



Nigeria's Language Policy: Implications for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Language policy is a delicate issue especially one set in a multi-lingual context as found in Nigeria. The role of language in education as a means of achieving sustainable development in any given society is a truism. This paper examines the language policies stipulated for education in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable development. It also proposes a framework for a sustainable language policy in Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The term 'language' could be applied to man's ability at exercising his innate vocal endowment. It could also be seen as a means of expression available to a given speech community for the purposes of communication and socialization as well as that of projecting, preserving and transmitting culture. Nigeria is a country so richly endowed with language that she has about 400 languages. Ethnic divisions in Nigeria are linguistically determined. Consequently, the existence of many languages implies the existence of many antagonistic ethnic nationalities. Three languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were elevated to major languages while the rest are seen as minor languages. This is predicated on the fact that the Hausas, Ibos and Yorubas are the three major tribes in Nigeria. The national language question saw the English language emerging as the *lingua franca* and the official/national language due to its neutrality in a multi ethno-linguistic and multicultural setting as Nigeria. The language has also been adopted as a medium of instruction in our school system. The English language, a foreign language plays multifarious roles in Nigeria being the second language, the *lingua franca*, official language and the language of instruction.

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The elevation and status of the English language has been saddled with numerous criticisms and condemnations. Opponents see the language as elitist in nature, having the tendency of excluding the majority of Nigerians from involvement in, and participation in national issues that concern them. In our education setting, they argue that academic underachievement in Nigeria is traceable to failure to comprehend teaching concepts owing to linguistic deficiencies. Fudor, in this regard establishes the relationship between thinking and linguistic abilities. He notes that “there is a medium in which we think, and of course it is a language” (56). This implies that the English think in English, the Hausas think in Hausa, the Yorubas in Yoruba and the Ibos in Igbo. For this reason, Ene perceives it as mental slavery to suggest that Nigeria indigenous languages are not comprehensible for thinking, for scientific studies and by extension, for concept formation (198). Supporters of the use of the English language as our official language, the *lingua franca* and the medium of instruction in schools base their arguments on the fact that the use of the English language engenders mutual understanding, co-operation and peace in a country bedeviled with too many ethno-political problems. They see it as neutral and has the capacity to be accepted by all as a national language more than any other indigenous language. They also remind their critics that the majority of Nigerian indigenous languages are still in the process of language engineering while some are yet to be codified.

Definitions

i. Native Language, Second Language and Foreign Language

Native language is synonymous with indigenous language, mother tongue and first language. A language that is aboriginal to a people, indigenous to a locality and is part of its culture is considered to be a native language. In this regard, any language that can be located in Nigeria having a speech community and speakers is a native language. In Nigeria for example, Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, etc are native languages. A native language is that language indigenous to a child's community in which he/she employs in his/her verbal communication. He/she internalizes the language by the process of acquisition, an unconscious and informal assimilation of the systems of a language. It is the child's first language; the very language in which the child is nurtured and raised by his/her mother and by extension, family members/relations; hence the name ‘mother tongue’. A controversy arises however, when a child is brought up in a linguistic environment other than his/hers. In such situation, the term ‘first language’ becomes more appropriate than the ‘mother tongue’. For most children however, their first language is their native language as well as their mother tongue.

On the other hand, a language which is non-native could either be a foreign language or a second language. In a multilingual society, a second language may be a language indigenous to the society such as we have in Northern Nigeria where Hausa is a second language functioning as a second

language where other native languages exist. In a monolithic society however, any other language acquired or learnt is referred to as a second language and is equally a foreign language.

ii. ***Language in Education***

The goal of education according to Ene is to “help the learner develop his natural ability by creating the necessary environment that will facilitate, challenge and involve him socially, physically, intellectually and emotionally in the art of learning and doing” (197). The relationship that exists between language and the mind is such that language is a reflection of the mind and a means of conveying knowledge and information stored in the mind. In the words of Olajide, language plays an important role in learning at any level of education. The normal teaching-learning process thrives on effective communication by which the teacher and his/her learners are required to command the language of instruction (2). This means that no matter how expertly learning experiences are selected and organized, the ultimate objective of the teaching-learning exercise; which is a change in behaviour, would not occur if the teachers cannot relate these experiences in the appropriate language. Consequently, language becomes a veritable tool for any form of education.

iii. ***Sustainable Development***

The phrase is becoming more like a mantra. Everything now seems to be sustainable. One hears of sustainable development, sustainable growth, sustainable economy, sustainable society, etc. Ikedah as quoted in Lindem agrees that the definition of sustainable development is broad in that it includes economical, ecological, social and educational aspects of sustainability (2). Adeniyi and Bello on their part view it as aggregate financial buoyancy as well as the education of, and involvement of the citizenry in activities that will lead to the nourishing of a country’s economy. The United Nations in her Brondtland Report sees sustainable development as a development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Sustainable development therefore, is an eclectic concept conveying a wide range of meaning. It entails a society taking a practical, realistic and positive approach to growth and development, and the ability to manage their natural, produced and social capital for the welfare of the present and future members of the society.

Having seen the role of language both as a veritable tool for education and as an instrument for sustainable development, there is need at this juncture, to examine Nigeria’s language policy and its implications for sustainable development.

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Nigeria's Language Policy

Both the documents of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999) and the National Policy on Education (2004) have made some stipulations that could be termed Nigeria's language policy. Section 55 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria stipulates that "the affairs of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa and Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof". Similarly, in the National Policy on Education, government recognizes the role of language as a means of social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. For this reason, it stipulates that:

a. every child shall learn the language of his immediate environment and in the interest of national unity is required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages.

b. for smooth interaction with our neighbours it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior secondary schools.....(10)

Specifically for early childhood/pre-primary education, the policy stipulates that government shall "ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community" (10).

Therefore, a summary of Nigeria's language policy reveals the following:

a. Use of English in the affairs of governance at the national and state levels and any of the three major indigenous languages.

b. Use of the mother tongue at the pre-primary level

c. Use of the mother tongue, the English language and the French language at the primary level.

d. Use of English, French and any one of the three major languages (provided it is not the child's mother tongue) at the junior secondary level.

e. Use of English and any indigenous language at the senior secondary level. (French and Arabic are language options).

f. No specific prescriptions are made in the policy document for language education at the tertiary level.

Implications for Sustainable Development

In essence, Nigeria has a multilingual/multicultural policy on language in the training of manpower needed for the development of Nigeria. It recognizes the strategic roles of both the native languages and English in education and overall manpower development. However good the intentions of government are in the stipulations of these policies, the implementation is far from realization especially in the use of the mother tongue, and hence, the objectives of the policy are far from being achieved. There is therefore, the need to overhaul the policy as it regards the use of the mother tongue with respect to the provisions and implementations.

In line with Lawal as quoted in Olajide, a framework that relates linguistic communication to educational, socio-economic and political needs in Nigeria is hereby proposed:

- that English be used at international and interpersonal levels, e.g for broadcasting, business and economic transaction; and as a medium of (and subject in) higher education.
- that the three major languages as well as other native languages which have had their orthography developed be used at the interzonal levels, e.g for broadcasting, justice, administration, etc; and as a medium of primary and lower secondary education; and a subject at all levels of education.
- that other minority languages be used for informal purposes, semi-formal use at interzonal level, e.g in customary courts, at lower levels of administration, etc.

These reforms become necessary against the backdrop of the fact that researches have shown that the child learns best in his mother tongue. Fafunwa submits that:

if the Nigeria child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, mechanical comprehension and co-ordination of hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through his mother tongue; after all, this is the most natural learning medium (25)

The development attained by Asian countries according to Ehusani, were partly because they held on to their local languages (4). For this reason, the Nigerian government has serious tasks to carry out in both ensuring that the process of language engineering for native languages is set off. This does not call for mere provisions of a blue print; but rather, an urgent and pragmatic approach to the implementation of the any of such proposals. Against the background of the multilingual composition of Nigeria and that language planning and engineering is not easy; against the stark realities of globalization; the status, roles and functions of the English language in Nigeria in relation to education, to empower, secure and achieve advancement is undoubtedly a foregone conclusion.

CONCLUSION

Language is central to the sustainable development of any society. Consequently, it must not be wrongly located in Nigeria's national reforms in her march for sustainable development. A monolingual policy of language in Nigeria is counter-productive. The consequences of such policy are dire! A monolingual policy in favour of any native language, or even the English language for that matter against the socio-political and linguistic composition of Nigeria; non-existent language planning and engineering, functions and

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roles of the English language as a world language and the language of globalization, is an impediment to sustainable development in Nigeria. It only stands to reason therefore, that the multicultural policy to language in Nigeria remains the best option in view of the role of language in sustainable development. However, there is obvious need to overhaul and reform the policy as suggested in this paper to situate language properly in its role in Nigeria as a tool for sustainable development.

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