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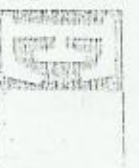
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CONTENTS

Pages

Editorial Board & Consultants
Call For Paper: Volume 4, 2004

The Effects of Enriching Two Main Instructional Strategies with Concept Mapping and Problem – solving on SSS Students' Cognitive Functionings – O.O. Busari.....	285
Combating Cultism in Nigeria's Institutions of Higher Learning: The Role of The Library W.A. Akinfolani.....	297
Management Strategies of Staff-Authority Conflicts in Institutions of Higher Learning: Targeting Ondo and Ekiti States of Nigeria E. F. Oyebade.....	305
Education and Ideological Commitments in Nation-Building G. Okolo.....	322
The Effectiveness of Some Models of Educational Evaluation A.O. Ogunmakin.....	331
The Role of Nigerian Languages in Achieving National Progress S. O. Makinde & O. Ogundimu.....	341 *
Development and Validation of an Inventory of Scientific Attitude that is Curriculum-Based K. O. Oloruntimehin.....	347
Improvisation, and Actualization of Science Teachers' Effectiveness in Nigerian D. Olowooye.....	357
An Assessment of Grievance Handling Procedure in Oyo State Secondary Schools O. S. Alimi.....	365
A Socio-linguistic Analysis of Pronouns in Yoruba – English S. A. Amuseghar.....	373

THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN ACHIEVING NATIONAL PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

For any meaningful and appreciable development to be realized in any nation, the role of indigenous languages cannot be overlooked. Hence, many scholars most especially language experts are of the opinion that a child should be educated in his or her mother tongue since it is the language in which he or she has the highest linguistic facility for communication.

The National policy on education in Nigeria has therefore provided for the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction for pre-primary and lower primary education. For political, cultural, psychological and pedagogical reasons, mother tongue is no doubt the most desirable medium of instruction. It is against this background that this paper consider it expedient to examine the role of Nigerian languages in achieving national progress.

Introduction

Nigeria is one the greatest nations in Africa and she is blessed with human and natural resources. But it is sad to note that the nation is still counted amongst the under-developed countries. Myriads are the problems facing the nation. Some of these are political instability; corruption, illiteracy, communal clashes, tribalism and majority of her citizens groaning in poverty. Solutions to these enumerated problems and many others are not forthcoming. In as much as the best long-term solution to any national problem could be found in the educational system, these researchers are in total support of the call by UNESCO for educational reforms in African nations as a preparatory step towards the technologic advances of the 21st century (Makinde 1997:1)

While the need for educational reforms in Africa cannot be underrated, it is important for Nigeria as well as other Africa nations to pay particular attention to the language (s) that serve (s) as the medium or media of instruction. Most of the nations in Africa are still under-developed because education is received in languages that are alien to the socio-cultural background of the people. The

political logjams and failures witnessed in our nation cannot be divorced from misunderstandings amongst the geo-political groups. A nation faced with political instability cannot achieve national progress or growth in terms of integration, education, economy and democracy.

Mwa (1987) believed that a nation in search of development must possess a dynamic knowledge of its cultural identity in order to orientate its development efforts appropriately. He added that cultural knowledge is embedded in the constituent languages of the nation. It is therefore not out of place to say that no appreciable national progress would be achieved without the study and promotion of a nation's indigenous languages. The role of Nigerian languages towards national progress would therefore be highlighted in this paper.

NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

Nigeria is a multilingual state with about 430 languages (Crozier and Blench 1992) out of which we have three (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) as the major languages. Other notable languages which are used on the news media are: Fuluḍe, Ibibio, Ijaw, Edo, Itsekiri, Efik, Egun, Kanuri, Twi, Nupe, Edo, and some others. As of now, English language is the official language of Nigeria and it has been super-imposed on the existing local languages by colonization.

One cannot but recognize some other foreign languages that are spoken in Nigeria like Arabic because of the Islam connections and French (for international relations, with France) and other Franco-phone countries (Makinde 1997:5, FRN, 1998). A lot of research projects have proved beyond doubt that the best medium of instruction for a child living in its own language environments should be the mother tongue (UNESCO 1953). Some of these experiments include: the Iloilo experiment (UNESCO 1963:127, 128); the Ghana experiment reported by Julian Dahan (1968:26) in Bamgbose (1976:12); the 16 six-year primary project, the Rivers' project and the Itsekiri language project reported in Bamgbose (1991:123). It is rather unfortunate that the Nigerian child is still being educated in a language foreign to him. The Pre-primary schools are not run by the government and as a result English language as the medium of instruction. Children find it more convenient to think about concepts in their mother tongue and this is the cognitive function of the mother-tongue (Nigerian languages for the Nigerian child).

PROGRESS IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY.

Results of the mother-tongue experiments earlier cited have proved to all that scientific knowledge is not peculiar to a particular nation. In the 16 six-year primary project, Yoruba language was successfully employed as the

medium of instruction to teach subjects like Mathematics and Elementary Science. There is no doubt that Africa nations including Nigeria can achieve greatness in science and technology if the indigenous languages are developed to serve as the medium of instruction at all levels of education. In this case, the language of wider communication in a particular locality can serve as the medium of instruction in that locality.

This could be a starting point. Towards this end, language experts should do more in the areas of indigenization of scientific technological concepts.

THE ROLE OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGES IN POLITICAL STABILITY AND NATIONAL INTEGRATION.

With the idea of teaching Nigerian language as L2 for non-speaker of a particular Nigerian language, this is a step towards national integration. When the language of a particular nation or people is studied, the culture is also people and the Hausa people respectively, he will be able to understand them, tolerate them and relate with them as his people. Therefore, the policy should be pursued more vigorously because the problems militating against its full implementation is that of death of Nigerian language specialists. The literature aspect of the language should be made compulsory for SSCE candidates because of the educational, entertaining and therapeutic functions of literature. Nowadays, any political aspirant who cannot communicate with his people in their local languages may become unpopular. In recognition of the importance of indigenous languages the government provided that the three major languages should be used jointly with English languages at the National and State Assemblies during the Second Republic. There is no doubt that Nigerian languages will surely contribute in no small way towards achieving national progress in the areas of political stability and national integration.

NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND TRADITIONAL MEDICINE.

Before, the introduction of western education and the importation or transfer of modern sophisticated technology, Nigeria as well as other African nations have had the sciences and technology considered adequate for the needs of their people (Raji 1997: 1). Despite the popularity of Orthodox medicines, traditional therapies are still very much in vogue today. They have not lost their appeal, by any chance.

It is quite unfortunate that in Nigeria and in most African countries, the traditional medicines have been left in the hands of illiterate herbalists and physicians who are not well informed about tests and records which could be referred to in the future. But it is good to note that recently, specialists in orthodox medicines are now conducting researches into how the traditional medicines work. Many or

such specialists are participating in the traditional medicine that is currently going on in Lagos State. Language is seen as a very important factor in determining the efficacy and potency of our local medicines. (Raji (1997: 7) form the point of collecting some herbs to the point of cooking, mixing or grinding and using, there are some statements that must be made correctly to prevent rendering such a medicine useless and powerless. Many incurable diseases have been effectively handled by the traditional practitioners and considering the fact that the local herbs are cheaper than the orthodox medicines, they should be properly 'Healed is Wealth'.

NIGERIAN LANGUAGES AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Nigerian languages have vital roles to play in the development of the economy. In order to reach the masses many industries are now writing the prescriptions and directions and even advertising their products in Nigerian languages. Today we have many professors in Nigerian languages; there are many writers today in Nigerian languages and many Newspapers are published in Nigerian languages. Many artists who have used Nigerian languages to convey their message have become millionaires and multimillionaires. In some foreign universities like America, Nigerian languages are being studied. From the above, it could be clearly seen that Nigeria has much to gain if the local languages are developed.

ATTITUDES TOWARD NIGERIAN LANGUAGES.

Research findings on students and parents' attitude towards Nigerian languages have revealed that majority including the elites have negative attitude towards the languages. Most parents would want their wards to specialize in English, French and other foreign languages instead of their own mother tongues. This had led to a situation whereby our engineers, doctors, and specialists, who are expected to have contributed meaningfully towards the development of this nation, have little or nothing to offer. We continue to depend on importation from even less privileged countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to meet the challenges of the 21st century, the major Nigerian languages should be more developed. For the non-major languages, their L1 curricula should be planned and developed (Garba, 1994). Each state of the federation should identify the languages of wider communication (LWC) and ensure that this is used alongside with English. Interested student should be allowed to offer French, Arabic and or any other foreign languages for international relations and religious considerations as the case may be. In order to put

the national policy into practice, one of the three major languages (other than their MT or LWC) should be taught in their schools.

Departments of African traditional medicines should be established in our colleges of medicine for effective research and development of our therapies. In addition, departments of African local technologies should be established in our Engineering faculties so that such local technologies can be developed locally to meet the standards of modern times.

The government through the Ministry of Education at both at the Federal and state levels should recruit more teachers in the Nigerian languages. The Nigerian language teachers should be encouraged like their counterparts in the sciences because 'what is good for the goose is equally good for the gander'. In order to make the Nigerian children take the language more seriously a credit pass in at least one Nigerian language should be required for admission into the tertiary institutions.

CONCLUSION

This paper had been concerned with the identification of the roles of Nigerian languages in achieving national progress. There is no doubt that the MT has been found to be the best medium of instruction, an effective means for cultural transmission and promotion of social economic and political values. In the light of the above, the government, educational administrators, teachers, students and parents must co-operate and develop pleasant and positive culture towards the study of our indigenous languages as a result of those invaluable benefits that will accrue to us if this is done.

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