

Language Policy: A Panacea towards a comprehensive integration and National Unity in Nigeria

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Abstract

Language is very important in every human life; hence one cannot communicate without language. Therefore the role of language in the society is significant that it can make or divide the people, build or destroy a nation or State. Nigeria's problem of multilingualism dates back to the colonial era and this has affected her national unity and genuine comprehensive intergration of the various ethnic nationalities. The debate about the use of mother tongue (part of the multilingualism) as part of the medium of education in Nigeria dates back to the colonial era. According to Afe (1991), the language policy had been in Status book since 1925, recommended that both English and the mother tongue must be given recognition in the educational system. This study therefore examines the Language policy of the country as a panacea to national unity, genuine intergration and development in Nigeria; The observations and problems in the National Policy on Education (Emenango, 1985) and Oyetade, 2003). In this paper, the authors try to determine the roles of National Policy on Education in enhancing effective communication among school children in Nigeria; ascertaining the role of schools in implementing the multilingual provisions of the NPE and ways of fostering national unity and integration through the English Language in Nigeria. The article views previous scholarly works by other researchers which are in line with the topic to ensure accurate information. Finally, the authors conclude with summaries, remedies and recommendations towards enhancing national unity through language policy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Language Policy, multilingualism, National Unity, ethnicity and intergration.

Introduction

There is no substitution to a cohesive society. In every human society, language plays an important role. The language of any society tells a lot about that society; hence language and human society are inseparable. Language plays different roles such as officialdom, legislature, mass media, politics, business, education etc. in a particular setting. The Encyclopaedia Britannica defines multilingualism as the use of several languages either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multilingual education is said to be the use of several languages in educational system.

The only effective process by which this can be achievable is through the formal system of Bilingual/Multilingual Education in our schools that will be loaded with enriched socio-cultural orientations

which will do away with cultural alienation in the hearts of the citizens (Ogunwale (2013). This implies that it is important for Language Education to produce a society with consumers of African-based knowledge. The case for Nigeria languages in the development process has been very articulated by scholars like Anayo (1983) and Bamgbose (1977). On research studies on mother tongue, there have been some laudable and successful experiment on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in selected schools in many developing nations including Philippines (Ramos et Al 1967), Mexico (Mediarno, 1968), Canada (Lambert and Tucker, 1972), Nigeria (The Ife Project, Afolayan, 1976).

Before Nigeria came in contact with Europe, missionaries and colonization, it existed as a sprawling territory of diverse ethnic groups, with each group having a distinct (and to some extent overlapping) historical, linguistic, cultural patterns expressed in traditional socio-political, educational and religious systems (Ajayi and Smith 1964, Dike, 1956, Enoch, 1996 in Morakinyo, 2015). In the Northern Colony, there existed the Hausa, Fulani, Kanuri, Eggon, Mada, Tiv and the Nupe to mention a few. In the Southern Protectorate are the Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, Efik, Ibibio, etc. These ethnic groups were in constant contact with one another through various economic activities and tribal expansionism. From the standpoint of history, it is understood that there were no completely isolated tribe, hence different socio-political interaction among different ethnic groups and nationalities that constitute what is today known as Nigeria (Ajayi, 1967 in Morakinyo, 2015). These contacts and transactions brought about linguistic and cultural exchange. Cultural and linguistic contact led to linguistic borrowing of new vocabularies and patterns but not necessarily linguistic domination or annexation. The above is verifiable according to Morakinyo, (2015), as there are lots of cognate words in Hausa and Yoruba that suggest that the two languages came in contact at some point in history. Another type of linguistic contact that Nigeria experienced was in the late sixteen century (16th c) when British missionaries and traders came into the coastal regions of Lagos and Calabar. Morakinyo (2015) opines that while the missionaries were concerned with Christian evangelization, the merchants were interested in slave trade. After slave trade was abolished in 1807, some of Nigerian slaves who had acquired Western Education came back home with English as a foreign asset and later served as interpreters and copyists to the missionaries. One of them was Ajayi Crowder who translated the English Bible into Yoruba language (Huber, 1999 in Morakinyo, 2015). This was the genesis of English in Nigeria. Going by this historical position, it is safe to conclude that English predates colonization in Nigeria.

During the colonial era, English became Nigeria's official language. English language gathered momentum as the missionaries established Western education in Nigeria and made it the language of instruction. As observed by Morakinyo, the Southern part of Nigeria welcomed the language and assimilated faster more than the North. To this, it was concluded that the North did not welcome the missionaries compared to the Southerners. Hence, its use in the North was restricted only to the traditional Hausa/Fulani feudal class.

In the post-colonial era, the linguistic situation of Nigeria got more complex. Nigerian pidgin was given birth to as there was need for a neutral language that could be used by all for communication irrespective of tribe, ethnicity, religion or level of formal education. Prior to Nigerian independence in 1960, ethno linguistic and political pressures have led to the change in the regional Government practiced in the first republic which resulted to the creation of twelve states in 1967; nineteen in 1976, twenty one in 1987; thirty in 1991 and thirty six states by 1996. Since then, there has been consistent demand from the minority language speakers for state or local government autonomy which further suggests that the minority feel marginalized in the life of the Nigerian nation. There was continual call between 1998 and 2014, from different ethnic minority groups for political autonomy from larger ethnic groups using language as their weapon.

Nigeria is faced with multi-ethnic groupings with multilingual problem. To understand the national language policy, the National Policy on Education (NPE) came up with some idea after the National Curriculum Conference (NCC) held in 1977. The conference gave birth to a comprehensive pamphlet containing a policy statement on the role and function of all levels of education. The 1977 policy statement was revised in 1981.

Hence, the NPE (1981 revised) defines primary education as an institution for children aged normally between 6 and 11 above (Ahmad, 2016).

This document assigns different functions to many Nigerian languages in the nation's education sector at various levels. The policy stated that every child shall learn in the language of the immediate environment in the first three years while English language shall be taught as a school subject. Emenanjo (1985) observes that there is still lack of awareness on the part of highly placed ministry officials' supervisor/inspectors of education, principal/headmasters of schools and practicing teachers of the multilingual provisions of the National Policy on Education etc. In addition, that the problems associated with the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction or as school subjects as stated in the NPE (that every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages in addition to his own) has not been implemented. However, in the interest of national unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, every child is expected to learn one of the three national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba). The provision of the NPE (2004), Section 4, Paragraph 19 (e) and (f) cited below confirms that the multilingual education is in existence:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. 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 subjects.

The policy made it explicit that from the fourth year of basic education, the medium of instruction shall be English language while the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. At secondary school level, English shall be the language of instruction while the language of the immediate environment, one of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) other than that of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as school subjects (Olagbaju, 2014). This article has examined Language Policy as a Panacea to Nigeria's Unity and comprehensive integration.

Problems/Challenges of Language Policy in Nigeria.

The reason why the importance of language in communication should not be over emphasized lies in the obvious fact that there will be no existence of interaction without it. The multilingual nature of Nigeria has been a problem right from the colonial era. This multi-ethnic nature of Nigeria constitutes a barrier to the successful implementation of the multilingual provisions of the policy. Oyetade (2003) asserts that the problems associated with the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction and for school subjects as stated in the NPE (that every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages in addition to his/her own) has not been implemented. There supposed to be a progressively implementation of this policy from the fourth year of the primary school to the Junior Secondary School level. But this provision is being waived aside in many schools. Oyetade adds that a stronger reason for the failure at the level of implementation might not be unconnected with the belief of the minority speakers that such a recommendation is an imposition on them.

Presently in Nigeria, this wonderful gift has been abused so much that some Nigerians are victimized and denied their right simply because they are not able to speak same language with the person who is supposed to attend to their needs. Justice in terms of equality of representation across board is being perverted because of language differences. This has brought about entronement of ethnicity, nepotism and other problems which are bedeviling Nigeria. The earlier the black goat is sought before it is dark, the better as the main problem confronting the state of Nigeria is daily ignored while searching for the solution to Nigeria's problems. Therefore, focus and attention ought and should be channeled towards Language Policies in Nigeria as one of the remedies to her many and numerous problems, if National Unity and sustainable integration must be achieved.

Nigeria government at all levels should adopt different remedies that will be of immense relevance and benefit to school administrators, linguists, scholars and other users of information towards the improvement of National Unity in Nigeria and corporate existence through the use of Language. In addition, addressing the problems of language in Nigeria through the institution of language policy would be meritorious in the enhancement of national unity. This paper has thus proffered solution and a way out from one of the biggest problem confronting it.

Since communication is done through language, it remains an important factor in national development and national consciousness. Nigeria has a natural division, through the rivers Niger and Benue, into three major areas, and these divisions correspond with the three major language groups in the country namely the Hausa in the North, the Igbo in the East and the Yoruba in the West. Outside the three major language groups, Nigeria is made up of more than 250 ethnic groups with a conservative estimate of 4000 languages (Akindele and Adegbite, 1992) and as quoted in Olusoji (2012).

The multiplicity of language in Nigeria is pronounced that within the major ethnic groups, there are still differences in languages and dialects. The situation is that some of the dialects found within a linguistic group are not mutually understandable amongst such group even though the speakers belong to the same linguistic group. For instance, within the Yoruba ethnic group, the Akoko Yoruba speaker in Ondo state understands the Ilorin Yoruba speaker in Kwara state, but the Akoko speaker is not understood by the Ilorin speaker. Elue (1981) in Ahmad (2016) opines that multilingualism is seen as phenomenon that results from a situation where people belonging to a particular society speak different languages. He goes further to state that it is a situation whereby different languages are spoken by the people in the same environment.

Chumbrow (1990) has articulated the challenges thus:

- 1) The need for an international language by African nations so as to relate to the world community easily. Languages like English or French serve such a purpose readily.
- 2) Given the multilingualism in Africa Nations, national unity would be best achieved by using a foreign language like English or French because it is neutral.
- 3) African languages are not adequately developed to express modern scientific and technical knowledge.
- 4) It is better to go straight for English than starting off with an Indigenous language only to return to English later. Such a switch is it feared, may result in cognitive deficits and low productivity.
- 5) It is expensive to provide education in African languages.

Language Policy and Planning

Language planning is both the symbolic function of language within a society, and as well as the instrumental use that its speakers make of their language Hoffmann (1991), in Danladi (2013). Crystal (1990) is of the view that language policy should be understood as a systematic attempt to resolving the communication problems of a community by studying the various dialects it uses while developing a viable policy concerning the collection and the use of different languages. Any guidelines for language, especially in education, have to take account of the attitude of those likely to be affected. In the views of Lewis (1981), no policy will succeed in the long run, which does not perform one of the three following functions:

1. Conform to the express attitude of those involved,
2. Convince those who expressed attitudes about the rightness of the policy,

- c Or those that seek to remove the causes of the disagreement in any case of knowledge about attitudes, which is essential to the formation of a policy as well as encouraging its success in its implementation.

For Apple and Muysken (1987), language planning is part of language policy, and that language planning is a part of, or the exact recognition of language policy. A government adopts a strict policy with respect to the language(s) spoken in the country and will try to keep it out in the form of communication planning. Any case of language design is based on an effective language policy, and this will indicate a more inclusive government policy. However, one way out of these controversies is to adopt the general view as a working principle where Danladi (2013) states that The language policy of a speech community may be revealed in its practices, its beliefs, or in straightforward language management.

Multilingual Language Planning and Policy in Nigeria

Language planning has been defined by Morakinyo (2015), as the thoughtful mediation by the government or the power that be on language. Hence, it is a conscious effort made on a language to change the condition of the said language. Such changes are targeted toward altering the status of a language and the linguistic range and functionality of the language.

Language planning deals with improving the social status of a language by a policy that empowers the said language with a status it has not enjoyed before. Oyetade (2003) notes that language planning as an organized and systematic pursuit of solutions to language problems has remained largely peripheral to the mainstream of national planning. One place a policy on language was ever mentioned in the Nigerian Constitution is the policy of Language in Education in which the mother tongue was allowed to be the medium of instruction at primary schools along with English. There has been three approaches to the language policy and planning in Nigeria which according to Morakinyo (2015) include: the nationalist orientation, the internationalist and the neutralist perspectives.

According to him, some writers are of the view that the nation should adopt one of her indigenous languages as the national lingual Franca. By this, they claim that the Nation will have a total emancipation from her colonial legacy hence, establishing the needed bond and ties towards national unity and integration.

To the Internationalist, language should favour an exogenous language over the indigenous ones. Those who are of this view adduce to the argument that canters on the multiculturalism and multilingualism of Nigeria. To them, English performs the task of unifying the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. English therefore should be viewed as aiding a pragmatic advantage in the life of the Nation. Hence, Nigeria cannot exist as a National Entity without English as the mechanism for governance and administration. To this, some scholars assume a neutral position on the indigenous/exogenous debate on national Lingual Franca. They are neither in support of English as a national language nor support any indigenous language as a possible national official language. They believe that the basilectal variety of the English language spoken in Nigeria called the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) could perform the task of an official language. The debate goes on.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, language has a crucial role to play in our daily life communication towards maintaining national unity, integration and development. The National Policy on Education should function actively for the purpose of enhancing effective communication and unity among school children in Nigeria. The government administrators, linguists, scholars, other users of information and the policy makers in Nigeria should join the academia in discovering different remedies to help improve unity in schools, which will serve as implementing tools to enhance the multilingual provisions of the NPE. Finally, Nigeria should look

inwards in its search for a way of fostering national integration through the English Language and determine ways of enhancing national unity through language policy in Nigeria.

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