
THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE IN LITERACY EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Language is a tool of communication, an art fully used and understood only by human beings, while communication is the process of transferring messages from one person to another. Any human language is understood and used better when the users are literate. Literacy is the ability to read, write, compute, communicate, understand, interpret and create, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. This work looks at the importance of indigenous languages in fostering literacy education, which will in turn help in sustaining national development. After an indept discussion on indigenous languages and literacy education, the author looked at the ways by which the two could aid in sustaining national development. Obstacles to the advancement of indigenous languages in the Nigerian educational system were also examined. The work concluded with recommendations for improvement on the implementation of education policy on indigenous languages and literacy education for a sustainable national development.

KEYWORDS: Indigenous Language, Literacy Education and National Development

INTRODUCTION

Language is an important tool man uses in the exploration of his environment. From the family level to the larger society, meaningful interactions in all spheres of life are made possible with language. The power and efficacy of language was put in place right from time immemorial as the holy scriptures made us to understand that God created the world by his spoken word (Gen.11:1-19). It was also language that God used to tame the early inhabitants of the earth when they became over inquisitive, by embarking on the Tower of Babel Project. (Gen.11:1-9).

Literacy education on the other hand is the process of continued acquisition and pursuit of knowledge in order to be able to read and write. Language plays a distinctive role in the process of literacy education because there is no form of knowledge acquisition that does not involve the use of language.

Development involves changing the society for the better. National development therefore means improving all aspects of life of the society for the better. At this juncture, it will be pertinent to go into more details of the above sketchy discussion of the various concepts.

It is most unfortunate that the role of indigenous languages in sustaining literacy education is not realized by the society, if realized, then it is being played down on. This is because of the attitude of those concerned in the implementation of the language policy as

contained in the National policy on education (NPE) of (1995) and other revised editions of (1998) and (2004). The policy State that “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate Communities and at a later stage, English. The above is never adhered to by those entrusted with the implementation, even those who formulated the policy are non-challant about its enforcement”.

Other factors which impede or stall the use of the mother tongue in primary school as enunciated in the language policy include:

- a. Failure of inspectors to visit schools to ensure the enforcement of the policy.
- b. No provision was made for the steady development of the mother-tongue in the policy
- c. Attitude of parents to the learning of the mother-tongue by their children or wards: Most parents from educated families detest their children speaking their mother tongue, much more, teaching them with it.

These and other factors not mentioned constitute impediments to the realization of the role of indigenous language in the sustenance of literacy education for national development. This paper is a plea to the Nigerian public to come to terms with the roles of indigenous languages in sustaining literacy education and lending their unflinching Support to its use in teaching the young ones at the early stage of their Primary education.

Conceptual Definitions

The word “language” has been given several definitions by various scholars. For instance language is defined as communication of thoughts and feelings through a system of arbitrary signal such as voice, sounds, gestures or written symbols (Free Online Dictionary).

Sapir (1947) stated that language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols. Language is a vehicle of power, a means by which we control, create and preserve culture. In essence the totality of human activities revolve around language.

Indigenous: The word “indigenous means born, growing or originating in the locality and not imported. It is also seen as belonging to a particular place rather than coming from somewhere else. In the light of the above therefore indigenous language is the language that is native to a region and spoken by the indigenes of the area. In this paper I intend to use mother tongue and indigenous language interchangeably. Nigeria has over 400 indigenous languages; (Adeniram (1995).

Mother Tongue: This is the first, language one learns to speak as a child, and it is universally accepted that a child first learns his mother tongue and it is as natural to him as his mother’s breast. Since the language exists in the child’s locality and not imported, it is therefore regarded as being indigenous to the child and other people of the area. It is also the language that a person has grown up speaking from early childhood. From the above it may not be improper to equate indigenous language with mother tongue.

Literacy Education: This is the process of continued acquisition and pursuit of knowledge. Literacy has been described as the ability to read and write. It involves reading for knowledge and the ability to write coherently and think critically about what has been written down. It includes the ability to understand all forms of communication like pictures, video or sound and so on. Literacy could be acquired for personal and community development, especially in this technological age where the concept had expanded to include the media and electronic text, in addition to alphabetic and number systems. Literacy represents a lifelong intellectual process of getting meaning from print and the outstanding fact about it. It is a social achievement.

UNESCO (2004) defines literacy as the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potentials and to participate fully in their community and wider society.

According to the 2011 Human Development Report Nigeria has a literacy level of 66.6%. In view of the importance of literacy education to a nation, the above literacy level for our country cannot be seen as adequate as it is a social right. The society owes it as a duty to make its citizens literate and so more needs to be done to increase our literacy level. With an increase in our literacy level national development will be enhanced and sustained.

The Need for literacy Education in Nigeria

Nigeria needs literacy education more than any other thing. This is because it is a powerful tool for the total liberation of the citizens from ignorance and an important ingredient for the nation's transformation and effective development. Literacy or education in general according to Shaull, R. (1970) is "the practice of freedom", the means by which people deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. Literacy emancipates, for illiterates are in bondage and darkness. In all spheres of life: Psychologically, mentally, socially, politically and even religiously, they are always at the receiving side, cheated and marginalized. Psychologically the illiterates usually assume the status of being inferior to the elites as they are always beclouded with inferiority complex. They lack self confidence and courage to tackle certain issues.

In the interest of national development, Literacy is seen to be synonymous with lifelong learning of language, all bearing the capacity and strength to equip the citizens with skill of reading and writing. When the greater percentage of the citizens of the nation become literate, such emerging problems like ignorance, misconception of ideas, conflicts, crisis, insecurity, atrocities, complexity, misinformation will pave way for harnessing national goals and aspiration. In recent times the emphasis and national consciousness on issues that have to, do with computer literacy, Information Communication Technology, (ICT), Global learning, Electronic transaction, Electronic learning up to Electronic banking stand a priority and privilege derived from proper literacy status of the citizens and the nation at large. The major desire of government in embarking on government programs like literacy is to liberate man. It is also the acquisition of literacy that gives people the lifelong tool with which to attain a real share in national development. Literacy serves as an instrument for social continuity and cohesion. Literacy also serves as an instrument for social mobility, which is required in the development of a nation like Nigeria.

The Role of Indigenous Language in Literacy Education

Indigenous language or mother tongue has a vital role to play in sustaining literacy education for national development. This is because language as earlier pointed out is the main ingredient that makes any kind of communication possible. Without it there will be nothing like communication and interaction since literacy education involves both communication and interaction.

For any meaningful and successful literacy education, the child should be at the centre of the scheme of things and his interest should be paramount. In other words the child needs a sound start in literacy education and to ensure that this is achieved there is the need that the child is well grounded in the language which is indigenous to him. It is universally accepted that a child first learns his mother tongue as it is natural to him as the mother's breast. Many nations of the world prepare their children for citizenship in languages indigenous to them and most educators agree that the first 12 years in the life of the child is the formative years in the child's life. During this period attitudes and aptitudes are developed. Also the child requires utmost care for his physical needs, and guidance in his emotional and social potentialities. It is strongly argued that if the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, good spatial visualization, spontaneous flexibility, originality, initiative, industrial knowledge, dexterity and mechanical comprehension, he should acquire these skills and attitude through his mother tongue which is the most natural way of learning. The above mentioned skills and attitudes, are very crucial to literacy education and national development. A nation whose young ones, who are the leaders of tomorrow can boast of the above skills and attitudes will surely enjoy sustainable development.

Some developed countries like USA, UK, Japan, France and others train their children particularly at the elementary level of education to explore their own natural environment in their own native language. By this the children acquire at a very early stage self confidence, initiative, resourcefulness, adaptability, skills necessary for further growth and development. If children are helped to lay future foundation of their development in their own mother tongue, they will likely be of great assistance to their nation in future. This will agree with the Biblical injunction which says "train up a child in the way he should walk, when he grows up he will not depart from it".

Language is the important tool with which society is organized and it is not possible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thoughts, ideas and needs. Essien (1995) states that Education which leads to alienation of the child from his ancestral environment cannot be right or out to achieve the important aim of education which is required in developing the powers and character of the people.

National Development

National development involves gradual and steady improvement in the economic, political, cultural and social life of the people. The ingredients for national development therefore should include steady improvements in food supply, clothes and shelter, unity and understanding among the people, good transportation system, employment opportunities, security, steady growth of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) among others. It is believed that one clear difference that exists between the developed and developing countries is the marked difference in education and literacy level. For instance while the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States of America (USA) have a literacy level of 99.0% each. Nigeria and

Cameroon have a literacy level of 66.6% and 67.9% respectively. (UN 2011 Human Development Report) Education can be acquired in any language but faster and better in ones own mother tongue.

Factors militating against the advancement of indigenous languages in Nigeria

The nation's policy makers on education recognized the importance of our indigenous languages in education. This is why the National Policy on Education (NPE) of (1997) and other revised editions of (1998) and (2004) emphasized that education is the right of every Nigerian child and should be brought closer to the environment of the child. As a result the National Policy on Education (NPE 1995, 1998, 2004) contain a policy statement on language to the effect that "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate communities and at a later stage English". This policy arose as a result of the conviction of the National government that the educational cycle is incomplete if the Nigerian pupils are unable to use their own language and the official language of the country in meaningful communication both within and outside the school system. This policy favours the use of the mother tongue and it implies that the language of instruction in primary school level up to primary three is the pupils mother-tongue and a change to English language at primary four is recommended. Laudable as the policy may be, the question now is whether the policy is being implemented. The answer is "No". The total implementation of this policy is faced with the following problems:

Inadequate number of Nigerian Language teachers.

- i. Non-employment of qualified teachers of Nigerian languages.
- ii. The native attitude of parents towards the use of mother tongue in the classroom.
- iii. Non development of orthographies of most Nigerian languages.
- iv. Government's non-supervision of the level of enforcement of this policy by schools (both public and private).

The above factors and many others constitute impediments to the advancement of the indigenous language policy in our educational system and this affects the advancement of literacy education. In the light of the above, the following recommendations were made.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has established the fact that literacy education is a sine-qua-non for national development and should be sustained at all cost. The place of indigenous language in laying a solid foundation for literacy education was also highlighted. It was discovered that even though the National Policy on Education (N.P.E) contains a policy on indigenous language, the implementation of this policy is nothing to write home about, because of some man-made obstacles which were pointed out. Recommendations aimed at improving the status of our indigenous languages in our educational system. It is hoped that if these were implemented it will give a boost to the sustenance of literacy education which in turn will ensure a sustainable national development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. In the first instance the nation's education policy makers should realize and recognize the importance and role the indigenous languages could play in enhancing literacy education. It is true that this realization was shown in the National Policy on Education (NPE) but it is not being implemented to the letter. It is one thing to make a policy and another to implement it. They should mobilize all the organs responsible for curriculum implementation to play their expected roles.
2. There should be thorough, frequent and effective supervision of the junior primary schools to ensure strict compliance with the provisions of the language policy.
3. Most of the Educated Nigerians (the elites) do frown at their children speaking their native languages, talk less of allowing them to learn it. Therefore, our educated class should value their language and ensure that their children acquire basic knowledge of their language.
4. There should be intensified efforts to produce orthographies in the various indigenous languages so as to facilitate the teaching and learning of those languages
5. Trained and qualified teachers of Nigerian languages should be employed and encouraged to deliver

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