

IMPLEMENTING THE LANGUAGE ASPECT OF THE EDUCATION POLICY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Language plays a crucial role in teaching and learning situation hence the need to use the appropriate language in education. The trend all over the world especially among the developed nations is that mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction in early years of the child's education especially primary education. This has helped countries like, Spain, Germany, U.S.A., Japan and U.K., just to mention a few, in no small measure to achieve sustainable development. Nigeria is not left out in formulating a policy that stipulated that a child should be taught in his/her mother tongue, first language or language of the immediate environment. However, it is unfortunate to note that most Nigerian primary schools, especially private ones, see the policy as a mere suggestion rather than a policy that should be strictly adhered to. This paper, therefore, examines the importance of mother tongue in national development and calls for its full implementation in Nigerian primary schools so as to achieve national development.

Introduction

Language is at the centre of human life. It is the tool by which man communicates and interacts with his environment and the means by which he interprets his experiences. No society exists without language. Apart from being a basic tool of communication, Ashubiojo (2011) submitted that it serves as the principal means by which knowledge and culture are transferred from one generation to another. It is also a means of cultural preservation. This vital role of language is acknowledged by the Federal Government of Nigeria in its National Policy on Education. According to the document, "government appreciates the importance of language as means of promoting social and national cohesion and preserving cultures (NPE, 2013).

The crucial role of language in human affairs is also being underscored by the myriad of conferences, local and international, that are held to discuss it. Individuals and governments gather to

discuss language and one of such was the inter-governmental conference on language policies in Africa which was held in Zimbabwe in 1998 which drew participants from 51 African countries. The conference, according to United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO,2002), was attended by language experts and ministers from various countries. To lend credence to this, Adekunle (1995) observed that languages are now being appraised and appreciated just like human and materials resources which also have to be properly managed so as to achieve maximum positive result at minimum cost in the process of national development.

Nations now sit to assess critically their linguistic landscapes to see how these can be managed. Each nation takes stock of the number of languages that are spoken in its territory, takes note of which ones are dominant or which ones are more widely used and the then legislate on which should

be used for what and at what level. The result is a language policy such as is available in South Africa, Tanzania and more importantly Nigeria, which is the concern of this paper.

Language policy could be referred to as what government does either officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used. It also deals with how to cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain language. Yitzaki (2008) said, in its basic sense, that language policy refers to the actions taken by a state to regulate the status of the languages spoken in its territory. From the foregoing, one could see that language is important enough to have become an issue for legislation and a subject for international discussion.

Nigeria, like other nations, has a national language policy as contained in National Policy on Education (2004 & 2013). The National Policy on Education recommends that the Nigerian primary school child should be well grounded in his or her mother tongue. Mother tongue should serve dual purposes; it should be the medium of instruction at the lower primary and at the same time a subject on the school curriculum.

Section 1 No. 10 of 2004 edition of National Policy on Education stressed the importance of language thus: "Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the language of immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Specifically on primary Education, section 4e stated that; the

medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject from the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subject.

The language policy, as relates to primary education, is a reinforcement of the language policy on pre-primary education which states that; "Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction (at the level of pre- primary) is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community". The position of this paper is that the provisions of language for the early years of primary education should be implemented and enforced if Nigeria wishes to experience national development This paper will also discuss how choosing an appropriate language of instruction (mother tongue) has positive implication for education in terms of increasing access and improving quality as well as enhancing national development.

The Importance of Mother Tongue on Overall Development of a Child in Primary School Level

The National Language Centre (1975) submitted that "for education to be meaningful, the child should be taught in his/her mother tongue which he can both read and write". The use of mother tongue in education is a practical issue and students that are taught with an indigenous language have to struggle with the understanding of foreign language which is being used as the language of instruction as well as the complexities of the concept that is being learnt. Taiwo (1976) reported that "there is no favourable means of rapport between the teacher and a child on his first day at school

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than a common language (that is the first language), which is the means of acquiring concepts and building them into ideas and skills. If Nigeria as a nation is serious in her quest to raise a generation of citizens that are academically sound, who will contribute positively to national development, then we must revert to and fully implement using mother tongue (L₁) as a medium of instruction in primary schools.

While lending his voice to the importance and potency of mother tongue as medium of instruction in modern education (which should start from primary education), Oluwole (2008) submitted that it is therefore generally acceptable that in teaching and learning processes the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance. For one thing, it categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names of all the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and many others that are so important to him as well as to any society. The researcher quite agrees with this view that a child's mother tongue, an indigenous language or a Nigeria language is the most appropriate vehicle to convey the theme; concepts and subject matter of what is to be learnt to the Nigeria child. Through mother tongue, their linguistic world view is shaped.

Mother Tongue and National Development

It should be noted that language and national development are like Siamese twins, difficult to separate. No wonder, Awolere (2013) submitted that “for economic and political growth as well as national reconstruction and development, the effective use of mother tongue in education cannot be underestimated. That is, there is a link between mother tongue and national development and that is why this paper calls for full implementation of mother tongue in primary education.

In The Nation of September 25, 2011, Achebe corroborated the fact that mother tongue (indigenous language) helps in fostering national development. He says: When people talk blithely about the signal achievements of the Chinese, the Japanese and some of the Asian tigers, they have forgotten that even when briefly colonized or politically decapitated, they never surrendered their cultural sovereignty to the invaders. After the siege was lifted, they simply reverted to the truncated paths particularly the potency of their indigenous languages and their powerful philosophies p.3

Judging from the foregoing, one can deduce that countries like, Japan, China, Germany were able to develop technologically, politically and economically and indeed in all areas of life because they retained their indigenous worldview (especially in their mother tongue). It could also be said that other countries – France, India were able to experience scientific breakthroughs because they retained their mother tongues as medium of instruction right from primary school. It also follows that if Nigeria is willing to experience scientific and technological breakthrough like her counterparts in the developed world, she must start the use of mother tongue in education right from primary school.

Another scholar that sees a concurrent relationship between the use of mother tongue and national development is Emenanjo (1996). He stated that “the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around is best done and realized in the language in which the pupils/students are most familiar”. The language which pupils are most familiar with is their mother tongue or first language (L1). This paper lends credence to the voice of the foregoing scholars that pupils think originally in the

language they best understand. So, if right from primary school, they are taught in their mother tongue, it believed that they will have firm grip of concepts in the various subjects. As a result, they will not be dropouts or lose out in their bid to become professionals in their dream carriers.

Also, Kolawole's (2016) inaugural lecture titled 'Language, Education and the Curriculum Nexus: Pathway to Achieving Sustainable Development in Nigeria' confirmed that indigenous language/mother tongue is a strong correlate of national development thus "we need education driven by practical curriculum that makes adequate provision for the use of our indigenous languages if we want to achieve sustainable development in our country". This assertion is in consonance with fact that mother tongue has a role to play in developing a nation and it must start from primary school.

Obstacles to the use of Indigenous Language/Mother Tongue

Some scholars, such as Abidogun and Adebule (2013), Olagbaju (2014) have highlighted obstacles to the use of indigenous language/mother tongue in formal education. But the one that appears most explicit to the writer of this paper is Benson's (2004) and it runs as follows:

- **The one nation-one language myth:** The colonial concept that a nation-state requires a single unifying language has influenced policy-makers in many parts of the world, yet imposition of a so-called "neutral" foreign language has not necessarily resulted in unity, nor have relatively monolingual countries like Somalia, Burundi or Rwanda been guaranteed stability. In fact, government failure to accept ethno linguistic diversity has been a major destabilizing force in

countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Ouane, 2003).

- **The myth that local language cannot express modern concepts:** Another colonial concept is the supposed inherent worth in European language in contrast to others, but all human languages are equally able to express their speakers' thoughts and can develop new terms and structures as needed. Leopold Senghor once illustrated this by translating Einstein's Theory of Relativity into Wolof, a lingua Franca of Senegal. The difference lies in which languages have historically been chosen for "intellectualization", or development, through writing and publishing (Alexander, 2003).

- **The either-or myth:** This myth holds that bilingualism causes confusion and that the first language must be pushed aside so that the second language can be learned. The research evidence to date shows the opposite to be true: the more highly developed the first language skills, the better the results in the second language, because language and cognition in the second build on the first (Cummins, 1999, 2000; Ramirez et al, 1991; Thomas & Collier, 2002). Further, there is no evidence that the L₂ must be a medium of instruction to be learned well; countries like Sweden achieve high levels of L₂ competence by teaching it a subject and preserving the L₁ for instruction.

- **The L₂ as global language myth:** The foreign L₂ is often seen as necessary for further education, work and other opportunities, yet as Phillipson (1992) points out this has not happened in a political vacuum but is the result of deliberate promotion by powerful countries or groups of their respective languages. Meanwhile, employment in the informal sector of low-income countries involves 50 percent or

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more of the population and is increasing, and primary schooling is still terminal for most. The vast majority will not be integrated into the global market place and will have little use for the L₂ (Bruthiaux 2002).

The myth that parents want L₂ only in schooling: The poorest and most marginalized are acutely aware that their access both to education and to the high-status language has been limited, and they have a right to expect the school to teach their children the same language that has benefited the elite. Undoubtedly parents will choose the L₂ when presented with an either-or proposition; however, studies (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2002) have shown that when parents are allowed to make an educated choice from appropriate options, they overwhelmingly opt for bilingual rather than all L₂ programs, and most bilingual program evaluations report high levels of community support (CAL, 2001).

Strategies for Implementation of Mother Tongue

In spite of all the challenges highlighted above, mother tongue can be fully implemented in primary schools and consequently, a way to achieve sustainable development in Nigeria. However, there must be the political - will by the government at all levels. Central decision making body in education should be ready to enforce the implementation of mother tongue in our primary schools and beyond. Non-conformists, especially private schools, should be sanctioned as this will serve as a deterrent to others.

Also, governments can overcome the above obstacles by investing time and resources, along with a commitment to collaborate among linguists, educators and community members. All these agents can work together to prepare materials and resources for mother tongue education. More importantly, roles (as language of education, media and Houses of Assembly) have to be assigned to mother tongue. This is in agreement with Kolawole (2016), who submitted that our indigenous languages (mother tongues) have to be recognized and be assigned roles in our efforts at developing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that there is a concurrent relationship between mother tongue and national development. Nigeria as a nation also needs to enforce her language policy especially in primary school. If pupils have proper understanding of concepts in their various subjects through the use of mother tongue, their cognitive development will be enhanced. Based on this conviction, it is therefore suggested that the policy on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction for primary school should be fully implemented and enforced. Violators of this policy should be properly sanctioned

Mother tongue should be actively promoted in the primary schools through public enlightenment since we cannot develop above the level of the language(s) in which our education is expressed. Also, Nigeria has to make provision in terms of human and material resources for the use our mother tongue in primary schools which is the foundation for all other levels of education.

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