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Significance of Language Education in Poverty Eradication and National Development: The Role of English Language

By

ABDULLAHI S. ONISABI

*School of Languages,
Kaduna State College of Education,
Gidan –Waya, Kafanchan.*

and

MOHAMMED AUWAL ADAM

*School of Languages,
Kaduna State College of Education,
Gidan –Waya, Kafanchan.*

Abstract

Education is the cornerstone of economic growth, social development and principal means of improving the welfare of individuals. It helps to reduce poverty by increasing the value and efficiency of the labour offered by the poor and by mitigating the population, health and nutritional consequences of poverty. As economies worldwide are transformed by technological advances and new production methods that depend on a well-trained and intellectually flexible labour force, education becomes even more significant. Based on the above statement, this paper, however, focused on the significance of language education in poverty eradication and nation development. The strong relationship between development, education and language will be explored. Suggestions and recommendations were made also.

Key words: Poverty, development, language education.

The level of poverty in West Africa is very serious problem. The statistics about it are scary and alarming. For example, Report on Economic and Social

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Conditions in West Africa by United Nations Economic Commission for Africa gives the following gloomy picture of social conditions of the region: “In West Africa, approximately one person in three in the towns, and one in two in the rural areas, cannot afford the expenditure needed to cover their basic needs. The situation has reached emergency proportions and calls for urgent social action. (Recent Economic and Social Developments in West Africa and Prospects for 2010). Many different policies and programmes to combat the poverty in the region have been embarked upon by the government of various countries in West Africa, but yet the ugly face of poverty still persists.

In Nigeria, many poverty eradication programmes have been formulated and implemented in attempt to combat the menace of the poverty. For example, MAMSER, Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP); National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) etc can be cited as examples. This is what Tomlison (2002) was pointing out when he observed that it is in the last twenty years, Nigeria has had thirty – seven programmes implemented with the best of intentions by Federal government.

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the role of education, particularly language education, in poverty eradication and national development. It is incontrovertible that education is the cornerstone of economic growth, social development and principal means of improving the welfare of individuals. It also helps reduce poverty by increasing the value and efficiency of the labour offered by the poor and by mitigating the population, health and nutritional consequences of poverty. As economies worldwide are transformed by technological advances and new production methods that depend on a well-trained and intellectually flexible labour force, education becomes even more significant. Based on the above statement, this paper, however, will focus on the significance of language education in poverty eradication and national development.

But before going further, it would be appropriate to define some operational terms or key words in this paper so that we can have a clear picture of what is being discussed.

Definition of Poverty

Poverty, according to Webster New Collegiate Dictionary, is the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions. Onisabi (2011) quoted Egwuatu, (2002) who attempts to define poverty as follows: Poverty does not easily lend itself to a clear and concise all encompassing definition. It is complex and multi-dimensional. In general, it is inability of people to meet economic, social and other standards of well-being. The World Bank has defined poverty as unacceptable human deprivation in terms of economic opportunity, education, health and nutrition, as well as lack of empowerment and security.

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Concept of Development

Ayanniyi (2004) identified development as an aspect of social change that is alteration in the structure and function of a social system. This may take the form of a revolution, adoption of a new production technique, formation of an improvement council etc. This change in behavior might lead to which objectives have been accomplished in all our implementation process.

In another words, Gyau and Jurbe (2004) quoted Amaechi (1994) who defined development as the sum of total quantitative and qualitative improvement in the political, economic, social, cultural and psychological well-being of man, while the quantitative dimension appreciates economic growth such as provision of infrastructural facilities (schools, roads, hospitals, markets, airports and recreation centers); the qualitative dimension connotes equity, equality, fairness, social justice and good conscience in the distribution of these facilities. In essence, Gyau and Jurbe (2004) observed that we can have economic growth without experiencing development. We may have the best roads, best hospitals, best telephone services, best hotels and best airports etc., yet we cannot reasonably talk of development. Unless qualitative aspects (equality and fairness in the distribution of these resources are on the ground, there is no development.

Ayanniyi (2004) opined that development is a socio- economic process that was adopted in 1945 by developing countries in order to overcome their economic and institutional backwardness. A key component of development is the improvement of the material condition of the populace and equitable distribution of resources and elimination of poverty. Consequently, development is a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing economic, social and political dimension. Thus, in order to achieve meaningful development, it is pertinent to integrate the rural sector where majority of population lives. This can be achieved by increasing the skills of people through education and mass mobilization.

Language Education

Language in education, according to Obanya (1998) embraces the wider questions of
(a) the languages taught and learnt in the educational system, and
(b) the languages used for educating at various levels and sectors of a national system

Education as a Catalyst of Development

It is a well-known fact that education is the most veritable tool for national development. The salient role of education as an instrument of unity and development was affirmed in the National Policy on Education (2004) thus:

- a) Education is an instrument for national development. To this end, the formulation of ideas, their integration for national development and the interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education.
- b) Education fosters the worth and development of the individual for each individual's sake and for the general development of the society.
- c) There is need for quality of educational opportunities to all Nigerian children, irrespective of any real or imagined disabilities each according to his or ability.
- d) There is need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria. To this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive, while interest and ability should determine individual direction and democratic process.

Going through the goals of education outlined above, one should not be left doubtful that education is cornerstone and a veritable tool of any aspects of national development. It is capable of taking us out of woods if it is faithfully implemented. That is why Ezekwesile (2007) contended that:

A 21st century Nigeria must be one where knowledge and ideas through innovation would become the major levels for growth..... if Nigeria must therefore emerge as one of the twenty largest economies in the world by the year 2020, then we must, as nation, begin to see education as a strategic asset. Why must we consider education a strategic asset? First, all the four pillars of economic growth and development: the quality of a nation's macroeconomic environment, the state of a nation's public institution; the level of its technological readiness; and the quality of leadership are underpinned in education. Therefore, without education, you certainly cannot expect quality leadership; without education, the citizens of a nation are less to relate on equal terms with citizens of other countries. In a globalized world therefore, education plays a vital role in technical progress. It is also central to the ability of a country to maintain social cohesion and political stability. In fact, human capital as transformed through education, allows for more benign politics, less violence and more political stability.

One will agree with Okeke (2004) when she opined that the development should be conceived as a multi-dimensional process, involving changes in structure, attitudes and institutions as well as acceleration economic growth, reduction in equality and eradication of absolute poverty or one not being able to provide basic necessities for meaningful livelihood.

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Adam and Adam (2007) assert that education shall continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because it is the most important instrument for any fundamental change. The intellectual, social, political and economic outlook of any society has to be preceded by an education revolution.

It is a strong belief of the current writers that, if education is actually a veritable tool for development in all its ramifications, as has been pointed out by many research works, it must contribute immensely to the reduction of poverty in the society. Thus, all various types of development be it economic, technological, social and political developments must have a positive impact on the majority of the people of the country and therefore bring down the level of poverty to the certain minimum level. That is why the Greek Philosopher Plato, quoted by Al-Hassan (2007), pointed out that education empowers people to change their lives for the better, thereby enabling whole societies to develop.

Concept of Language

Language has been defined by many writers of different ages. Block and Tragger (1974) defined language as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which social groups co-operate.

Adam and Adam (2007) see language as a process by which an infinite set of sounds or utterances which produce meaning are being used by human beings to communicate with one another.

In view of the above, Aboderin (2002) asserts that language involves the use of vocal organs, that it is used for communicating thought by a group of people (or society), for sharing opinions, collaborating and interacting generally.

Importance of Language to the Educational System

Language is the vehicle for the acquisition of knowledge. This assertion was shared by Adeyemo and Biringwari (2007) when opine that language is very essential and highly indispensable when discussing teaching and learning in the society.

In the same vein, Al-Hassan (2007) quoted Malmkjaer (1991), who observes that :

There is no doubt that an individual's linguistic abilities affects his or her chances of success in the educational system of his or her culture, since much of what takes place in that system is linguistically realized.

Based on the above, Mallum and Haggai (2000) lamented that lack of mastery of the language used as a medium of teaching impedes understanding in the children. English is the language of the school and it must be learnt. It is the same English

language that is used in learning other subjects in school. Poor performance in English language will mean poor performance in other subjects.

It is apparently clear, from the above statements, that no any meaningful and significant development can be achieved in the educational system in absence of language. Because it is the vehicle to acquire knowledge. Thus, language plays a vital role in attainment and realization of any desired goals of the educational system, either in scientific, technological or vocational education.

Language Education in Nigeria

When we talk of language education, it can be viewed from two different perspectives as been observed by Meikiliuwa (2001) when he says: “Language education has two dimensions vis – a – vis language in education and language of education. The former refers to language taught or learnt in an educational system as a school subject, while the latter has to do with language used as a medium of instruction or language of instruction.

This idea was shared by Obanya (1998), when he asserts that language education embraces the wider questions of:

- a) The languages taught and learnt in the educational system and
- b) The languages used for educating at various levels and sectors of a national system.

National Policy on Education (2004)

In NPE, specific roles were assigned to indigenous languages and English (our language of wider communication) at different levels of education. At certain levels, the indigenous languages are expected to serve as languages of instruction while English is to be taught as a classroom subject. At some other stages/ levels of education, English is to take over as the language of instruction while indigenous languages can only be taught as classroom subjects (Aboderin, 2002).

At the primary school level, the policy states that the medium of instruction at the first three years shall be the language of environment while English shall be taught as a subject. On the other hand, as from the fourth year of primary school level, English shall be the medium of instruction while the language of immediate of immediate environment and French shall be taught (Adeyemo and Biringwari, 2007).

The Significance of Language Education in Poverty Eradication and National Development

Following the points previously highlighted in this discussion, the importance of education and particularly language education in national development cannot be over emphasized. There is a strong correlation between education, language education

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and development. This position was corroborated by Olaofe (1998: 19) when he remarks that:

.....there is a perceptible interdependence between education, language and development: development depends on education, which in turn, depends to a large extent, on language development. In fact, language stands rock solid in any educational system, especially because it is the medium by which educational concepts are imparted and learnt.

The thrust of this paper is to focus on the importance of language education in relation to the all round of developments in a nation. It is inevitable that whenever there are genuine developments it must have positive impacts on the entire citizenry. That is why Okolo (1998) observed that development means a reduction of the gap between rich and poor nations, but also between rich and poor people, between the educated and ignorant, between those whose education gives them freedom of choice in the development of skills, and those who cannot choose because they have no skills to offer.

In the same vein, Olaofe, (2002) asserts that the development of any nation is firmly rooted in applied linguistic research.

In order to be able derive benefits or tap from the importance of language education, concerted efforts must be made by all stakeholders of education to improve the language of education in Nigeria. By stakeholders, the writers mean, Government in all levels, Institutions of learning (from Primary to the tertiary institutions) and Teachers of languages and particularly English language owing to its status as official language of our great nation and the medium of instruction in all levels of education in Nigeria.

Problem with Language Education in Nigeria

Despite the fact that we have a very good language policy but the implementation is our major problem. Several research studies have consistently pointed to many different problems ranging from the poor implementation of the National Policy on Education, and consequently, to extreme low in – put and out-put of learners of English across the Nigerian educational levels. Some of the problems confronting language education in Nigeria are briefly outlined below.

It is observed that Government's lack of commitment is another factor militating against effective teaching and learning English in Nigeria. A clear manifestation of this is it is not doing enough to implement the national language policy in a meaningful way... Many see the National Language Policy as a mere

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statement of intention... (therefore) many children in the school system are neither literate in English nor in their mother – tongue (Oyetunde and Muodumogu 1999).

The National Language Center which is charged with training teachers of indigenous languages could not take off for want of funds and neither has the National book Development Centre performed satisfactorily in terms of making text books available in or on Nigerian languages (Al- Hassan, 2007).

English and French lack electronic teaching aids especially language laboratories and their accessories to facilitate the acquisition of pronunciation. (Al- Hassan, 2007)

Another problem in our language policy, has been observed by Aboderin (2002), is the non-availability of the mother-tongue or the language of immediate environment for every Nigerian child. The present situation where only thirty- six (36) of the over 300 indigenous languages have orthography (see table 1) cannot guarantee equal opportunity for every Nigerian child. A good grounding in the language of immediate community will ensure the child's initial integration into community while the Language of Wider Communication (LWC) will ensure a desirable spreading out to the larger community.

Low In – Put and Out-Put of Learners of English

Olagbaiye (1985) discovered that one out of every three primary pupils in Lagos cannot read well and a number of them cannot read at all, even text written in their indigenous languages.

Between 2001 and 2004, active research and participatory studies conducted in thirty public schools in Zaria area showed that only 5-10% of the pupils in primary 4-6 of the schools could read, speak or write a word of English. Some children in primary 6 could not even recognize Basic English alphabets (Olaofe, 2005).

A lack of any coherent and consistent adherence to an appropriate linguistic theory in fashioning English Language Teaching (ELT) programmes has left its own indelible mark on the overall image of failure of the total Nigeria ELT situation. Consequently, the English language learnt and used in an incoherent hotchpotch not capable of serving as an effective and efficient tool of communication in any of the situations, general or special, everyday or academic or professional, in which it is required (Ubahakwe, 1988).

Madaki (2007) points to lukewarm attitudes towards using the languages in various components of the educational system as a result of lack of awareness of the language policy by many practicing teachers, headmasters, principals, supervisors and inspectors of education, parents and various community.

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Inadequacy of trained teachers in various Nigerian Languages, lack teaching and learning materials, lack of committed teachers, problem of curriculum development in various Nigerian languages (Madaki,2007, Al- Hassan, 2007 and Aruwa and Deshi, 2004).

Conclusion

This paper attempted to examine the significance of Language Education to the national development. It briefly reviewed the role of education to the national development and highlighted the strong relationship between development, education and language. Some problems confronted by language education in Nigeria were briefly outlined while suggestions or recommendations were proffered.

Table 1: Orthography of Nigerian Languages

Manual	S/N	Languages	States where spoken
I	1.	Hausa	Kano, Kaduna, Katsina, Jigawa, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, Niger, Bauchi, Gombe.
	2.	Igbo	Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Bayelsa, Imo, Ebonyi,
	3.	Yoruba	Delta
	4.	Efiki	Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Lagos, Kwara, Ondo, Ekiti, Kogi Cross River
II	5.	Edo	Edo
	6.	Tiv	Benue
	7.	Fulfude	Adamawa, Taraba, Gombe
	8.	Kanuri	Borno, Yobe
	9.	Ijo	Rivers
III	10.	Ibibio	Akwa – Ibom
	11.	Nupe	Niger, Kwara
	12.	Beron	Plateau
	13.	Idoma	Benue
	14.	Kalabari	Rivers
IV	15.	Ebira	Kogi, Federal Capital Territory (FCT).
	16.	Igala	Benue, Kogi
	17.	Isoko	Delta
	18.	Kaje	Kaduna
	19.	Gbagyi/Gwari	Kaduna, Niger, FCT, Plateau, Nasarawa.
	20.	Bwatye	Adamawa, Taraba
	21.	Esan	Edo
	22.	Bura	Borno, Adamawa

V	23.	Ikwere	Rivers
	24.	Urhobo	Delta
	25.	Wukari jukun	Taraba, Adamawa
VI	26.	Obolo	Akwa- Ibom, Rivers
	27.	Igede	Benue, Cross- River
	28.	Mbembe	Cross- River
	29.	Tarok	Plateau
	30.	Lokaa	Cross – River
VII	31.	Ejagham	Cross – River
	32.	Etsalo	Edo
	33.	Koro	Kaduna, Nasarawa
	34.	Margi	Borno, Adamawa
	35.	Mumeye	Taraba
	36.	Ngas	Plateau

Source: Nigeria Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC)

Recommendations

Having examined the expected role of Language Education in the national development, this paper contends, despite the mountainous problems confronting the language education in Nigeria, that if the concerted efforts are made by the stakeholders in the educational industry, it can undoubtedly play a significant and formidable role in the national development and consequently contribute immensely to the poverty eradication. Therefore, suggestions and recommendations are briefly spelt out below.

1. Government, as matter of urgency, should make concerted efforts to improve and upgrade the existing facilities in our schools, particularly library, teaching and learning materials among others.
2. Imperative for a functional and dynamic Language Education Policy in Nigeria and full implementation of the policy.
3. Adequate funding of education in all levels.
4. Teacher training schools, colleges of education and faculty of education in our universities are urged to improve more on area of methodology and exposure of their students to the use of technical education or material resources, particularly the use of language laboratory.
5. For school of languages and language arts should take this humble suggestion by Olaofe (1997) for the betterment of future of our rising generation. According to Olaofe (1997), our graduates must be trained to be creative,

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innovative and self-reliant, if they are to face the socio-economic realities of the moment. It means that the teaching-learning situations across educational levels should move learners beyond rudimentary language utilization level to high-order language thinking tasks in order to produce the kind of self-actualized and self-reliant school leavers relevant to the overall needs of the nation.

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