thus necessitating the need for a policy on the use of these languages. This paper X-rays the provisions of the Nigerian languages policy and some of the problems associated with the implementation of that policy.

Academic Excellence

Policy Provision

The National Policy on Education (2004:10) clearly reiterates: the importance of Language which it identifies as an important means for promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures”. A summary of provisions of the policy as it concerns language learning and or use in schools given hereunder, as follows:

1. That every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. This language is to be used in giving instructions to the pre-primary and lower primary schools. The understanding here is that by promoting the acquisition and use of this first language (L₁) of the child in this manner, the child will be very well grounded in it. Of course, this language must not necessarily be one of the three official Nigerian languages.
2. That every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Where the language of the immediate environment differs from these languages, the understanding that the child acquires one of these in addition. It shall be the language of

instruction at the pre-primary and lower primary levels and thereafter become, one of the subjects studied in the school (during the senior primary and secondary levels).

3. That government shall develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages. In other words, apart from the ones already developed (which of course include Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, government intends to develop the orthography of more languages as a way of facilitating the use of these languages.
4. That from the 4th year of primary school, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment and French (see below) shall be taught as subjects. It is worthy of note that during the pre-primary and lower primary levels when the medium of instructions was the language of the immediate environment, English was studied as a subject.
5. That French shall be the second official language in Nigeria. accordingly, the study of this language shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school. According to the policy document, the reason for recommending the study of the French language is to ensure a smooth interaction with our neighbors' Nigeria being surrounded by French – speaking countries.

From the above, it can be seen that the policy is quite comprehensive and straight-forward. English is the official language and medium of instruction from senior primary to the university level. However, the study of the indigenous languages is encouraged. If well implemented, children would have mastered the indigenous to a considerable degree before dropping them if they are not to be specialized on. Thus, to all a large extent, it can rightly be said that government is interested in promoting the acquisition and use of the Nigerian indigenous Languages.

Problems of Implementation

Laudable as it is the above policy has proved to be difficult in terms of implementation. Many factors account for this:

First, the attitude of Nigerians is usually that of scorn for what is indigenous and warm embrace for what is foreign. This is why school proprietors especially the private ones prefer to use English even at the nursery level to teach the children. In fact it has become fashionable to judge the standard of a school by the extent of the English the children are able to grasp or speak. Ironically, supervisors of instruction at the primary and secondary schools do not bother themselves about what is going on in private schools, because they only restrict their visits (their supervision) to public schools.

Scholars are divided in their opinions on the language that should constitute the medium of instruction. Although NPE has recommended the use English, some are still clamoring for the use of vernacular languages in teaching at even the higher levels like secondary schools and universities (Fafunwa, 1969). The contention of proponents of this view is that the child is bound to benefit more from, school if taught in his first language, as a result of the controversies ranging in academic circles regarding the language of instruction. The actual implementation of this policy by those who have directed contact with the school children (teachers) has proved to be difficult.

Effective communication in schools and particular effective teaching and learning continue to be hampered because English is learnt or used as a second language (L₂). The Nigerian child learns English as a second language because he already has a language even before he enters school. Language learning is more complex, more time consuming and more demanding because having learnt and internalized his mother tongue which now interacts negatively with the learning of the second language, the child always faces severe difficulties (Baldeh, 1990, Ike 2007) The situation becomes even more complex when it is

realized that the Nigerian child is not just grappling with English and his mother tongue, but with the two as well as with at least one other indigenous language, and French, the second official language. This brings the number of subjects expected to be taken by the child to four. If the problem of interference in learning between one language and another is anything to go by one wonders how terrible the situation will be especially given the fact that the problem of linguistic interference is more profound with indigenous Nigerian languages.

Funding is another serious problem hindering the effective implementation of the policy. With dwindling budgetary allocations to education (Opara, 2001: 199; Odo, 2005:8), the provision of necessary facilities, equipment and infrastructure for teaching and learning becomes more inadequate and this ~~directly becomes more inadequate and this directly affects everything that goes on within~~ the educational system including the implementation of the policy. Directly linked with this is the lack of textbooks, although the NPE stipulates that government shall produce textbooks in Nigerian languages". The actual situation shows that this is not being done.

Availability of teachers and adequate remuneration of the few that can be found are other dimensions to the problem. On many occasions the teacher who take care of the school children may not be sufficiently grounded in the languages that they are expected to use. They may also have come from a different language environment from that of their class children. Sometimes still, the teachers may not have learnt enough English or French to be able to handle them. Let there is not provision for specialist teachers to handle them in these subjects. The situation becomes more worrisome when we consider the fact that generally the remuneration is poor and therefore these teachers lack the motivation and zeal to put in their best.

In a situation where the language of the environment, the mother tongue English and perhaps French or Arabic are expected to be learnt, the problem of over-crowded timetable now manifests itself. How do you accommodate these languages and the other school subjects? Usually, when such a problem rears its ugly head, the school authorities may allocate periods that are so few that not much can be achieved from the whole exercise. When these are added to the problem of ineffective supervision or monitoring which has become a feature of the school system today, then it will be seen that the gap between the formulation and actual implementation of the Nigerian language policy is wide. Of course, this reinforces the claim that Nigeria is good at formulating policies but very poor in their implementation (Mkpado, 1989).

The Educational Administrators Role

The Educational administrator is an important stake – holders in the school system and has very much to offer in the attainment of the goals of the policy. This is because he has direct contact with the teachers and the students. References has been made to the effect that the poor supervisory programme contributes to poor or ineffective implementation of the policy. But the school administrator is the instruction as well as the disciplinary leader in school system (Odo, 2005:5,7). Therefore, the school administrator is needed for the policy to become effective.

The teaching of languages, whether local or foreign, requires the extensive use of, books. As indicated earlier, the production of books in the different languages is a necessary condition for the successful implementation of the policy. Most schools today do not have separate personnel who provide library services. In the absence of the school librarian, the school head accommodates or integrates this take in his own routine duties.

The educational administrator has direct contact with the teachers. He is in a position to identify the good and bad ones. When the system is falling as a result of poor performance of teachers, he is the first to receive the signals. Therefore, even during recruitment exercises, he can identify the right calibre

of teachers who will necessarily give a boost to the achievement of the goals of the language policy can easily be identified by serving educational administrators.

If funding has become such an important determinant of the success or failure of educational policies, then the role of the educational administrator becomes glaringly obvious in this discussion. As the overall manager of the school funds, he can make or mar any policy in operation in the school system, the language policy inclusive. Even if funds are available, his injudicious use of the funds can be the reason for the failure of any policy. Therefore, if there is anybody who is to be described as an indispensable instrument in the attainment of educational goals, that person is the educational administrator.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, the conclusion can well be drawn that the successful implementation of the Nigerian language policy requires the participation of the educational administrator. He is needed for the supervision of the teachers of the various languages learnt in schools. His participation is equally needed for he alone is in the best position to provide the discipline necessary for the optimal performance of the school system. The prudent manager of the funds provided for the prosecution of the goals of the language policy in Nigeria is required from the educational administrator before the policy can succeed. In the final analysis, it is correct to say that the educational administrator is an important link in the chain of the Nigerian language policy implementation.

Recommendation

For effective implementation of the Nigerian language policy for positive results in the teaching of Nigerian languages, the following recommendations could be helpful:

- a. The ministry of education should ensure that the language policy, as stated in the National Policy in Education, is implemented in all schools.
- b. Awareness campaign like workshops, seminars and symposiums should be organized for language lecturers and teachers, where experts will discuss recent methodologies of teaching and learning language.
- c. There should be proper funding for the continuous up-keep of training of language teachers in primary schools and tertiary institutions.

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