

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract

English language in Nigeria is often regarded as a language of imposition going by its introduction and incursion into Nigeria by missionaries and colonial masters, and its unbroken history of 165 years. If there is any area in our national life where the English language is more noticeable or is playing a prominent role, it is in the Nigerian educational system - be it primary, secondary or tertiary. This paper seeks to examine the evolution of English language in Nigeria, its characteristics and uses in Nigeria. The paper will also attempt to establish whether or not the English language in Nigeria has been an effective tool for national cohesion and development amidst the challenges of the 21^M century.

Introduction What is language?

It is not out of place to begin a paper of this magnitude and with language as its main thrust with working definitions. According to the renowned linguist Halliday (1964), language is a paternal social activity of human beings displaying patterns of substance (phonetic and graphics) form (grammar and lexis) and context. The English phonetician and renowned scholar in languages, Sweet (1992), defined language as the expression of ideas by means of speech sound combined into words, words combined into sentences, and these combinations answering to that idea into thoughts. Emenike and Odeyemi (2002), also see language 'as systems of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a group of people cooperate or a rule of governed symbols for conveying meaning'

From the above definitions, one can see that because human beings as social animals need information and communications, there is a compelling need to have a platform for communicating ideas, emotions etc. This is the emergence of language. It thus, became the chief facilitator with which all forms of human activities, socialization and interaction are conducted - be it learning, trading or even quarreling.

Language is said to be systemic because it is organized and its operation or usage is governed by a set of rules. For language to be effective as to engender meaning, it must be used within the framework of the rules such as word order, concord, inflections etc.

Language is arbitrary because there is no inherent relationship between language symbols and the meaning of the objects they refer to or represent. For instance, what is the direct semblance between the table and a four-legged object with a flat surface in the real world. The four-legged object could have been anything else but table. In that case there is no relationship between the referent and the meaning attached to it. The arbitrary nature of language evolved over time with the development of language. That language is symbolic derives from the fact that a symbol on its own does not have meaning but depends on conventions to make meaning of their own but immediately there are seen, objects and experiences are conjured up in the mind of the people. Language is equally said to be vocal because language is produced using the vocal tract. The speech process begins in the lung with the buildup of air to when it is expelled either through the mouth or nose. Language is above all dynamic. It is often said that the permanent thing in the world is change. That language is dynamic means it is not static, like human beings it is subject to change. This may be as a result of invention, discovering, taste, perception and sophistry. It could also be a *form of loan words* or coinage of new words or the evolution from one *period to the other* as witnessed in *English language*-medieval English, Middle English and modern *English*.

English Language in Nigeria

English is one of the most *widely spread* and spoken languages in the world with over 700 million speakers. This spread is attributable to many factors-viz (the colonial exploit of Great Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries, and the influence and dominance of America in the world politics, economy and information technology. The introduction and incursion of English language into Nigeria could be traced to the above factors. How and when? Tomori (1974), captures the experience vividly. English in Nigeria has had an unbroken history of (165) years. It was introduced into Nigeria by missionaries who arrived at Badagry in 1842. It is (rue that before then (here was a settlement of English-speaking freed slaves in Sierra Leone-. Also before that time there were sporadic incursions of

English slave traders into towns and cities along the coasts of West Africa, These had very little effect on the introduction of English into Nigeria. Thomas Birch Freeman, of the Wesleyan Mission, arrived in Badagry in 1842. He was closely followed by Henry Townsend of the CMS mission. By 1843 the CMS mission had moved to Abeokuta and started the work of evangelization. The activities of the missionaries were not confined to Evangelization: they also engaged in educational activities.(p.2).

The church as well as the state epitomized by the missionaries and colonialists respectively saw the urgent need to produce a Nigerian elite to help the missionaries and colonial administrators. The educational policy on English language before and after the amalgamation of the Education Departments of Northern and Southern Nigeria prior to 1948, point to the fact that there was a compelling need to produce an English-speaking Nigerian elite and this was paramount in the minds of the early colonial administrators. The record also shows that Nigerians themselves were enthusiastic about learning to speak standard British English which had become more or less the most prized status-symbol in colonial Nigeria. With the colonization of Nigeria, what was needed for the government of the territory was not just a trade language but an official language and English language played these roles perfectly thus the cultivation of standard British English in Nigeria and the beginning of a conscious educational policy of the colonial administration. Sadly enough, English in Nigeria became a language of conquest and of imposition, and thus, entrenched in the Nigerian system. This paper will now examine the conditions and situations of motivation that led to English language taking a fair root in Nigeria. It was the *Education Ordinance of 1882* that made the teaching and learning of English compulsory as a condition for the award of government grants to proprietors of schools in the country. Nigerians were motivated to learn English by the desire to speak the type of language spoken by the Whiteman, the desire to read books in the language, particularly the Bible and also the desire to get jobs eventually in the missions. Arising from this *Education Ordinance* English language was made compulsory in all schools in the country in 1882. The government of the Southern provinces did much to promote the cause of English in Nigeria through inspection of schools, advice on the curriculum, and choice of books and so on. These and other several incidents significantly help in strengthening the motivation of learning English during the period 1882 to 1927.

Motivation for learning and speaking English in Nigeria today than ever before is very strong. The Report of the Commonwealth Conference on the teaching of English as a Second language (1961), sums it up this way.

The place of English varies in different commonwealth countries from that of sole mother tongue to that of the first foreign language with many subtle gradations between these two extremes. In many commonwealth countries however, English is a medium of instruction in secondary and higher education and in some it is taught to at least the older children in the elementary schools- in some countries throughout the elementary schools. It will be, moreover, for some years to come the common language of technology and commerce and of public and professional life throughout the commonwealth, and it is in many cases the easiest means of communication with many foreign countries (p. 1).

This is aptly so in Nigeria and that taken us to the roles English language is eminently playing in Nigeria.

The Role of English Language in Nigeria

English language is the official language in Nigeria. What does this mean? It means that it is the language used to conduct the business of government of the country. It means that government policies, documents, statements and correspondences are all couched or written in English language. Debates on the floor of state and national houses of Assembly are also conducted in English language. Section 55 of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria stipulates, "that the business of the National Assembly (or state) shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof."

This constitutional provision and by extension the government policy statement at best is ambivalent. The true situation in Nigeria remains that up till now it is only the English language that is being used in conducting the business of the house. The clause " when adequate arrangements have been made thereof is not only misleading but vexatious for after many years that clause was inserted no adequate arrangements in terms

of indigenous language have been made to take over from English. This issue of a national language is so germane to our development as a nation and within the comity of nations that we cannot afford to toil with the issue. If we must develop as a nation in this age of computer and information technology, and of international trade we will need to embrace English language to succeed in this direction. According to Ime Ikiddeh (1981),

The present fate of English and of other European languages in Africa is a concomitant of their history. Whatever advantages English has conferred upon us not only as an international language, but also as up to now, the Language of our national unity, whatever the level of our competence in its use and the vigour of our energies in its promotion, it unfortunately remains true that it was a language of conquest and therefore of imposition. It also remains true that however open-mindedly we have accepted it as our language and strained ourselves to use it as such, the cultural artifacts of which the language is essential part, the social attitudes inspired by it, its sound system, its intonation patterns, its rhythms in speech and-writing, its idioms of seriousness and humour-all these have always been slightly foreign to our culture and environment (P. 79)

This paper thinks that the issue here is not whether English is foreign and alien to our culture/environment or whether it is a language of imposition but whether it has been able to play any meaningful role in our quest for national development and technological breakthrough, it is rather whether or not it has served the country well as a tool or agent of national cohesion in the midst of the multiplicity of languages in Nigeria. Without sounding unpatriotic or apologetic to the cause of English language in Nigeria, at the expense of mother tongue or put succinctly indigenous language, this writer is of the view that the language has fared very well. For now it is our official language and will remain so for a long time to come whether we will it or not. If there is one area in Nigeria where the English language has made or is still making so profound a landmark impact it is in Nigerian Educational system. Since the country's economic, political Scientific, technological development and advancement of the nation is being determined by the Nigerian Educational system, according to (NERCE 1991), it is the cornerstone of any nation like Nigeria and will also remain for sometimes a big industry in the country. Education can be defined as a system of institutions, resources and processes for the development and the delivery of knowledge, skills and attitudes for the development of the child and the society at large (Ogunmosule 1992). Lasso (1996), also views education as a crucial factor in the economic development, social welfare and improvement of the quality of life of any nation. It is crystal clear that education is the most powerful instrument for developing and empowering citizens for survival which in turn develops the nation. Since Nigeria is multilingual in nature there is need to have an instrument and binding force that can bring about unification in the Nigeria educational system in the area of a common language of instruction in all levels of learning in the educational sector of the country. That common language has been and will remain English language for some time to come. English language is used as a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools -be it primary, secondary or tertiary. This means that English is used to teach pupils and students in schools, class work, and examinations are also done using the language. Textbooks are written in English. That accounts for why so much attention and importance is attached to the teaching and learning of the language in Nigeria.

Beside the game of soccer (football) the next common factor that unites the nation is the use of English in Nigeria. No doubt the multiplicity of languages and ethnic groupings has created a chaotic, volatile and fragment language situation in Nigeria. English language had been able to some extent unite the members of these ethnic groups since they communicate among themselves using the language. It becomes possible for them to discuss issues of common interest thereby establishing and sustaining bonds of unity in the country. There is no doubt that one of the daunting challenges that English language in Nigeria is facing in this 21st century is the clamour for an indigenous language to replace it or serve as a national language or lingua Franca in the country. Nigeria as a nation is made up of different ethnic groups with different languages. A musician once aptly described the chaotic language situation in Nigeria as *one-kilometer means another language*, [f any of the languages is adopted as the language of the country, the speakers of such a language will no doubt have undue advantage over others because of the accessibility to government positions it will give people from such a language group. This ultimately will place others in disadvantaged position that might create fears and suspicion. This is already happening in the Northern part of the country where Hausa overtly or covertly is being adopted as the language for the region. On this vexed issue of adopting a nation language Nigerians are

sentimental, fanatical and vociferous about it. Our problem stem from the fact that Nigerians do not fully recognize any other language apart from their own. Everyone clings tenaciously to his or her own language for fear of domination and marginalization. To impose any indigenous language on them, on the pretext of a national language will further exacerbate the already volatile situation. This is where English language comes to the rescue. The use of English in Nigeria

has helped and is still helping to douse these fears-real or imagined. Nigeria is not prepared for another war. This time a war of languages.

Recommendations

For English language in Nigeria to be strengthen and fortified, this paper makes the followings:

1. The Federal Government should as a matter of priority give more impetus to the teaching and learning of English language in the country.
2. The government should encourage research work in all areas of the language.
3. As part of efforts to strengthen the language, the literature aspect of the subject should be made compulsory in all schools.

Conclusion

I have said elsewhere in this paper that there abound favourable factors that will make the country more dispose towards adopting and using English language in Nigeria. One, if Nigeria must remain relevant in world international economy and politics, where the speakers of English account for over 700 million of the world population, two, if the nation will not be kept in the dark in this age of internet and information technology (IT) which makes profuse use of English, three, if the nation can as well jettison a language that over the years has served as a unifying factor- welding link between the divergent people of this country. Can we afford to do without all these?

This paper is of the view that it is not just enough to clamour for a change or replacement for English language but we should be bold enough to accept the fact that with the multiplicity of language in the country the most viable alternative or option is English language-if only to douse-the fears of suspicious and domination. I make bold to say therefore, that but for English, the language situation in Nigeria would have been something akin to the biblical 'Tower of Babel' with its attendant problems and con-comittant effects language like an organism can only live, grow and flourish when conditions around it are favourable. There are favourable conditions for English language to flourish in Nigeria.

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