

The Use of Nigerian Languages in Formal Education: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

Language plays an important role in teaching and learning situations, not only as a subject taught in school but also, as the vehicle through which information is shared between the learner and the teacher. It is therefore important to use an 'appropriate' language in education. The word 'appropriate' in this sense means a language that can effectively capture and interpret all the aspirations of the teacher to the learner in a way that he or she best understands. The trend all over the world especially amongst the developed countries of the world is that the Mother Tongue is equally used in the school system as the medium of instruction. This factor has helped those countries (China, Japan, India, and South Africa to mention but a few) in no small way in achieving enviable development amongst the committee of nations because learners are able to transfer concepts learnt in the mother tongue easily. It is however sad to note that Nigeria, a multilingual with over 400 living languages seems to be reluctant to tap into the benefits of using the Mother Tongue in her system of education. This paper delves into the various challenges that confront the adoption of an indigenous language as a medium of instruction in formal education in Nigeria and their solutions.

Keywords: Mother Tongue, Language of Education, Challenges, Solutions, Formal Education.

Introduction

The effectiveness of using the language a learner is comfortable with, a language in which he can express his thought and translate his internal ideas into articulate sentences has been established by many scholars (Taiwo 1976, Emenanjo 1996, Osborn 2007, Olanrewaju 1996, Oluwole 2008, Obanya 1992). Though some other scholars consider the use of mother tongue or Nigerian languages in modern education as one of the problems militating against qualitative teaching and learning of the English language (Kolawole and Dele 2002). Emenanjo (1996) states, 'Formal education in Nigerian languages, Aku (Yoruba) began way back in 1831. Yet up till now; not much progress appears to have been made in education in Nigerian languages, irrespective of the 1926 Education Edict of the colonial government, and the many noble sentiments of indigenous federal and state governments and valiant activities of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria.'

Okon (1982), Bamgbose (1982), Taiwo (1976) and Emenanjo (1996) have correctly identified the barriers and challenges facing effective use of West African languages in general and Nigerian languages in particular. Even studies have established the effectiveness of teaching learners in their L1, notable among such studies is the Ife Six Year Primary Project (SYPP) which proved that learners achieved better when taught in their mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community. Also, the National Policy on Education (2004) Section 3 (xx) states 'Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue (MT) of the immediate community and at a later stage, English.' The policy further states 'In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving peoples' culture, the government considers it in the best interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue (MT).'

Emenanjo (1996) states 'The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around is best done and realised in the languages in which the students are most familiar.' To me, the language that a learner is most familiar with can be any of the following: the learner's mother tongue (MT), first language (L1) or language of the immediate community (LIC) and so; it is important to make use of same as language of instruction in modern education. Although the National policy on education favours the development and use of the mother tongue in education but in implementation, very little has been done or achieved in this regard. There are a lot of challenges facing the adoption and complete use of Nigerian languages in modern education and it is the quest of this paper to identify the various challenges and as well proffer solutions to these problems.

Oluwole (2008) while lending his voice to the potency of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in modern education states, 'It is therefore generally acceptable that in teaching and learning processes, the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance. For one thing, it categorises a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names of all the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on that are so important to him as well as to any society. I quite agree with the view that a child's mother tongue, an indigenous language or a Nigerian language is the most appropriate vehicle to convey the theme, concepts and subject matter of what is to be learnt to the Nigerian child.

Olanrewaju (1996) states, 'In what type of language will such a heterogeneous group be taught? Of course, it has to be in the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment which is common to the young and the old. Under this condition, it will be easy to understand the process of science and hence, application of these processes of science to solve problems confronting man will not be too difficult. Evidences from the Second International Science Study showed that Japanese primary schools children came first in primary science among the countries of the world with Nigerian pupils coming last (STAN 1992)

The first challenge that stares anyone that wants to make use of a Nigerian language in modern education in the face is the stark realisation that most of the indigenous languages in Nigeria are not fully developed. Taiwo (1976) asserts that Kiswahili never improved until it was adopted as a lingua franca and the language of schools in Tanzania 1967. This confirms that the indigenous languages in Nigeria need to be trusted and assigned more defined roles in the different sectors of the country. To Taiwo (1976), the mother tongue has very little incentive for development and use in education especially in most African countries where English (or other foreign languages) is used as the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in schools. However, the development and unrestricted use of a child's home language or mother tongue in education will promote universal basic education and equal access to education across Nigeria and the African continent.

The National Policy on Education (2004) recommends that the Nigerian primary school child should be well grounded in his or her mother tongue apart from learning English and/or any other language as the L2 or L3. The National Language Centre (1975) in a paper titled 'The importance of language learning on the overall development of the child in primary school: solutions to the Nigerian problem' states, 'For education to be meaningful, the child should be taught in his mother tongue which he can both read and write.' The use of mother tongue in education is a practical issue and students that are taught with an indigenous language have to struggle with the understanding of the foreign language which is being used as the language of instruction as well as the complexities of the concept that is being learnt. Taiwo (1976) states, 'There is no favourable means of rapport between the teacher and a child on his first day at school than a common language, which is the child's mother tongue. As the child progresses in his adventure of schooling, the mother tongue is a reassuring means of acquiring concepts and building them into ideas and skills.' If Nigeria as a nation is serious in her quest to raise a generation of citizens that are academically sound then we must revert to using the Nigerian languages as a medium of instruction in our schools.

The use of Nigerian Languages in Modern Education: Challenges.

Many scholars have studied and made use of mother tongue (Nigerian languages) in modern education and some of the challenges encountered are discussed in this work. Taiwo (1976) opined that Nigerian languages are rich in traditional settings, but they are generally insufficient to cope with the modern curriculum and concludes that this insufficiency is a major problem.' Language is a tool for expressing our innermost views, feelings, desires, thoughts and experiences, the challenge therefore is that there are certain concepts in modern education which may not be adequately conveyed by any of the Nigerian languages. A number of factors work against the effective use of Nigerian languages in modern education and these are summarised under the following themes:

1. Resource – related factors.
2. Attitudinal factors
3. Orthographic factors
4. Legislative/Policy related factors

Resource – related Factors

This deals with human and capital resources-related challenges of using Nigerian languages in modern education. Some of these problems include:

- (1) Lack of qualified or trained teachers in the (Nigerian) languages.
- (2) General student-apathy to studying Nigerian languages in the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.
- (3) Low incentive to learn and specialise in Nigerian languages: this is because the English language is made compulsory in Nigerian secondary schools and also as a major pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions of learning while any of the Nigerian languages is not.
- (4) The government has not committed enough funds to the development of materials such as textbooks, teaching aids and other instructional materials in Nigerian languages. Little or nothing is being done by the Nigerian government in the area of research in order to develop and make available these materials for the teachers.

Attitudinal Factors

(1) The status or prestige the English language and other foreign languages enjoy in Nigeria: the English language serves as the lingua franca and the medium of instruction in both the secondary and tertiary institutions. A sound knowledge of the language can as well boost an applicant's chances or prospect of getting a good job. Thus, parents as well as students would stop at nothing to learn and make a good grade in the subject. This attitude has therefore endangered all the Nigerian languages.

- (2) Only a few Nigerian languages have been developed or made adequate enough to express new

experiences and concepts in modern education courtesy of the most recent drive in the field of language engineering e.g gifted and talented students, personalised learning and teaching, active votes, electronic white boards etc and in other subjects like Geography, Mathematics and English.

(3) Negative attitude of the elite parents: most of the elites and educated parents prefer to communicate with their children in the English language. They feel that on leaving school, a student should have attained an acceptable level of achievement in English. Some illiterates would rather employ the service of a teacher of English language to take their children in extra lessons than a teacher of any of the Nigerian languages. Ogunbiyi (2008) opines, 'Most Nigerian parents prefer to send their children to English speaking schools. Some parents even go to the extent of not allowing their children to watch films in Nigerian language as that hinders their acquisition of the English language (according to those parents).

(4) The parents, teachers, students and society at large view fluency in the use of the English language as a symbol or emblem of being educated. Parents believe that the only proof of literacy that their children can exhibit is to communicate in English and they tend to look down on friends and children that cannot express themselves in the English language as uneducated or uncivilised. Unfortunately, even in religious circles, clerics that cannot preach in the English language are seen as uneducated, local or crude. Thus, everyone keeps struggling to speak and learn the foreign language because by the attitude or standard of the society; it offers a kind of prestige or class to its speakers.

Legislative/Policy - related Factors

(1) According to the language policy statement as stated in the National Policy on Education (2004), the English Language is to assume the position or status of the language of instruction or education from primary four and must be progressively used for the purpose onwards. The National Policy on Education (2004) Section 3 (xx) states 'Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue (MT) of the immediate community and at a later stage, English.'

Thus; legislature by way of the policy statement is a major challenge that confronts the use of Nigerian languages in modern education. The National Policy on Education does not support the use of any Nigerian language as a medium of instruction from the upper primary school.

(2) Adoption of the English language as the language of the government in Nigeria (Lingua Franca) and the importance attached to the knowledge of the language by employers has made many people (including students, parents and teachers) to consider the Nigerian languages inferior to the English language. The poor attitude thus poses a great challenge to using any of the Nigerian languages in modern education.

(3) One of the major challenges of using Nigerian languages in modern education is the language policy as contained in the National Policy on Education. This is because there is a big problem in its interpretation and implementation. The policy is a shoddy attempt to escape the important question of which language is to be used in a multilingual community as the medium of instruction in the pre-primary level. Also, the policy fails to explain how the teacher caters for the bridge or gap that exists at the level of changing the language of education in primary four.

(5) Poor and lack of proper monitoring: a large share of the blame goes to the education officers (EO) and officials of the federal and state ministries of education. Though the National policy on education (2004) states that the mother tongue (a Nigerian language) and/or language of the immediate community (LIC) should be the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels and of adult and non-formal education. But in practice, most private nursery and primary schools teach even the pre-primary and junior primary classes using the English language as the medium of instruction without any restriction from the ministry of education officials who are never available. Ogunbiyi (2008) submits that in spite of the government's position on the status of the English language and the Nigerian languages, some schools still relegate Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English and French languages.

Emenanjo (1996) raises serious questions about the workability of the National policy on education and some of the questions are:

- (i) Don't the statements in the policy constitute just a statement of intent rather than a serious programme for implementation?
- (ii) If the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community is considered so important at the pre-primary level as an integral part of a child's culture and the link between the home and the school, why should it be 'principal' and not 'solely' used at this level?
- (iii) How do people identify the languages of the immediate environment in pluralistic settings like the urban centres or international communities like universities?
- (iv) Why is the policy silent on pidgin – one of the country's major languages?

To further buttress some of the points already made in this paper, it is necessary to consider the work of Emenanjo (1996) who sighted some of the observations made by the 'Panel on the teaching of Igbo in the Imo State school system and the implementation of the National language policy.' The panel was established and began work in 1985, the panel was charged to come up with a policy on Igbo in particular and languages in

general and the following observations were made:

- (a) There is still lack of awareness on the part of highly placed ministry officials: supervisors/inspectors of education, principals/headmasters of schools and practising teachers of the language policy as stated in the national policy on education. This lack of awareness, on its part, is responsible for the :
- Relatively inferior status accorded Nigerian languages in the school system in particular and the society in general.
 - The non-sponsorship of practising teachers to relevant courses, conferences and seminars on languages.
 - Lack of incentives by way of in-service courses with attendant incremental benefits for serving teachers, and bursaries, scholarships for would be teachers.

The panel also observed that Igbo is not being taught or tolerated in most nursery schools in the state. Igbo is not being consistently used as the medium of instruction in the 'junior' primary classes nor is it being seriously taught as a 'core' subject in the upper primary classes. Osborn (2007) opines that the language of education even now remains predominantly English. Although the National policy on education has made the necessary provision for the use of Nigerian languages (Mother tongue) in modern education, the problem as always, is the implementation. The government does not enforce the provision of its policy. The policy assumes that a language of instruction at the secondary school level is English whereas the case has been very clearly made that students perform better when their mother tongue is the language of instruction for all subjects (Fafunwa 1989).

Orthography-related Factors

(1) Lack of literature in Nigerian languages hinders the sufficiency of the language as a medium of instruction. Most of the textbooks are written in the English language and so, teachers are 'handicapped' thus cannot embark on such a noble venture.

(2) Another problem in the area of orthographic is that most Nigerian languages do not have standard orthography. For example, there are confirmed cases of variation in the orthography of the Igbo language; such variations will make it difficult to have a uniform, standard and acceptable system of writing thus developing textbooks in Nigerian languages may not be very easy.

(3) Wikipedia webpage: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/languages_of_Nigeria states that the number of languages currently estimated and catalogued in Nigeria is 521 (five hundred and twenty one). A breakdown of this number includes 510 living languages, 2 second languages without native speakers (English and French) and 9 extinct languages. It is sad to note however that only about a hundred Nigerian languages have been fully developed with standard orthography as at the year 1978 according to Brann and Max (1978).

The use of Nigerian languages in Modern Education: Solutions.

A lot has been said about the importance and challenges of using Nigerian languages in modern education but this work will not be complete without the suggestion of possible solutions to some of the problems identified. Muslimi (1999) in a study on implementing the mother tongue -medium policy in the lower primary classes concludes, 'On the other hand, the mother tongue instructional policy needs a review. It is evident that majority of teachers in the public schools use the bilingual medium despite the stipulation of the use of the mother tongue medium in the lower primary schools in the National policy on education (NPE). There is a need for a more definitive pedagogical approach in the medium of instruction at the lower primary classes.

While Muslimi (1999) places all the blame on the teachers, I am of the opinion that the federal and state ministries of education needs to do more (than it is being currently done) in the enforcement of the policy statement on the use of mother tongue or Nigerian languages in education. There is a dire need for constant inspection of what goes in the private and public nursery and primary schools in order to enforce total adherence to the use of Nigerian languages in modern education. Though Nigerian languages have been described as grossly insufficient to meet the demand of modern education, they should therefore be developed and the orthography needs to be improved upon. Emenanjo (1996) is of the view that something drastic needs to be done concerning the orthography of most Nigerian languages. Taiwo (1976) is of the view that the Hausa orthography is fully developed while Emenanjo (1996) states that more should be done in the area of developing the orthography of the minority languages in Nigeria.

Textbooks and educational materials in the Nigerian languages should be developed while obsolete ones should be improved upon or upgraded to cope with the present realities of modern education. There is equally a need for national re-orientation and awareness on the benefits attached to making use of Nigerian languages in modern education. Parents, students, teachers and other stake holders in education need to be educated on the dangers of relegating our local or indigenous languages for a foreign language. The government needs to come up with a policy that makes a sound knowledge of and/or success in at least one Nigerian language part of the criteria for securing gainful employment in the country.

The mass media – print and electronic, should take up the responsibility to promote the status of Nigerian languages. Also, orthographies of Nigerian languages should be standardised (especially the minority languages) to meet the demands of modern education. Emenanjo (1996) stresses the importance of training and re-training

Nigerian language teachers. He also suggested that by way of incentives, the federal government should subvert courses in Nigerian languages in institutions of higher learning.

In addition, Emenanjo (1996) while proffering a solution to the dearth of Nigerian language teachers suggested that producing graduate teachers in the right quantity and quality for ALL Nigerian languages is the only way by which we can meet the challenges of using Nigerian languages in modern education. In his words, 'Practising teachers of Nigerian languages need to be updated in content, methods and language technology.' Obanya (1992) lauded the efforts of state ministries of education (as in the Rivers State Readers' Project) and of the NERDC (Nigerian Educational Research Development Council), the Gaskiya Corporation (for the Hausa language) in the development of curriculum materials in indigenous languages but he was quick to note that there is more to be done, especially in the area of non-text materials. According to Obanya (1998), 'The resources outside the school system (traditional poetry and drama and cinematographic resources) still have to be fully developed.'

Conclusion

In conclusion, no language (foreign or indigenous) is inferior to the other. Every language has the capacity to adequately function in whatever role it has been assigned to. However, the only impediment to the successful use of indigenous languages in Nigeria in formal education is that they have not been fully developed to cope with the demands of formal education. If the required attention and steps were given to the development or standardisation of the numerous indigenous languages in the country, Nigerian languages and indeed, all the numerous indigenous languages in Africa can be used in education either as the language of education or a school subject in formal education. All that is needed for the successful implementation of the indigenous language education policy is a 'will-to-do' and the implementation of the right language policies by the government of Nigeria.

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