

The Role of the English Language and Language Policy Reforms in Nigeria

Eugene Uchechukwu Ejiofor

Department of Linguistic and Nigerian Languages

Faculty of Humanities

Nigerian Police Academy, Wudil, Kano

E-mail: nkegenee@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates and focuses on the importance of the English Language in our education system. The paper adopts descriptive analysis in lieu of theoretical framework. On methodology, the paper considers the historical perspectives of the different aspects of language policy reform in Nigeria. The different observed weaknesses of language policy in Nigeria are then used to make some recommendations and draw conclusion. The English language is the foundation stone towards the improvement in learning most subjects or courses taught in our schools and institutions of higher learning. The English Language, as a national language, has its own share of problems, enveloped within the folds of teaching, studying in higher primary schools, and tertiary institutions. Many administrators and policy makers have left out the important part of re-examining and re-appraising the role played by the English Language in the lives of our students. Therefore, in this paper, attention is drawn to such problems, and recommendations made, with a view to making the policy reform a reality. The paper concludes with a call for training and re-training of the English language teachers and a call for full implementation of the language policy reforms in Nigeria.

Introduction

Several definitions and terminologies like language planning, language policy and planning are being used interchangeably with the term "language policy". There is no consensus on the definition and there is no unified theory on language policy (Ricents and Hornberger 1996:402). In this article, language policy and language planning will be used interchangeably. The term Language planning (language policy) is said to be first mentioned by Uriel Weinrich in 1957, at a seminar held at Columbia University, United States of America. Language policy can be described as a body of ideas, laws and regulations, change rules, beliefs and practice intended to achieve a planned change in the language use in one or more communities. In other words, it is a deliberate, although, not always overt, future oriented change in a system of languages code and/or speaking in a societal context. (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997:3, cited by Dekhir and Abid, 2011). As Language Policy means different things to different people, varying models with different approaches, conceptualizations and methodologies of Language Policy have been propounded. Ricents (2006:10) claims that there is no overarching theory of Language Policy because of the complexity of the issues which involve language in society. According to Haugen (1983), Language planning is "the development of policies or programs designed to direct or change language use, as through the establishment of an official language, the standardization or modernization of a language, or the development or alteration of a writing system". The Haugen language planning model includes four basic stages namely selection, codification, implementation and elaboration. The selection step includes the option of a language or different languages as official or national languages. On the need for language planning, language planning arises when the prevalence of one particular group of language users in a diverse language community is greater or less than desired so the language planning can be undertaken which can change the prevalence towards any desired goal (Milligan, 2007). According to Spolsky (2009:4) Language Planning is about choice which has three components: practice, beliefs and management. Moreover, Spolsky (2004:217) argues that: language policy may be the choice of a specific sound, or expression, or of a specific variety of language. It may be the choice regularly made by an individual, or a socially defined group of individuals, or a body with authority over a defined group of individuals.

Governments of various countries try to solve their language challenges by engaging in conscious, well articulated and principled language policy. There are many government establishments that can handle Language planning or policy. Some of these establishments include government departments and agencies, education system, special government committees, etc. Three focus areas have been identified

in discussions on language policy. The focus areas include language status, language corpus and language acquisition. Language policy can either be positive or negative in nature. Positive language policy refers to when a language policy leads to increase or sustainability of any language. It is used to denote reversing dead languages to active languages. The major aim of positive language planning is to keep a minority or endangered language from becoming extinct but can also be conducted for other languages too to make it stronger. On the other hand, negative language policy is a term that is used to identify any language policy that decreases the strength of language. The negative language policy is often regarded as suppression of minority languages by a majority language.

In Nigeria, English Language Education could be traced to the 16th Century when indigenes living on the territory came into contact with British Settlers (Medubi O. 1999) quoted in Suleiman; L.M 1997. However, its formal teaching dates back to the 19th century when the missionaries established schools purposely to train indigenes how to interpret English speech, read the Bible with average proficiency. English language education covers the formal teaching and learning of English in the classroom across all levels of education. English has assumed a superior role in Nigeria, it is not only spoken by the elite, (Ikara 1986), but it has become so entrenched that its use permeates every fabric of our national life. (Fafunwa. 1986) cited in (Suleiman and Bamgbose, 1995). English language; being an official language in the country, has made it a pivotal factor in national awareness. It is the language of administration, education and the mass media. "English language has a dominant position in all, official transactions, higher education, science and technology, the media, the legislative and the judiciary"..... (Bamgbose 1995: 11).

Education on its part is a service provided by the society for its members at all stages of development, it involves the training of the individual, for a life inside and outside the society, and not merely for the present but also for the future. This service is obtained through the acquaintance of language. (Farrant 1980 :18) describes "Education as the total process of human learning by which knowledge is imparted, faculties trained and skills developed; schooling is one form in which education is provided".

Therefore, the aim of education is to help the child develop his natural abilities by creating the necessary environment that will stimulate, challenge and involve him socially, physically and intellectually in the art of learning. It is the responsibility of the educational system to facilitate learning by creating also an ideal situation adequate for teaching English language. That is, there is the need for a collective approach toward decision making and organization to realize its objectives.

Concept of policy reforms

A reform is defined as "a long process that begins with problem identification, study and analysis, and ends with the evaluation and continuation or termination of the programme. It involves, among other things, the development of policy alternatives, experimentation, implementation and feedback" (Edukugho E. 2007: 1).

Hence, from the above definition, the purpose of policy reforms are plans of actions; or statement of aims and ideals made by government. These propositions are put in place in order to make the plan better by removing or putting right what is bad or wrong, such reforms are carried out with a view of removing imperfections and implementing the reforms practically.

Fagbemi (1999) stated that "many of Nigeria's educational policies and reforms of either federal or state level have been initiated only to fail because they have not been realistically implemented". Examples given by the above scholar are the U.P.E. scheme of the 1970's and the 6-3-3-4 system, which have succumbed to natural deaths. Therefore, in this reform bid, the quality of content teachers using English language as a medium for academic purpose must definitely be identified. Teachers of other subjects need to be "summoned" to attend retraining courses, in order to "polish" their methods of teaching and interaction. This is a step towards making the objectives of policy reforms a reality. Teacher education will continue to be given a major emphasis in all our educational planning because no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers, (National Policy of Education 1985: 37).

Language teachers badly need the help and interest of the teachers of all other subjects in the curriculum, with their active co-operation an English course may be successful (Bright and McGregor 1970).

Objectives of English Language Teaching

The objectives of English language teaching as stated in the National Policy on Education cited in (Enesi 2000) includes;-

- A. Ability to speak fluent and acceptable English.
- B. Ability to understand simple conversational spoken English at normal speed.
- C. Ability to comprehend contemporary writing at a level of attainment.
- D. Ability to write clear, acceptable English on prescribed topics.

All these have gone to prove that the objectives of teaching English language in Nigeria as encompassed in the National Policy on Education 2004. The feasibility of realizing the objectives lies in re-appraising and implementing them.

The State of Language in Line with Policy Reforms

Olaofe (2001) Blames English language course content (theoretical courses are on the high side, while functional and methodological courses are on the other side), incompetent English language teachers, brain drain of good English language teachers to greener pastures, unqualified English language students among others.

I am of the view, if policy reforms concerning education are to be activated, there is the need through the emergence of the Universal Basic Education (U.B.E), that mother tongue introduction (during the former 6-3-3-4 system) at the pro-basic, lower basic trend should be abolished. The insistent of English language at the early stages of education should be the concern of all

School administrators, especially in public schools, and their counterparts in private schools have already examined and then implemented this plan. The purpose of this trend would be the first steps in making educational policies and reforms a reality.

English language, as the language for academic purpose, is officially the medium of instruction from primary four upward to the university, as stipulated in the (National Policy an Education Revised 1998 section 3 :17) also suggests that from the fourth year in primary school English progressively be used as a medium of instruction.

The National Policy on Education section 4 :20(a) states “to provide all secondary school leavers with opportunity for education at a higher level, irrespective of sex, social status, religion or ethnic background”. It should be borne in mind that achieving this lofty objective depends largely on the students' ability to use and manipulate the English language. This could be realized when content teachers show extreme commitment in refreshing their standard of the language. The first debate on the Nigerian language policy started in 1961 at the Federal Parliament. However, the first positive official statement on language policy is the provision of the (1979 constitution, chapter 7;51), which states that “English will remain the language of academics, and business transaction and in the national assembly”.

Although, lack of appropriate English language policy and the failure of its subsequent implementation, are among some problems English language teachers face which causes failure of learners in their education. There is a great necessity, and desirability for the review and the redefinition of the language policy with a view to keeping it in touch with reality. (Olugbode 1999:4).

English Language for Academic Purposes

A language for academic purpose concerns us with the teaching, studying of English language in schools, tertiary institutions and universities. There should be a liberty to teach and discuss problems arising and put in motion theory and logical policies on the wheel of practice. The importance of English language in our education system cannot be overemphasized, yet it receives a negative attitude,

particularly from students who attend public schools. This abounds from their myopic reasoning, that they prefer and understand all other content subjects when taught entirely in the mother-tongue. This notion comes from the trend set forth by their teachers, which “mirrors” their deficiencies. This is one of the reasons why educational failure has often been associated with language failure. Language is the vehicle to propagate culture within a community or nation. English is the focal point that links an individual to all subjects in the last stages of his secondary education. This would eventually gear him towards the world of university or tertiary education, and this can be promulgated through effective policy reforms.

The significance of this paper is its contribution to knowledge. It has become necessary for the government, teachers, students and parents to build a concrete foundation for the education system at the local, state and federal level. This can be realized by realistically implementing policy reforms made; through effective English language teaching and learning. Hence, poor English language background performances in our schools. The pivotal role that English language plays in Nigeria's education system has further been entrenched in the tertiary level of education. Apart from being used as a medium of instruction, it is additionally studied as a specialized discipline in which researches are conducted as regards to its nature and-use in society. In this level of education, students are expected to have a complete mastery of the language and the ability to use it almost as "second nature". Student's ability at this level should correspond to that of the mother-tongue English speaker.

Factors Militating Against Academic Achievement

The view held among the general public that teachers influence is a significant factor in student's performance as far as teaching and learning processes are concerned. The irony here is that our students are left at the mercy of teachers who are not professionally trained, now this act has the remains of its “fossils” within the academic life of an individual. The imprints left are reflected in the abysmal fall of educational achievement. Success in second language learning depends not only on the quality and quantity of an instruction and the absence of impediments to learning but also on the makeup of the learner, the makeup of teachers, methods and materials (Strevens 1973).

Every society, whether simple or complex, has its way of bringing up its youths and that education for the good life among other things has been the concern of man throughout history. (Fafunwa 1974). Earlier studies on students and teachers views on school curriculum implementation show that accountability among students, teachers, and administrators of the educational system should be emphasized, as students and teachers have continued to demand for their involvement in curriculum implementation, in order to enhance the smooth running of the whole teaching programme.

The aim of life-long education will become irrelevant to an English teacher when such a teacher ceases to experience problems or ceases to face new challenges or new knowledge or ideals on how to teach effectively.

Recommendations

The policy reform is a gateway to solving anomalies in our education system. The following suggestions are targeted towards the achievement of the place of language use in academics.

1. Special attention should be given to the re-training of teachers through refresher courses. This would enable them to update their knowledge of teaching skills and enhance the medium of instruction.
2. Workshops and seminars in language should be attended by all content teachers and not only the English language teachers. This would keep them abreast in the ever-changing world where old methods are replaced with new ones.
3. There is the need for a reform in English education in Nigeria, given its multifarious roles. The English language is not only Nigeria's official language but also the language of education in Nigeria; from higher primary school level to a pre-requisite for admission into any institution of higher learning in Nigeria.

4. The needs of teachers should generally be attended to a forum must be made where they are listened, involved in planning and implementation, of such problems. Effective performance does not surmount frustration in any discipline, but it depends largely on professional personnel and sharing of ideas among professional colleagues. Where such is lacking, it creates a very wide gap of mastering that discipline. In the same vein, professional English teachers should always find professional companions to discuss problems, methods and techniques of improving the teaching, learning process in Nigeria.
5. All teachers must be equipped with a license to teach, as required by the recently introduced Teacher Registration Council. This allows the individual teacher to be inclined towards proper handling and mastery of skills to his object. As there are quack doctors, there are also quack teachers and the latter needs licensing.

Conclusion

This paper has incused on some problems militating against academic achievements in Nigerian schools. The ineffective use of English language as the medium of instruction by content teachers should be arrested through training and re-training. Provisions should be made to activate policy reforms concerning English language teaching and learning with the intention of fully implementing such reforms. Success in effective use of the English language by students largely determines success in the achievement of education in Nigeria.

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