

DISCOURSE ON THE STATUS OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN BASIC ONE TO NINE

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Abstract

This paper discusses the study of the Nigerian languages both in primary school and Junior Secondary School Levels. It reveals that a Nigerian language is not only to be taught as a subject, it is equally to be used as medium of instruction in the first three years in primary school. While the local language should only be taught as a subject from primary four to six and in three years of Junior Secondary School. The paper laments that the NPE (2013) is still at variance with the use of Nigerian languages as media of instruction throughout a child's primary school education despite the enormous results from research works that support this laudable idea. (Fafunwa et al, 1989) Ramirez et al, 1991) (, Thomas et al, 1997 and 2002),-(Ogunremi, 2012). The paper suggests among things that the Ministries of Education both at the Federal and States should have effective monitoring divisions to enforce and monitor the implementation of the National Policy both at the public and private schools. The paper submits that using proficiency in a foreign language (English) in measuring the standard of education in Nigeria is not only quite misleading, it portrays that this country is still languishing in linguistic slavery which is worse than political slavery. Any man that loses his language loses his natural identity.

Introduction

The slogan that "The standard of education in Nigeria is falling" has been a great concern to all the stake holders in the education sector. Nevertheless very few talk about how the standard can be raised either to the status quo or even beyond it. To some school of thought, however, the standard of education in Nigeria is not falling at all. Rather the standard of education is higher than what it used to be some two decades ago.

While the first school of thought hold the view that many Nigerian students, even the university graduates, can hardly compose a correct sentence in English language not to talk of solving simple mathematical problems. Another school of thought perceive the majority of Nigerian children from their knowledge of technology. To them, even the educated adults are always marveled at how children these days operate complicated electronic gadgets and cell phones successfully without pre-knowledge in those areas from either their parents or teachers in school.

To this paper the potential knowledge of Nigerian children to technology could be developed to the level of inventing gadgets other than repairing or manipulating the imported ones, if conducive educational environment is provided coupled with good curriculum, driven by the right language of instruction.

Furthermore, this paper advocates that it is misleading and unacceptable using a foreign language especially the English language as the parameter for measuring the standard of education in Nigeria. This boils down on linguistic slavery which is worse than political slavery.

Definition of Terms

It is highly expected to define some terminologies used in this paper for proper clarification of the discourse to the readers.

Discourse: This refers to a serious discussion on the issue presented in this paper. The paper views the status of Nigerian languages from the different perspectives.

Status: This connotes the respect and importance that the subjects matter Nigerian languages, are given both in the learning institutions and the society even by the speakers of the various languages. This paper examines the place of the Nigerian languages viz-a-vis foreign languages such as English, French, Arabic and Nigerian-Pidgin (NP).

Nigerian Languages: These are the languages that take their roots from Nigeria. The National Education Research and Development Council (NERDC) puts the number at about five hundred (500) and they cut across two hundred and fifty (250) tribes in Nigeria. Nigeria languages are otherwise referred to as either indigenous languages or local languages in this paper. Three of the said languages-Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the ones referred to as the three major languages due to the large population of Nigerians who speak them. The Hausa language is widely spoken in the northern part of Nigeria. The Igbo language is spoken mainly by the Igbo people in the South-Eastern of the country. Moreover, the Yoruba language is spoken by the Yorubas in the South Western part of Nigeria. It should be clarified that the three languages are limited to the geographical areas mentioned above as the speakers can be found in the nooks and cranny of the country speaking their languages and practicing their cultures.

Mother Tongue (MT): This is the language spoken within the family setting of a child. It is also seen as the language spoken by the mother to a child. Hence the word mother tongues. This is right as the mother is first language teacher to her child.

Language of the Immediate Environment (LIE)

This denotes the language spoken in a child's vicinity. In some case it may be the same language being spoken in the child's home. To many children, it may not.

However, the LIE is mostly understood by the majority of population in a given area.

Acculturation: Iloene succinctly describes acculturation as a kind of immersion programme designed to inculcate communicative competence in second language learners of Nigerian languages(Iloene 2013). There are about five centres established for this purpose in the country national institute for Nigerian language (NINLAN) in Aba for the learners trying to acquire Igbo language as their second language. Likewise, Federal College of Education, (special), Oyo where all the students study Yoruba language as their second language.

Thirdly, Federal College of Education, Kano where all students study Hausa language as their second language normally either for their acculturation programme.

Moreover, French and Arabic languages students are taken to Badagry-Lagos state and Ngala-Borno state respectively for their acculturation experience.

The Status of the Nigerian Languages in Basic 1-9

As touching the utility of Nigeria languages in the country, Ogunremi observed that there are types of schools in Nigeria based on the usage of these languages in Nigerian schools(Ogunremi,1998). The first batch of schools are those where Nigerian languages are used as media of instruction only in pre-primary up to primary three while the English language is switched to from primary four to primary six. Most of the schools under this batch are public schools that religiously implemented the NPE.

The second set of schools are those where Nigerian languages are prohibited either as media of instructions or as a school subject. Most of the private schools in the country fall under this category.

The third set of schools are those pilot schools where Nigeria languages are used as media of instruction throughout the six years in primary school, such schools are found in Osun state where Yoruba language is being used as medium of instruction in some pilot schools.

The Federal Republic of Nigeria having seen that Nigeria is a multilingual nation, has shown interest in using it for national development,and has made provision for their use in the constitution of the

Federal Republic of Nigeria and the National Policy on Education (NPE). Section 55 of the 1999 constitution which states that:

The business of the national Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore

While section 97 of the same constitution states:

The business of the state houses of assembly may in addition to English, be conducted in one or more languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve.

The use and teaching of the Nigerian languages in formal education is about as old as formal education itself in Nigeria, beginning with the early Christian missionaries who recognize the effectiveness of the indigenous using languages to spread their religious and therefore, studied these languages developed them as best as they could, translated the scriptures into them and taught the people to read and write in their own languages. After that, the importance of the use of these languages in formal education was recognized and encouraged in varying degree in the several reports and conferences and seminars since then (cf Emenanjo, 1999).

Implication of the National Policy on Education

The implementation of the NPE could be likened to the proverbial statement by Achebe of the people living on an island where there is abundant of water but use spittle to wash their hands.(Achebe 1978). With about five hundred (500) indigenous languages in the country we still use the proficiency in the English language as the yardstick to measure our standard of education. By now, Nigeria is supposed to have adopted one of the indigenous languages as lingua franca after six decades of political independence from the colonial masters.

The results of numerous research studies carried out on the advantages of mother tongue (MT) over foreign language as medium of instruction in learning institutions affirm that using MT as medium of instruction helps in hastening the development of affective, cognitive and psychomotor skills of human being. Again choosing a language which a learner is competent in makes the learner a better and adjusted citizen in the community. (Fafunwa et al 1989) -Ramirez et al ,1991,-(Thomas et al, 1997 and 2002).

Further, the deviation of the national policy on education from the use of MT or Language of Immediate Environment (LIE) throughout the six years of the learners in primary school is of great disadvantage to both the learners and the society in general. On this note Bamgbose and Quane posit that the imposition of the foreign language in the educational and even in the administrative systems creates unnecessary barriers to the participation of the majority of the citizen's population.(Bamgbose,2003) (Quane, 2003)

Moreover, the recent research studies carried out by Ogunremi on the attitude and performance of pupils in mathematics reveals that pupils taught using pure MT perform far better than their counterparts taught using the English language.(Ogunremi, 2012)

This paper sees this result as an eye opener that the use of MT as medium of instruction throughout the learners' primary education, otherwise referred to as Basic 1-6 is of tremendous help to the learners' career not only at the secondary or tertiary education but also in their life endeavours.

One could infer from Ogunremi's work that the reason why learners from the Asian countries such as China, Turkey and others are doing extremely well in mathematics and science related courses could be as a result of using their local languages as media of instruction in school instead of adopting foreign languages as the practice is in Nigeria.

Furthermore, Ogunremi decries the use of code switching and code mixing which constitute a great threat to the teaching and learning of most Nigerian languages(Ogunremi,2010,1992). It is observed that many Nigerians can hardly speak their local languages without interjecting or mixing their speech with either the English language or other Nigerian languages. Though people see it as modernity, the attitude is a silent cancer on the local languages which if care is not taken on time we may lose some of our indigenous languages. On the other way round uncoordinated languages may emerge from such practice.

Suggestions/Recommendations

Having gone through the implications of the Nigerian languages both in the formal and non-formal education settings, this paper offers the following suggestions: -

- i. Political will is very crucial on the success of any policy: Nigerians are good in formulating policies but the implementation of such policies becomes a problem. The Nigerian governments. Federal, State and Local Government should be willing to support the implementation of the national policy on education including its amendments.
- ii. Capacity building is key on this matter: There should be training and retaining of teachers, who are to implement the policy. Seminars conference and workshops should be organized from time to time or translation of technical terms especially on science and technology into Nigerian languages. Moreover, writing of textbooks on various subjects using Nigerian languages should be paramount.
- iii. Ministries of education both at the Federal and State levels should revamp their monitoring or inspectorate divisions for effective monitoring of the amended National Policy on Education both at the public and private schools.
- iv. The National Institute of Nigerian Language (NINLAN) Aba, should extend its arms to accommodate and encourage the study of Nigerian languages as second language (L₂). Hence, the L₂ products from different colleges of education in Nigeria can move further in their various studies.
- v. The Federal Government should take over the sponsorship of acculturation programme of the L₂ students all over the acculturation centres in the country.
- vi. Departments of Nigerian languages in all higher institutions in Nigeria should not only be encouraged to write and publish relevant books in their various languages, they should carry out research at regular intervals.
- vii. Parents, students, teachers and other stake holders in education need to be educated on the dangers of relegating our local or indigenous languages for a foreign language.
- viii. The government needs to come up with a policy that makes a sound knowledge of and/or success in at least one Nigerian language part of the criteria for employment in the country.
- ix. The mass media – print and electronic should take up the responsibility to promote the status of Nigerian languages.
xAlso orthographies of Nigerian languages should be standardized to meet the demands of modern education.
- x. Emenanjo while proffering a solution to the death of Nigerian language teachers suggested that producing graduate teachers in the right quantity and quality for all Nigerian languages is the only way by which we can meet the challenges of using Nigeria languages in modern education.

Conclusions

Having discussed the status of the Nigerian languages coupled with the suggestions offered on how to improve their status, this paper submits that it is highly incredible to be using the proficiency in the English language as the parameter for measuring the standard of education in Nigeria at this 21st century.

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