

REPOSITIONING LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: A CASE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language, undoubtedly occupies an important position in the life of a people because of its usefulness as a vehicle for social mobilization, integration and growth. This paper, therefore, examines the importance of language education especially English Language in a society such as ours as well as the problems militating against the use of English Language in education in Nigeria. It also recommends ways through which English Language education can be strengthened and repositioned for the realization of its set goals and objectives in Nigeria.

Introduction

It was Ludwig Wittgenstein as quoted by Dale (1969) that posited that "the limit of my language is the limit of my world". The foregoing assertion of Wittgenstein, no doubt, underscores the fact that language is not only important in a society like ours but also a veritable and an indisputable tool for fostering the much-vaunted social, economic, intellectual and academic growth. Language also fosters development of both the individual and the nation at large, (thus, the better shaped and positioned the language of a people, the more the ethno-Linguistic, groups that make up the nation would be united (Nwakile 2002).

It is an indisputable fact that even though language education in Nigeria has witnessed a tremendous development in the past with respect to English Language, it is also an incontrovertible fact that the same English Language has in the recent past witnessed a plethora of teething problems. Hence, like the patient suffering from appendicitis direly needs a doctor to conduct appendectomy on him/her, the English Language education in Nigeria urgently needs to be redressed, redirected, refocused and, indeed, repositioned. How to realize this noble objective of restructuring and reshaping the English language education in Nigeria is the main focus of this paper.

Language: A Journey To Definition

Quite a lot of academic ink had been expended on trying to find and arrive at a seemingly acceptable definition of the term "language". According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Language is human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, feelings and desires by means of a system of sounds and sound symbols. In line with this definition is the fact that language is non-instinctive and can only be used by human beings. Halliday (1964) sees language as "a paternal social activity of human beings displaying patterns of substance, form and context". The patterns, according to Halliday, are what constitute different areas in the study of language. Sweat (1992), an English phonetician and language scholar also defined language as the expression of ideas by means of speech sounds combined into words, words combined into sentence and this combination answering to that of ideas into thought.

Carrol (1966), on his own part, opines that language is a structured system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds which is used, or can be used, in interpersonal communication by an aggregate of human beings and which rather exhaustively catalogs the things, events and processes in the human development. Apart from the above authorities, several definitions have been ascribed to language by some African writers. Ifensor (1996) defines languages as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which people within a social group interact. This writer goes further to explain that the vocal symbols are speech sounds produced by speech organs which include the larynx, pharynx and the vocal cords. Akin to the above definition of language by Ifensor (1996) is the definition given to language by Nwosu (1996). According to this prolific writer, "language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by which human

beings communicate". Derivable, therefore, from both Ifensor and Nwosu's definition is that language is systematic, arbitrary, symbolic and human. From the above, therefore, language may aptly be defined as a means of communication which must be systematic, arbitrary, symbolic and human.

What is English Language

English language, according to the *New English Dictionary and Thesaurus*, is, simply "the language of the English people and US, and many areas, formerly under British control." In Nigeria, the English language is not just the language of scholarship and learning. As Ajiboye (1999) puts it, English Language also happens to be the official language supposed to be spoken and not just written, by as many Nigerians as possible. Sarwal (2004) states that over 6.5 billion human beings use over 6,800 Languages to carry out their affairs at present, but English Language has emerged as the 'de facto' Global language for universal communication in the closing years of the twentieth century.

From the above, therefore, it can safely be said that repositioning English language education in Nigeria involves the totality of efforts to be made towards uplifting and bettering English Language education in Nigeria so as to meet up with the global demands.

The Concept Of Language Education

Language education in the words of Udoegu (1999) in concurred with such issues as language policy and planning as well as Language use in educational institutions and in the overall educational process. Language education emphasizes language acquisition and learning, teacher preparation and curriculum development in relation to language and literature at all levels of the educational system. Language education embraces wider questions of the language taught and learnt in the educational system and the language used for education at various levels and sections of a national system. (Nwakile, 2002).

Importance Of English Language Education In Nigeria

Language education as put forward by Udeogu (1999) is concerned with such issues as language usage in educational institutions and in the overall education process. Nwakile (2002) goes further to state 'that language education emphasizes language acquisition and learning, teacher preparation and curriculum development in relation to language and literature at all levels of the educational system.

English language education, therefore, is very essential in a society like Nigeria for the following reasons.

- i. English language education brings about dependable policies that will help to foster the much needed development in the educational sector.
- ii. English language education assists in unifying the several ethno-linguistic elements that make up Nigeria. Little wonder article 9 of the National Policy on education states that:
Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion... thus, every child shall learn the language of the 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.
- iii. English language education helps in training the required manpower that will in turn educate future Nigerians on correct and appropriate language usage. iv. It strengthens the educational sector through effective communication between the teacher and the students as language is a means of communication,
- v. English language education provides means of empowerment as many people earn their living through it. vi. English language boosts international image and better understanding between one country and another, and in Nigeria between one ethnic group and another.

Problems Of Language Education In Nigeria

Though language education in Nigeria especially English language has recorded some meaningful growth and development over the years, it is still faced with a long line of problems that stare it in the face. Some of these problems are highlighted below,

Perhaps, one of the main problems militating against English Language education in Nigeria is the fact that English is seen and used as a second language in the country. Many a time, and naturally too, people pay "loyalty" to their individual native languages or mother tongues. In this fight, English Language becomes a matter of learning only the essential parts that could only assist these people in merely communicating and interacting with other diverse groups in the country that have diverse language.

Related to the above is the issue of pronunciation and, indeed, the interference of mother tongues in the use of English Language'. Example, many a time, one hears some Hausa men while speaking, replace "p" with "f" as in "folitics" for "politics" and some Igbos placing "r" where there should be "l" and vice versa. The Yorubas are not left out in this near absurd and sometimes embarrassing mispronunciations of English words by those who use English as a second language.

Apart from the above, the dearth of qualified English Language teachers seems to be another clog in the wheel of progress as far as English language education in Nigeria is concerned. Today many see English Language as being difficult to learn or teach. As a result, those to teach English Language as a subject are scarce at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. This, unfortunately, has led to the invasion and taking over" of some of some English classes by people who never studied English as a discipline.

The fourth factor that constitutes a problem to English language education in Nigeria is lack of incentives for language teachers from government. Since many see the learning and teaching of English languages as tasking and demanding, they almost always opt for less tedious courses.

Another impediment to the growth and development of English Language education in Nigeria is lack of interest and seriousness on the part of the students. Most pathetically, many students pay less attention to the study of English Language than they pay to other courses. This has brought about great failures in English Language examinations over the years.

Finally, examination malpractice has remained a cankerworm that has burrowed deep into the main fabrics of education generally and English language education in particular. Leakages of English Language examination papers have become not only an eye-sore to the nation's educational system but also a great impediment to the realization of the aims and objectives of English language education in Nigeria.

Repositioning English Language Education

Having examined the importance as well as the problems of English language education in Nigeria, this paper will also look at the ways through which English Language education can wriggle out of the quagmire it is currently wallowing in. In other words, how do we reposition and uplift English Language education in Nigeria? How do we improve on the teaching and learning of English language? The following have been presented as the way forward:

First, there is no gain-saying the fact that a formulated policy which is yet to be implemented is almost as good as not having been formulated. Therefore, all the enabling policies on language education especially that of English language which are yet to be implemented should be "resurrected". These policies if well implemented, will act not only as a tonic but also a catalyst for language education in Nigeria.

Secondly, government and, indeed, Nigerians should understand that one of the ways through which Nigeria could continue to be a united, progressive and cohesive country is through language education especially English language. Thus, resources, should be channelled through the training of English language teachers so as to ensure that the scarcity currently experienced in schools as regards English language teachers is curbed.

Government should also provide incentives for both those studying English language and those teaching the same language. The salary scale of English language teachers should be the same as that of those in other endeavours like the medical field considering the position of English language in Nigeria and in the global world. The fact also remains that those in other endeavours all passed through teachers of English in their undergraduate years.

Apart from the above, lack of interests as well as un-seriousness on the part of the students must be looked into. This is a serious issue which the government should, through a panel of enquiry, investigate and proffer solutions to this task that must be accomplished.

A new curriculum should be designed along with the new teaching methodology that would incorporate the media and internet resources. English Language teaching should not be based on-texts alone but on the learners' need such as the need to communicate with others, the need to express their ideas and opinions on different issues facing humanity as representative of their states or countries or organizations, the need to provide others with the required scientific and technical data, the need to participate fully in legal and banking transactions, the need to pass international examinations like IELTS or TOFEL or interviews for jobs with multinational companies.

We should also adopt a value-based, human-centric, and learner centered language teaching approach considering the challenges of (the 21st century, that is, learning to learn, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. Students should be made to be less dependent on the teachers or elders, and be self-reliant in their learning.

The eclectic methods that focus on developing the communicative competence of the learners should be adopted in place of the suggestopedia, audio-lingual, grammar-translation, silent way and other methods. The teacher should aim at getting every student break out of their shell and talk.

Finally, the issue of examination malpractices especially leakages of English Language examination papers must be doggedly and selflessly addressed. Those who perpetrate this dastardly "raping of a virgin" must be brought to book while those who head our examination bodies must be constantly monitored.

Conclusion

English language education remains the bedrock for the intellectual, social, religious, economic and political emancipation, -unification and development of a nation. The neglect of English language education may be likened to neglecting the geese that lay the precious eggs.

In order to salvage the English language education sector, all the problems militating against English language education presented in this paper should be looked into. The recommendations offered in this paper are also, in my humble view, some of the ways towards bettering and repositioning English Language education in Nigeria. This will, no doubt, put our English Language education sector in the right pedestal where everyone in the sector can stand ten feet tall and thump his/her chest in the fulfillment of a great noble objective -sound English language education.

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