

# THE INFLUENCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION ON THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY AND BEYOND

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## **Abstract**

*English language is the life wire of the nation's economic, social, political, educational and administrative development as well as the window that links the nation to the outside world. This paper recognizes the positive roles of English language as a tool for national development in all aspects of human endeavour. It examines factors that brought about English language in Nigeria, why Nigerians clamour for the language over the indigenous language. It viewed development as the process or result of improving a basic design which is likely to have an effect on an existing situation. National development therefore could imply the improvement in the quality of life of the people – these efforts are those moves geared towards the utilization of national resources to meet the need of society by achieving good quality livelihood, eliminating or at least reducing poverty and maintaining physical and human environment for the present as well as for the succeeding generation. However, an individual who reads English language as a skill will be more functional in the society and the world at large.*

Education is a crucial tool for moral, social, economic, political and technological development of any society, for this reason, the importance of education to the development and sustenance of the state cannot be overemphasized. This means that education is very significant in enhancing national development. It is in recognition of this all important role of education that government all over the world have at least in principle placed high premium on educational development of their various societies.

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It is also in recognition of the important role of education that the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 stated that every one has the right to education which shall be compulsory at the primary level.

However, education begins with language. There is a symbolic relationship between language and education and for any language to be meaningful, it should be perceived within the context of formal and informal education, language and man can never be separated. It is the most outstanding characteristic which distinguishes man from non thinking animals. It is basically the means of communication used by human beings. Language is a system of arbitrary symbols combined according to the rules of grammar for the purpose of communication. Aneghogu (2001) defined language “*as a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, emotions, desires, etc. through complex vocal or written symbols.*”

The general assumption of education symbols is to impart knowledge and it is the bedrock of development in any society, yet it largely depends on language. It is only through the use of effective language that knowledge can be imparted and for this good reason, the educationist really intensified the study and use of language for national development. The lingua franca or official language in Nigeria is English language used as means of instruction and effective communication. Various terms have been used particularly in Nigeria for language variants. For example, there is the official language, mother tongue, first language and Nigeria is blessed with over 400 different languages. Within the indigenous languages, three are chosen to be the major languages: that is Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

English language education will be the writers’ main focus in this paper due to the fact that it is a notable legacy of Nigeria’s colonial experience and it also functions as Nigerian official language and the predominant language of power, of rising high, of mass media, of officialdom, and most importantly of education. Code – mixing and code switching are the order of the day as Nigerians hardly sustain two minutes of conversation without either of the two above. Even those that cannot read write or understand English now possess respectable repertoire of English words and phrases with which they spice up their daily speech.

### **Factors that Brought about English Language in Nigeria**

English language has had a long history in Nigeria which goes beyond recorded instances of its use, and although no one can say precisely who was the first person to speak English, the exact advent of English language in Nigeria happened during the 15<sup>th</sup> century. (Osuafor, 2002).

It is recorded that the major factors that led to the introduction of the English language in Nigeria include trade, colonialism and evangelism. The first Europeans to visit Nigeria were the Portuguese who arrived in 1472. Later on, English traders who

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were very aggressive in nature forcefully displaced the Portuguese and monopolized the lucrative trans-Atlantic trade with the natives of the coastal region, Nwachukwu (2004). It is very important to note that through this trade the English language came in contact with these natives. Again colonization is another factor that brought this language into Nigeria. Once they did not understand the language of the natives, they imposed the English language on the colonized.

The colonial legacy of English language as a means of communication and a course of study in this country is indisputable. It was also introduced into the nation at the advent of Christian missionaries who had to communicate with their converts in a given language, and that language obviously was the English language. Furthermore, the free slaves from Sierra-Leone and Liberia made their ways into other English West African countries such as Nigeria and Ghana to serve as missionaries, interpreters, clerks and middlemen for European traders. The English language again spread and gained importance among the native speakers of West Africa.

#### **Why Nigerians Clamour for English Language over Indigenous Language**

Why Nigerians strongly clamour for the use of English language over the indigenous languages or mother tongue:

- a] Proficiency in the language is the gateway to formal educational acquisition – thus the English language is an important tool for educational development in Nigeria as stated by the national policy on education (2004) “From the fourth year (of education) English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.”
- b] African languages are not adequately developed to express modern scientific and technological knowledge. For example, which of the indigenous languages would be able to produce all those internet words such as scan, browsing, yahoo messages, loading, explorer, etc. in their own mother tongues?
- c] The economist says – “English is the language of globalization of international business, politics, it is the dominant international language in communication, science, aviation, entertainment, radio and diplomacy.
- d] English language is an important tool for operating on the world stage says John Whitehead, director of the British council. He quoted that “the ability to speak and understand English is mandatory in certain fields, professions and occupations. In fact, English language is so widely spoken that it is referred to as ‘lingua franca’ of the modern era.
- e] English language is a prerequisite for gaining admission into tertiary educational institutions for studies in almost all disciplines in Nigeria. A credit pass is needed before a candidate gets admission.
- f] Language and culture are inseparable. The fact is that the English language and culture are in contact within the lives of many Nigerians. The Nigerian people tend to do and act the English way and once you do not act or exhibit those

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English attitudes you are termed a timid person. The early language education also coincided with the beginning of the wide spread use of indigenous languages in radio broadcasting. This helped to enlarge the intellectual horizon of Nigeria languages as they attempted to invent expression for the new experience (political, economic, technical, etc) that came with independence. The period also witnessed the coming on board of numerous language interest groups. These groups exerted pressure which had also helped to influence the cause of language education in Nigeria. Obanya (1971) reports that the establishment of institutes and centres of applied linguistics were actable in certain areas like Lagos and Aba. Their work include the following:

- i) Description of indigenous language
- ii) Development of materials for indigenous and foreign languages (English and French)

All these efforts were made in order to give language education in indigenous languages a serious attention. However, this genuine effort and attention did not last for too long for it was not everybody that liked the products of such a system of education. For example, the elite felt that the products of that system of education were not suitable for the job market of those days, for they preferred people who were trained in English rather than indigenous languages (Taiwo, 1980:11). Apart from this, questions were raised on the psycho-pedagogical appropriateness of education in the indigenous languages. Some have even doubted if teaching and learning in the mother tongue would not damage the course of national unity especially if one starts one's education in the mother tongue. Language educators like Fafunwa (1989) assert strongly that these are issues to be taken seriously for a number of programmes of mother tongue education did not go beyond the experimental phase.

The governments in the country then were eventually influenced by these views and gradually intervened in the education of the country in order to accord English a greater prominence. In a very short time, the view succeeded and the interest in language education in the country shifted away from the indigenous language towards English. The quick shift towards English language was as a result of the belief of most people that it was more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages, secondly, certification in school became conditional upon passing English. Apart from this, the various governments in the country from the colonial time up to 1960 did nothing to promote the study of indigenous languages but rather encouraged and even forced the study of English language.

The unfortunate situation was that those children were not exposed to English at home as it is the case today before coming to school. Consequently, they found it very difficult to start learning in English but preferred to be instructed in the medium of

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their mother tongue until they had gained enough proficiency in English in the upper classes. The prevailing situation eventually changed and reversed to the encouragement of indigenous language studies in our schools.

At that time, there was a policy backing on language education. The policy aimed at shifting backward to indigenous languages from English. Again people questioned the wisdom of not giving English much more attention and importance in government and education. Bamgbose (1976) reports that “people began to canvass in parliament for English to be replaced as official language by one of our indigenous languages some twenty years after independence. Osayi (1979) advised that more efforts should be put into the teaching and learning of the major indigenous languages to enable them serve as an alternative to English as official means of communication in government and business. This was to avoid the problem most people in the country had in understanding English and communicating well in it. The effort of these suggestions and pressures brought about a shift in the attitude of the federal government to indigenous languages. The government at this time agreed with linguists that a language is a vehicle for a people’s culture and a means of maintaining and preserving that culture. What the government failed to appreciate here is that, if we are not to lose our national identity together with our indigenous cultures, then we must begin to pay attention to the teaching and learning of our indigenous languages. The governments also came to realize and see indigenous languages as a practical means of communication which could easily be harnessed for effecting national integration, in addition to the relationship that language has with culture. These views actually forced the federal government to make policy pronouncements on the teaching of indigenous languages. The Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on education (NPE) (1977) revised in (1981) states that

- a] In primary school, which lasts for six years, each child must study two languages, namely
  - i) His mother tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in the area of domicile.
  - ii) English language, Arabic and French were language options at both junior and senior secondary schools.

The policy is however, silent on language education at the tertiary level. It is also necessary to point out that the innovation made by the National Policy on Education (NPE) is the teaching of three major indigenous languages as second languages which had never happened before in the formal school system in the country.

### **National Development**

One of the definitions of development as stated in the BBC English Dictionary (2000) is that, “it is the growth of information of something over a period of time.” It also viewed development as the process or result of improving a basic design... an

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event which is likely to have an effect on an existing situation.” By implication, development here means change and it describes the process of economic, political and social transformation within societies. National development therefore, could imply the improvement in the quality of life of the people. A nation can only be said to be developed when it is able to provide all the basic needs of its people, needs like food, clothing, adequate shelter, quality education and healthcare facilities. National development efforts are those moves geared towards the utilization of national resources to meet the need of the society by achieving good quality livelihood eliminating or at least reducing poverty and maintaining physical and human environment for the present as well as the succeeding generation. This can only be achieved by ensuring the mobilization and participation of all members of the society (both men and women) in the developmental processes.

Okoro (1999) sees “*national development as a progressive transformation of economic, social and political structure of a society from a relatively less complex, less efficient and more desirable forms while Bamgbose (1991) reiterated that national development is the full realization of human potential and maximum utilization of the nation’s resources for the benefit of all.*”

The basic determining factors of national development in any nation include:

- i) Economic conditions
- ii) Educational provision
- iii) Political state of affairs

The most essential of all these are the political and economic conditions and the effectiveness of these resources depend on the human factor. For instance, for these human factors to be developed education is very essential.

### **The English Language Education**

As a functional member of a society, the English language individual benefits immensely from the society.

As a vehicle for togetherness for example, the English language as a course or subject occupies a very important position in the social life of Nigerians as a whole. It is the language spoken at social gatherings and at formal occasions. It is the language of the president, governor, the legislature teacher, as well as the judiciary or law courts.

Bamgbose (1991) states that “of all the heritage left behind for Nigerians by British at the end of their colonial rule or administration, probably none is more important than English.”

- Politically, English education enables Nigerian leaders to communicate all policies to the people using it as an official language.

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- It is used in national newspapers, radio and television programmes and many others. It has imaginative and innovative roles in promoting peace and unity in the country far beyond the years we can imagine.
- It is used for literary works, prose, poetry and drama, which have to do with sonnet, lyric, elegy, epic, ballads, dirge, ode, etc. as well as tragedy, comedy, melodrama, farce, dance-drama, mime and pantomime and fiction and non-fiction that culminate to novel, novella, short-story, folktales, legends, myths, biography, autobiography, travelogue, memoirs, essays, diaries, criticism, epistles, letters, etc. In the words of Afolayan. “It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think of national unity in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language.
- Economically English language connects the country (Nigeria) to the world. It is the language of science and technology – it is the language of globalization – it is used in international trade and commerce. The importance and the necessity of English language in Nigeria makes it imperative for a greater majority to use it. Apart from the elite, the English language is being maneuvered by the uneducated beyond the pidgin English. The future of Nigeria’s English is taking shape which makes the future of English language unpredictable.
- A person who acquires English language as a skill will be more functional in the society. He will be more competent, proficient, and more professional in his career. In any case that person will be self-reliant, self-employed and independent because the knowledge acquired will be of great benefit for him to set up business that will prevent poverty – eradicate unemployment and bring about peace and stability to the society he belongs.

### **Conclusion**

With English language, there is no conflict that cannot be resolved as communication is made clearer to the parties involved. A society that has the influence of English language education will be able to develop nationally and far beyond this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Recommendations**

The influence of English language education on national development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and far beyond will have positive impact on the users if only the following recommendations are adhered to strictly.

1. English language teachers must encourage the users to maintain the link between words and meanings so that the users can be abreast with their vocabularies, and establish a greater preference for the language that helps them meet their survival requirements.
2. There should be enlightenment campaign on the importance of having a reading culture which will be of great help.

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3. English language teachers should help to portray the study of English language education.
4. Just like English Language Teachers Association of Nigeria (ELTAN). English language clubs should be established in all levels of education right from the primary to the secondary and universities (tertiary).
5. Language lessons should be available in the web so that both teachers and students will have the opportunity of learning English from native speakers. Remedial schools should be set up for graduates of secondary schools and for those who cannot catch up with the subject. One year compulsory training in the English language should be a good time for preparations for entry into higher institutions.
6. Teachers of English language must insist on correctness, endeavour to be good models and hold the profession in high esteem. English language must be the official language in schools, not occasional language.
7. Examination bodies like NABTEB must be monitored to stop further abuse of the English language in the alarming number of 'A' grades they erroneously award candidates.
8. The English language syllabus should be re-structured to reduce the content for each year as these are never covered. This should create more room for more practical involvement of students than the theorizing of the teacher. The syllabus should be made to reflect the developmental needs of the learners. For instance, modern speech sounds should be in the syllabus for nursery and primary schools.

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