ENGLISH LANGUAGE: FUNCTIONAL TOOL IN ACHIEVING NATIONAL UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language is an important tool in the human society. The saying that “no language, no society” is a fact. Societal integration and development are tied to language and of interest is the notion that there is no aspect of the human society that is not tied to the existence of a particular language which acts as a unifying force and a tool for achieving national integration and development. This paper, therefore, aims at examining English Language as a functional tool in achieving national unity which when achieved, will culminate into national development.

A lot has been said or written about language and its roles in the society as well as in education, politics, arts and culture, socio-economic development and in information and communication technology. Language is the most fundamental element that brings about changes in the attitude and in making people to reorient their perception and hold on to their cultural values because every individual tries to express his/her feelings, beliefs and desire through the medium of language. Language, according to Egbokhare (2004:507), permeates all aspects of human endeavour… It exists in a socio-political, historical, cultural and temporal milieu…The fortune of language is closely tied to the fortune of the people who speak it. This implies that language is very essential in every aspect of human endeavour and one can hardly make a meaningful impact in the society without making use of language.

The above assertion buttresses the importance and relevance of language to man and the society at large. It is a principal source of group identity and the transmission of that identity to other group of people. Olugbuyi and Olaleye (2005:1) were of the opinion that language facilitates effective communication which in turn, guarantees lasting peace and unity. They further explained that a nation that is united will enjoy lasting peace and stability and as well, develop economically, socially, politically, culturally and technologically. A multilingual and multiethnic nation like Nigerian is richly blessed with numerous languages that cut across the different ethnic groups. It is in this regard, that the Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) expressed its appreciation of language as a vehicle for enhancing national unity and national development. According to her:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the people’s 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 mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. (Page 9)

English language acts and is still acting as a unifying force in Nigeria hence, Obanya (1982) pointed out that English plays a unifying role in Nigeria because it is the only language common to Nigerians from diverse linguistic, social, cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds.

However, this paper is to examine the roles of English language at large in achieving national unity which when achieved, will in turn bring about national development in all areas of life. To
Language
The concept of language cannot be over-emphasized. Over the years, the concept has always been likened to a means of communication and interaction. The concept is a universal phenomenon which is highly essential for human and national development. There are as many definitions of language as there are experts and linguists. Sapir (1963) opined that “language is the key to the heart of a people”. Language is therefore, conceived as a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols. This functional knowledge of language symbols human experience, which has been achieved in the way of dealing with situation, can be communicated through language.

As articulated earlier, language has no limited definitions world over, but from the assertion above, one will posit that language points to the fact that national unity, development and peace are well-seated in the heart of man and through language; the heart of man is revealed.

Nigeria: Its Language Situation
Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural nation with about 450 languages and thousands of dialects. Three languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are recognized and classified as major Nigerian languages probably because of their number of speakers and wide range of use which outweigh other languages in Nigeria. The problems arising from these classifications of the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the major Nigeria language keep escalating as other languages are given less regards.

Moreover, this unfavourable situation has unduly favoured the use of English, slangs and pidgin languages in Nigeria. In fact, English language is seen as a domineering language in the country (Nigeria) as it is used for commerce, social interaction, politics and mass media. It is against this back drop, that the federal government deemed it wise to have English language as a unifying force in Nigeria. The entire nation uses it to communicate their feelings, emotions and desires where necessary.

History of English Language in Nigeria
English language found its route in Nigeria as a result of exploration and colonization. It was introduced in Nigeria in 1842 by the first batch of missionaries who arrived in Badagary to evangelize as well as educate us. For their purpose to be achieved, they however, needed a medium of communication with the local merchants and middlemen. According to Tomori (1981), “English language in Nigeria has an unbroken history of 131 years”. The first people to come in contact with it are those who live along the coast, such as Calabar, Warri, Benin, Lagos etc. With the British taking over administration and the missionaries propagating religion, some Nigerians had to be taught English on the ground that they help missionaries in churches and also occupy positions like interpreters, clerks and messengers to colonial administrators. In the same vein, the teaching of English language gained ground in Nigerian schools by colonial administrators and the freed African slaves believed that the adoption of European values and cultures would save them from barbarism, ignorance, poverty and disease. English since then has occupied a vital position in Nigeria.

English Language and National Unity
A multilingual and multi ethnic nation like Nigeria would have been in a mess if each ethnic group was made to use its own indigenous language for official communication purposes. Thus, to achieve unity in Nigeria, English Language is the language that can unite us. With it, the diverse people scattered all over the shores of Nigeria come together to discuss in common language. This in turn, results to a stronger and united Nigeria. It is to this extent that the Federal Government stated clearly in the National Policy on Education that, “one of its objectives of Education is to inculcate
national consciousness and national unity. It is in the light of this, that the federal government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child be encouraged to learn one of the three major Nigerian Languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba).

However, the government on its own fails to realize that “Nigerians speaking the same language characteristically find themselves in accord while those speaking different tongues view each other with suspicions” (Benards 1964), hence, where one indigenous language is imposed on the entire nation, it would result to political domination of those ethnic groups whose languages are not in use. In the same vein, unity in Nigeria can thus be achieved when English language is used and made the official language as it is now, because the diverse people scattered all around the globe of Nigeria would come together to discuss in a common language, thereby resulting to a stronger and united Nigeria.

**English Language: Catalyst for National Development**

National development is the ability of a country to improve the social welfare of the people. It is a multi-faceted area which involves economic, social and political system. To view these etymologically; “national” is connected with a particular nation; “Development” is a process which gradually unfolds or a growth of something. According to Owolabi (2006:4), national development refers historically to the infrastructural, economic, cultural, social and political advancement of growth of a nation. This definition by implication implies that a country is said to have developed nationally when there are remarkable positive increase and changes in terms of its infrastructures, manpower, political advancement and the likes.

Ewegbe (1990) opined that “national development is the growth of a nation in terms of unity, education, economic well being and mass participation in government” (p.14).

As a matter of fact, language (English language) and national development are partners in progress; hence, the relevance of English language to national development cannot be over-emphasized. Development as a matter of fact in Nigeria can be achieved through English Language as a medium of instruction. The saying that “a united nation is a developed nation is a fact to be reckoned with. As said earlier, English language has succeeded in achieving unity in Nigeria thus, paving the way for development.

English language occupies an enviable position in Nigeria, that it could be seen as the live wire of the survival, growth and unity of Nigeria; this does not mean or imply that the native languages are inferior; but rather, Obanya (1982:3), saw it as:

Filling a huge communication gap. It helps to facilitate contact between Nigerians of diverse language backgrounds. It is also the official language of the country, the language of official documents, official communication”, and so on.

Obanya’s view by implication, means that English language is a unifying language in Nigeria as people from diverse linguistic background, interact in English language thus, bringing about national development. The role of English language in Nigeria is far reaching as it is succinctly put by Olagoke (1979:16). Thus:

In fact, as the language of science and technology and a passport to educational advancement and prestigious employment, as the language of commerce and administration, a means of national and international communication,.....
He concluded that, products of schools should be proficient in English as it is official language. In fact, those who cannot speak and understand English language and its literature have no hope of educational advancement, job opportunities and fuller participation in other social activities. Hence, Olagoke recommends that Nigerian children be given maximum encouragement and opportunity to learn it effectively in school.

Still emphasizing on English language as a catalyst for national development, Ubahakwe (1979: IX), added another dimension to the role of English language in Nigeria. It is the language of parliament and of law courts as well as the language of communication and instruction in all statutory institutions and situations… the language is daily use outside the mandatory official contexts such as the home, the market place, the religious houses, the playground, etc.

English language plays an important role in socio-economic development of the nation and the individual. According to Odumosu (1991) “there is a great correlation between high frequency in English language and socio-economic success in trades and professions. English is a language of social mobility in Nigeria, there is great disparity among those who are proficient in English language and those who are not. It is in the light of this, that Jiboku (1991) opined that children from a well balanced socio-economic background perform better in the use of English language than those from lowest level where it is hardly used.

Education, viewed from the Greek perspective is “educi” meaning leading through; is the bedrock on which any nation can achieve development, hence, the resources needed for the development of any nation must be harnessed through a system that will make them contribute meaningfully to the diversified areas that need development. Since, the language of formal instruction in Nigeria is English language; it is the language that manpower employs for the development of the nation. English is used at all strata of education from primary to tertiary. The vital role English language plays in nation development cannot be over emphasized as the National Policy on Education stated it clearly that English language should be one of the languages used for education; thus, lending itself as a catalyst for national development in Nigeria.

As far as Nigeria and other countries are concerned, engineers, pilots, lawyers, teachers, medical doctors and the likes that are needed for the purpose of developing the nation must be educated and the language used for achieving this purpose is English language, hence, English language has immensely acted as a catalyst in the speedy development of the Nigerian society. Some of the literary artistes and writers have gained international recognition and awards because their works are either written in their indigenous languages and translated into English or written purely in English language irrespective of the variety. This in turn serves as a pointer to the development of a nation.

In the same vein, there is no aspect of politics that involves unity and development of a nation that will de-emphasis the use of English Language in Nigeria. So, for a nation like Nigeria to be politically developed, she must rely on English language as a tool for sensitization and mobilization of the masses.

Finally, English language also acts as an incentive for sports, development in Nigeria. Aziza (1998) opined that: language is the most important tool with which society is organized and it is hardly impossible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thoughts, ideas and needs”. The growth and development of sports and national development were facilitated as a result of effective communication in English language. For a good sports performance to be achieved, education must take place through learning and teaching using the medium of English language, culminating to national development of Nigeria.
Conclusion

English language is the major and widest language of communication in Nigeria; it acts as the vehicle for establishing national unity among the diverse ethnic groups. In Nigeria, quite a number of intellectual endeavours of the nation are carried out in English language. A developing and democratic country like Nigeria requires her youths and future leaders to be able to communicate freely in English language as it is a medium through which the nation can achieve national unity and development in all ramifications.

References


