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LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY

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Abstract

This paper examined the centrality of language to national development in a typical multilingual nation like Nigeria. Language is an instrument to establish and maintain social identity and ethnicity. It is closely tied to the nation's development because all the four features of national development (i.e., political, social, economic and education) depend on language for their attainment. Nigerian language problem vis-à-vis language education programme were also examined. Although information and communication technology (ICT) is useful to language education programme, computer should assist rather than displace language teachers. Language should be made functional by practicing its use. The paper re-examined the status of English as the nation's lingual Franca in relation to the recommendations of Modern Language Association (MLA), concerning the qualifications for English language teachers in particular and the teachers of indigenous languages, for a visible and enviable language education programme in the 21st century.

Introduction

Language can be seen as a means of communicating thoughts and as a means of social control. Language makes it possible for individuals to live in a society as well as a means of individual self-expression. Speech is the instrument of society, which is used by man for specific and distinguishable purposes such as using it to establish and maintain social identity and ethnicity. Individuals build upon residual elements of shared culture to receive a common sentiment upon which to establish ethnically based interest groups (Mencer, 1998). Ethnicity identity thus becomes a means of eliciting political and social support in the pursuit of goals, which are defined within the terms of reference established by the society at large.

Every society, especially the developing nation like Nigeria, craves for development. There are four features in the concept of development that every developing nation aims at; these features are political, social, economic and educational. All the features have a very strong tie with **language** for their attainment.

Politically, especially in very recent times, democracy is the in-thing, the fashionable trend of Nigeria political activities. As democracy is being stressed generally, self-determination by small nationalities is also being actively encouraged (Banjo, 1995). The meaning of democracy has been refined to cover the freedom of

all nationalities, however great or small, to determine their future. This new emphasis poses a problem for most developing countries like Nigeria, which are trying to forge a nation out of nationalities. The implications of this for the nation's language programme are very devastating because each ethnic group, in trying to re-assert its future uses the weapon of Language – no wonder the loads of problems that besiege Nigeria's language policy in Nigeria. Democracy emphasizes participatory governance, which also has important implications for communication.

Socially, the most important feature of modernity is the freedom of the individual to develop himself to the fullest extent, and the necessity for all citizens to be equal before the law. At the same time, a serious attempt is made to fashion a national culture out of the diversified cultural groups, and the need therefore arises for that culture to be projected by a language.

The modern state is largely governed by economic considerations. The creation of wealth, according to Banjo (1995), is the goal of modern democracy; and the rough and ready yardstick by which development is measured is economic. The nations in the top economic league are developed, the aspiring ones are poverty-stricken. A nation is as developed as its economy allows. It costs money to develop people individually and collectively, and it costs even more money to develop the environment and the peoples' culture through their language.

Also, education has to be put at the service of the development process, making it possible for individual citizens to be as fully developed as possible, improving skills and creating new knowledge. But it is also an important agency for forging a common nationality. This may be a relatively easy task for monolingual countries, but not so in multilingual ones, like Nigeria

Language Problem in Nigeria

The language problem in Nigeria is tied to the consequences of the implantation of the English language in the country. The incidence of English and its maintenance as an official language in Nigeria derives from colonial experience under the British who administrated the pre-independent Nigeria with English, thus institutionalizing it as the official language in the country till the present time.

One of the conflicts which have hindered unity and socio-cultural development in Nigeria is language conflict. Language problem in Nigeria has to be understood from the backdrop of the numerous ethnics' languages, all of which are in competition for supremacy and survival. A constant source of language conflict in Nigeria is the relationship of the major to the non-major languages (Bamgbose, 1985). Apart from the demographic factors, the major languages were among the first to be reduced to writing in the early or mid-19th century with substantial vocabularies, primers, collected texts, and translations (Hair, 1967).

Minority languages in Nigeria are often neglected. Their speakers seem to be aware that their languages do not often function in gaining upward social mobility. Government's national language policies, in general, and minority language development in particular, are often viewed with suspicion. Among speakers of the neglected minority language, there are usually political tension and rivalry resulting from perceived educational infrastructural under-development, cultural and linguistic alienation and manipulation, discrimination and exploitation on linguistic grounds (Webb, 1974). Language attitudes in many African nations are seen as a central element in language policy, language use and language learning (Schmied,

1991). There exists a strong relationship between language and ethnicity. No wonder Adegbiya (1994) reports that mutual suspicion existing between language groups result in prejudice, stereotypes and subtle linguistic hostility. He observes further that such deep-rooted, culturally-sectioned stereotypes and prejudices are a commonplace in multilingual and multicultural societies both among major language groups and among the minority groups.

In Nigeria, English is generally perceived as a language of prestige. It is still the dominant language on the Nigerian linguistic scene. Its status hardly diminished after forty-five years of the Nation's independence or by the promulgation of the national policy on language in Education. For some obvious political and demographic factors, indigenous language development in Nigeria favours the major language. Following the recognition of the role of language attitudes in developing Language policies as well as the on-going agitation, for the rights of minority languages, there is a great need for thorough research on the attitudes of linguistic minority speakers and their stereotyped perceptions of the speakers of major languages in order to assist in developing a comprehensive language policy in Nigeria.

Many people genuinely believe that more than a national policy on language in education, we need a national language policy. But the policy on language in Education can, in fact, be seen as the government's cautious and indirect approach to what is potentially an explosive national question.

Language Policy for Educational Development

Educational development is one of the most important and crucial variables for national development. Although the other three variables (i.e. economic, political and social) are equally important, Educational development is a wide and clear access road to them. Without a virile national Policy on Education, there can be no meaningful development in the educational sector. And without a clear and well integrated language policy, considering the language problem already existing in Nigeria, the road to national development via Economic, social, political and Education would not be clear.

Considering the multilingual nature of Nigeria, two things need to be considered. The first relates to the pattern of communication that would enable the socio-economic institutions to function most effectively and equitably in meeting the needs and interests of the population. The second is how to ensure that the different groups within the society, varying in their linguistic repertoires, have equal access to the public system and opportunities to participate in it (Kelman 1971).

Focusing on the above assertion, Adeniran (1977) suggested that language policy for Nigeria should serve the following objectives:

- (1) Increased integration through (a) common indigenous language(s).
- (2) Increased communication efficiency in our public institutions.
- (3) Increased and easy access to knowledge of varying degree of technicality.
- (4) Equal access to information in the public system leading to equal opportunities to participate in the system; and
- (5) Increased access to our indigenous literary act, and have opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and propagate them.

teaching. It requires scientific training to applying the best that is known to the teaching and learning of a second language. Based on this, the language teacher in the 21st century cannot ignore the results of linguistics (the scientific study of language) the psychology of human learning, the age and education of the pupils, or the personality and capacity of the individual students. A scientific approach to language teaching applies the best that is known to each particular class and its students. When a better way to teach something is reported, the teacher incorporates it into his courses, just as a physician incorporates into his practice new and more effective ways of meeting each ailment as reported in medical literature.

For one to successfully perform professional duties, one must be professionally qualified. The language teacher must be educated, at least to the level of his peers. He must have the following special qualifications in the field of the foreign language he teaches.

The language teacher must know the target language well enough to be imitated by his students. The English language teacher for instance must be able to use the language freely not only the significant sounds, syntactical constructions, and general vocabulary, but also many details of pronunciations and idiomatic expressions of native speech and writing. The language teacher should devote a great deal of effort to the achievement of this level and to maintain his proficiency once achieved.

Also, it is not enough to speak a language, to be qualified to teach it. Even native speakers cannot model the language or guide the students unless he can isolate and demonstrate its various elements. He must know the description of the structure of the language. He must also know the linguistic facts of the language of the students in order to understand the particular problems they will have in learning the target language.

The student cannot go far into the target language without facing differences in cultural meanings because the meanings expressed in a language are largely culturally determined. Therefore, the language teacher must understand the intimate relation between a language and its culture. These involve knowledge of specific facts concerning the culture and some understanding of the major patterns of thought, beliefs, traditions, and values that account for the way the people live and behave and give significance to their accomplishments.

Finally, this formidable set of qualifications represents a standard that all language teachers must strive to fulfill. In this 21st century, however, Nigerian language teachers should strive to meet if not surpass the Modern Language Association of American (MLA) qualification, which includes (1) Aural comprehension (2) Speaking (3) Reading (4) Writing (5) Language analysis (6) Culture and (7) Professional preparation. Each is described on three different levels of excellence superior, good, and minimal. These qualifications represent the standards advocated by the largest professional association of language teachers of the United States. They reflect a growing preoccupation with the need for qualified teachers to meet the language needs of the modern world.

Thus, language situation in Nigeria is still facing a serious dilemma. While some educators are clamouring for education in mother tongue, some sound otherwise. The attitude of the Nigerian elite to indigenous language, according to Bamgbose (1985), are plagued by linguistic imperialism – an attitude that recognizes as normal the continued use of English language in all advanced sectors

of life. This attitude is reflected in the impunity with which proprietors of nursery and primary schools disregard the provision in the National Policy on Education on the use of indigenous languages by using English as a medium of instruction right from nursery to primary six. Also, the inferior status accorded the indigenous languages in the secondary school curriculum reveals their positive attitude to English language.

Not only this, people believe that it is not economically viable to teach in the mother tongue due to cost of production of textbooks. And finally, no Nigerian language or mother tongue is as encompassing as English. The above reasons should not be enough to neglect totally, our indigenous language(s). It should be given an equal opportunity to develop as English language in order to achieve our goal of national identity. Also, since English language has been accepted as the nation's lingual Franca, the language of advancement, the advanced world's language (which Nigeria is emulating), its teaching should be more functional in order to increase communication efficiency in our public institutions. Government should pay particular attention to the recommendations of modern Language Association of America's (MLA) qualifications as mentioned earlier too.

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