

VISION AND MISSION OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION THROUGH INNOVATIVE LANGUAGE POLICIES

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss the merits of developing indigenous languages and the need for a pragmatic language education programme for our younger generation and the millions of illiterate adults who are excluded from governance, largely because of language problems in proposing innovations. The issue of a national language is considered beyond the immediate or local ones. Like human material resources, language resources have to be properly managed to achieve maximum positive results at minimum cost in the process of national development.

Introduction

The colonial missionary activities in Nigeria had become widespread by the second half of the 19th Century but unfortunately, no concrete language teaching policy was put in place for education. It is however, true that these same missionaries showed great interest in the codification and development of orthographies for local languages. The aim for this interest was for evangelization crusade. Akere (1995) argues that beside the issues of the conversion, the inculcation of Christian culture, fighting the men, prevalent social evils of poverty, ignorance, diseases, inter-ethnic wars and slavery were other major motivation. In fact, it was assumed that African schools would follow as closely as possible, the models of colonial education in syllabus, content and standards.

Nevertheless, in parts of the North, the use of Arabic in Islamic (Koranic) education was very popular. In Sokoto Caliphate and in El-Kanemi Empire of Borno at the beginning of 19th Century, considerable Arabic scholarship through Koranic education conference of 1911 and 1923 led the beginning of British colonial interest in the colonies. However, the first full scale investigation into educational problems, including those of language teaching started with the Phelps Stroke Commission of Enquiry of West Africa. Its report of 1922 opened the way for the determination of the role of languages in the overall design of British colonial education policy in West Africa. Among the recommendations made by the Phelps Stroke Commission after a detailed survey of the complexity of the language problems in Africa was that:

The local language should be used in the lower elementary standards or grades. A lingua franca of African origin should be introduced in the middle classes of schools if the area is occupied by native groups speaking diverse language. The language of the European nation in control should be taught in the upper standard" (Phelps Stroke P.25).

The 1927 report of the British Government's Advisory Commission for Education in Africa perhaps, influenced by Phelps-Stroke commission, produced the first comprehensive policy statement on language teaching in African schools. It affirmed the importance of the mother tongue in the education of the child. In 1943, the British Colonial Office in its memorandum on language in African school education, came up with British official position. It proposed that all education should be through the medium of the mother tongue in the first three years. By the fourth year, English should be introduced as a medium of instruction in the selected subjects until finally, English became the medium of instruction in all subjects. From the 1940s through independence, therefore, the dilemma of colonial educational administration was the opposition between a good general education given in mother tongue at the primary school level and the early achievement of a good standard of proficiency in the English language. The administrator's argument against the ideal was that:

- some indigenous languages could not support the burden of education beyond a certain stage;
- the multiplicity of language made the introduction of some general medium necessary at some stage in education;
- Africans themselves demanded the benefits of an English education.

The result was that, in practice, English was introduced both as a medium of instruction and as a subject in the school curriculum much earlier than official policy stipulated. This was in spite of the fact that the 1943 "memorandum" had warned of the "grave danger that the general education of the child might suffer, if the teaching of English was emphasized". Another danger of emphasis on English, highlighted by the 'memorandum' was the possibility of the disruption of the teaching and learning of the indigenous language. It is sad to report, that long after independence this situation in language education persisted.

Language Education Policy in Nigeria After Independence (1960-1977)

After independence and until late 1970s, policy focus on language education issues was generally influenced by the resolutions taken at meetings and conference sponsored by international organisations such as UNESCO and UNICEF. The 3963 Addis Ababa conference on mother-tongue education upheld the United Nations charter "that the child shall be given education which will promote his general culture through the medium of the mother tongue". The 1970 UNESCO meeting of experts on-contribution of African Languages to Cultural Activities and Literacy Programmes held in Yaounde, Cameroon, established the justification for instruction in African languages. Among the

claims was that:

- (i) the languages spoken by African people have an irreplaceable and decisive part to play in the establishment of a system of education and the widespread dissemination of science and technology, and authentic national cultures;
- (ii) the African language spoken in the home and in daily life, is the best medium of Africa thought;
- (iii) education will not be effective until primary school, far from being a disturbing element for the six or seven year-old African child, becomes, on the contrary, a natural extension of the pre-school education received at home and in Kindergarten. To achieve this, it is necessary that primary school programmes and methods be based on the child's immediate environment and the intuitive grasp, which he already has of the basic rules of his mother tongue. The child would thus learn quicker and the length of his primary instruction would be shortened.

The various recommendations at these international and national conferences eventually formed the basis for what became the Nigerian language policy. It may therefore, be said that the period between 1960 and 1974 was a planning/preparatory era for "Nigerian language policy"

Nigerian Language Policy Since 1977

In the National Policy on Education (NPE), the categories of languages provided for are:

- i. Mother tongue (MT);
- ii. Language of Immediate Community (LIC);
- iii. Major Nigerian Language (MNL) (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), and
- iv. English and foreign languages (Arabic and French).

The political Bureau Report (1987) recommended that the three major languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were to be adopted as national languages and taught in all primary and secondary schools in the country. Government would provide special incentives for teachers trained in these languages to remain in the teaching profession. Government should also, take note of the high demand for graduates in these languages by professions other than teaching and, therefore, positively encourage all universities and colleges to expand enrolments in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba classes. In spite of all the recommendations from conferences, research reports, the Nigeria Education Research Council (NERC); the Comparative Education Study and Adaptation Centre (CESAC); Institutes of Education of Universities, the Ife-Six Year Primary Projects (ISYPP) among others, the various governments have not properly addressed issues of language education in Nigeria. For instance, the ISYPP has been acclaimed as having achieved tremendous success in demonstrating the superiority and effectiveness of the Mother Tongue (MT) medium in primary school education. Sectional considerations and the lack of political will have prevented the application and implementation of the project nationally.

Also, the report of the Technical Committee on the production of teachers for the three Nigerian languages (EME 1988) showed that about 55.23% Nigerian language teachers were needed at the secondary school level, but only 6,383 (11.56%) were available to teach Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Unfortunately, nothing positive has been done by government to improve the situation. In fact, the few teachers of Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba who graduate yearly roam the streets when the school system is worse off without them.

Proposed Innovations

Oyelaran (1990) has explained that the most important carrier of a people's "culture" is its language, and that the most efficacious access to information remains a people's language. He adds that

... No nation has had a break through, through the instrumentality of an alien language...

Oyelaran's argument supports the views of Fafunwa (1969). According to Fafunwa,

... The first twelve years is the most formative period in a child's life. It is during the period that attitudes and aptitudes are developed... also the child requires intelligent care of his physical needs and trained guidance in his mental, emotional and social potentialities. It is our thesis that if the Nigerian child is to be spiritual, have visualization, spontaneous flexibility, originality, initiative, industry, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother tongue which is the most natural way to learn (p.65).

Adelunle (1979) and Lewis (1981) among others have at various times taken the same view as the prominent educationists just discussed above.

It, therefore, becomes imperative that far reaching innovation be introduced to enable our language policy meet the desired goals. In fact, Adekunle (1995) quarrels with the very weak and different expression in section paragraph of the NPE, which states in part that:

... The government considered 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 own mother tongue (p. 15).

Apart from "should be encouraged" the suggestion is that language developed and instruction are aimed at (i) assisting the educational process (ii) preserving the people's culture and (iii) promoting national unity. Generally this policy lacks clarity. The goals are not comprehensive. The means of achieving the limited goals does not take consideration of the social linguistic habits of the target community and the social interaction basis of language policy formulation. Section 2 paragraph 7 of the document on medium of instruction with the pre-primary level is also effeminate. Section 3 paragraph 15(4) on medium of instruction in the primary school is also not definite enough.

What finally emerges are statements of intention and not a language policy. It is suggested that the language policy, especially in areas requiring compliance, should be clear in its imperative nature. The goals of the use of indigenous language should be more comprehensive with social linguistic habits and interaction basis clearly spelt out. If the indigenous language of a community is considered important as an integral part of the child's culture, and a link between the home and the schools at the pre-primary level, then it should be "solely" and not "principally" used at this level. Further, the pronouncements on the three major languages should be direct and clear and should not give the impression that the choice of language is optional and left to the child to choose. The present day reality of the situation is that most schools do not teach any of the three major Nigerian language let alone the language of the immediate community. It is therefore now, a matter of states taking their time do what suits them. This trend must stop. The Federal Government should direct that the provisions of the NPE as it affects language education should be adhered to, strictly. As Bamgbose (1983) stresses, unless we make it possible, for our children to learn the basics of modern technology,

science and mathematics for example in their mother tongue, "the seed of transferred technology will fall on barren ground and fail to germinate".

A pragmatic mass literacy campaign will be the quickest way to make majority of Nigerians literate in their own languages. This means that there is an urgent need to develop local languages. The campaign on local language will raise standard of living in rural areas by using language of the people to teach basic technology. This will be far from what obtains now, as Fafunwa (1985) puts it:

We teach agriculture in English and the Nigerian farmers in Igbo, Yoruba,
Hausa, Efik, Nupe, Kanuri etc.

It is envisaged that a realistic indigenous language educational programme will bring about mass participation in government. Our democratic experiment cannot truly succeed when only an elitist few (the speakers of English) can participate. Elugbe (1990) has argued that, trying to make the masses see the issues in an election is meaningless where the people cannot be reached. Amayo (1983) and Bamgbose (1983) have both made this point in the strongest terms at different times. The end result will be that feeling of belonging is cultivated in those who feel they are not left out of the scheme of things. It is hoped that a good language policy would eventually lead Nigeria to a national language that Adekunle (1995) calls a language of national culture, "to bring together into unified whole, the various traditions of the different segments of the Nigerian community". Elsewhere, linguists have warned that the time schedule for bringing one of the three national languages to emerge as the national language must not be seen in terms of decades but centuries. The government, which has the foresight to take the necessary steps that lead to this desirable goal in the end, will not be around to receive the credit for it. Posterity will nonetheless be grateful to it.

Recommendations

The government should consider 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 language.

Also the Federal Government should direct that the provisions of the NPE as it affects language education should be adhered to, strictly. We should make it possible for our children to learn the basics of most subjects in their mother language.

Furthermore, mass literacy campaign should be created to make majority of Nigerians literate in their own languages. The campaign on local languages will raise the standard of living in rural areas by using language of the people to teach basic technology. It is envisaged that a realistic indigenous language educational programme will bring about mass participation in government.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the merits of developing indigenous languages and the need for a pragmatic language education programme for our younger generation and the millions of illiterate adults who are excluded from governance, largely because of language problems in proposing innovations. Issues like incentives for teachers of Nigerian languages, subsidy for publication of books on indigenous language among others are deliberately left out. Also, the issue of national language resources has to be properly managed to achieve maximum positive results at minimum cost in the process of national development.

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