

UTILIZATION OF THE MOTHER TONGUE TO ACHIEVE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The purpose of a language is solely for communication. Language is an important tool in achieving national development. It is a distinctive feature of man and must not be neglected in any human development programme. All languages are used for exactly the same purpose, be it as a mother tongue, second or foreign language. It is therefore, amazing and disappointing to note that proficiency in mother tongue is declining rapidly due to the exalted position, the English language achieved in the teaching and learning processes in the country's educational attainment. This paper highlighted the process of utilization of mother tongue to achieve national development, the roles of mother tongue in language education and they include: moulding the child's early concept; the child receiving his orientation in the cultural environment; enhancing continuity in the child's learning etc. Strategies for improvement of the teaching of mother tongue were also identified. It concluded with some recommendations.

Introduction

It has become increasingly necessary to study the linguistic system of the nation despite the use of English as the official language. Nigerian languages are dying out because of the exalted position of the English language. English language is said to be one of the legacies left behind by the colonial masters after their administration and it is firmly established as a second language (L₃) and it is still regarded as the official language (Bamgbose, 1971). In other words, it is regarded as the language of government, education, business and commerce, the mass media, literature and for external communication.

We now live in a world where everyone is at least a bi-lingual, where English and mother tongue exist side by side, implying that Nigerians communicate in two cultures. But the survival of mother tongue is threatened by the success of English language, which may cause one to feel envious, resentful or angry. This may lead to fear, which is the root cause of conflict. In every speech community where the use of two languages exists, there is the tendency for the bilingual to switch from one to the other in their daily activities. This is referred to as code switching. This phenomenon is much more visible in the indigenous languages that constitute the mother tongue in this nation. The knowledge of the English language as the official language and medium of instruction in schools is posing a threat to the indigenous languages and this can be seen as a linguistic sabotage which can lead to the pidginization of the indigenous languages. The phenomenon has been a source of concern to linguists, sociolinguists, psycholinguists and educators. It is therefore important to draw attention to the speed and seriousness with which English is encroaching into the indigenous Nigerian languages, the culture of the people and the need to curb this issue by all through a much more serious commitment - the teaching of mother tongue in schools, homes, etc.

National Language Policy

The government of Nigeria recognizes the crucial role language plays as a means of promoting and enhancing social interaction. As a result, the National Policy on Education (1998)

makes it mandatory for every child to learn the English language which is the medium of instruction and regarded as a symbol of national unity.

The multilingual nature of Nigeria has been a serious problem in the choice of an indigenous national language. The policy to use one of the major Nigerian languages as the official language was greeted by Nigerians with indifference and others with outright hostility. The debate generated by this notion both in the intellectual and political circles eventually led to government national policy (1998) that:

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 own mother tongue.

In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

The contact between mother tongue and English Language has resulted in an uneven distribution of language patterns because of the unequal prestige between them. This has resulted to borrowing from the more prestigious language into the less prestigious one. This is a great threat to the latter. Hence, a lot of debate concerning the restoration of the indigenous languages has been the pre-occupation among linguists, socio-linguists and educationists.

Nigeria is a multi-lingual nation with an approximate number of 452 languages (Jowit, 1995). Three indigenous languages have been adopted for national languages. They include: Hausa for Northern Nigeria, Igbo for the East and Yoruba for the West. The criteria for adopting only three languages for a nation with 452 languages is absurd as many more languages are excluded. This does not represent the interest of the overall populace. And the attitude of the government towards the learning of the national language is biased and it merely encourages the child to learn such languages. Awobuluyi (1979) frowns at this policy when he says: "if learning major national language contributes towards the unity of the country (as recognized by policy) then doing so cannot be optional ... it has to be obligatory"¹. There is therefore the need to review the national policy in this direction in order to develop the nation not only in writing but also in practice.

The Role of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue or first language (L₁) is the first speech habit a child acquires from his mother. It is the language the child first encounters and it is the total experience gained or acquired from his mother. It could be the language of his father, relatives and other people in his immediate environment. The native habits are deeply embedded in the child through this medium.

Chomsky (1972) is of the view that the child is "genetically endowed with some Language Acquisition Device (LAD) or language faculty which provides an abstract specification of the range of possible" Hence, he affirms that the study of one language may provide crucial evidence concerning the structure of some other languages. It is therefore, very important to study Mother Tongue which is the first language the child comes in contact with as speech habits are already embedded in the child in that language.

When a child has acquired the Mother Tongue (L₁) and attempts to learn another language -English (L₂) during teenage or adult years, there is the tendency to forget the Mother Tongue and adapt to the new language which is the medium of instruction in school. Proficiency in mother tongue is thereby reduced, as there is the tendency for the new language learnt to interfere in the mother tongue. This is the situation of the Nigerian indigenous languages today.

It is pertinent to make a distinction between 'acquisition' and 'learning' in language use. Yule (1996) defines 'acquisition' as "the gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situation" while 'learning' is defined as "a conscious process of accumulating knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of a language. 'Learning' is associated with language teaching in schools which results in knowledge about the language studied.

When a child acquires a language (mother tongue) and learns another language (English), the child tends not to develop proficiency in the mother tongue if it is not learnt in addition to the acquisition. The native-like proficiency is lost in this regard. A language that is not reduced to orthographies is bound to die out with time. To reduce a language to orthographies is to reduce the language to learning, and learning is achieved through teaching. Teaching and learning is an exercise mostly carried out in schools. Proficiency in mother tongue therefore, requires a combination of acquisition and learning.

Mother tongue helps in moulding the child's concept. Language is very closely related to the mind (Chomsky). It is the means by which we conceptualize and think.

Mother tongue is the means by which the child receives his first orientation in the cultural environment. It then follows that the Mother tongue has some psychological and socio-cultural effect on the

child. Language is closely related to culture. It is an expression of the common cultural experience of the members of the linguistic community who speak it.

Mother tongue is the first language learned by the child to express his ideas about himself and about the world in which he lives.

Mother tongue enhances continuity in the child's learning process and maximizes Ms-intellectual development and bridges the gap between the home and the school. A situation where the child is taught in a foreign language in school at a tender age, it is likely to cause some fear leading to feelings of inadequacy and resentment towards self, the teacher and the school, it is likely to slow down the learning process.

It enhances mutual understanding and a sense of respect for individuality. Mother tongue can be used as a powerful force for nation building and national development.

Improving the Teaching of Mother Tongue

The teaching of mother tongue in Nigeria has not been given the necessary attention that should be accorded to it and it is not considered as great significance. Hence, there has been little or no improvement in the teaching of the mother tongue as regards the sound patterns, compositions and the effective teaching methods that have been adopted in the teaching of language in the developed nations.

Improving the teaching of mother tongue will help greatly to achieve national development. The teaching of mother tongue is the teaching of language whether second' language or foreign languages as some of the methods used in the teaching are similar and most of the principles underlining those methods will be the same. However, the secret of teaching the mother tongue lies not solely in the method, but in a skilful and in intelligent handling of the method of teaching it.

The teaching of mother tongue is highly desirable, as, if it is well taught, the teaching will help the learning of a new language (L₂).

If mother tongue is taught on sound lines, the training received will promote a better understanding and a better use of the mother tongue.

Gurrey (1964) highlights three main reasons why the teaching of mother tongue is highly desirable, thus:

First, improvement in handling language is directly favourable to improvement in all kinds of thinking, such as reasoning and other mental operations that make use of words. Secondly, nearly all children need instruction and specially devised practice in the use of their mother tongue in order to acquire the ability to express themselves with clarity, ease and correctness. The third reason is that those children who acquire some skill in using their mother tongue, have had a good preparation for acquiring similar skills in using a foreign language.

When we are using a second language (English) we bring into play the same linguistic skills as those we use when we speak or write in our mother tongue. The skill in constructing sentences will be active whether in the use of mother tongue or in writing composition in a second language (English). Consequently, the skill of understanding the meaning from context in second language will be the same skill we use to understand meaning in our mother tongue context.

A child that has been taught to use his mother tongue with grammatical correctness, will be ready to learn to use the second language correctly, therefore, becoming a potential correct - language -user! He would have acquired the habits of attending to correctness of language.

A child that has been taught to express his thoughts clearly in his mother tongue is sure to express the same thought clearly in the second language, since he has acquired the habits of clarity of thought and expression, though special instruction is needed to effect the transfer.

If a child talks freely and fluently in his own mother tongue, it will be easy to learn to speak well and easily in the second language when he has been taught the forms and structures of the languages; (Gurrey, 1964).

The improvement of the teaching of mother tongue and second language will enable the child to master more quickly the fundamental skills that are needed for the efficient handling of both languages. To learn a second language perfectly well, the learner needs all possible assistance in order to make good use of the new instrument of thought and communication. Most of the methods used in teaching the mother

tongue can also be applied in teaching the second language, and vice-versa.

The learning of any new language can help in linguistic education and in the mental development of a child. For language is one of the main activities of mind., and mind is the main part of personality. If language is taught in psychologically sound manner, it will help to contribute to the learner's general growth, because it will sharpen his intellect and make it play over many kinds of knowledge and experience. Language therefore, will help to educate the learner; (Gurrey, 1964).

The Language Teacher

Language is learned in order to determine its structure and to provide a systematic description of it. This description forms the scientific basis from which grammar can be written and from which vocabularies or dictionaries can be compiled. The description obtained by different linguists will be compared in order to find typological groupings and to formulate hypotheses about the relationship between the languages, which lead to their classification.

The language teacher has the duty of training the minds of the learners to become competent instruments for mastering the knowledge that can be obtained from books. This knowledge enables the learners' minds to be capable of learning all subjects that make use of books and in dealing with various problems that might confront them during their life time.

Language Education for National Development

The importance of language in national development cannot be over emphasized as learning cannot take place without communication between the teacher and the learner. The relationship between language and national development should be obvious from the fact that since education is crucial in the training of manpower for national development and the language medium is crucial in the education process, it follows that language is important and in fact vital to national development as well; (Yule, 1996).

Human resources development through education and training programme means activating human genius and creativity; human skills and motivations as the spring of development action (Yule 1996). This can only be done through language.

Moreso, Mother Tongue Education has vital roles to play in the mobilization of rural populace for various national developmental programmes, such as agricultural activities, fishery, vocational training, etc. Fafunwa (1985) as cited by Anene-Boyle opines that "we teach agriculture in English and the Nigerian farmers farm in Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Efik, Nupe, Kanuri etc. The rural populace is likely to easily embrace a training that is relevant to their mainstay occupation, especially when that is done in their own mother tongue.

Mother tongue education does not only aim at acquiring skills but also enables the child and adult to read and write. It aims at eliminating illiteracy which is a setback to development in any society and it helps to eradicate poverty.

Mother tongue education promotes a greater participation in civic and political life by the illiterate adults who have been eliminated in the civic and political life by a few individual who could read and write in English.

Language is expression and Yule (1996) opines that it is "a personal expression at the individual level, but always with the more general framework of a culture or a civilization".

Language Education has a very important role to play in the mobilization of the rural populace for various national developmental programmes such as agriculture, fishing, vocational-, training etc. The rural populace is likely to embrace a training that is relevant to their main-stay-occupation especially when the training is done in their own mother tongue.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following were recommended:

1. To maintain the status of the indigenous languages, the indigenous languages in the linguistic community should be taught in primary and post primary schools.
2. Relevant textbooks and other materials should be made available to teachers for the teaching of mother tongue.
3. In-service training programme should be organized for indigenous language teachers both on State and Local Government levels in order to keep them abreast of the orthographies and

- strategies for teaching mother tongue.
4. There is the need for adequate motivation to be given to indigenous language students in tertiary institutions in form of scholarship award, book allowance and creation of good employment opportunity for the language graduates.
 5. Seminars, workshops, conferences etc should be organized on a yearly basis for teachers of indigenous languages to discuss the problems facing them and to learn the immediate solutions. This would enable the teachers to learn the more modern language methods for use in the teaching of mother tongue.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to discuss the role of mother tongue and its utilization to achieve national development. There is no gain saying that the inculcation of indigenous language education will enhance mobilization sensitization in children as well as the illiterate adults. No standard language has been developed at a reduced cost, therefore, Nigerian languages need to be developed at great cost. The benefit will be great and it will go a long way to promoting national development and enhancing national unity. It might be late but it will be a welcome development. It is better late than never.

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