

ENHANCING THE STATUS OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES STUDIES IN NIGERIAN HIGHER INSTITUTIONS OF LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The utilitarian dimensions of Nigerian Languages continue to project its relevance despite numerous challenges that face its development and that of adequate annexation of its potentials. Low socio-economic status of indigenous languages poses a major threat into the pace of development. The paper examines the challenges facing the development of indigenous languages, implications of the persistence of this challenges and recommendations to stem the tide.

A number of factors threaten the thrive and survival of indigenous language education in Nigeria. Language conflict has to be understood from the backdrop of numerous ethnic languages, all of which are in competition for survival and supremacy.

Although the National Policy for Education appears to have given a level playground to all Nigerian languages infrastructures, manpower in terms of trained teachers and employment opportunities are not readily available for the available few trained teachers because the said mother tongue system of teaching only appears in papers, the implementation does not seem to be in sight yet. This however makes language education in Nigeria attract a low income status thereby making it unattractive a subject of study in Nigeria higher institution of learning.

The perceived elimination of discrimination against any indigenous language, due to its close affiliation to the psyche of its native speakers in order to ensure that the psyche of the native speakers is not deflated by avoiding marginalization of any Nigeria Language thereby giving all languages equal opportunity to develop and thrive has occasioned struggle for the survival of language among different ethnic groups (Ogunsiji 2001). It is worthy of note to observe that this driving force is not strong enough to boost the enrollment figure of language students in higher institutions of learning.

The official language in Nigeria is English. The country is blessed with a diverse community of ethnic groups with their various dialects/languages.

Yoruba is spoken in South Western Nigeria by a collection of people who are united in common belief that the spiritual city of Ile-Ife is their place of origin and Alaafin of Oyo is their spiritual father. Igbo is spoken in the South Eastern part of the country, a region they call 'home' while Hausa is majorly spoken in the North (Northeast, North central and North West). Majority of the languages spoken in the South South are: Efik, Edo, Ibibio, Izon, Itsekiri, Urhobo, Isoko, Kalabari,

the list is endless. (Fakuade, 2004). Language is further described as a phenomenon that establishes links between people and society.

It has been observed that in Nigeria, for some obvious reasons, there is not a notional language policy. What can therefore be referred to as a national language policy is the provision for language in the National Policy on Education (Ohia, 1998 in Igboanusi, 2001).

This study has attempted to find answers to questions that relate to the attitude of diverse language groups in Nigeria towards developing their individual languages to enhance the social and educational status of the languages.

Problems Associated With Language Studies

The Nigerian Language Policy (NLP) is a statement of the Federal Government of Nigeria which guides the teaching, learning and official use of different languages in the country. Nigeria languages are languages which are indigenous to Nigerians by virtue of the fact that they are spoken by people who hail from Nigeria and are legally Nigerians. The Nigerian language policy affects all the languages in Nigeria one way or the other. The NLP targets Nigerian languages however, because of the multilingual nature of Nigeria, some non-Nigeria languages such as English, Arabic and French are given official recognition until such a time when one or some of the Nigerian languages matures by gaining wide acceptance to play the aforesaid official role, (Mbah, 2012).

In an attempt to correct linguistic imbalances, NLP advocates multilingualism, recognition is accorded all Nigerian Languages. Emenajo (2007) asserts that 'All languages like all persons would not only be seen to be equal in all respects, they would also be seen to be treated equally in all respects in all polities.

Nigerian Attitudes towards Nigerian Languages

People react quite in different ways to different things, ideas, events etc. language issues is not an exception. An attitude can be developed based on a number of factors – historical, political, economic, ethnic, educational or religious. Sometimes, an attitude can be a product of and unexplainable phobia or love for a given phenomenon.

As far as Nigeria language studies is concerned, especially in Nigeria, people tend to be favourably and positively disposed to that which is accorded recognition both at national and international level. Because of the many important roles that English language performs, it becomes expedient for any Nigerian who wants to be relevant to his social, economic and political environment to learn and acquire some appreciable knowledge of English, (Babajide, 2001). In Nigerian Policy on Education, use of mother tongue in teaching was proposed but not implemented

Primary and Post Primary Education

Findings according to Duze (2011) reveals that contrary to the policy statements, there were no government guidelines for the implementation of the mother tongue language policy: curriculum materials were not supplied in schools for mother tongue instruction, teachers were not trained and as a result, English and not mother-tongue is being used in pre-primary and primary school education.

This finding reveals lack of interest in the policy by both the government who proposed it and Nigerian populace for whom it is proposed. The situation was the same both in rural and urban communities.

Nigeria is a political state with many nationalities. The position of the indigenous language is threatened by English, a colonial language, hoisted on Nigerian people from the advent of colonialism. Mbah (2012) states that all major economies in the world use their indigenous languages as official languages, a case of China, Germany, France etc. The attitude of Nigerian Government and people continues to make development of indigenous languages difficult.

He asserts further that until indigenous languages are accorded official position they deserve and English demoted to a position of foreign language, educating Nigeria will continue to be difficult. If educating Nigerians is made difficult, then developing Nigeria will continue to be a mirage. The country will continue to lie prostrate with English language as a medium of instruction in schools.

Attitude towards Studying Nigerian Language

Nigerian policy on education hitherto remains a paper work. Facilities are not provided for teacher training purposes and teachers who managed to get trained in their own little capacity are not being recruited for employment. When the economic viability of a course of study is low in comparison with others, there is the tendency that unfavorable attitude will be developed toward such courses. Munkaila (2001) asserts that attitude towards foreign language is often positive because language, gives them certain privileges (such as power and prestige). On the other hand, the attitude of most Africans towards African languages tends to appear negative because of the perceived lower economic reward that one will receive if he/she studies an African language.

In Nigeria today, economy is one of the most powerful driving force in decision making process especially career choice and this is due to the capitalist economy that is operational in Nigeria. What is mostly the economic viability of such venture? A graduate of English studies seems to enjoy the privileges of gaining employment opportunity in any part of the country while his counterpart in Nigeria languages. According to Ogunsiji (2001) the appalling rate of educational failure in the English language particularly in the senior secondary school certificate level is an effect of dominance of English. Some potential geniuses have been reduced to dropouts because of their inability to secure pass grade in the language. In an attempt to the secure the desire pass grade a student devote more time to the study of English language, failure of which attracts the penalty or inability to forge ahead with his desired career choice. It is rather unfortunate to note that in our educational arrangement, failure in English at the senior secondary school certificate level almost amount to academic failure.

Utilities of Indigenous Languages

Indigenous languages are expected to be mother tongues. One major instrument of a child's socialization is the mother tongue. In the Nigerian context, the various indigenous languages perform this role in some homes. Even among some educated Nigerians, the mother-tongue remains the medium of intimate communication at homes; they are the languages of custom and traditions.

Munkaila (2001) states further that, indigenous languages especially Hausa has the potential of being used in working for tourist operations. It is used in the media as some media houses relay some programmes and read certain news in indigenous languages.

Language attitudes are formed, established or changed according to the functions, status and potentials people perceive particular languages as possessing (Adegbija, 2000).

In creative arts, the indigenous languages cannot be cast away. In the Nigerian context, many works of arts in the area of drama, prose and poetry have been produced. Some films have been produced and are being produced in indigenous languages especially Yoruba. Film production especially in Yoruba language has become means of livelihood to many Nigerians including non-Yoruba.

Their proficiency in the language of expression has earned them the privilege of acting with the language speakers and making a living out of it. The likes of Mercy Akhigbe, Kelvin Ekeduba, FathiaBalogun etc belong to this category. Not only are they making a living from Yoruba film industry, some of these non-indigenes have also come to stardom as Mercy Akhigbe happens to be one of the award winners in 2013 Nollywood award night.

The boost that Yoruba film industry has brought to development and publicity of Yoruba language has been the individual efforts of the various producers and marketers that dominate the industry, because the government of Nigeria has not done much for the growth of the industry (Alamu, 2010).

Challenges of Languages Education in Nigeria ASA Capitalist State

Capitalism is conventionally defined as an economic system in which means of production and distribution are privately or corporately owned and development is proportionate to the accumulation and reinvestment of profits gained in a free market, (J. Landaver and J. Rowland, 2001).

Going by this definition, the value accrued to a particular entity or profession determines its degree of productivity and consequent distribution of the gotten product. The low socio-economic status of Nigerian languages reduces its lucrative prowess thereby making it less productive which consequently inhibits products distribution. Mention is made in Uwalaka (2001) of difficulty in the production of print media apparatus for the proper graphitization of indigenous languages on account of the phonetic demands of African languages. If people are not going to get some basic career and consequently financial benefits out of it, they may not be willing to do it, the benefit they get makes them happy doing it and thereby becomes a motivating factor.

M. Munkalia and A. Haruna uncovered instructive and useful facts about the place of Hausa in the hierarchy of values of German students, who are studying Hausa language. It was revealed that German students who choose courses that focus on the West African sub-regions often choose Hausa out of a variety of African languages offered because of the political and demography importance of the language in the sub-region. The implications of the study of Hausa language by German students

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is noted on the image of the language. In respect of using Hausa language as a secondary skill in international trade and tourisms, a student wrote:

There are many Hausa businessmen coming to Germany to trade in cars and other merchandise, and our company acts as an agent. In anticipation of expanding trade link, our company is planning to establish business contact in Kano and Niamey. I have therefore been asked by my company to study Hausa because the language skill and cultural knowledge are very useful in our business (Munkaila and Haruna 2001)

It is rather justifiable for people to be favourably disposed to a language with domains that correspond with advanced areas of life where issues like education, science and technology, government administration, judiciary, commerce and trade are given prominence. As English guarantees opportunity for white-collar jobs and better conditions of life in comparison with Nigerian language, it will therefore be preferred as a language of choice.

Munkaila and Haruna (2001) observe that most African students hardly exhibit their pride in studying an African language such as Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo or any of the minority languages because the students colleagues often consider an African studying an African language as less intelligent, hence such student is often subjected to ridicule. This is so because of the low economic and social importance attached to the language.

Implications of Deplorable Attitude towards Language Studies

Bangbose (1986) emphasizes the importance of indigenous language as means of attaining national integration and unity. Accomplishment of this notion is largely dependent on the attitude of Nigerians to indigenous language. One point that needs not be overlooked is that language attitude may be influenced by a number of factors notably, political and economic earlier discussed. Until 1967 when Northern Nigeria was administered as one region under a Hausa – Fulani leadership, Hausa was a major factor in the ‘northernisation’ policy of the Northern Nigerian government. It was the principal medium of communication and together with English, an official language in the House of Assembly. In spite of some political resistance by some of the non-Hausa-Fulani groups, the political integration of Northern Nigeria enhanced the spread of the Hausa language, with the result that it came to assume the role of a lingua-franca in the area. The point to be noted here is that although Northern Nigeria is multilingual, the differences were largely submerged as a result of the political ideology of “One North One People”.

In the same vein, the thirty six states of Nigeria can take a leaf from this act of integration by making an indigenous language from each of the states an official language together with English, in the House of Assembly. This is in addition to integrating the states, will boost social and economic relevance of such indigenous language.

It should also be noted that propagating English above the indigenous languages is adopting the policy of spreading the language that is not elite. When business of government is conducted in a language that is not available to the masses, it leads to a wide gulf between the elite who can handle the language of government and the masses who are cut off from effective participation in national

affairs. It has been estimated that majority of Nigerians are illiterate. Of the proportion that are literate, a fair proportion are only literate in a Nigerian language. To ensure participation of the masses in the affairs of the government therefore involves massive investment in indigenous language education. This to an appreciable extent will bridge the gulf between the elite and the masses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

So far we have enumerated factors militating against the relevance of indigenous languages in national development; we have clearly stated that the low socio-economic status of Nigerian languages is one of the major factors militating against the development of the languages thereby exposing the languages to a danger of extinction. UNESCO has estimated that globally, some 4000 languages have already been lost with some 6,000 remaining, but with the majority facing one level of risk or the other. Majority of Nigerian languages are in fact at risk since they are not being systematically transmitted to the younger generation. To stem this tide, an effective policy which embraces every Nigerian language as languages of instruction should be enforced.

Government should provide adequate funding of such policy in order for it to cease from being a mere propaganda.

Also an advocacy for the Global Service Mobile (GSM) providers through the National Communication Commission (NCC) to upgrade their infrastructure to accommodate more Nigerian languages in addition to the Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo already being used on their network.

In addition, UNESCO identified film and video productions in indigenous languages as a vehicle of identifying values and meaning which can open the door to dialogue and understanding between peoples and foster economic growth and development. Nigerian film makers have also realized that it is through films produced in their indigenous languages that their culture can find expression and survive the challenges posed by globalization. According to Alamu (2010) the Yoruba of the South West are leading in this enterprise. They are followed by the Hausa. Igbo actors seem to prefer the English medium to their indigenous languages, hence only a few films are produced in Igbo language. It is imperative at this juncture that government lend a helping hand in promoting Nigerian film industry by ensuring its adequate funding. Government should continue to create enabling environment for Nigerian languages to thrive but the process for such development will have to rest on the shoulders of the speakers of the language.

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