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## Language Education As A Tool For Functional Literacy

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### **Abstract**

*Language Education embraces the wider issues of the languages taught and learnt in the educational system and the language use for educating at various levels and sectors of a national system. This paper deals with two sides of the coin. Its purpose is to discuss the prevailing patterns in Nigeria and to suggest practical ways in which language education can be used to eradicate illiteracy and promote functional literacy. It is concluded that there is need to revisit the National Language Policy and overhaul the quality of language education in such a way that language education and literacy programmes become more closely integrated into overall non-formal education programmes, the formal school sub-sector of education and to society's overall programme for functional literacy and by inference, sustainable human development.*

### **Introduction**

The goal of primary education, as stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 1981) is the inculcation of permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively. The rationale as noted by Umoh (1997) is that many Nigerian pupils terminate their formal education at the level. This being the case, the education received in order to be functional should be able to sustain them in coping with the demands of their carriers as many of them take to different vocations. Basic to this is the use of language-the vehicle of communicating information and ideas.

Thus language education should be geared towards functional literacy which its raw form involves linking literacy programmes directly to the daily life activities of the beneficiaries, improving their farming techniques, making them better able to store, market and transport farm produce, enabling them to keep their own accounts and manage cooperatives. In short, it enables them to do whatever vocation they choose to do well with optimal benefits and satisfaction. The thrust of this paper is to examine how this life improvement approach can be achieved through language education.

### **Languages in and of Education in Nigeria**

The choice of languages for Education in Nigeria has been influenced by the historical experience of colonialism and the political evolution after the

attainment of independence. This dates back to the introduction of formal education to Nigeria through the teaching of English language. English was introduced to Nigeria in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by British pepper traders and later perpetuated by British slave traders, missionaries, colonial administrators and pre-occupied with spreading the knowledge of the Bible and winning souls for Christ. Since they had no knowledge of local languages and they wanted to win souls for Christ, the only recourse was to teach the people the English language in order to enhance communication between them. According to Fafunwa (1974: p.81)

Knowledge of the Bible' the ability to sing hymns  
and recite catechisms as well as the ability  
to communicate both orally and in writing  
were considered essential for a good Christian.

The process of gradual introduction of the people to the English Language began at this stage, and it also marked the beginning of the formal school system and western education in the real sense of it. The English language was to become the medium of instruction as well as a subject of study in the school curriculum. This development has a profound effect on our language use and development, and on our consciousness till date.

The urge to acquire the language of the white missionaries, and to be able to read and write, soon propelled the people to offer themselves to be instructed in the language which they thought was superior to the indigenous language. It was the desire of parents that their children should be able to speak the English language as it was thought to confer some privilege. A black man who could speak English certainly enjoyed the admiration or even the adulation of his colleagues. He was held in high esteem. It must be borne in mind, however, that the education at that time was especially tailored, first and foremost, according to Fafunwa (1974).

--- to enable the new Christian converts to  
acquire the mastery of the art of reading and  
writing with a view to facilitating the study of  
sacred writings and for the performance of  
their religious duties (P.91)

With the upsurge in the evangelising activities by the church, the need arose to offer it and the priest some form of protection from hostile natives, and give effect to its legitimization, and so the church had to be complemented by some sort of civil authority. This paved the way for colonization, and in effect the entrenchment of the English language as language of religion, of government business, of commerce and the judiciary.

It must be mentioned though, that later on after it had effectively consolidated the church also undertook evangelisation using some indigenous languages. Efforts were made to translate the Bible into the various local languages. But this has in no way diminished the status or pre-eminence of the English language. In fact, the practice in most cases, is that church service is conducted alternately in English and in indigenous language, or both,

simultaneously, with the resultant code-switching and code-mixing. code-switching is a speech habit common with bilinguals whereby in course of an utterance, they juxtapose sentences or codes from two different linguistic backgrounds, that is from both English and Yoruba (in full sentence forms). Code-mixing on the other hand, obtains where in the course of a speech being delivered in Yoruba.

It is pertinent to add that the Christian Missionaries had exerted a great impact on development of the Yoruba language through its codification and standardization for literacy purposes, especially against the back drop of the fact that it was a Christian Missionary in the person of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who first translated the Bible into Yoruba.

### **The concept of Functional Literacy**

The early 1960s (after Nigeria's Independence) marked the decade of mass literacy campaigns to produce the needed man power for the expansion of the education system. This resulted in the establishment of many primary, and secondary schools as well as institutions of higher learning. At this time, literacy thinkers and workers recognised that there is a wide difference between inculcating knowledge and ensuring that they remained literate. This awareness gave rise to the notion of post-literacy : a phase during which a wide variety of moves are made to reinforce "literacy behaviour" continuing interest in reading and writing through the creation of an enabling literacy environment. The point has however been made that there is often no motivation for people to remain literate in situation in which the acquisition of literacy does not significantly improve their conditions. As noted by Obanya (1999), this latter awareness was mainly responsible for the development of the functional literacy. This life improvement is still the major feature of literacy projects by development assistance agencies in Africa. Specific groups are targeted and all literacy/numeracy activities are rooted in their daily preoccupations: improved productivity, health, sanitation, etc.

In almost every case, project evaluation dwells on the extent to which the daily life of the people have been positively affected by literacy programmes. Short term (end-of-project) positive impact has often been reported (UNESCO, 1998). The question usually left unexamined is what happens 10, 15, 20 years after. Could the mere acquisition of literacy and its application to the conditions of subsistence in the immediate environment. This is a question that functional literacy should tackle. It is reflection of the extent to which beneficiaries become better able to take their own decisions, manage their own affairs, chart their own future and 'mainstream' themselves into the wider society.

### **The Language Education-Literacy Functional Literacy Continuum**

In promoting functional literacy in Nigeria, most emphasis has been on out-of-school adults. These are usually persons who have not had the opportunity of formal education or who have dropped out of the system.

Even though a considerable amount of work has been done towards making a substantial proportion of the adult population literate through

adult literacy programmes, a large number of issues are still not sufficiently addressed. Such issues are:

- (a) Most literacy campaigns are not usually sustained (in terms of continued intensity) to ensure that the initial tempo is maintained.
- (b) Most literacy programmes do not often go beyond the basics (the 3Rs and the basic operations).
- (c) The large number of persons who even if they have acquired reading and writing skills and are considered "educated" have not internalised the habit of literacy and are still allergic to figures, quantities and graphics.
- (d) The fact that some who are even considered 'learned' in the "new literacy" (civil literacy, environmental literacy, scientific, technical/technological literacy and computer literacy (Obanya, 1999):

Taking cognizance of these factors, it is evident that functional literacy has not been totally achieved in Nigeria. Related to this is the tendency to underestimate the incidence of illiteracy. This is because persons who have gone beyond the basics are generally considered literate, even when a good proportion of them has not internalized literacy-promotion habits. Above all, the "new literacy" which are instruments for enlightenment, empowerment and continuous self-improvement are not sufficiently taken into account. The use of language education comes in handy to remedy the situation. This can be done in the ways enumerated below:

- (a) National authorities should pay greater attention to language teaching at the primary level of education.
- (b) There is the need to make the country's stand on the position of English as a medium of instruction clearer in the National policy. The policy should recognise as a matter of reality the different kinds of bilinguals who though are Nigeria with their Nigeria language as L1 but who are proficient in English before schooling. This group use English more competently even from home. This is the case with the children of the elite. Such children find it easy to follow a lesson conducted in English better than their mother tongue which they hardly speak. Their parents also prefer to send their children to schools where English is adopted right from the start. The schools are left with no choice, for he who pays the piper dictates the tune. The second group (L2) are those who speak their mother tongue at home and come to school with little knowledge of English. For this group, what is needed is a time of adjustment from the home language to school language. Obviously the same programme of literacy cannot work for the two groups. The policy should come up with a stand that takes cognizance of this, so that an arrangement is made such that the two groups can equalise at a stage because a situation where the children of the elite are taught in English and others in the Nigeria language may be misunderstood by such parents as disseminating and creating class distinctions.

- (c) Improving the quality of language education at the primary school with regards to reading skills which include the basic abilities of recognising individual alphabets, combining alphabets from words, combining words to form phrases and sentences for literal meaning and reading across and between the lines for hidden meaning. To these can be added such desirable skills as reading at an appropriate speed and developing a love for the printed word, to be able to lead a life which involves continuous reading for information, continued self-improvement and pleasure.
- (d) The enrichment (not merely overloading) of programs of adult and non-formal education. This will involve integrating into the conventional skills literacy the "emerging literacy" of functionality, empowerment, environmental population concerns, gender issue through reading materials, and group discussions in both the L1 and L2.
- (e) Creation of a literacy enhancing environment in the wider society through the provision of literacy service and a national publishing program that promotes works in National language and the development of indigenous authorship.
- (f) Audio-visual communications development including neighborhood radio and television networks, capitalising on indigenous capacities and language for production and diffusion of programmes.

### Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been to show that language education plays major role in the development of programme functional literacy. Functional literacy is a force at the very heart of sustainable human development. Human development is a continuous process, enriched by the capacity to adequately be tuned to changing times through the use of language. The paper has tried to show that concentrating mainly on an adult illiterate leads to a severe underestimation of the scope of the illiteracy problem. The language education policy and quality has to be revisited so that the formal education system can produce functionally literate civilization citizens. Above all, a number of threats to human civilization (e.g. population the environment, emerging issues of importance to sustainable human development (e.g. peace, human rights, civic awareness, gender) and the powerful influence of science and technology and the dawn of an information age have created new needs, and new demands that literacy program ought to take into overall non-formal education program, for sustainable human development.

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