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LANGUAGE PROBLEMS AND THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

In a multilingual and multicultural setting like Nigeria, there are educational, communicative and interactional problems resulting not only from the multiplicity of languages and the use of a foreign language, English, but also from an inconsistent and poor national language policy. One of such obvious problems is the complexity of first conceiving universal concepts and foreign ideas in one's mother tongue and translating them into English for meaningful expression. Another is the pervasive influence of mother tongue on target language resulting in stressful learning/teaching situations. This has been the bane of the educational system in Nigeria and other multilingual nations. Data and figures reveal that a good number of Nigerian children easily excel in endeavors that require less of the English usage/learning due to deficiencies in communication in English. Many eminent Nigeria scholars have over time pointed out this problem and its effect on educational development in Nigeria but nothing decisive has been done to address it. A dimension of the compounded nature of the problem is the stipulation in the subsisting national language policy on education. This policy is due for review in line with our concomitant experiences since its inception and the global educational demands. The time to do so is now, as we are at the moment critically reassessing education and politics in Nigeria in relation to global trends.

Introduction

Modern societies thrive on democratic structures that guarantee the rule of law, freedom of the citizens, economic productivity and political stability. In this atmosphere, education plays a major role in the developmental thrust of nations. Nigeria is still struggling to come out of a general strangulation of the national system by the protracted reign of the military that inflicted a loss of momentum on every aspect of our national life including education (on the one part), and the poor/weak educational policies of the present democratic governments (on the other part).

Following the 1999 constitution, government is entrusted with the educational objectives of ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels and striving to eradicate illiteracy among others (see constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 chapter 11 section 18 subsection 1 to 3a-d).

It is believed that government agencies, such as Education Tax Fund, are appropriately invigorated to refocus energies in mobilizing all stakeholders for the identification of the critical areas of needs in the educational sector and apply appropriate techniques to achieve our objective of eradicating illiteracy. It is a recognition of literacy as citizens right on a par with the rights to life, food, drink, shelter, supportive social relationship and personal security which ensure physically and psychologically healthy human life.

This level of literacy agrees with what Oxenham (89) describes as functional literacy: a level of skill in reading and writing related to needs actually occurring in the country and that enable the person to engage effectively; identify and solve problems by using creative and critical thinking as an individual and critically evaluate information; understand the world as a set of related systems and respond to the aesthetic cultural and social values. The implication here is that literacy, education and development are the functions of effective communication principally via the medium of language. The expected outcomes are the ability to make and negotiate meaning and understanding through appropriate communication strategies for specific purposes and situations.

If communication is the bedrock of literacy and development, then the re-engineering of the Nigeria education system cannot be overlooked. This constitutes the thrust of this paper. The aim here is to point out the low level of our

linguistic performance and communicative competence as one of the problems that impede our speed toward the attainment of the set objectives of our educational sector. Communicative competence consists in the manipulation skills which the speaker attains and displays. This relates to the knowledge of facts, conventions, principles, generalizations, sequences and structures of language. Communicative competence produces comprehension which involves (i) ability to understand literary statements like metaphor and irony (ii) the ability to grasp the thought of a discourse and (iii) the application of the knowledge (abstractions of general ideas or principles) in analysis, synthesis and evaluation to produce more ideas.

The above explications justify the role of proficiency in language and communication for effective education, literacy and development. The next issue to consider is the language situation in Nigeria, our educational system and the future.

Language situation in Nigeria

Nigeria is a multilingual nation with about 400 languages and dialects. There are many bilinguals, trilinguals and quadilinguals in Nigeria. In addition to the indigenous languages, there are many foreign languages spoken in Nigeria, prominent among them are English and French. English-based pidgin is also spoken by a good fraction of the population. The characteristics of a multilingual situation are prominent in Nigeria and there is the attempt at defining roles for the languages. In this arrangement, an official document titled "Nigerian National Policy on Education" stipulates that English shall be the language of instruction in the upper primary schools through the university levels. The policy further stipulates the teaching of some indigenous language as well as French at various levels of education.

At the macro level, the language scenario is one in which English seems to enjoy a higher status than any other languages spoken in Nigeria. It is the language of government activities; it is used in the media and in trans-ethnic communication. It is considered a world language as well as the language of science and technology.

It is a sociolinguistic truism that where speakers use a foreign language for education, they lose some of the advantages and key inputs in the process of

translation and digestion of the universal concepts and ideas via the mother tongue into the foreign language expression. While we learn in English, we think in our native languages and try with difficulty to construct new ideas from second-hand foreign concepts and propositions. This process impedes effective learning and produces poor outcomes.

This reality is the function of the multiplicity of languages and the attitudes toward each of them. As described in Eka, (2-13), the language use on Nigerian campuses is a case of polyglotism.

English is the main language of instruction in all Nigeria university campuses. It is therefore used during most lectures, tutorials, seminars, conferences and debates, among other occasions. Other languages like French, German and Russian often feature on formal occasions, too, and this happens where such languages are specific subjects of study. The same holds for Nigerian or African languages where such languages (like Hausa, Igbo, Efik or Yoruba) are studied specifically for degrees or diplomas. On other occasions, it is common to find undergraduates resort to the use of specific indigenous languages or to English-based-pidgin.

The problems

The situation portrayed above is describable as complex multilingualism which Adebayo (151) sees as capable of resulting in a serious problem in our educational system in general and our efforts at improving the literacy abilities of the Nigerian nationals, in particular. The truth is that many of the languages and dialects in Nigeria are not adequately studied and described. We cannot also claim a good mastery of the English language. The result is that many Nigerians are caught in a serious dilemma which is having a dangerous effect on the intellectual development of the nation.

According to Unoh (9), in their present state of developments, Nigerian languages are incapable of being used effectively for information dissemination in various communication settings whenever the issues are of complex, technical and scientific nature due to the low literacy rate in Nigeria prompted by learning in English via the mind of our mother tongue. This bilingual imbalance is the source of the multiple problems that have plagued our educational system in Nigeria. A mind in dilemma is incapable of any clear perception except

confusion. A confused mind can achieve every other thing except positive development and dynamic progress.

The way out

(1) Early exposure to English: the policy which stipulates the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction in early stage of education in Nigeria should be reviewed in line with the concomitant experience of its practice since inception. For example, the kindergarten/nursery schools use English from the earliest stages. Today, the elite, the educated people send their children to these schools while on paper it is stipulated that all such schools and the public primary schools should use the mother tongue at that level.

The odds facing a learner of Nigeria indigenous languages are many: the absence of standardized and generally accepted orthographies, lack of writing literatures on and in them, lack of specialized vocabularies (technical and scientific terms), lack of instructional materials (dictionaries, encyclopedias and reference texts). In the face of these, it is self-mutilating to continue emphasizing the use of the mother tongue at any level to the detriment of English. Let us decisively accept the 'undesirable' reality that English has come to stay. The more the Nigerian child is exposed to it, the better and easier for him to adapt to the modes of perception and expression in it.

We may balance our view here by recommending that the local languages should be developed in their own rights for the appropriate contexts at the appropriate time.

(2) Intensification in the learning of English: there is great need to emphasize the merits of mastering the English language in Nigeria. As the language of instruction, the instructor must first prove himself capable of acceptable and optimum expression in the language.

Fortunately, the last decade in Nigeria, a great work and research has been carried out to prove that we do not necessarily need to be enslaved under the burden of speaking English as the British. Emphasis now is on what is described as a Nigerian fashion of English which is at once universal and enables one to carry out peculiar experiences within the context of bilingual and bicultural ecology. This English is the 'Nigerian English' rooted in social acceptability and national/international intelligibility.

Intensification of learning English in the light of the above calls for government's policy towards learning that has as its outcomes the training of citizens to communicate effectively, get access to, produce and use information at the personal group levels and apply the information in the understanding world (including Nigeria) as an interrelated system.

The teachers of English must be acquainted with the methodology of teaching a second language with the goal of confronting the dilemma of the dominance of the first language and the acquisition of the second language. For effective functioning however, the English teacher requires adequate motivation, exposure to research and materials.

In particular, the approach of teaching and learning English in Nigeria should emphasize vocabulary development as a linguistic skill, and context-determinant meaning communication. Only then will the broad objectives of the educational sector be realized along the lines of effective communication, functional literacy and optimum intellectual growth.

Conclusion

Nigeria, being a multilingual and multicultural setting, using a foreign language, English, for most of its communicative activities, many speakers are found with the tendency of first conceiving universal concepts and foreign ideas in their mother tongue and translating them into English for expected meaningful expression. This is usually prompted by the pervasive influence of the mother tongue on the target language. The result of such a linguistic setting is that there is bound to be communicative as well as pedagogical problems, particularly if the available language policy is weak or there is none at all. Suffice it to say that the Nigerian language policy has not adequately addressed the subsisting linguistic problems in Nigeria; and this lax is having a dangerous effect on the intellectual, technological, and political development of the nation.

In view of the above, and of the need for national development, it is advisable that parents begin to encourage their children to have interest in learning to speak and write in their local languages. It has also become imperative that Nigerian policy makers evolve a language policy that will give prominence to the teaching and learning of major Nigerian languages and dialects, not just in the primary schools but also at the secondary level of

education. A language or dialect may be considered as being major if it is predominantly spoken in a given linguistic community. Giving prominence to the indigenous languages/dialects will, no doubt, give them the status of effectively disseminating information in complex technical, scientific, educational and socio-political dimensions, thereby resulting in national development and integration.

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