

Ozo-mekuri Ndimele (Ed.)

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**NIGERIAN LANGUAGES,
LITERATURES, CULTURE
& REFORMS**

A Festschrift for Ayo Bamgbose



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13. Harnessing Language & Education as Tools for Economic Empowerment

Foluso Okebukola

Department of Curriculum Studies, Lagos State University

e-mail: fokebs@yahoo.com

This paper examines the role of language and education in reducing poverty. It is argued that in order to respond to societal needs for economic empowerment, and to bridge the gap between the less-privileged and the privileged, education programmes should be guided by language policies that are sensitive to the role of indigenous languages in fostering learning and enhancing skills acquisition. Enhanced skill acquisition in turn will ensure better income, and then reduce poverty and enhance economic empowerment. It is recommended, among other things, that language education policy should take account of the multilingual nature of society, and allow learners to use their indigenous languages to enhance acquisition of skills that will guarantee gainful self-employment, thereby contributing to economic empowerment. This should put all African nations on course to attaining the United Nations goal of emancipation from the abject and dehumanizing condition of extreme poverty.

Introduction

Economic empowerment in both material and human forms has been the focus of attention among many nations of the world. The overall policy on social development emphasizes adequate social investment through education. This explains why education features prominently in the action plans on poverty reduction for all countries of the world.

Economic empowerment, which is a function of poverty reduction, has been the subtext in every UN conference and summit during the 1990s. The poverty theme is emphatically stated in the United Nations millennium Declaration (UN 2000).

We will spare no effort to free our fellow men, women, and children from the abject and dehumanizing condition of extreme poverty to which more than a billion of them are currently subject.

Along with the goal of poverty reduction by 2015, the family of nations also promised to achieve the related developmental goals of establishing universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowerment, reducing child mortality, improving material health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and developing a global partnership for development.

Since this declaration, poverty reduction has been deeply implicated in structures of politics, economy, culture and technology from the global down to local levels.

Irrespective of particular political ideology of a nation and of the specific strategy for mobilization, education can and must play a significant role in reducing poverty including preventing its inception. The present article examines the role of language and education in economic empowerment within the African context using Nigeria as a reference point.

The central plank of the Nigerian government's strategy to foster economic development is the stress on education in general and basic education in particular. For perhaps the first time, the education sector has been given pre-eminence and moved to the center of political debate. The outcome of governmental interventions in quantitative terms is the goal of having all young people in school by 2010. The nature of these policies has been analyzed elsewhere (Okebukola 2006). However for our purposes, it is important to note how the discourse around the value of education affects language education and poverty reduction.

A discussion of language and poverty reduction can be of relevance from many perspectives. From an economic consideration, a discussion of languages and poverty reduction could inform an entrepreneurial programme with emphasis on the need for knowledge for the purpose of self sufficiency and as a catalyst for enhancing participation in national development. This is very much in line with the objectives of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme. From a pedagogical point of view, however, language use in the formal school system in Nigeria raises a fundamental question: why it is that contrary to the stipulations of the NPE, Nigerian languages are not used for initial literacy? The NPE (2004) has spelt out the statuses and functions of all languages in use in the Nigerian polity.

During the first three years of primary education, Nigerian languages should be used as medium of instruction while English remains a subject in the curriculum.

However, the languages change roles at the upper primary. English becomes the medium of instruction and the indigenous languages remain as subject to be taught like any other in the curriculum. This persists through out the remaining years of formal schooling.

Studies have shown that this policy statement suffers from effective implementation (Okebukola 2005) as most primary schools in Nigeria employ the medium of English from the nursery classes. In spite of research evidence in support of mother tongue in early literacy, many schools turn deaf ears to the policy. The reasons for the flagrant violation of the policy have been adduced: the policy is out of tune with social and education realities in urban areas where classrooms are typically linguistically heterogeneous, the problem of meta-language especially in science and methods, teacher mobility, the fear of the minority group that the policy is a political design intended to propagate the major languages at the expense of the minor ones and the colonial mentality of the superiority of English language.

As noted in an earlier work (Okebukola 2005) the fundamental thing is that we have not developed our psyche to associate learning and education with anything apart from English or European-oriented education. According to Emenanjo (2000) what is required includes "a positive and pragmatic conviction, political will, strong governmental and institutional backing and iron-clad commitment of native speakers".

It is worthy of note that numerous countries have formulated policies to encourage people to become literate for a variety of reasons. In many cases, there has been success in the recruitment of learners but often these quickly leave classes for lack of satisfaction and/or fulfillment. Motivation, recruitment and retention of literacy learners have then constituted a major problem for literacy promotion. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) of 1975 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) of 1999 have sought to address the issue of how to get learners to school or endow them with learning skills. However at the heart of this is the need to marry home experiences with the child's life at school. Introducing literacy in the child's home language can help to foster motivation, satisfaction and fulfillment.

Poverty Induction

The induction of poverty in developing nations can be traced to colonialism. The colonial masters under the guise of trade enslaved and exploited the people, accumulating wealth and high value possessions of the subjugated people to the extent that abject poverty became a prevalent condition of peoples within the first few decades of the arrival of the colonial masters. During the subsequent centuries, wealth continued to be squeezed and siphoned off from the colonies to the capital cities in the west (Ekist Encyclopedia 2004).

Colonizers also constructed a concomitant "culture" of poverty by discounting indigenous cultures and languages and making the natives *discontinuous with their traditional knowledge*. The inherent inability to speak the colonial language rendered subjugated peoples silent, workless, worthless and powerless. Every encounter with others in the new social structures was designed to induce a sense of inferiority in the subjugated. Colonial subjects were also deprived of technology and technological knowledge for fear that they could gain economical independence and that the rulers would thereby lose security (Koroma 2000).

Thus, in Nigeria poverty induction is conditioned by pre-colonial units: imperialist oppression and exploitation, the incorporation into the world capitalist system and Nigeria's assemblage as one political entity. As noted by Koroma 2000.

Nigeria inherited a disarticulated socio-economic system from her colonial master, Britain". This has greatly manifested in the material and political inequalities in the country. This could not have been otherwise since uneven economic and political development is an absolute law of capitalism (44)

Education and Poverty Reduction

Education has been given different definitions by various authors. Some describe education as the process of expanding awareness and extending one's existence to an even greater sense of being. Others propose that education is the process of defining and redefining oneself in terms of successive researches of one's transactions with others and the environment. It has also been described as the process of actualizing human potentials. (Okebukola and Ogunbiyi 1999).

The dictionary of Education in Good (1973) defines education as the social process by which people are subjected to the influence of a selected and controlled environment (especially that of the school) so that they may attain social competence and optimum individual development. Whitefield (1962) defines education as 'the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge, the transfer of past knowledge, skills and values of the entire human society from generation to generation, in order to prepare the individuals for their positive contributions to themselves and their society. Education helps the individual to achieve self-fulfillment in the society. Education meets the needs of the society by equipping the individual with national awareness, promotion of unity and struggle for social, political, economic, technological and scientific development.

Education is categorized into formal, informal and non-formal. Given the slant of this paper to essentially pedagogical issues, our concern would be on formal and non-formal types of education.

Formal education refers to the education provided through schools, colleges and universities. These institutions cater for the education of children and youths. This group emerges as schooled children who expectedly take their positions in families and communities. University education also serves the purpose of literacy for professional development and job security. It develops and strengthens enquiring mind in people of various professions in order to acquire relevant skills and knowledge. This is not only to enhance the efficiency and productivity but also to help promote effective service delivery in various organizations. Formal education ultimately contributes to both the modernization and democratization of societies.

Non-formal education is also an organized learning activity outside the structure of the formal education system that is consciously aimed at meeting specific learning needs of a particular group of children, youths or adults in the community. What is learned is structured but not so obviously as in the case of formal education. There is more flexibility as to age of learner, the places of study, and the methods of teaching.

Non-formal education is also defined as any intentional and systematic educational enterprise in which content, media, time limits, admission criteria, staff, facilities and other system components are selected and/or adapted for particular student population or situations in order to examine attainment of the learning mission, maximize attainment of the learning and minimize maintenance constraints of the system (Akinpelu 1994). Training in vocational skills and adult education are usually classified under non-formal education.