

## CHALLENGES FACING TEACHING AND LEARNING OF NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### Abstract

*The 21<sup>st</sup> century is a century of great possibilities with the compression of the world into a global village. Language which is very vital in every human endeavour is used as a powerful tool in this age in E-Teaching and learning, E-trading etc. Every field of human endeavor involves the use of language in both oral and written form. Languages of wider usage like English Language and French are waxing stronger by the day due to the fact that their knowledge and acquisition is becoming more imperative by the day. The hydra headed multilingual landscape coupled with multi ethnic and cultural leaning and sentiments attached to the issue of language makes the situation to be a very delicate matter. Coupled with this is the low premium attached to the Nigerian indigenous languages which has made enrollment figure to drop. The government's failure to enforce a strict compliance of its language policy in education in the face of daily flouting of the policy added to the low esteem accorded to Nigerian languages. It is therefore in the face of this worrisome trend that the paper seeks to examine some of the challenges facing the teaching and learning of Nigerian indigenous languages and the way forward. The paper concludes that ideally as Nigeria grows and develops, her indigenous languages should also develop with it.*

**Key words:** *Teaching, Learning, Language Extinction, Language Loyalty, Nigerian Languages*

### Introduction

The linguistic map of Nigeria depicts it as a multilingual nation. Multilingualism is a phenomenon of linguistic pluralism within a single polity. According to Stewart (1986) national multilingualism is the use of more than one language within a single polity. The estimate of the indigenous Nigerian languages varies between 250-500 (Grimmes, 2000). To worsen the situation, these indigenous languages have various dialects, some of which lack mutual intelligibility to the extent that one cannot say for certain whether they should be regarded as dialects or separate languages. The phenomenon of multilingualism exists in varying degrees in other areas of the world such as Asia, Latin America, Ghana, etc. To this innumerable number of languages, the colonial masters added English Language. This fact has in no small measure facilitated the ascendancy of English Language as Nigerians national language. It is against this backdrop that Jubril (1995) postulates "the function of English Language has become extensive. Apart from expanding its territorial spread as Lingua Franca in ethnically homogenous areas such as Abuja, Lagos and other large cities, it is used in radio and television broadcast, novel, poetry and drama". In spite of its wide range of usage, English is exclusive because a good number of Nigerians are deficient in its usage. It

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has been said by language specialists' that languages are today being murdered faster than ever before in human history. A report published by Champion magazine revealed that "there is hard evidence that the number of languages in the world is shrinking; of the roughly 6,500 languages now spoken, up to half are already endangered or on the brink of extinction". Linguists estimate that a language dies somewhere in the world every two weeks. In other words, weak languages are consumed by predator tongue which deprives it of its natural habitat, or is displaced by a more successful competitor. In many parts of the world, languages also disappear because the young who are in contact with the outside world have embraced the view that traditional ways are illegitimate and irrelevant (Emenanjo & Bleambo 1999). According to Ejembi (2021), most aboriginal people in sub-Saharan African lost their native languages over many generations of colonial rule. The indigenous languages were swamped by the language of the dominant group and their numbers were decimated by war-fare and diseases (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). The language choice of a people may send their language to an early grave because language is a living thing that has capability of growth and death. As a society develops, it is supposed to grow along with its language, but this is far from what is on ground as far as Nigerian indigenous languages are concerned. The problem of Nigerian indigenous languages teaching and learning are too numerous. In spite of the efforts made so far by the government and other agencies; the future is still bleak for Nigerian indigenous languages. It is therefore in the face of this worrisome trend that the paper seeks to examine the challenges facing the teaching and learning of indigenous languages and the way forward.

### **The Concept of Indigenous languages**

According to Dimejesi (2018) indigenous languages are considered languages of one's immediate environment or one's mother tongue. They are languages native to a region and spoken by indigenous people. Ihezuonu (2018) says indigenous languages are languages that are peculiar to native people or people living in an environment. According to her, indigenous languages tend to make people feel safe, feel at home and more comfortable when interacting with them and when they respond to others. It has been said that indigenous languages clear doubts and suspicion, smoothen all life activities and ensure mutual understanding. In fact, they are strong means of communication and identity. Indigenous language is a language which a particular group of people occupying an area use to communicate among themselves and is passed down from generation to another. Anumudu (2014), states that indigenous languages are synonymous with native language, mother tongue and first language. A language that is original to a people, native to a locality and part of its culture. Adeniyi and Richard (2006), cited in Anumudu (2014) sees indigenous language as the various native languages spoken in Nigeria, the language that is original to a people. Indigenous language can be summed up as a language of a particular group; the mother tongue which is acquired and not learnt. It is a language into which a people are born.

### **The common Goals for Nigerian Indigenous Languages**

These include:

- to transmit the cultural heritage and to serve public interest
- to teach and do research
- to help individual development and the nation by fostering unity through dissemination of information in the Nigerian languages.

### **A critical Examination of the Nigeria Language Policy in Education**

According to the policy, the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment shall be the medium of instruction at the preprimary level (NPE, 2012 ).

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- The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. (NPE, 2012).
- From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subject (NPE, 2012).

The curriculum for primary education includes among others:

- (a) Language of the environment
- (b) English language
- (c) French
- (d) Arabic etc (NPE, 2012)

The curriculum for junior secondary school Group A core subject

- i. English
- ii. French
- iii. Mathematics
- iv. Language of the environment to be taught as L1
- v. One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment (NPE, 2012)

### **Senior Secondary School**

In the senior secondary school, every student shall take all the six (6) core subjects in group A.

- i. English language
- ii. Mathematics
- iii. One major Nigerian language
- iv. One of these subjects biology, chemistry, physics or health science
- v. One of literature in English, History, Geography or Religious Studies.
- vi. A vocational subject (NPE page 16).

Laudable policies like this needs effective supervision and evaluation if the set goals are to be attained. The National policy prescribed the use of mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction from pre-primary education to the third year of primary education and this is not adhered to. The language of instruction in these levels of education is English language both in public and private schools. Findings indicate that English is widely used. The use of indigenous languages as medium of instruction for pre-primary to primary 3 would have helped to keep these languages a life in the mouth of the young ones. Thus preserving and also enlivening the language and enabling them to grow. In terms of teaching of indigenous language as a subject in primary school as stipulated in the policy, about 80% of primary schools (both public and private school) do not teach indigenous languages. Though the indigenous language is in the curriculum but it is simply ignored as irrelevant to the academic development of the learners. Again, in junior and senior secondary schools, indigenous language is added as a core subject. It is worthy of note that of all the subjects in the group, the Nigerian languages are the only subjects in the group that are not taught. Their inclusion as core subjects in the curriculum is just for formality. These lapses in the teaching and learning of indigenous language and their use as medium of instruction has in no small measure impeded the development of the indigenous languages both as a medium of communication and as area in academic study.

### **Other Efforts made for Development of Nigerian Indigenous Languages**

According to Iwuagwu (2012), other efforts made by the government for the development of more Nigerian indigenous languages include:

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- The Nigerian Educational Research Development Council (NERDC) has standardized many more Nigerian languages in six (6) manuals. This comprises 30 languages
  - i.Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik
  - ii.Edo, Tiv, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Izon
  - iii.Ibibio, Nupe, Beron, Kalabari, Idoma
  - iv.Ebira, Igala, Isoko, kaye (Baju) Gbanye
  - v.Bwafje, Esan, Bura, Ikwere, Urhobo, Wukari
  - vi.Mbembe, Obolo, Tarok, Igede, Mumuye, Loka
- Production of meta language in Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba
- Establishment of National institute for Nigerian language (NINLAN) Aba in 1992.
- University of Ife mother tongue experimental project
- Implementation of the Nigerian language curriculum at schools, colleges and universities
- Organize seminars and workshops in Nigerian languages and established of Nigerian language departments in colleges of Education and universities.

In spite of these efforts the future is still bleak for Nigerian languages considering the colossal and the predatory stance of English language on one hand and French on the other hand.

### **The challenges facing teaching and learning of Nigerian indigenous languages.**

#### **i.Non implementation of the language policy.**

The language policy is replete with good vision but the lack of match between vision and mission hinders the full realization of the language policy. It is known that the policy is broken everyday across the country. Simply put “the policy is not adhered to “the medium of instruction from pre-primary to primary school is English language rather than indigenous languages as stated in the policy statement. It is only in the unity schools that one can see the study of indigenous language in secondary schools and most times, the indigenous language is taught in English language. Another intractable problem militating against the successful implementation of the policy is lack of monitoring by the Federal Government. There are no punitive measures to deter people from defaulting. According to Bamgbose in Iwuagwu in spite of the forceful language in which the policy is couched and the proposal for implementation, it has remained an archival material to be quoted by scholars writing on language policy. He further explained that another weakness of the policies is that they are not enforceable, and infractions do not attract sanctions. On the issue of the language of legislation, which dominant position has been given to English language and the three major language – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made, it is worthy of note that more than 30 years have passed yet no meaningful arrangement has been made. Criticizing this Bamgbose in Iwuagwu (2003) observes

*“The interesting thing to note about language empowered through legislation is not whether it can be done but to what effect. Legislation by itself is not meaningful unless it is accompanied by a detailed plan for implementation which will spell out time frames for achievement of certain objectives, domains of application of policy, incentives designed to facilitate compliance and sanctions to discourage non-compliance”.*

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### **ii. Language proscription**

Language proscription can emanate from the government and its agencies as well as private organizations. At the macro-government level, it could take the form of legislation in favour of certain languages. It can also take the form of recognition of certain language such as the three major Nigerian languages and others 27 that have been approved as medium of instruction in schools. At the micro level, organizations and schools make rules for language use in their establishments. They carried over colonial practice of proscribing the use of the so called vernacular. Punishment for contravention includes fines, copying of a sentence many times over, corporal punishment etc. The effect of the language proscription is to make speakers of proscribed language develop negative image of their own language( Bamgbose, 2003).

### **iii. Language Stigmatization**

Attitude to language may be unfavourable as a result of language prejudice. Those that studied indigenous language are regarded as academic misfit. They are regarded as low quality graduates. Hence such exclamation as “Ah! You mean you spent all those years pursuing a degree in an indigenous language; “You have a good command of English why did you study Igbo in the University”. This attitude has led to lack of trained teachers in indigenous language, many students do not enroll to study indigenous languages and those that are trained do not want to teach. They prefer to work in other areas to teaching. A few that accepted to teach, do so in English language. Writing on this Bamgbose in Iwuagwu (2003) says it is common place that people make uninformed judgment about language and accent, some being considered beautiful, harsh, melodious, soothing etc. Such prejudice reactions is often reflected on speakers, example in job interview. An extension of such prejudice is the way children who came to school speaking a non-standard variety of a language tend to be ridiculed and considered unintelligent. In the same vein, parents place a very strict embargo on the use of Nigerian languages for their children in their homes. The learning of foreign languages is given top priorities and registered in extra lesson to help children learn it effectively. According to Apakama (2010), the English language was seen as a language of the prestige, meant for the upper class, the educated, the knowledge of which placed one on the position of class and prestige; therefore people regard it as a taboo for their children who have been to school to speak Nigerian language. These attitudes raise to a high level the negative attitude of pupils and students towards indigenous language learning since in their estimation; it does not matter in the scheme of things. Chukwu (2005) observes that recent studies on language attitude indicates that majority of Nigerians have strong positive attitude towards English language while their attitude towards Nigerian languages is rather negative.

### **iv. Lack of Teachers**

Today, there are no teachers of indigenous languages in many schools. In reality speakers of other languages are wary of the language of other groups. This is the dynamics of politics and the problem of multilingual country like Nigeria. This has led to good language policy being hampered by mutual suspicion.

### **v. Teacher retraining programmes**

Retraining variously called refresher course or on the job training is the process of learning a new or the same old skill for the same group of personnel. It is required to be provided on regular basis to avoid personnel obsolescence due to technological changes and individuals’ memory capacity. There is no systematic attention to update regularly the knowledge and pedagogical skill of teachers in Nigerian languages in the light of changes in the curriculum and the wider society, this affects the quality of teaching in schools. The Nigerian language teachers need to improve their teaching skills through the acquisition of innovative techniques in the language skills. This will help them improve their competence, mastery of the skills for teaching all aspects of the language including

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literature. The non attendance to training and workshops has made them unable to cope with global trends in the innovative strategies for teaching (Iwuagwu, 2011).

**vi.Lack of Fund**

Funding for Nigerian languages programmes has declined while there is a boost and support given to effective teaching and learning of English and French languages. Instructional materials are not provided for teaching and learning of indigenous language while the learning of foreign languages are done with adequate instructional materials including language laboratories.

**vii.Allocation of Time in the Time Table**

The level of competence and performance expected of the learner in each of these languages, the timing and effective teaching is worrisome. Indigenous languages are allocated only one period per week for every level (for those that consider indigenous languages), but more time is allocated to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the time table.

**viii.Lack of Suitable Pedagogical Materials**

There are inadequate facilities and infrastructures for teaching Nigerian language. Most schools don't have language laboratory also in most schools there is no electricity. Materials like textbooks, printed or tape recorded text and other teaching aids are not made available for Nigerian indigenous language teacher. The unavailability of multilingual text books, teacher guide and other visuals for teacher's use makes teaching and learning of indigenous language a difficult task.

**ix.Poor Motivation**

Teachers of indigenous are poorly motivated due to the low premium placed on the subject and the attitude of the general public and the lip service paid to its teaching and learning by the government.

**x.Teacher preparedness (quality)**

Majority of the indigenous language teachers are not thoroughly grounded in content and methodology. It could be said that the subject is not effectively taught by the teachers due to the use of obsolete methodology.

**xi.Problem of Multilingualism**

Language issue is a sensitive one. There has been a lot of controversies, debates, politics on national language which has defied resolution. Also there is contradiction in practice, the concept of multilingualism in schools are not being well managed. The implementation is skewed towards catering for English language alone at the expense of indigenous languages. Again the class is a mixture of learners from different linguistic backgrounds, these linguistic differences also have sentiments, attitudes, and prejudices both towards the teachers and the language being taught. This poses a problem to the teacher who is forced to teach with English language.

**Conclusion**

Language is a living thing that has the capability of growth and death. Its capability to grow imbues it with the capability to develop. Every language has a people that use it as a means of expression. As a society develops, its language develops with it. But the reverse is the case when no premium is placed on a language both by the government and the society; the resulting effect is lack of interest in learning the language academically. This is the situation on ground within the Nigerian polity, where development is done via a foreign communicative medium. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has compressed the world into a global village with internet surfing, E-learning, E-trading, browsing and others things all made possible through languages which can best be described as sophisticated. However, these sophisticated and prestigious languages went through developmental rigors, enjoyed language loyalty from its owners, were kept alive through everyday usage etc. Also individual and cooperative efforts with financial commitments went into the making of these prestigious languages. What is the

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fate of Nigerian indigenous languages in the face of globalization? These and other questions are supposed to be a food for thought for every Nigerian as we want to join the rest of the world in taking the world by storm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Recommendations**

In order to improve the teaching-learning process of Nigerian indigenous languages in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the following recommendations are made:

- The standardized indigenous languages should be used as medium of instruction since this will ensure revitalization of the languages.
- Training/retraining should be organized for indigenous language teachers.
- Enough time should be allocated for teaching and learning of indigenous languages in the time table.
- Indigenous language should be made compulsory subject in Senior Secondary School.
- Indigenous languages should be taught as general course in tertiary institutions.
- Certification requirement should include a pass in indigenous language.
- Indigenous languages should be used in expanded domains such as judiciary, politics, media literature etc.
- Incentives should be provided to encourage people to study indigenous languages.
- Job requirement should include a pass in indigenous language,
- Condition for appointment and promotion in the public service should include a pass in indigenous language.
- Language promotion measures such as literary competition, award of prizes and subsidy for public deserving manuscripts should be used as a measure to encourage students to study indigenous languages.

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