

NON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOLS: RISKS AND IMPLICATION

Getrude Chika Osuji and Nkeoma N. Akueshi

Abstract

The mother tongue is the child's first language. Young children are anxious to become integral part of their adult community. Before these children enter formal school, they must have learnt a lot from the language of their immediate community. Callahan and Clerk (1977)"... consequently, after much practice and attentive listening during the first five years of life, children manage to enter formal schooling in possession of a vocabulary as many as 20,000 words and with speaking patterns that include every part of speech and almost every type of sentence'. From the foregoing therefore the Nigerian child enters formal schooling with much knowledge. It is true that children enter formal school in possession of many vocabularies, if they are encouraged and the medium of instruction is the mother tongue in the junior primary, their mental development will be faster. The work is an attempt to ascertain the teaching of the mother tongue in our schools and suggest ways of sustaining government programmes on the improvement of mother tongue teaching/learning. If nothing is done to encourage the teaching/learning of mother tongue, in the next fifteen years, the Nigerian languages will be a thing of the past.

Language is the use of any set or system of symbols in a more or less uniform fashion by a number of people within a language community. It enables them to communicate with one another. The child's first language is the mother tongue. It has made great impact on the child's memory. The anxiety of the child to become an integral part of the adult community makes it listen closely and acquire the speech patterns of the members of the language community. Consequently, the children acquire enough vocabularies that will enable them enter formal school. This explains why the child gets encouraged to learn especially when the medium of instruction is the mother tongue. Their mental development is usually faster in such a situation.

From the foregoing therefore, it can be deduced no foreign language can take the place of mother tongue without serious detriment to the mental development of the child. Language certainly is a vital instrument for man's day-to-day activities on earth. It is the chief means of inculcating knowledge, values, skills and competences. Language is the basis for most human communication. In Nigeria, the National Language Policy, states that: the medium of instruction at the junior primary school should be the native tongue i.e. the language of the immediate community. The children at this level should in addition be taught the English Language as a subject. For the senior primary, the medium of instruction should be the English language and the mother tongue as a subject. The National Policy declared that the primary educational system is the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system. The rest of the educational system is built upon it.

In general, the primary education equips the child with the basic learning tools which include speech, reading and writing, mathematics and other primary school subjects. This stimulates the child's intellectual growth and it is better achieved if the medium of instruction is the mother tongue. From the foregoing observation therefore, it is the conviction of the writer that the implementation or otherwise non-sustainability of the National Language Policy at the primary school level of education leaves our children almost illiterate at the primary level of education. This is a violation of the National Education Policy. The Nigerian child at the lower primary needs the reading skills more importantly to help him operate more effectively using it for learning and acquisition of skills.

Non Implementation of the Nigeria Policy in the Primary Schools, Risk and Implications

Though language is universal to man, that every man, everywhere speaks one type of language or the other. That means that there is no community where people do not use a type of language for inter-personal communication. Language differs with people and communities, but every normal human being every where in the world uses language as a form of communication in his day to day activities. This means that language is a universal mark of man. As described by Petty and Becking (1976),

Language is a human activity, it is a form of behaviour, it reflects behaviour that has occurred, it causes behaviour to occur, Language is arbitrary and structured yet it is flexible and dynamic. It has orderly arrangement-recurring patterns-but each language has it's own system. It is a flow of sound, system into meaningful symbols that may be transformed into graphic form. Language is the basis for most human communication.

The children at this level should in addition be taught the English language as a subject. For the senior primary, the medium of instruction should be the English language and the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community-should be taught as a subject. The National Policy declared that the primary education is the key to the success or failure of the whole educational system. The rest of the educational system is built upon it. Throughout the history of education in Nigeria, from the days of the early missionaries till date, the question of what language to be used as a medium of instruction at the primary level has remained with us. The federal government always comes up with laudable or good policies to effect positive change on the educational system; but the problem all the time is sustainability. The language policy that states that the indigenous language should be used as a medium of instruction in the junior primary school is interesting but can it be sustained?

Many linguists objected to and challenged the continued undue emphasis on English language in the junior primary schools. They contended that our over emphasis on the use of English language slows down education in the country. The child's first language or mother tongue has a very vital role in the child's intellectual development. The child first thinks in his mother tongue and what he understands, he transfers to another language. A child who masters his mother tongue may well find it very easy in the study of another language be it English, French, Swahili, German, etc.

Importance of Mother Tongue in the Education of the Child

In general, the primary education equips the child with the basic learning tools which include speech, reading, writing, maths and other primary school subjects. This stimulates the child's intellectual growth and it is better achieved if the medium of instruction is the mother tongue. After considering the role of mother tongue in the education of the child, Anukam (1999) in her view stated that, "No foreign language can take the place of mother tongue and no system of education can afford to disregard it (the mother tongue) without serious detriment to the mental development of the child". From the above statement, one can see that the negligence of the mother tongue means that the federal government's objective of permanent literacy after the child's six years in the primary school is not realistic. Parents and other members of the society always complain that the graduate of the primary school does badly in all language skills especially in reading and writing. He finds it very difficult to write letters to relatives both in English language and the indigenous language. He is also unable to read letters written in these languages. From the above observation therefore, it is the conviction of the writer that the non-implementation or otherwise the non-sustainability of the National language policy at the primary school level leaves our children almost illiterate at the level of education in question. The Nigerian child needs his basic language skills which will help him operate more efficiently using it for varied learning and skill acquisition.

In other countries of the world, studies have affirmed the critical role the mother tongue plays in the acquisition and mastery of concepts. The importance of indigenous language is gaining ground. To achieve the education objectives, government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the immediate community.

This also emphasizes that there will be a great achievement if the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is the medium of instruction at the pre-primary and primary

Non Implementation of the Nigerian Language Policy in the Primary Schools: Risk and Implication

levels of education. This is the language of initial literacy for pre-primary and of the adult non-formal education.

What is of paramount importance to the indigenous language teacher is that despite the language policy over the years, the foreign language (English has an edge over the indigenous Nigerian languages). Oyetade (2001:14) had this to say: 'Consequent upon the use of English in high domains especially its official and international function as the gateway to the cream of world culture, English is a prestigious language in Nigeria.

From the above statement, it is believed that the elite of this country do not see anything good in our indigenous language or mother tongue which has the following advantages.

1. Mother Tongue Enhances National Development

The mastery of the mother tongue facilitates the mastery of a foreign language (English). A child who has a good knowledge of his/her mother tongue (LI) does very well in any other foreign language. For all languages share the same properties even if they have different surface structures in sound, grammar and meaning. This is to say that English and Igbo languages have something in common, so English is not superior to the indigenous languages. The continued and undue emphasis on English language shouldn't be. All human languages, even those of primitive tribes, are complete, complex and comparable. So any normal person can learn to speak any language he is taught.

2. Science and Technology as Sure Tools and Skills of National Development must be Indigenized

The great and developed nations of the world, the industrialized high performance nations are those in which the total populace (both the informed and uninformed) have acquired good communication strategy, used goods and services to create and to a sophisticated extent, the skills of their language acquisition which is realized in these skills: listening, understanding, speaking, reading and writing. The languages spoken in these countries are those that have developed their languages for discourse in those languages meta-languages to meet all the demands of modern living in science and technology, including computer and in the human and social sciences. In support of the importance of indigenous language as a means of national development, Emenanjo (1999: 56) says:

The example of Japan since the meiji revolution, China since the cultural Revolution, the Asian Tigers following the Japanese miracle, the various European nations and English in Britain and U.S.A confirm that the mastery of human language is a condition sine qua non for overall national development".

This is to say that many languages (multilingualism) is what is necessary for development. No nation can develop with imposed and imported foreign language. This is true of Nigeria where everybody wants to speak English language without good mastery of it. Many nations have developed in spite of many languages for instance Canada, Russia, India, Switzerland etc. Nigeria can and should develop with her many indigenous languages. A child that cannot think in his language cannot bring development to the society.

3. Language Mirrors Culture

Every language is necessary and important because it is the means of communication in the immediate community and environment of the people's culture. Culture is the people's way of life and should not be over looked or neglected. It is the way people think and how they interact with others. Culture is the total way of life of the people or a learned pattern of behaviour. Language helps to identify people. It is often said that language is culture. This means that the culture of the people is stored in their language. Oke (2002:19) opined that culture in our usage encompasses.

Language, means of making a living arrangement of family life, the focus of group loyalties and ways of perceiving the world, both the physical world and the world beyond. Culture puts a control on man's drives, it influences his eating habits, hours of sleep, display of emotion and sexual behaviour.....

Language is strictly tied to the culture of the people. Language is both an element of culture and a medium of its expression. So the indigenous language is potent.

4. **The Indigenous Language Stands for Many Good Things**

It is used in training our children with our proverbs, songs and dance. The proverbs are full of knowledge and are educative. For instance, the Igbo proverb “Nwata gbakaa ute ya, o hie n’ala”. This proverb is a short writing saying that can guide a child to be serious in life. Most students in the schools are not serious because they lack advice with the proverbs. The parents want foreign language and would only want to talk to their children on phone. For instance an Igbo father would always call the child in school and say “hello” Emeka; be careful. This “hello” can never change Emeka’s bad behaviour. Technology has bastardized many aspects of the Nigerian language and culture. Parents cannot have good grip of their children unless they talk to them or advice them in a language they are proficient in.

5. Good government will be achieved in Nigeria if those who make laws at all levels of government and those who implement them can use the indigenous language which every body is proficient in. As long as the language of government is an imported language which is accessible only to the informed, the masses will be excluded and Nigerians cannot talk about participatory democracy. Bangbose (2005) opined that ‘It is therefore important to give indigenous language a priority over the use of English language as a medium of instruction in the state and National House of Assembly’. In order to have a sound democracy, indigenous language must be encouraged right from the campaign ground to the business of the House instead of making English language “priority language of Government”.

Displacement of the Indigenous Language and Its Effects

1. This displacement has slowed down national development because language is culture as stated earlier. The indigenous language helps in national development because language is culture as stated earlier. The indigenous language helps in national development. Our ancestors loved and practiced various arts and crafts such as carving, panting, music and dance.

They gave all these names in the indigenous language. They produced materials they used and even sold for exchange such as guns, hoes, knives, woven cloth and baskets. Many of such materials like cloth and raffia works are very beautiful. E.g. Akwete cloth and raffia baskets. They communicated in their mother tongue irrespective of the dialectical diversities in the language. In their days, there was a system of government. Above all, everything they had and used had indigenous name. The dominance of the English language in our society has stopped the efforts our fathers made. If we made the efforts as they did, we would have achieved greater success technologically.

Lack of National Language is one of the major impediments to full participation in politics. The National Language policy states that each Nigerian child will learn one of the three main Nigerian languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in addition to the language of his immediate community. English the policy stated, will continue to be used side by side with these major languages pending the time a national language will emerge and supplant it as our lingua franca. But contrary to expectation, almost 29 years from 1981 when the programme was expected to have taken off, no single National language has emerged to supplant English as a lingua franca and it is a big problem. In Togo for instance, the Eve language is the lingua franca used alongside French as official language.

It must be noted that one of the major impediments of full and active participation in politics is the language barrier because the political opponents cannot communicate with the electorate in their own indigenous language. Understanding and using one indigenous language in the Government Houses will eradicate or minimize all political wrangling and there will be unity. Indigenous language is the material that will aid participation of all politics.

2. It helps National Unity. Unity is attained where there is understanding, i.e. everybody in the country understands one another.

The National Policy on Education (2004) stresses the importance of National language as a vehicle of national unity. This language policy if achieved will help in the integration of the diversified cultures existing in our country. No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language. If Nigeria wants national unity, the speaking and learning of our indigenous language should be encouraged as this will help in the emergence of a national language.

Non Implementation of the Nigerian Language Policy in the Primary Schools: Risk and Implication

Language envelops our thoughts and mediates our relationship with others. Language concerns everyday life of the people, their social interactions, economic, political and developmental situations.

3. The foreign language with its culture has bad effects on our youths. It has been observed that technology has bastardized the Nigeria culture. Using our various cultural dances as example, every community in our country has a particular dance step (style) that is associated with the custom and culture of the community. Nigerians prefer anything that is foreign, this makes our children to adopt foreign dance steps, Akporherhe (2002:31) opined that “..... But as of today, all the cultural dances in Nigeria have been taken over by makossa dance imported from francophone countries especially Congo”.

The language of the music is so foreign and the pattern of their dance is so corruptive, morally unacceptable to the Nigerian culture. This is so because of its pornography nature and leads the youth to some sorts of sexual dreams. This foreign dance pattern has helped in polluting our youths. The mode of dressing of our youths has also changed. Nigerian youths are almost going naked in the streets, market places, schools and the worst is that most of them dress anyhow and go to church to serve God.

4. The English language has affected the indigenous language negatively. The manner of speaking the Nigerian languages. Many parents are guilty in the area of child upbringing in terms of languages. They teach their children foreign languages in their early years but they cannot speak their mother tongue. Some are fond of code mixing Nigerian language with English language especially the Igbo language. It has been observed that the Igbo people now speak engliligbo for instance, one hears these sentences in the villages “Aga m eme obere travel ka m wee nweta small money m ga-eji zuru something di important”.

The English spoken by the old people and the youths is a matter for great concern. This is caused by the glorification of the English language by the leaders. In support of this, Bamgbose (1983:69) in his view stated thus:

The essential strands of the argument point somewhat gloomily to the fact that Nigerians timid language policy and the blind glorification of English language by the ruling class have conspired to undermine the local languages and rob them of their utilitarian values in the all important national development.

This is to say that virtually most societal developments are achieved using the national language.

Implementation of the National Policy and the Nigerian Secondary Schools

The national language policy, like other new innovations contained in the National Policy on Education, was expected to have taken off in the year 1982. This pre-supposes that if the National Language policy was implemented as expected from the date, the Nigerian secondary schools would by now have produced many products of secondary schools who are able to speak one of the three main Nigerian languages- Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba in addition to the language of their immediate communities. But contrary to expectation of Nigerians, as at the time of writing on this subject, almost twenty nine years from 1982 when the programme was expected to have taken off, a random sample of the graduates of our secondary schools of this period would reveal that the number able to speak any of the three major Nigerian languages as a result of the National language policy, will be negligible, if not non-existence.

Researchers have also indicated that schools have not seriously embarked on the implementation of the policy. They attributed the non-implementation, to many problems that the Nigerian governments are not yet ready to look into. In support of the above problems, Osuagwu (1997:3) observed that:

The problem of teaching indigenous languages is faced with many difficulties such as non-provision of teaching materials, insufficient time allocated to the teaching of the language, lack of practices in essay writing, negative attitude of Nigerian government toward indigenous language.

Lack of teaching materials also militates against the teaching of indigenous languages in our school. To this end, Gbenedio (1999:45) had this say:

Non availability of textual and instructional materials are the problems of the teaching of mother tongue. Without texts and instructional materials, it is impossible to teach and learn mother tongue.... A lot more is involved, primers, supplementary readers, spelling materials, dictionaries and grammar books are required. The fact that there are very few books available for teaching and learning most mother tongues militate against effective writing.

Conclusion

This paper has been able to explain the meaning of language, and implications and national development. The researchers have discussed that science and technology as sure tools and skills of National development must be indigenized giving examples with other nations that developed in which the total populace (the informed and uninformed) have acquired to a creative and sophisticated extent, the skills of their language acquisition and advised that indigenous languages should be developed to meet all the demands of modern living in science and technology, including computer and in the human and social sciences like the Japanese and also we have discovered that in this recent political dispensation, the indigenous languages have not gained ground in most states. The decision of the Nigerian government to make the indigenous language the language to be used in the state and National legislative Houses has yielded positive achievements.

Recommendations

The following suggestions are made for the general improvement of the indigenous languages.

1. All policy provisions, in relation to Nigerian languages should be fully implemented.
2. Suitable learning materials should be provided in the schools. This will help the students to have a better understanding and mastery of the language.
3. Like English language teachers, Nigerian language teachers should come together to form an association to fight for certain benefits and seek the promotion of this language.
4. Textbook writers and publishers should write and publish texts written in the standard form of the language.
5. More time should be allocated to the teaching/learning of the mother tongue.
6. More indigenous language teachers should be employed and posted to the schools and more grammar books should be written by the experts.
7. Like any other written document, the national language policy is quite beautiful on paper but, it has not yielded the desired result, it caters for English as a language of interethnic/international communication. Indigenous languages and the English language should be given equal status.

References

- Anukam, H.O. (1999). *English Language Teaching in Schools*. Owerri: Springfield Publisher
- Bamgbose, A. (1983). *Mother Tongue in Education; the West Africa Experience*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Bamgbose, A. (2006). *Language and Good Governance*. Nigerian Academy of Letters (NL), 2005 Convocation lecture Conference centre, University of Lagos. August 11, Mine.
- Callahan, F.J. and Clark, L.H. (1977). *Teaching in the Elementary School*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc.
- Emenanjo, E.N. (1999). Toward Neo-Central Igbo. *Journal of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, 5 No. 4.
- Gbedio, C. (1990). *The problems of Indigenous Languages*. Ibadan: Heinemann.

Non Implementation of the Nigerian Language Policy in the Primary Schools: Risk and Implication

Mgbodike, T.O. (1999). *Fundamentals of Language Education*. Nsukka: Mike Social Press.

Okonkwo, Chuka, Achunine, Rose N and John-Nwosu, Angel D. (2005). *Pre-primary and Primary Education in Nigeria*. Nigerian: Longman Plc.

Osuagwu, E. (1997). *The Teaching of the Mother Tongue*. Ibadan: UPL

Oyebade, F. (2009). *Expanding the Frontiers of Language study*. Lead paper presented at the 4th National Conference of the schools of languages. Adeyemi College of Education Ondo, held on 2nd-5th March, 2000.

Patrick, Hanks and Simeon, Potter (2003). *Encyclopaedic World Dictionary*. New York: Hamlyn Publishers.