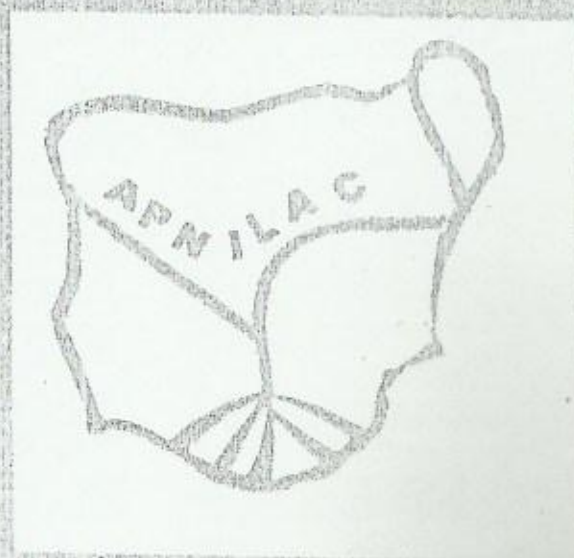


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CHALLENGES OF THE CHANGING ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The importance of indigenous languages in formal education is inestimable. Many academicians most especially language experts are therefore of the opinion that it should serve as the medium of instruction if not in all stages of education, the earlier part of primary education for two reasons. These are both for the cognitive and educational benefits. Since the National Education Objectives have been tailored towards the National Objectives enshrined in the National Constitutions, the role of indigenous languages in Nigeria would definitely transcend that of the use as a medium of instruction in the classroom to the performance of roles like Language for Mass Literacy Campaign, Mass Media, Economics and Social-Political functions. The changing role of the Nigerian indigenous languages is no doubt a challenge to the Language experts, Educational administrators and the society in general, hence solutionary recommendations are given as to how these challenges would be met.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that the changes in the role and status of indigenous languages in Nigeria poses a great challenge to every Nigerian. This paper sets to serve as an eye opener to the changing role of the indigenous Nigerian languages with a view to calling all concerned to action in order to meet up with the attendant challenges.

Indigenous language could be described as the native language belonging naturally to a particular group of people regarded as the original inhabitants of an area. (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary). Indigenous Nigerian Languages refer to the various languages spoken by the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. For example, Igbo is spoken by the Igbo people mostly found in Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo and some other parts of the Eastern Nigeria. Yoruba language is spoken by the Yoruba people mostly found in the South-Western part of Nigeria like Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun and Oyo States. Hausa is spoken by most of the Northern States like Kano, Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina and Kaduna. Ijaw belongs to the Ijaw people mostly found in Rivers State; Itsekiri and Urhobo in Delta State while Edo belongs to Edo State. Efik is spoken by people in the Cross-River and Akwa-Ibom States. Nigeria is a multi-lingual state. Bamgbose (1970) identified about 400 indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Out of the many indigenous languages, Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba have been selected as the major Nigerian Languages (MNL) because each is considered to be the language of Wider

Communication (LWC) in the eastern, northern and western parts of the country respectively. In the light of the above a child's first language L_1 would be the language of his immediate Community (LIC). This indigenous language could be a child's Mother-Tongue (MT) which has been described by Awoniyi (1973) as:

"The language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication (134).

He went further to explain it as the first language acquired by a person in order to distinguish it from any other language(s) that may be subsequently learnt i.e. Non Mother-Tongue (NMT).

MT is the very first language of the immediate linguistic environment of the child. Thus a Nigerian child of Igbo setting, for example if born in America is going to pick up the native language of America as his MT. The Language of his parents will then become his second language.

However, M.T. as used in this paper is the child's first language L_1 that is (Igbo or Hausa or Yoruba etc.) acquired from parents, surrogates and peers with the basic assumption that the child's first linguistic environment is either Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba or any other indigenous Nigerian language.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION

Language is the principal medium or vehicle for communication of ideas, emotions, attitudes and information. Other means which are non-vocal in nature include: gestures, signals, pictures and so on. Language could be in written form and it could be any system of sounds.

Whereas language is consciously and unconsciously acquired at home, it is acquired with full consciousness at school, because each school subject has special register of language. Language is that vehicle of thinking that helps a child understand whatever knowledge is being imparted to him. Afolayan (1970) remarked that language and thought are intricately interwoven and the failure to acquire a high degree of linguistic competence would mean stunted intellectual growth. This goes to show that the learner needs language to think and respond to all learning experiences offered to him by the teacher. All aspects of literacy education-be it science, arts, vocational/technical and so on utilize language as a vehicle of understanding.

Language is also a means of expressing a people's culture. Every society has its own traditional culture. Culture has to do with the total way of life of a people, hence it embraces our social-political values, social attitudes and ideas, artistic, scientific, economic and historical heritage (Bamisaye 1990).

One of the social functions of culture is Communication. Quoting Taiwo (1988:4-55) Bamisaye (1990:80) explains that our most effective vehicle of communication (language) is a cultural trait. Language is one of the binding forces of a given society, hence an effective study and teaching of a language can promote the education of the speakers of the language in the area of cultural reproduction.

- (a) 2 Nigerian Languages as core subjects at the JSS where the M.T./LIC is to be taught as L_1 if it has an orthography and literature. But where it doesn't have these, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy;
- (b) One major Nigerian Language (other than the M.T. or LIC) to be taught for communicative competence as L_2 .
- (c) A major Nigeria Language as one of the subjects in the core-curriculum at the SSS. Emenajo (1995:6&7).

With the language provisions stated above, one could rightly say that the indigenous languages have been given a pride of place in our Education Policy.

THE CHANGING ROLE OF NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

Today, the indigenous languages are not confined to the four walls of the classroom. The indigenous language can help the child to socialize, himself in the society, develop him physically, mentally, spiritually and to train his character so as to make him responsible citizen within the society. This could be seen in the example of character training as in Yoruba education which include: honesty, morality, intelligence, knowledge, diplomacy, respect for customs and so on. In other words, apart from the fact that the M.T. like any other language performs both cognitive and educational functions, MT and culture are intricately interwoven. Awoniyi (1992) concluded that:

Man being himself, at the same time, the cause, the transmitter, and recipient of culture, his mother tongue reflects his culture and personality as well as the group to which he belongs.

The mother tongue therefore, is a part of culture, it conveys, or, transmits culture, and itself is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs

When Bamgbose (1986:29) was comparing the past with the present as regards the role of Yoruba, he had it that:

This state of affairs persisted until comparatively recently when emphasis started to shift from restriction of Yoruba to a few domains to its spread to wider domains, notably in education, the media, and to some extent in administration and public affairs.

One of the factors responsible for the people's attitude to Yoruba like any other indigenous language is nationalism, that is, people taking pride in what is authentically African like the African mode of dress, art, languages and literature.

The Federal Government recognises the fact that nationalism can best be attained through indigenous languages hence the language provision that each child should be encouraged to learn open of the three major languages other than his M.T. This spirit of national unity must have inspired Bamgbose (1970) when he advocated for the adoption of one of the Nation's Indigenous language as a national language. Banjo (1995) also supported this view by remarking that the choice of a national language will promote national psyche and facilitate natural mobilization for sound development. The translation of the National Anthem into three languages, Igbo Hausa and Yoruba is also an attestation of the role of the indigenous languages in our quest for National Unity.

The role of the mother tongue in administration and public affairs has in the past been minimal as a result of the role of English as an official language in Nigeria. However, the governments have recognized the political functions of the M.T. and the importance of reaching the masses through their local languages hence public enlightenment programmes in respects of voting, change of currency, environmental sanitation, census and other civic duties have tended to be conveyed in Nigerian languages Bamgbose (1986:390).

Politicians are not unaware of the power and emotive influence of the language of the people hence civilian as well as Military Administrators usually communicate to their people both in English and dominant indigenous languages of their states.

Bamgbose (1986:40) also observed that the role for the M.T. could be seen in commercial activities especially at the level of the market women, tradesmen and artisans. Some of them write their signposts in the indigenous languages. The indigenous languages are used for trade communication.

In the area of Mass Media, Bamgbose (1982) had acknowledge the role of the indigenous languages and remarked that:

"The role of newspapers, radio and television in corpus planning has always been of great importance... The message is even more severe in the case of the radio and television where the newscasters are required to translate news gathered and broadcast in English to the appropriate Nigerian languages.

The indigenous languages are therefore languages of the Mass Communications. Both radio and television use them for broadcasting, entertainment, and other informative and educative programmes. The newspapers like *Isokan* and *Gbohunbohun* also publish Yoruba news.

In the area of entertainments, the indigenous languages have been playing a crucial role. Entertainers like musicians, dramatists/comedians entertain Nigerians, non-Nigerians, including Europeans with their indigenous musical ensemble, songs, drama and film shows. Sunday Adeniyi (Sunny Ade), Shina Peters, Ayinde Barrister, Victor Olaiya (Baba Sala) are a few examples. In the area of Publishing or Publications, textbooks, literature texts, comic writings, magazines and special publications like the Highway codes, and so on are now produced in the indigenous languages.

Indigenous languages have also been discovered to be functional in the area of boosting our

foreign policy. For example, Hausa language is broadcast on the British Broadcasting Corporation (B.B.C.) while recently, one of the countries in the Carebeans has requested Nigeria to recruit some Yoruba teachers in order to teach the Yoruba people in diaspora in that country. It is believed that this will soon become a reality under the Federal Government Technical Aid Corps Programme.

Without any iota of doubt, indigenous languages have been functional in the development of cognition, educational purpose(s), the Mass Media, economic and in socio-political affairs.

CHALLENGES: IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

Many are the problems militating against the effective implementation of the Mother-Tongue (M.T.) educational policies in Nigeria. Some of these problems are analysed below.

One of these problems is that of inconsistency between policy and practice. While some schools would adhere strictly to the use of mother tongue in the early primary school, many schools especially in the urban areas and most especially the private schools do not.

Furthermore, teachers of Nigerian languages are inadequate in quantity and quality. Some teachers who are not experts in the languages are assigned the job of handling them in our secondary schools just because they can speak the languages. The products of such endeavour are usually half-baked.

Nigerian Languages teachers are not motivated enough like their counterparts in the sciences and this accounts for the negative attitude visited on the languages by both the students and their parents. In many homes, the indigenous languages are not spoken at all. There is no doubt that such parents are ignorant of the cognitive and educational functions of the indigenous languages.

The escalating cost of textual materials in Nigeria is a serious hindrance to the promotion of our indigenous languages. As a result of this, many writers find it difficult to public their works thereby denying us of having enough useful and relevant textbooks in the market.

The multilingual nature of the Nigerian society has made it difficult to evolve a perfect language policy. Added to this is the fear expressed by many that it would be difficult to find adequate registers for teaching some subjects like science and technology in the local languages. It is true that there are no textbooks on subjects like Home Economics, Geography, Integrated Science, Computer, Chemistry, Physics, and other science and technology related subjects in the indigenous languages. However, experts must see it as a challenger to make textual materials available in all subjects across the levels of our educational system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the challenging roles of the Nigerian indigenous languages as highlighted above, the writer shares the same view with Garba (1994) that L₁ Curricular for the Non-Major Nigerian Languages should be planned and developed. Each state of Nigeria should then legislate the language of wider communication (LWC) that will be used in the state alongside with English and then choose one of the three major languages (other than their M.T. or LWC) to fulfil the provision of the National Education Policy.

Recruitment of qualified, willing and interested people as Nigerian Languages Teachers should be done in quality and quantity. Emenajo (1995) has suggested that more NLT for L₁ and L₂

should be done by increasing the admission quotas for Nigerian Languages. Not only that, the NINLAN Curriculum should be adopted by the Nigerian Languages Departments in all Universities and that of Colleges of Education should be harmonized to conform with the standard of the NINLAN Curriculum. Nigerian Language Teacher should be encouraged to remain on the job by rewarding him adequately like his counterparts in the sciences and by giving him incentives for advancement in training and for research activities.

The government should lift all restrictions on importation of books in order to bring down the escalating cost of books and in addition, schools and other educational agencies should be funded and encouraged to produce useful texts in Nigerian Languages. Textual materials should also be produced in MT for eradication of illiteracy in the country.

The indigenous languages should be firmly pursued at all levels of educational system in the nearest future in Nigeria such that all other subjects and courses are taught in MT. English Language would be studied just like other foreign languages like French, Arabic and others. For the purpose of admission into the tertiary institutions, a credit pass in one indigenous language should be required. The society, most especially parents and students, should change their attitude towards the indigenous languages. We all must be proud of our language, or culture and our nation.

CONCLUSION

This paper had been concerned with the identification of the changing roles of the Nigerian Indigenous Languages. The MT has been found to be functional as medium of instruction, eradication of mass illiteracy, transmission of culture, promotion of socio-economic and political values. Children would be better taught with the MT because they can easily think about concepts in their MT. This is the cognitive functions of the MT. If education is nothing but cultural transmission of societal and cultural values to the children, the best vehicle to do this is the Language of the immediate environment. The quality of learning gained is greater when taught with MT than when taught with other languages.

The government, the teachers, educational policy makers, students and the society in general must co-operate and work hand-in-hand to ensure that the indigenous languages are developed like the English language and other languages spoken by the more advanced countries.

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