

REDEFINING THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION

Godwin F. Akpan and Sam A. Okpongette

Abstract

Indigenous languages have many unique properties and play very limited role in the educational development of Nigeria. This paper seeks to re-examine the place of indigenous languages in National policy on education. Attempts have been made to evaluate the merit of the policy vis-a-vis the present reality where English has completely taken over. The notes that the flaws interest in the policy has necessitated the need for an evolution of a brand/variant of English language that can be used if Nigeria is to develop its education. The importance of English examined and placed side by side those of indigenous languages and at the end, it concludes that the time for policy makers, educationists and government to act fast is now. It is against this premise that this paper advocates for the domestication of English language in Nigeria and argues that this brand of English adopted will suit Nigeria's educational need.

Language, it would be agreed is central to learning and it is an indispensable tool for the development of any nation. Thus, without language no meaningful progress can be achieved. Success in language learning would not only have a multiplier effect on education alone but the whole gambit of human existence. For any purposeful knowledge transfer to take place, language must be central. Hence, education is the function of human development.

Over the years, educationists, policy makers and successive governments have attempted to fashion an acceptable language policy for our country Nigeria. And quite often, these attempts have suffered severe set backs. There have been quite a number of scholarly papers suggesting and advocating for the adoption of the mother tongue at the first three years of an individual education in the case of formal education. But many years after this proposition has achieved very little if any. One of the reasons for the failure is that many Nigerian languages lack an approved orthography as well as qualified instructors to teach this so called indigenous language. And second is the political factor of national language policy itself. There has been and still no concerned efforts on the part of government to seriously have a rethink on this issue and allow the English language which has already enjoyed the pride of place among Nigerian languages to continue to serve as the language of institution.

The constitution of the Federal republic of Nigeria has unequivocally given the English language an edge over other Indigenous languages. By this, our local languages are only thriving to survive since they cannot meet with the highly sophisticated English language. English language enjoys wider coverage and an assigned official role in Nigeria. Again, it has adequate texts and Instructors to teach the subject. What is even made worst is that it is the language used in teaching the so called Indigenous languages. As can be seen above, the policy instead of finding solution to the language problem rather compounds it. For instance, section 3, subsection 15, paragraph 4 of the National policy on Education (2004) states; "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary schools is initially the mother tongue or the language of immediate community and, at a stage, English". This statement seems rather ambiguous and confusing because it has failed to assign roles for the language referred to. And again, use of the future tense "will" is suggestive of government non commitment. These few bottlenecks have continued to inhibit the smooth functioning of the policy.

Evaluation of the National Policy on Education

The 1977 National language policy which was revised in 1989 and 2004 has given the English language a prominent place by recommending it to be taught right from the first year of primary education. But before the 2004 edition, the policy seems to have promoted ethnic based languages, for instance, section 1, subsection 8 states:

Government considers it to be in the interest of the national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba.

A critical analysis of the above suggests that government of the day merely wanted to promote language loyalty of the major tribes in Nigeria and not to solve any particular language challenge. Udefot (2007) observes that:

These National policies, however, cannot be said to be fully in operation... also, the learning of another Nigerian language in addition to the mother tongue hardly operates even in Federal Government schools because of the difficulties in having teachers. (P.10).

Today, because globalization and the development of internet services English has become very popular. And even though the government claims that education is free in Nigeria, 95% of Nigerian children attend private schools where the use of vernacular is highly prohibited. Besides in almost all urban homes, children are being encouraged and forced to speak in English language. So that we can agree that National Policy of the mother tongue have been defeated. The question is, how can the use of mother tongue within the span of three years of studies affect the development of creative imaginative teaching in school?

National policy on language believes that a nation's policy on education is a government way of realizing that part of the national goals, which can be achieved using education as a tool. No policy on education, however, can be formulated without first identifying the overall philosophy and goal of the nation which is to live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, democratic and sovereign nation founded on the principle of freedom, equality and justices, promotes inter-African solidarity and world peace through understanding. Nigeria's policy of education therefore is based on:

- (a) the development of the individual into a sound and effective citizen.
- (b) The full integration of the individual into the community, and
- (c) The provision of equal access to educational opportunities for all the citizens of the country at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels both inside and outside the formal school system.

Nigeria does not need indigenous languages to achieve the above as stipulated in the NPE. From the thrust of the policy, the language policy discourages the development of Indigenous Nigerian Languages. This can be seen in the relative inferior status accorded Nigerian languages in the school system and the society in general.

Also, Nigeria is believed to have above five hundred distinct indigenous Languages. As each of the language is by definition a mother tongue, in theory they all qualify to be taught as school subjects under the NPE policy, but is this realizable or practicable? Instead, the policy causes disunity among Nigerians, because each Nigerian linguistic group tends to see itself as being superior to others.

The Place of English Language in National Policy of Education: A Domestication of English Language

Even though English language is often stigmatized as language of imperialism or oppression in Nigeria cannot be under-estimated. A clear fact must be stated that the colonial masters did not force Nigerian leaders at independence to adopt English language as their official language. The choice over indigenous languages was primary to de-emphasize ethnicity and to build up a sense of nationhood. Thus, attempts by latter leaders to formulate a policy to promote indigenous languages: Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba had suffered a serious setback, for us Oha (2004, P.283) observes:

Redefining the Place of Indigenous Languages in National Policy on Education

Seem to be the kind of unity referred to by Emeka Odimegwu Ojukwu as the unity of Jonah and the whale... the majority ethnic beasts swallow the minority. Being in the belly of the beast would certainly not be a comfortable experience...

This kind of feeling of marginalisation, dominance and insecurity made it imperative for the adoption of a neutral language which can bridge the gap of ethnic divide. The only language in Nigeria as at today is English language.

Today, English language plays a very important role in the first three years of primary school, if it is taught as a subject and from primary four it becomes the language of instruction. In the core curriculum of each level, it occupies the number one position. The aim of teaching English language, according to the curriculum prescription, is for the learners to acquire literacy skills and the ability to communicate effectively (NPE, 2004).

English is a major international language with multiple functions and roles. It plays a critical role in entertainment and the media, in diplomacy, in commerce and tourism, in migration and in education. Thus, Nigeria as a country with the league of Nation cannot function effectively with English language.

Coleman (2010) identified four areas where English language functions:

- (a) To promote employment opportunities
- (b) To promote international mobility
- (c) To unlock development opportunities and access international
- (d) As an impartial language.

Given the function above and the challenges posed by Indigenous languages, there is therefore a growing need to evolve a brand of English that suits the Nigerian environment for our specific purposes. Nigeria should not expect to speak and use English as the natives do, primarily due to the influence of language contact. Since, attempt at adopting one of the three major languages in Nigeria as a lingua franca failed, effort should be geared toward adopting the brand of English that has been with us.

Many scholars are suggesting the use of pidgin as Nigeria's lingua franca. Mbarachi (2013), argues that although the existence of Nigerian pidgin is not officially acknowledged by Nigeria's policy makers, It is currently used for informal purposes at home, schools, offices, market etc. Mafeni (1971), acknowledges that it accelerated growth has been attributed mainly to the number of indigenous languages in Nigeria which creates the need for communication in urban areas.

One can hardly see a state today where pidgin is not spoken at some level and by a given population. For instance, in Delta state, pidgin is creolized and is functioning as a lingua franca. In other major cities in Nigeria with people from linguistically different origin, pidgin comes handy to play the role of communication when participants in a discourse do not belong to the same linguistic group and cannot use English effectively. Whether or not the position of these proponents are taken, the truth is, pidgin has come to stay in Nigeria and instead of teachers of English aligning with chomsky prescriptivism, they should rather recognise pidgin and teach the Nigeria children as a special brand of English.

However, in Nigeria today, we have many varieties of English and none of this as at today can be said to be used effectively as the native's. Even the one spoken by so called educated class in Nigeria still shows some departure from that of the home base/nativised English. The proposition of this paper therefore is that English (whatever variant we have today,) has come stay and that concerted effort should be made to ensure its proper teaching and learning in the school environment. Eyo (2004, p.34) comments:

Given the global importance of English language and the fact that the language has a very promising future as Nigeria's national and international language, pupils in our school systems should be exposed to the language, from the pre-primary level since they will ultimately be required to secure a credit pass in the subject as a condition precedent to the study of any course in university.

Eyoh's view is that more attention should be given to it and that parents should be encouraged to use English with their children even before they are exposed to formal education.

Collaborating this position, Udofot (200), argues that no one hardly finishes a sentence without a word of English. According to her, English language is recognized by all Nigerians. He suggests that a nativised variety of English should be implemented and used in Nigeria both as a lingua franca and as the official language while each state should develop and use its own indigenous language in addition to English.

This paper believes that Nigeria had neglected the wise opinion of Achebe, when he avers:

For an African writing in English is not without its serious setbacks. He often finds himself describing situation, or modes of thought, which have no equivalent in English way of life. Caught in that situation, he can do one or two things. He can try to contain what he wants to say within the limit of conversational English or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate his ideas (Achebe, 1975, p. 12).

The situation as shown above calls for Nigeria to develop a variety of English which will suit her needs instead of depending on the English of the natives where she cannot achieve communicative competence. Achebe's view is very realistic in Nigerian situation if we look at it from the perspective of our extent of growth, particularly, in education, science and technology. Thus, the nativization of English to suit the Nigerian environment remains the sine-quo-non if the standard of English is difficult for some Nigerians.

If meaningful standard of living of education is to be achieved at the primary school level in Nigeria, educators, policy makers, linguists and government need to urgently rethink on the indigenous language policy and instead encourage and develop the English and make it to grow side by side with the indigenous ones. This is so because it is a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them. Since language is dynamic, if acquired especially at the basic stage will endow learners with the means to improve themselves in all areas relevant to dynamic development.

Conclusion

Given the important roles and contributions of English language to the socio-political and national development of Nigeria, the need to develop this unifying language (English) for used right from the start of school cannot be over-emphasised. Thus, we advocate a variety of English (may be pidgin) be upheld and domesticated.

Because this paper has seen the near failure of the use of indigenous languages at primary school level, it has also looked at the role of English in Nigeria and concludes that it will be impossible at-least for now to stop the spread and dominance of English.

If therefore concludes that English should not be seen in terms of correctness but should be made for practical to serve the needs of Nigerians at least in line with Achebe's opinion.

References

- Achebe, C. (1975). *The African writer and the English language*. morning yet on creation day. London. Heinemann.
- Coleman, H. (2010). *In development*. London: British Council. www.teaching-English.org.uk/transform/books/English-language-development.
- Eyoh, I. (2004). The future of English in Nigeria in the context of Globalization. *Journal of Nigerian English and literature*, pp32-40.
- Mafen; B. (1971), Nigerian pidgin. In Spencer (Ed.), *The English language in West Africa*. London: Longman (pp95-112).

Redefining the Place of Indigenous Languages in National Policy on Education

Mbarachi, S. C. (2013). *Language and national identity. The case for Nigerian pidgin*. Being a paper presented at the 7th university of Uyo conference on language and literature.

National Policy on Education, 1977, 1981, 1989, 2004.

Oha, O. (2004). National politics and the Deconstruction of Linguistic subjectivity in Nigeria. In A. Awonusi, S. Awonusi & E. Babaolola E. (Eds), *The domestication of English in Nigeria* (pp 280-295).

Udofot, I. (2007). *English and the Nigerian Situation: Trend and imperatives*. Inaugural Lecture, University of Uyo, Uyo.