

LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS FOR NIGERIAN INDEGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Language education is the teaching and learning of foreign language or second language. It is a branch of applied linguistics. Language education has many unique functions among which are that it plays dual roles in most known formal education systems. It is featured as a subject on the school curriculum just as we have history education, economics education, chemistry education etc. On the other hand and completely unlike any of the other subjects on the curriculum, it serves as the medium of instruction in all subjects including itself. This paper wants to capture and examine the indigenous languages in school environment. The paper also examines the prospects of using the indigenous languages for education and the problems associated with it. Finally, a conclusion was made on the stand of the paper.

Language education is the teaching and learning of any language, either as a foreign or second language in schools. Language education is important because it is a process by which a child develops the communicative attitude which is a positive value to his or her society. It is therefore, the formal acquisition of communicative skills by an individual.

Language education is also about language acquisition. It examines how languages are learned and about the pedagogical methodologies for language acquisition. This means that it is the acquisition of language using certain methodologies. education on the other hand

is a process of teaching, learning and acquiring training, most especially in schools or colleges, in order to improve one's knowledge as well as giving room for the development of skills. (Hornby 2001). One can therefore, see education as a strong instrument of development in all ramifications of human life, including language.

Formal language education was introduced in Nigeria in the nineteenth century by the Christian Missionaries. The missionaries therefore, determined the nature of language education for the country for every thing was in their hands. The Christian missionaries felt that the

African child could be best taught in his native language (Hair 1967). They also felt that by using the indigenous language they would propagate their religion better. For this reason, the teaching and learning of indigenous languages received genuine attention in those days of formal education in the country.

Language education became necessary because of globalization. It has created a need to communicate in multiple languages for the purposes of education, commerce, Religion, government etc.

Halliday and Hassan (1990) posited that man studies language for two reasons: “partly in order to understand language and how it works and partly in order to understand what people do with it” language education therefore, helps us to inculcate in us both the skills and functions of language so that when these skills are used in linguistic activities they may correspond to the proper functions of language in human society, proper language education aims at bringing a participant to a stage where by when he listens, he knows what to expect from the speaker and when he speaks, he should be able to determine or predict the reaction of his listener. Strevens as cited in Uguru (2007) maintained that being a scientist or a technologist, entails learning a good number of habits especially the habit thought for it affects the scientist’s use of language. He can only function properly as a scientist if he learns how to use language appropriately to express these habits of thought.

Akase and Omachonu (2011) argued that indigenous language education or study can bring about information on economy boosting areas such as traditional medicine, food technology, and health awareness, etc, Aziza (1999) mentioned traditional food preservation as another area that can be harnessed through proper language education. From the emerging evidence in indigenous language study, it has become clearer that if proper goal-oriented indigenous language education should be intensified and sustained, Nigeria will have a great harvest of technologies to which reference can be made even by notable and renowned world scientists.

Following the relevance of language education in our society as discussed above, the government has given it a constitutional backing or approval. This is enshrined in the 1989 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, section 19(4) which says that “Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages”.

The first generations of applied linguists in Africa were missionaries and anthropologists who helped to reduce most of the indigenous languages into writing and who wrote the first religious and secular books. The missionaries recognized the need to get hold of the heart and win the soul for Jesus Christ through the indigenous languages.

The early language education also co-incided with the beginning of the wide

spread use of indigenous languages in radio broadcasting. This helped to enlarge the intellectual horizon of Nigeria languages as they attempt to invent expression for the new experience (political, economic, technical, etc) that came with independence. The period also witnessed the coming on board of numerous language interest groups. These groups became pressure whose work has also helped to influence the cause of language education in Nigeria. Obanya (1971) reported that the establishment of institutes and centres of applied linguistics were noted in certain areas like Lagos and Aba whose work include the following:

- i. Description of indigenous language, and
- ii. Development of materials for indigenous and foreign languages (English and French).

All these efforts were made in order to give language education and indigenous languages a serious attention.

However, this genuine effort and attention did not last for too long because not everybody liked the products of such a system of education.

For instance, the elites felt that the products of the system of education were not suitable for the job market of those days, for they prefer people who were trained in English rather than indigenous languages (Taiwo, 1980). Apart from this, questions were raised on the psychopedagogical appropriateness of education in the indigenous languages. Some have even doubted if teaching and learning in

the mother tongue would not damage the course of national unity and whether starting one's education in the mother tongue would not jeopardize later learning of English or French and learning at higher levels of education. In most cases, these issues were raised by persons who themselves had the early parts of their education in the mother tongue. Language educators like Fafunwa (1989) asserted strongly that these are non issues. Others like Sanoch (1989) asserted equally strongly that these are issues to be taken seriously for a number of programmes of mother tongue education did not go beyond the experimental phase.

The governments in the country then were eventually influenced by these views and gradually intervened in the education of the country in order to accord English a large prominence. In a very short time, the view succeeded and the interest in language education in the country shifted away from the indigenous languages towards English. The quick shift towards English language was as a result of the belief of most people that it was finically more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages. Secondary, certification in school became conditional upon passing English. Apart from this, the various governments in the country from the Colonial time up to 1960 did nothing to promote the study of indigenous languages but rather encouraged and even force the study of English language.

The unfortunate situation was that these children were not exposed to English at home as it is the case today before coming to school. Consequently, they found it very difficult to start learning in English but prefer to be instructed in the medium of their mother tongue until they had gained enough proficiency in English in the upper classes. The prevailing situation eventually changed and reversed to the encouragement of indigenous language studies in our schools.

At this time, there was a policy backing on language education. The policy aimed at shifting backward to indigenous languages from English.

Again people began to question the wisdom of giving English no much attention and importance in government and education. Bangbose (1976) reported that “people began to canvassed in parliament for English to be replaced as official language by one of our indigenous language some twenty years after independence. Osaji (1979) advised that more efforts should be put into the teaching and learning of the major indigenous languages to enable them serve as an alternative to English as official means of communication in government and business. This was to avoid the problem most people in the country had in understanding English and communicating well in it. The effect of these suggestions and pressures brought about a shift in the attitude of the Federal government to indigenous languages. The government at this time came to agree with linguists that a

language is a vehicle for a people’s culture and a means of maintaining and preserving that culture. What the government care to see and appreciate here is that, if we are to lose our national identity together with our indigenous cultures, then we must begin to pay attention to the teaching and learning of our indigenous languages. The governments also came to see indigenous languages as a practical means of communication, which could easily be harnessed for effecting national integration, in addition to the relationship that language has with culture. These views actually forced the Federal government to make policy pronouncements on the teaching of indigenous languages. Thus the Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE) (1977) revised in (1981, 1988 and 2004) States that:

- a). in primary school, which lasts Six years, each child must study two languages, namely:
 - i. His mother tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile, and
 - ii. English language.
- b). In junior secondary school, (JSS), which is of three year’s duration, the child must study three languages, viz:
 - I, his mother-tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile, and
 2. English language, and

3. Just any one of the three major indigenous languages in the country, namely, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, provided the language chosen is distinct from the child's mother tongue.
- c) In senior secondary school (SSS), which also lasts three years, the child must study two languages, viz:
 - i. an indigenous language, and
 - ii. English language.

Arabic and French were language options at both Junior and senior secondary schools. The policy is however, silenced on language education at the tertiary level of education. It is also good to point out that the innovation made by NPE in language education is the teaching of three major indigenous languages as second languages which had never happened before in the formal school system in the country.

Problems of Developing a National Language Policy

It is a well known fact that our country is a multi-lingual nation and this has automatically constituted a problem for achieving a National Language Policy. The less multilingual a country is, the easier it has been to develop a national language policy.

There are over four hundred indigenous languages in Nigeria and by implication they are all qualified to be taught as school subject as slated in NPE. Policy on language education in primary and junior secondary schools.

Practically, it will be very difficult to teach all of them as school subject for many of them have small numbers of speakers.

Consequently, a suggestion is made that a number of selected indigenous languages should be made in addition to the three major languages and be taught in our formal educational system. The problem with this suggestion is that, if implemented, they will not enjoy the loyalties of some of the minority languages that are not selected and may frustrate this effort.

The implementation of such policies has also been made easier by strong political will or by strong government action in other African countries. Strong political push by charismatic leaders, has led to the adoption and development of regional or zonal languages in a number of multi-lingual countries. The greatest problem with the strong political push approach is that the populace tends to see this move as cases of language imposition. But there will always be linguistic, social or political minorities whose languages are not promoted.

Lessons for Nigeria

Nigeria has done well in consolidating the gains of the colonial period and improving upon what was inherited from colonialism with reference to language education. The departments of linguistics in Nigeria universities and colleges of Education have trained thousands of people who are today active in linguistic research and language

teaching. Infact, indigenus languages have been the greatest beneficiaries of these efforts. This is because more Nigeria languages are today taught in schools and also used as languages of instruction in schools.

A step forward from this is the development of curriculum materials in indigenus languages particularly in the area of textbooks. The efforts of state ministries of education and Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) have been quite laudable in this regard. A large number of textbooks on indigenus languages are produced today as a result of linguistic and pedagogic research. Creative writing in indigenus languages have also come a long way.

A very important achievement of Nigeria is the inclusion in the National policy on Education of a section on language, which declared

- i. Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba as major languages
- ii. Emphasis on initial formal education in the mother tongue
- iii. The teaching of a second Nigeria language at secondary school level.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the general picture of language in and of education in Nigeria. From this paper, Nigeria has a lot of experiences which include the experience of colonialism, the influence of missionaries on formal education in general and language education in particular and the desire for

educational reforms since independence. Many African countries can benefit from the experiences of Nigeria particularly in the area of education in indigenus languages. At the same time, Nigeria has to learn that political push can achieve a lot in matters of educational reforms. It should however, be noted that Nigeria is different from other African countries based on her size and population, the level of her multi-lingualism, etc. shows a clear difference. Implementing Nigeria's language education policies therefore requires taking into consideration the 'Nigeria factor' or those features that make the country what it is.

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