

Promoting Empowerment through Language Studies: A Sociolinguistic Analysis

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Abstract

The topic promoting empowerment through language studies is analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective. The author proposes that language studies are veritable tools for promoting empowerment. By language studies, the paper means the study of languages through linguistics. The theoretical framework is sociolinguistics, which the author believes is central to human activities in the society. The language studies identified as the main tools for empowerment cover phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics and applied linguistics such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, dialectology and discourse analysis. The paper discusses the role of these courses, and relates them to language education in the ethnology of mankind, especially the role of multilingualism in man's development.

Keywords: Empowerment, Ethnology, Multilingualism, Pragmatics, Holophrastic

Introduction

Empowerment is the process whereby people are enabled to improve, grow, develop and progress, in order to achieve or contribute to positive and self-fulfilling change. Empowerment can also be defined as a process of challenging dominant power structures that may inhibit one's personal growth and advancement in the society, in order to gain recognition, control or power (Olaoye, 2009). It takes varied forms and dimensions which include activities like individual self-assertion, self-improvement, collective bargaining or resistance in order to challenge existing power relations (Towley, 1986; Okeshola, 1995 and Olaoye, 2009). Self-empowerment takes varied forms like education, apprenticeship, usurpation, domination and force (Olaoye, 2009). Education is the most fundamental and important tool for empowerment or for the achievement of social justice and equity. Social scientists prescribe education as a tool for the up-lift of the underprivileged, the marginalized, and the oppressed within the society (Afonja and Pearce, 1984; Graham-Brown, 1991). Education is therefore a veritable instrument for promoting empowerment, and it is best done through the medium of languages.

Modern man can hardly contemplate communal life without the instrument of language. Performance, especially spoken language, defines personality. For the language educator, his credibility is almost entirely anchored on his competence in communicating ideas, and stimulating learning through the use of language. Articulate and well-spoken teachers always invariably win the hearts and respect of their students.

Feminists have advanced the issue of empowerment of women through education as a means of challenging patriarchal ideology of male domination and women subordination. Empowerment entails life-long struggle for survival and transforming the structures and institutions (e.g. laws, social practice, political process, religious matters, etc) that seem to perpetuate or re-enforce gender discrimination and social inequality. According to Graham-Brown (1991), for the individual, empowerment through education promises an escape from poverty, oppression, and also promises greater social prestige, job mobility, and promotes management skills in entrepreneurship for better future prospect (Olaoye, 2015). Education empowers through language.

Language Studies

Language studies empower those who are engaged in them. Language as a means of communication is the corner stone of any educational process (Ige, 2002). Language studies play a vital role in education. Education, whether formal or informal, is carried out through the medium of some languages, and learning at any level is largely verbal (Awoniyi, 1978). Language, whether spoken or written is the vehicle through which knowledge is imparted, and knowledge is power. One of the cardinal points in the Federal Government National Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) is education (Olaoye, 2004), and language education is a key tool and bridge to the future. It empowers children and the youth to take charge of their lives (Olaoye, 2013). This involves acquisition of skills and knowledge that would prepare children for the world of work.

Language Acquisition and Learning

Language studies and language learning are co-terminus. If this statement is true, then the child's struggle to empower himself begins at infancy when he begins to babble. This is the first stage of language empowerment. This is the pre-verbal stage, which is described linguistically as phonological and visual. The child uses body language to communicate. The middle vowels are most prominent in their noises, which also contain labials and velar. This primitive language acquisition stage is essentially noise making, like yelling, crying and laughing known as echolalia (Olaoye, 2009). The child in this development stage struggles to empower himself through the acquisition of one or two syllabic words, a one-word –stage, known as holophrastic stage. The feature of this one-word stage is both phonological and morphemic. The child uses a lot of function words, these are single words used for setting communication in motion, such as flower, book, table, food, water, and so forth. The struggle for language empowerment continues as the child tries to speak two words or more in a telegraphic manner. This two-words-utterance stage, called

telegraphic stage, has two classes:

- (a) The Pivot class – which has a reliably high frequency of occurrence, and
- (b) Open class – the child's grammar at this stage is telescopic but functional.

The child eventually moves to the semantic stage. This is the sentence stage or the beginning of the syntax, inflections and transformations. At this stage the child is gradually becoming more empowered as he uses the language with dexterity, finesse and with a sense of maturity to communicate.

Mother Tongue

The child's mother tongue or his first language is an instrument of empowerment. It has instrumental function. Mother Tongue (MT) is being used for communicating emotional feelings, information and ideas. It is used for regulatory purposes i.e. to control people's behavior through warning, persuading, dissuading, threatening, cajoling, teasing and praising (Olaoye, 2009), what Olaoye (2019) calls speech act illocution. It has interactional use i.e. for socialization. MT has its use for personal purposes, especially for personal development. The heuristic function is the use of MT for investigating reality through questions such as Who? Where? Why? What? and When? The MT is also used for imaginative purposes, i.e. to think, imagine, conceptualize, and to make propositions and to count.

Promoting empowerment through language studies entails the teaching of certain aspects of language for pragmatic or functional purposes. Linguistics as a discipline has to be studied or taught. Linguistics is an analytical science devoted to the study of languages in all their aspects. For instance, the study of linguistic forms provides tools for dealing with human behavior and social processes.

The study of Linguistics is therefore imperative and this deals with a broad spectrum of courses which when put together are capable of

transforming the most primitive, rustic homosapiens. The humanistic aspects of the following courses have to be brought out in order to empower the students:

- Theoretical Linguistics: language studies must of necessity start from the study of theoretical linguistics, which includes phonetics, and phonology, or phonemes and grammars that comprise morphology, syntax and semantics. Language incompetence is a hindrance to empowerment.
- Phonetics and phonology as a course is very crucial in language studies, because one's competence in the structure of any language can be negated by incompetence in speech (Ilori, 1992).
- Psycholinguistics: This is learning about human mental processes used in the production and use of language, through which education is carried out. Psycholinguistics has to be taught. This deals essentially with the theories of language acquisition and learning. Two broad processes of language acquisition have been identified. The first is the natural or spontaneous process where the child acquires a language effortlessly and naturally, while the second is the "studial processes" according to Omoyajewo (1998). This is done through non-natural force such as language personnel, scientific gadgets, language laboratory and other environmental factors which all work in tandem to help enhance the child's proficiency. Lecturers therefore have to be knowledgeable about the principles of language studies. For instance, course design must take account of the nature and type of students the course is meant for. Course design should therefore be learner-specific (Palmer, 1975).
- Pragmatics: studies of the relationship between sentences and the context of situation. Context brings linguistic

illumination, and obviates confusion in discourse.

- Lexicography: writing and making of dictionaries. This is important in language planning, especially during language standardization exercise, language revival and language purification through orthographic design and lexical simplification. Enriching one's language leads to linguistic sophistication, and this in turn leads to linguistic empowerment.
- Speech pathology and therapy : the study of speech abnormalities and disorders and how to solve them is fundamental to language empowerment
- Discourse Analysis: This course prepares the learner in the theory and practice of public elocution, the legal aspects of discourse and the socio-pragmatics of speaking all which empower the interlocutors.

Political Sociolinguistics

This is an aspect of applied linguistics which deals with language and society. It deals with language behavior across a nation especially language use in government administration, political parties, mass media, judiciary, including, of course, normative language, such as language use in the home, school, church and offices. It deals with language varieties such as dialects, idiolects, acrolects, mesolects and basilects. It looks at issues like diglossia, bilingualism, multilingualism, code-mixing, code-switching and language planning (Olaoye, 2014). To promote empowerment through language studies, much emphasis must be placed on socio-linguistic competence, or what Hymes (1964) calls communicative competence. Students have to be grounded in the knowledge of the grammar of the language and knowledge of rules of speaking, otherwise known as the ethnography of speaking. Aspeaker, whether he is a politician, a pastor, a union leader, or even a civil servant needs sociolinguistic competence in order to achieve his goal.

Language study should focus attention on certain aspects of socio-linguistics which enculturate and acculturate the learners in the act of speaking. These aspects include public elocution strategies: turn-taking, intercalary expressions, illocutions, use of idiomatic expressions, adages, wise cracks, humorous expressions, simple sentences, pauses, interjection, phatic communion, witticism, appropriate eye-contact, coupled with the speaker's understanding of the linguistic milieu and the nature of the audience.

In political socio-linguistics, dialogue, participatory democracy, creative thinking and community inquiry are promoted. Language studies which encourage teamwork or what Olaoye and Maiyanga (2004) call linguistic andragogy should be embarked upon. Linguistic andragogy is not only concerned with just the acquisition of linguistic skills but rather the development of a critical and creative spirit leading to higher order thinking.

Language Education

Language policy and planning is another very important aspect of socio-linguistics which helps in promoting empowerment. The National Policy on Education, for instance, stipulates that every child should learn the language of his immediate environment. The child is required to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages, thus promoting bilingualism and multilingualism, help to empower people to understand each other better, thus removing suspicion, biases and ethnocentrism. Multilingualism is a veritable tool for empowerment. A multilingual has the advantage of job opportunities. He is exposed to many cultures and the technologies of the nations whose languages he speaks. A polyglot has a very rich understanding of the world (Olaoye, 2014).

Language planning, an aspect of sociolinguistics, also rescues indigenous languages from what Idudhe (2002) calls threat of extinction. A UNESCO 2005 report shows that over 60 African languages are threatened by extinction,

and that 23 of this figure are Nigerian languages. Experts, like Banjo, (1983), Adeniran, (1990) and Emenanjo, (2004), have identified the neglect of local languages, especially in private schools and many homes as inimical to the future of local languages. More concerted efforts are expected to be made by educational institutions in the area of orthographic design and language standardization. Multilingualism prevents language endangerment, promotes linguistic versatility, enhances cosmopolitan experience and facilitates learning (Olaoye, 2014; Adegboye and Olaoye, 2017).

Language study focused on how to develop the orthography of many Nigerian languages with the eventual choice of some of the Nigerian languages as National Official Language (NOL), is capable of promoting empowerment. When corpus or status planning results in the emergence of a strong NOL, this may eventually become a viable candidate for the nation's lingua franca. By the same token, students become more linguistically enriched or empowered when they become bilingual or multilingual. The development of minority languages – or local languages regarded as endangered species (Onoyuwe, 2002) is another sure step towards promoting language empowerment.

Language of Religious Worship

From ontological point of view, language can be regarded as the celestial electricity which illuminates the dark part of the linguistically blind person. It transforms him from the primordial barbarity of the rustics to a refined man. For instance, in the socio-linguistics of religion the language of spiritual communication or communion according to Olaoye (2001) involves the use of epithets or adjectives in addressing God or qualifying God. For spiritual empowerment, language of intercession, such as “praise”, “magnify”, “worship”, “glorify”, “beseech”, etc, is used. Idiomatic expressions and appellations such as the almighty, the merciful, the pardoner, the listener, the omnipotent, the beneficent, and other omni-temporal statements are used. It is also

believed that ability to speak many languages (i.e. speaking in tongues in religious term) is another form of empowerment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, for language studies to promote empowerment, lecturers have to teach students phonetics and phonology, bearing in mind the importance of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics in language learning. Communicative competence whether as a monolingual or multilingual is a skill which enhances the speaker's personality and endears him to his listeners. Language study, whether it is Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba, or any of the Nigerian languages for that matter, humanizes mankind. It opens the gate to the innermost recesses of man, makes possible easy access to the culture of the world and empowers in no small measure..

Recommendations

There must be individual level empowerment and collective or community level and government or institutional level empowerment. On individual level, staff and students on their own should make serious efforts towards improving on their language competence. Collectively, lecturers can carry out research on languages, especially on how to enrich the lexicon of particular languages. On institutional level, government should empower lecturers by funding research and publication, and procuring more language laboratory facilities and equipment. Government should also encourage education associations such as the Nigerian Book Fair Trust, Association of Nigerian Authors, Dramatic Association of Nigeria and Linguistic Association of Nigeria. The Mother Language Day for instance, which was instituted to promote multilingualism as heritage of humanity, should be supported by government. These language associations can empower language teachers. More researches should be conducted on how to revive and revitalize moribund or dying languages in order to empower the speakers of the languages.

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