

LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION IN NIGERIA: POLICY TO PRACTICE

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Abstract

The Nigerian nation is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society with over 500 indigenous languages (Wiki Answers). The government of Nigeria appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion, and preservation of cultures and thus advocates that every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment and in the interest of national unity, every child shall learn one of the three major Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (FRN, 2004:10). The policy statement has remained a mere statement of intention as it is not practiced in any state of the federation. A gap exists between the language policy and what is practiced in the classrooms. The policy statement is plagued with some challenges thereby, making its implementation difficult, if not impossible in all parts of the federation. The position of this paper is that not until some measures are taken to ameliorate the challenges plaguing the implementation of the policy statement, English language will continue to be the language of instruction in practice.

A policy is a principle or protocol that guide decisions and achieve rational outcomes. Language policy is the plan of course of action of a dynamic programme in directing language affairs as needed by government. It is what a government does either officially through legislation, court decisions, or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages, (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia). Many countries of the world have a language policy designed to favour or discourage the use of a particular language or set of languages. This paper examines what the National Policy on Education (2004) specifies as language of instruction at the primary level of education and the factors hindering the implementation of the policy statement. It also examines the importance of language, English as language of instruction and then made some recommendations.

Importance of Language

Human communication is specifically called “language”. Human beings have both the oral and written language. The oral language, as in listening and speaking, involves the use of vocal sounds while written language involves the arbitrary graphic representation of the sounds in writing. Human communication, that is language, is far more complex than the system of communication used by non-human. Human beings do not communicate in isolated sounds or words, rather sounds and words are woven together in connected discourse. Man’s daily activities are conducted via language. Language carries information. It is like a map that points to people, things and places all around us. It is a meaningful medium of sending a message from a sender to a receiver. How well individuals use language has much to do with what kind of people they are. Language is the most important tool of communication that distinguishes human beings from non-humans; educated from uneducated persons. Word power is as important as muscular power. With inspiring words, an individual will triumph over a formidable enemy. Ojetunde (2012) stated that the strategic position occupied by language in human affairs can never be exaggerated, that whatever scientific and technological breakthroughs achieved by man to date is attributed to the existence of language.

Language is the most powerful tool of learning. It serves a crucial role in the teaching/learning process as all the educational messages the teacher has to pass on to the learner are encoded in language. How far a learner is able to learn depends very much on his ability to grasp and understand a spoken utterance in the language in which the instruction is passed on to him.

Language of Instruction and National Policy on Education

The language of instruction is so vital to the teaching-learning process that attention is given to it in the National Policy on Education. By language of instruction is meant the language which the teacher uses to pass on the instructional or educational messages to the learner in order to effect a change in the learner's behavior in a desired direction. According to Perren (1967) cited in Ogbonyomi (2003), it is the language used as a teaching medium (in) informal and formal setting for the transmission of knowledge and skill aimed at developing the pupils' or students' mind and character. Studies have shown that the child will learn very little, if he has not mastered the language of instruction. He cannot learn the most elementary facts and ideas until he has understood the language in which those (educational) ideas are expressed, (Olagoke, 1979; Idris (1994) in Danmaigoro, 2003).

According to Ojetunde (2012), scholars such as Fafunwa (1989), Emenanjo (1990) and Bamgbose (1991) are of the opinion that mother-tongue (MT) should serve as a medium of instruction in the formative years (1-12) and that this should extend to as late a stage as possible. This, according to them, will offer the child opportunity to explore his natural environment, develop curiosity, communicate in the natural language, develop reasoning ability and engender self confidence as practiced in many countries such as China, Kenya, India, Tanzania, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong etc. Awobuluyi, (1998) stated that the overall effect of the suggestions and pressures from well meaning Nigerians brought about an important shift in the attitude of government, particularly at the Federal level to the indigenous languages.

The shift, to begin with, took the form of an admission by government of what had long been known to linguists and anthropologists namely, that a language is simultaneously a vehicle for a people's culture and means of maintaining and indefinitely preserving that culture. The implication of this which the government came to see and appreciate, is that if individuals are not ultimately to lose their national identity together with their rich indigenous cultures, then they must begin to pay attention to the teaching of their indigenous languages, (Awobuluyi, 1998). In addition to seeing the relationship between language and culture, the government also came to see the indigenous languages more clearly for what they had all along been – a veritable and practical means of communication some of which could be easily harnessed for effecting national integration, a matter of paramount importance for a country still struggling to consolidate its independence, (Awobuluyi, 1998). For these reasons, the government deemed it fit to specify the language of instruction for each level of education in order to tackle problems associated with language of instruction in Nigeria.

Some twenty years after independence, some people felt and openly canvassed in the Parliament for English to be replaced as official language by one of Nigerian's indigenous languages (Bamgbose, 1976 in Awobuluyi, 1998). Federal government began from late 1970's onward to take interest in, and make policy pronouncements on the teaching of indigenous languages at the various levels of the educational system. In the National Policy on Education first published in 1977, revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004, the position of the government concerning language or medium of instruction is clearly stated. In the 2004 edition of the National Policy on Education, it is clearly stated thus:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years, and that during this period, English shall be taught as a subject. Then from the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment shall be taught as subjects, (p.16).

The language of the environment is by implication, the mother-tongue (MT) or the language spoken by the people of the community. The second implication is to cater for situations where the MT may not be viable as language of instruction. The implementation of this policy is not being pursued with

any degree of seriousness, anywhere in the country. English language has remained the language of instruction despite the policy statement.

English Language in Nigeria

The inception of English language in Nigeria could be traced back to the arrival of the missionaries, traders, and the colonial masters in the 16th century (Odumuh, 1987 in Abubakar, 2003). The need to foster understanding and enhance communication between the missionaries, traders, colonial masters, and the local people (i.e. Nigerians) triggered on the pursuance of a policy that encourage the use of English in Nigeria. For the British traders, English was a contact language between them and the Nigerian middle men along the coasts. The local people wanted and indeed, encouraged their children to learn English which had then become the status symbol of commerce, civilization and Christianity (Fafunwa, 1974 in Abubakar, 2003).

English was super-imposed on Nigeria by colonization. Bamgbose (1975) cited in Odusina (1989) remarked that English is about the most important of all the heritages left behind by the British colonial administration. English is today, the official language in Nigeria as well as the acceptable medium of expression in all facets of national life. Banjo (1989) noted that, if an educated man is defined in Nigeria as one who had had at least secondary education, then no Nigerian who speaks no English can be regarded as being educated. Banjo stressed further that this is because, English is a key subject at the primary and secondary levels and becomes the medium of instruction before the end of the primary level.

English is used for a variety of purposes in Nigeria. It has for well over a century now continued to enjoy the pride of place in the nation's educational system (Awobuluyi, 1998). It is the language of government, business and commerce, education, the mass media, literature, much internal and external communication (Bamgbose in Spencer (ed), 1971). Socially, economically, politically, English is the medium of communication. It is the primary vehicle of international communication, a passport to international or universal cultural uniformity and cohesion.

English language determines the social status of an individual in Nigeria. It ensures an individual's social mobility. It is an indispensable requirement for anyone to rise in the Nigerian society. It is the language of unity. Given the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Nigerian society, with the three major languages - Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa contending for priority attention, English has the advantage of being a compromise candidate at least, in the interim since the adoption of one of the so-called major indigenous languages as the national language would have meant the alienation of large sections of the citizenry, especially in an atmosphere bedeviled by ethnic nationalisms (or parochialisms). The use of English has meant continuity and it is thus, inevitable for system maintenance, (Odumuh, 1989). English has fostered the emergence of a national culture, boosted the spread of national consciousness, facilitated transactional interaction and provided a base for the development of a national identity, (Ikegulu, 1989).

English enjoys the status of being a second language in Nigeria. It is taught and learnt as such. The second language situation is one in which the language has special status in the community e.g. as the medium of instruction in the sector of the educational system, as the official language in the courts, etc. In such situations, there is usually 'pervasive public awareness' of the language, although the general standard of competence in it may not be very high and the language is on a par with all others that are taught (and used), (Strevens, 1978, cited in Odusina, 1989).

English in Nigeria cannot be classified as a native language because there are indigenous languages. In recent times, however, it has become fashionable for most Nigerian children in both urban and rural areas to adopt English as their native language or mother tongue, thereby relegating their own indigenous language which they think does not command same status like the English, to the background.

Commenting on this, Odusina (1989) remarked that so disadvantaged were the indigenous languages in the status-conscious people that Nigerians are, that by 1960, English had become the ‘mother-tongue’ of the children of most middle and elite families. Stressing further, Odusina pointed out that the learning of the Nigerian languages in the secondary school became mere academic exercises for less intelligent children. According to Awobuluyi (1998), pupils and parents strongly hold the opinion that it is financially more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages.

English language enjoys a greater geographical spread, a greater popular acceptance, a greater status, as a language of communication and learning both at the national and international levels. Its present-day importance as a world language is the main reason for the widespread demand for English. English is learned at some levels of the educational systems of nearly every country in the world, both highly developed countries and those in the process of development. English and other Nigerian languages are linguistic partners in meeting the communicative needs of the Nigerian populace. English however, is essential for the total emancipation of the Nigerian society.

English language has been the language of instruction in Nigerian schools with an unbroken history of over one hundred years. It was introduced into the country by missionaries who arrived at Badagry in 1842. The desire to speak the type of language spoken by the white men motivated the people then to learn English and also, the desire to read books particularly, the Holy Bible, (Bdliyu, 1999 cited in Danmaigoro, 2003). The local people wanted and indeed, encouraged their children to learn English which according to Fafunwa (1974) cited in Abubakar, (2003) had become the status symbol of commerce, civilization and Christianity. English language, ever since, had been spoken in various forms in Nigeria for about four centuries, (Odumah, 1989).

English, apart from being the language of instruction in Nigeria, is also a school subject. English teaches the ability that underlies the learning of all other school subjects. It is a foundation subject, the medium through which other subjects are learnt.

Factors Militating against the Implementation of the Language Policy in Nigeria

Nigeria, like any other African country, suffers from an extraordinarily high degree linguistic diversity with a population of over 148 million (Wikipedia, The free Encyclopedia). Nigeria ranks third in the world with 516 ethnic languages spoken, below Papua New Guinea with 820 and Indonesia with 742 (Vistawide). The linguistic map of Nigeria depicts it as a multi-lingual nation. This is predicated on the fact that there are diverse ethnic groups with their varying languages in each of the regions that make up the nation, Nigeria, (Ogunsiji, 2001 cited in Ojetunde, 2012).

An independent mono-lingual and mono-cultural country has little or no problem of choosing its own language (if it wishes) as a medium of instruction. A country like Nigeria just like many countries in the world particularly in Africa, due to their multi-lingual and multi-cultural nature, have problems in assigning roles to languages. The policy provisions on language in the NPE are very explicit; however, the implementation had been plagued with a lot of challenges. The following are some of the challenges militating against with the implementation of the language policy.

1. Lack of Awareness: Most teachers as well as political leaders, education managers, parents and the public are not enlightened about the use of indigenous languages as language of instruction. This has led to seeming misunderstanding, misconception and misapplication of the language policy provisions, (Obioma, 2011).

2. Linguistically Mixed Classroom: Considering the fact that Nigeria is a multilingual and a multicultural nation, it becomes virtually impossible to find a classroom that is composed of learners from one linguistic group particularly in parts of the country where the three major Nigerian languages – Igbo,

Yoruba and Hausa are not spoken. In Rivers State for instance, there are so many ethnic groups with different languages and dialects. The composition of a class in a Port Harcourt school could be made up of over eight linguistic groups – Ikwerre, Ekpeye, Ogoni, Abua, Andoni, Kalabari, Ijaw and Okrika. In such a situation, which indigenous language can be used as the language of instruction? The question critics have asked in this direction is: How do people identify the language(s) of the immediate community in pluralistic settings like urban centres or international communities like universities? Thus, identifying the indigenous language to use in a linguistically mixed classroom is a major factor hindering the implementation of the language policy in any part of the country particularly, in urban settings.

3. Lack of Teachers: Teachers are key players in the implementation of any curriculum package. A teacher's ability to use his own mother tongue to teach is different from a teacher being trained to use his mother tongue to teach. How possible will it be for the government to train teachers in over 500 indigenous languages? Where are the institutions? What about the financial implication? As at 1988, the total number of teachers required for the teaching of three major Nigerian languages was 55,237. Only 6,383 or 11.6% of these were available, (Emenanjo, 1998). Now, one can imagine the number of teachers needed in all primary schools in the federation to teach in the mother tongue or language of the environment and the cost of training them. Critics have also asked if the recruitment or training of these teachers is to be by chance or coordinated programme involving all agencies concerned, (Emenanjo, 1998).

4. Lack of Necessary Materials: For effective teaching and learning to take place, necessary materials in form of books, teaching or instructional materials, must be available. It is on record that government agencies such as Nigeria Education Research and Development Council (NERDC), National Teachers Institute (NTI), Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), West African Examination Council (WAEC) etc. have developed some materials like L₁ primary school curricula, L₂ & L₂ JSS curricula, L₁ SSS curricula, orthographies, textbooks and materials in the three major Nigerian languages. The question is: How possible will it be for the agencies concerned to develop teaching and learning materials for over 500 languages? The fact remains that books and other teaching materials that will enhance the teaching and learning of mother-tongue or the language of the environment community are not available. In a state like Rivers, which language curricula will be developed and used in all the schools for the different ethnic groups within the state? Accommodating all the 500 odd languages in a scheme in practice, will definitely not be academically feasible.

5. The Government: There is no strong political will and leadership on the part of the government to implement the language provisions. This is probably because the language provisions are not in any way considered a priority. So, there is no clearly worked out action plan that will guide implementation at the lowest level. Obioma (2011) stated that the federal government has made policy formulation, guidelines and procedures following due process for the implementation of the language provision and has established necessary institutional structures to facilitate, monitor and supervise the effective implementation of the language provisions. The state governments on their part, have not followed suit. If the government is serious at implementing the language policy, there should have been laid down sanctions for defaulters.

6. Pupils' and Parental Attitude: Most children use the English language as their first language (L₁). Such children enter the lower primary classes knowing nothing about their mother tongue or the language of the environment they live in. They cannot speak nor grasp any utterance spoken in language that the policy statement is advocating for its use as a language of instruction (i.e. MT or LE). How academically feasible will it be to teach such a child in a language he knows nothing about? Parents on their part, do not even want their children to speak their mother tongue if not, why should a parent be communicating to his/her child in English language? A parent that does not want his/her child to speak the native language will certainly not want that child to be taught in such native language. Right from the

early missionary era, the local people had always wanted and indeed encouraged their children to learn English (Fafunwa, 1974 in Abubakar, 2003). This attitude is still very much in place and thus hinders the implementation of the language policy statement.

7. The Private Schools: There are so many private schools littered all through the federation. Ogbonyomi (2003) observed that many parents who send their children to private nursery and primary schools expect them to be taught in English even at the pre-primary level. All private schools are profit-making ventures and will certainly succumb to what their patronisers want, rather than adhering to government policies that do not attract any form of penalty.

8. Duration of the use of the Specified Language: The policy specifies that the language of the environment will be used to teach the child in the nursery and the lower primary classes (1-3). This duration does not connote any form of seriousness. Critics have questioned thus: if the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community is considered a very important medium for achieving initial and permanent literacy and numeracy, why should it be only used 'initial' and not throughout the whole of primary education? They have also asked: if the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of the child's culture and the link between the home and the school, why should it be "principal" and not "solely" at this level? (Emenanjo, 1998).

Conclusion

Not until the above measures are put in place, the language policy statement for the lower primary level of education will continue to be a mere statement of intention, not practicable in the classroom.

Recommendations

The policy statement will only work if the following measures are put in place:

- Political leaders, educators, parents and the public in general should be adequately sensitised about the language policy on education.
- Parents and pupils should be enlightened on the importance of upholding their mother tongue in order to enable them change their attitude towards indigenous languages (both mother tongue and language of the environment).
- There should be laid down sanctions for defaulters at all levels – federal, state, local and even school. Thus the federal government should specify sanctions for defaulting states, and state government should do same for defaulting local government, and an effective and efficient monitoring team should be delegated to ensure that mother tongue or the language of the environment is used strictly in teaching pupils at the lower primary level of education.
- The above are however dependent on adequate provision of all that is needed to effectively implement the policy. Hence teaching and learning materials e.g. text books and instructional materials, as well as qualified teachers should be made available to cater for all the languages – over 500.
- Colleges of education and Faculties of Education in the Universities should plan language education courses for all the languages in a given state so that would-be-teachers will be trained to have rudimentary knowledge of their mother-tongue as well as the language of the immediate environment.

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