

Multilingualism and Teacher Preparation for the Universal Basic Education among Ethnic Minorities in Nigeria

Mathew Nsing Ogar and Mercy Imoh Ugot, Cross River University of Technology, Nigeria.

Abstract

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme was launched by the Federal Government of Nigeria to ensure that each child of school going age compulsorily and freely attends school continuously for 9 years. Specifically, it is aimed at inculcating literacy, numeracy and life skills for entrepreneurship and national development. Also language teaching and learning is one of the core components for achieving the UBE goals. Although the National Policy on Education stipulates the learning of at least three languages on completion of Junior Secondary School by each learner, the Nigerian linguistic environment which is evidently multilingual poses some challenges and setbacks for language teaching and learning among ethnic minorities. The absence of adequate orthographies, materials and personnel in the languages and a general apathy in studying the indigenous languages were identified as impediments for realising the objectives of the UBE programme. A paradigm for language development and teacher preparation was presented. It was concluded that a systematic approach which ensures the interactive rather than the linear relationships of the steps provided should be adopted to achieve the language objectives.

Introduction

Language is a combination of sounds and symbols to generate meaning. Language is used by human beings as a vehicle of communication. It is used to communicate ideas, feelings and desires. Essien (2003:23) modifies Bloch and Trager's 1945 definition of language by citing language as "a system of structured arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which human beings communicate with each other in a given community". Philosophically, language has been described by Chomsky (1968) as "a species specific human possession, the human essence". It would be recalled that carvings on stones were discovered by anthropologists to be 20,000 years old. These carvings could have been used for communicative purposes, thus, indicating that language has existed even with the primitive man. (Aina, 2003). Language has continued to evolve and develop with a myriad of languages noticeable in our societies. Some of the languages are highly well organised with highly developed orthographies and nationally and internationally recognised while some others are mere vernacular without orthographies.

Nigeria could be regarded as a multilingual society with a coterie of languages. A survey on Nigerian languages reveals that they are about 600 languages in Nigeria (Egbokhare, 2004). Of these, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are considered as the major languages (Federal Ministry of Education (F.M.E), 2004). Also Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are predominantly

utilised in the North-West, South-West and South-East zones respectively. However, in the South-South, North-Central and North-East zones, there is a multiplicity of languages clearly depicting a situation of linguistic fragmentation.

In Nigeria, English is generally regarded as a language of prestige of which its acquisition and proficiency would enhance social mobility. In the order of importance of languages, English is ranked first and the major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are second and the minority languages are next (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001). Also, while the development of the major languages is highly favoured, in relative terms, the minority languages are less developed due to political and demographic factors (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2001)(Essien 2003). Therefore, against the backdrop that the National Policy on Education (F.M.E. 2004) stipulates the completion of Junior Secondary school, each learner would learn at least 3 languages, this study among others, highlights the challenges that teachers would face in preparing for the teaching of indigenous minority languages considered less developed.

The Universal Basic Education (U.B.E) Programme

Arising from the hues and cries of well meaning Nigerians about the shortcoming of the Educational system in terms of its failure to prepare learners to be relevant at the work place and the needs of society, the Federal Government introduced the 9 year Basic Education Programmeme in 1999 (National Teachers' Institute, 2008)

The curriculum provides for Lower Basic Education (Primaries 1-3), Middle Basic Education (Primaries 4-6) and Upper Basic Education JSS 1-3). The philosophy of the UBE is to install the skills of numeracy, literacy and life skills adequate for the products to have basic entrepreneurial skills to enable them engage in purposeful productive ventures. These would enable them to contribute meaningfully to the national economy. It also pays attention to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the National Economic Empowerment Strategies I and II (NEEDS) (National Teachers' Institute, 2008).

The language aspect of the UBE stipulates the study of English Studies, Arabic, French, Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba languages as subjects. However the National Policy on Education elaborates further on the teaching and learning of languages in schools.

Language Policy for the Nigerian Educational System

Nigeria is superfluous, amorphous, complex and a large geographical entity comprising several ethnic groups with an avalanche of Languages (about 400) (Egbokhare, 2001). Perhaps this accounts for the imposition of English Language by the colonialists to aid administration and business within the area. This was more imperative in minority areas such as the South-South, North-East and North-Central zones which are characterised by linguistic differences. These fragmentations might have influenced the educational policy on language. Hence, the National Language policy on Education (NLPE) as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (F.M.E. 2004) states thus; "The Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. In this connection, Government considers the major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba" (.9). It states further that: "For smooth interaction with our neighbours it is desirable for every Nigerian

to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary Schools but Non-vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School.” (9)

Basic education is expected to cover a period of 9 years, which are 6 years of primary education and 3 years of Junior Secondary School education. For the curriculum on languages at the primary level, the following languages are stipulated to be learned : Languages of the immediate environment, English, and Arabic

Also at the Junior Secondary Level, English, French, the language of the immediate environment (L1) and one major language other than that of the environment to be taught as (L2). These, among other subjects are regarded as core subjects.

Furthermore, the Policy states that the language of immediate environment shall serve as the medium of instruction for the first three years at the Primary School Level while English shall be taught as a subject. Subsequently, English shall be the language of instruction while French and the language of immediate environment shall be taught as subjects.

These provisions could be termed ambiguous because not all the teachers and learners nationwide are placed on equal footing. The following are some of the problems and challenges they face. Teachers resident or working in areas where the major languages are regarded as L1 would also be expected to study English, French and / or Arabic. This may be less demanding when compared to the succeeding challenges. In states and zones with a multiplicity of languages such as Cross River (34), Edo (30), Taraba (54), Kaduna (43), and Plateau (74) teachers need to acquire and learn several languages to cope with such trend (Egbokhare, 2001). So many languages do not have developed orthographies (Okedara, and Adelere, 2001). Hence, teachers do not study them or study in the languages during training. How would they teach them as subjects or use them as a means of instruction? An orthography is clearly a basic necessity in the course of linguistic development and the lack of one inhibits the National Policy on Education. (Udoh 2003). Most major Nigerian Languages have limited vocabulary for expressing ideas, concepts or even names in science and other fields. In most cases indigenous languages do not possess scientific and technological names/terminologies to replace the ones in English (Araromi, 2005). For instance, what is the equivalent of ‘eclipse’ in any of the Nigerian Languages? The use of computers in teaching and learning generally, and language specifically, has been underscored as making learning easier and less painful for all forms of language acquisition (Monke, 1998). The “One Computer per Child” programme was introduced in Nigerian primary and secondary schools in 2006 but was quickly scrapped by a new administration in 2007. Changes in government policies have clearly often hindered progress made in education. Most Nigerian schools especially the public ones do not have computers and even if they do, most teachers cannot use them. Some teachers and learners in rural areas might not have seen computers except in pictures. Even though the computers are acquired in schools, they are programmed in conformity with languages with developed orthographies such as English, French and Arabic. How do Nigerian teachers and learners cope with using computers effectively for studying using the indigenous languages? Print material in most indigenous languages is either non-existent because of the absence of a developed orthographies or a dearth of them. General apathy or lack of interest by both teachers and learners in studying the indigenous languages because of the relative prestige

accorded the English language could be inimical to success in this direction. Even if the study of the indigenous language(s) is introduced during teacher training period, it would apparently be too short a time to master skills on different aspects of the language(s), therefore its/ their study ought to start at the foundation stages.

Language Conflict (The Canadian Experience)

Language could be a cohesive factor in national life. However, it would also generate serious controversy in different spheres of life. Case studies from other countries could help to further sharpen our focus in order to mitigate unnecessary conflict and suspicion. Premier Robert Bourassa was successful at the provincial polls on the 25th of September, 1989 in Quebec but his Federal party was troubled by constitutional issues related to Language. Bourassa's Sign Law, BTU 178, engendered protest from Anglophones who objected to the banning of English language in public. However the Law permitted minimally more indoor bilingual signs. The Francophones were anxious that French could fade in Quebec since it was surrounded by English speakers. Before Bourassa's electoral victory, the supreme court of Canada had in December 1988 ruled against Quebec's French Language Charter (Bill 101) that outdoor signs must be exclusively in French.

Preceding this controversy, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism had been established in Canada (1963-1971) to recommend measures for equal partnership between French speaking and English speaking Canadians. This notwithstanding, the establishment of the commission generated serious debate. While some believed it was an attempt to impose French on them, English speaking Canadians believed it was an attempt to minimise the use of their language. Some ethnic groups in Canada were angered because the concept of bilingualism and biculturalism excluded them (McRoberts, 2007).

This typical case shows the problems and challenges that a multi-ethnic and multilingual society faces. The controversy, debate, tension and suspicion that this issue generated in Canadian social, educational and political life is better imagined. Nigeria might have learned similar lessons especially as it is more highly multi-ethnic and multilingual. Perhaps this would have informed the recommendation for the study of the multiple languages as stipulated in the National Policy on Education for teachers and students although this in itself poses enormous problems and challenges.

Language Conflict (The Nigerian Experience)

Language conflict in Nigeria stems from the numerous ethnic groups which struggle for supremacy (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2005). Also while the minority languages witness a decline in their usage, English, the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) and the major languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) continue to experience increase in spread (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2005) Furthermore, the creation of States in 1967, 1976, 1987 and 1996 which arose from ethnic agitations and autonomy deepened the conflict. This is because majority groups in the East (Igbo), West (Yoruba) and North (Hausa) lost some of their speakers to states such as Rivers and Delta, Edo, and Kwara and Northern minority states respectfully. A main and constant source of conflict is the relationship between the major and minor groups (Bamgbose, 1993). Aside from demographic reasons, the major languages developed vocabularies, primers, texts and translations (Hair, 1967 as quoted by Igboanusi and Ohia, 2003).

In addition, certain efforts to promote the major languages have not been fully welcomed by the minority groups. These include the language provisions in the NPE of 1977, revised in 1981 and 2004. The introduction of second language courses in the major languages in some Colleges of Education to train teachers for teaching at the secondary school. The inclusion of a clause in the 1979 constitution for the use of the three major languages in the House of Representatives and Senate in addition to English. The development of a meta-language for the teaching of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2003). Also Bamgbose (1993) reports that the conflict started in 1961 when the Parliament debated the National Language Question of which the consequence was the serious opposition by the minority language speakers against a legislation to adopt any/ or all of the majority language(s) as a national language.

A study undertaken by Igboanusi and Ohia (2003) reveals that minority speakers consider the survival of their language(s) a priority. They also conclude that language conflicts in Nigeria could be accounted for by language attitude, language contact, language policies, ethnicity and political domination. In the light of these, the present study presents a paradigm for language development and teacher preparation for the UBE programme. To encourage Colleges of Education, Universities and Language Centres to offer opportunity for the study of languages. On the successful completion of the programmes, the graduates should be offered automatic jobs with special allowances for graduates who teach the language. To ensure the provision of language laboratories and gradually ensure the production of computer hardware and software in the languages. Training and retraining of teachers through regular courses, workshops and seminars should be continuous. Research in aspects of the languages should also be sustained. Encourage the use of the language(s) in media, churches, institutions and informal settings. Provide legislation to strengthen the standardization of languages. These steps are not really linear but rather an interface thus there should be constant feedback and the results used to monitor and modify the activities.

Paradigm for Language Development and Teacher Preparation

Language development in Nigeria is skewed towards the development of the major languages. This has led to conflict between the major ethnic groups and the minority ones (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2003). Narrowing the development of languages to only the three major ones would be a threat to the minority groups for fear of ethnic and political dominance and loss of social and cultural identity.

Ogar (2007) presents a language development and utilisation paradigm to highlight the Following: sensitising communities and ethnic groups on teachers and learners needs in relation to language; involving teachers, linguists, sociologists, psychologists, local interpreters, counsellors, community leaders and government representatives in the development of languages; classifying the languages in the States along linguistic and cultural lines and producing hybrids of dialects/languages before developing orthographies; and identifying and producing language materials based on the hybrid languages.

Other recommendations by Essien (1990) includes the role to be played by the government, especially in approving the orthographies for these languages officially and helping to fund the publication of primer series without which literacy would be impeded.

It must be stated that the government's desire to develop all indigenous languages characterised with a myriad of dialects is too ambitious, and would remain a mirage and its objectives unachievable if such an effort is not made to classify and develop the languages along ethnic, cultural and linguistic commonalities.

One of the ills that have bedevilled the nation's educational sector is unpreparedness by government to first train teachers in relevant fields before introducing an innovation typified by the UBE programme. It is apparent that except for the major languages and few of the minorities, Colleges of Education and Universities do not have provisions for training teachers in most of Nigeria's languages. The present study proposes that the following steps in preparing teachers for the use of languages be adhered to sensitise institutions, administrators and would-be-teachers of the languages on the benefits of studying such languages. Benefits such as rewarding teaching jobs, job opportunities in relevant sectors of the media and banking/insurance etc. The Nigerian National Language Centre should have branches in all states of the Federation to initiate the move to develop hybrid languages where necessary. The Centre should involve stakeholders (linguists, community leaders, administrators, politicians, religious leaders, teachers, researchers, sociologists, counsellors and psychologists). Develop workbooks, literature, dictionaries and software for studying the language(s) and speaking in the language(s). This must be systematic by developing, trial-testing and reviewing the material. Train teachers/resource persons in the languages.

Conclusion

Minority languages in Nigeria are often in contact with the major languages. This breeds conflict. Also minority languages in Nigeria are in most instances neglected because their speakers seem to believe that they do not help them to move upward socially. In addition, Government's Language Policy regarding minority language development is often perceived with suspicion.

Even though in strict terms, Nigeria does not have a language policy but only a provision for language in the National Policy on Education (Igboanusi and Ohia, 2003), the need to work out strategies for effective language development and teaching is imperative. This would also promote cultural and social identity, reduce mutual suspicion, prejudices and hostilities among different ethnic groups. In consonance with the University of Ife project (Ogunsiji, 2001), it would engender higher performance in school subjects, therefore achieving UBE objectives of teaching the language of the immediate environment, and teaching in same.

Achieving these language objectives would be conjectural except a systematic approach is adopted to prepare for the huge tasks. The steps presented could serve as a launching pad though not linearly but cyclically and interactively adopted to achieve the objective

References

- Aina, S.(2003). Anatomy of Communications. Abeokuta: Julican Publishers.
- Araromi, M. (2005). The Mother Tongue, Language and Instruction and Issues in Methodology. The Nigerian Experience. In A. Dada, A. Abimbade and O.O. Kolawole (Eds) *Issues in Language, Communication and Education*. 15-31. Ibadan: Constellation Books.
- Bamgbose, A. (1993). Language Dominance and Conflict in Nigeria. *LTCCA Research Reports on Languages in Africa*.
- Bloch, R and Trager, G.L (1945). *Outline of Linguistic Analysis*. Baltimore: Linguistic Association of America. Waverly Press.
- Chomsky, N (1968). *Language and mind*. New York: Harcourt Brace and World Inc.
- Egbokhare, F. (2001). The Nigerian Linguistic Ecology and the changing Profile of Nigerian Pidgin. In H. Igboanusi (Ed) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*.105-124. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers.
- Essien, O.E (1990). "The Future of Minority Languages," In Emenanjo (ed). *Multilingualism, Minority Languages and Language Policy in Nigeria*. 155-164. Agbor: Central Books Ltd.
- Essien, O.E (2003). "National development, language and language policy". In Okon Essien and Margaret Okon. *Topical issues in sociolinguistics: The Nigerian perspective*. 1-41. Aba. National Institute for Nigerian Languages.
- Federal Ministry of Education (2004). *National Policy on Education 4th edition*. Lagos: NERDC.
- Hair, P.E.H. (1967). *The Early Study of Nigerian Language*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Igboanusi, H. and Ohia, I. (2003). Language Conflict in Nigeria. The Perspective of Linguistic Minorities. *African Journal of Educational Research*, 9 (1and 2), 18-23.
- McRoberts, K (2007). Royal Commision on Bilingualism and Biculturalism. Microsoft student (DVD) Redmont, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
- Monke, L. (1998). Computers in Schools: Moving Education of the Child into the Machine. *The Internet and Higher Education*. Stanford: JAI Press 1 (2), 147-155.
- National Teacher's Institute (2008). *Manual for the Retraining of Basic Education Teachers in Curriculum Implementation and Record Keeping in Schools*. Kaduna: National Teachers' Institute.
- Ogar, M.N. (2007). Language Issues and Learning Opportunities in Adult and Computer Education in Cross River State, Nigeria. Paper presented at the Nigeria National Council for Adult Education, at the Kano Resources Centre, Kano. November 11th-15th.
- Ogunsiji, A. (2001). Utilitarian Dimensions of Language in Nigeria. H. Igboanusi (Ed) *Language Attitude and Language Conflict in West Africa*. 152-164. Ibadan: Enicrownfit Publishers.
- Okedara, C.A, Okerdirin, A and Adelere B. (2001). Issues in Language Education: Language Choice in Literacy Education. In J.T. Okedara, C.N. Anyanwu and M.A.L Omole (Eds). *Rethinking Adult and Non-Formal Education*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers.
- Udoh, I.I (2003). The languages of Cross River State. *Uyo Journal of Humanities*. 87-109.