Re-Thinking Language Policies and Implementation in Nigeria

By

Cajetan Onugha, PhD
Department Of English and Communication Art, Faculty of Humanities,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education
Email: cajeonugha@gmail.com
&
Iwejor, Eze Nnamdi
Department Of English and Communication Art, Faculty of Humanities,
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education.
Email: ezen11599@gmail.com
Phone: 08061554217

Abstract

This study focuses on re-thinking language policies and implementation in Nigeria. What informed this study was the need to have a re-think on language policies and implementation in Nigeria, in order to maintain a sustainable language education in Nigeria. The paper reveals that when a child learns the language of his immediate environment and in the interest of national unity is required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages, more emphasis should be placed on the child learning his mother tongue. Also, there is no need attaching much relevance to French language, since English language performs every national duty, with regards to official language. The attention that would be given to French language should be channeled to Nigeria's indigenous languages. This is a way of reviving our languages from going into extinction. Furthermore, more emphasis should be given to the use of mother tongue at early childhood/pre-primary education. As 'native intelligence' is embedded in one's language, the children having mastery of their mother tongue will help them think outside the box, if the need arises. And certain national examinations should be conducted in the three major indigenous languages. Based on the above, the paper recommends that the Federal

government should fully develop more educational resources and orthographies of indigenous languages to meet the demands of multilingual education. Also, Nigerian scholars in the field of language should intensity efforts in the codification of aspects of indigenous languages and produce reading materials.

Keywords: Language, Language Policies and Implementation.

Introduction

Language is the most creative and unlimited instrument for social communication and it helps us to understand the deep seated social relevance, culture involvement and the human relatedness of language. According to Yule (1985), the culture of a society is the way of life of its member the collection of ideas and habits which they learn and transmit from generation to generation. These cultures, ideas and habits can be transmitted from generation to generation through language. In linguistic every language is considered adequate to represent the communicative needs of its people and as such should not be made to suffer any biases. Language in multilingual societies such as Nigeria has always been a matter of concern to educators, educational planners and parents especially with regard to its appropriate use in communication.

The English language is the medium of instruction in all Nigerian educational institutions at all levels. In the countries language policy, the fact that for a long time to come, English will continue to play a prominent role in the socio-economic and political development in Nigeria as the language of administration, politics, industry, education, science and technology is of paramount importance.

The English language, to a large extent, functions as a second language in Nigeria. Although Nigeria is believed to have more than five hundred and twenty one (521) languages with over two hundred and fifty (250) ethnic groups, the English language is the only language used for all forms of official transaction. Despite the central role the English language has been playing in communication process nationwide, the language excludes the majority of uneducated Nigerians who live in rural communities. Some Nigerian communities have more than six distinct but

mutually unintelligible languages. This makes communication among neighbours difficult.

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 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.

Language

Language is a set or system of linguistic symbols as used in a more or less uniform enabled to communicate intelligibly with another. According to Stork (1976), all human languages are highly developed and sophisticated communication systems, all capable of meeting the demands of the society in which they are used, and the personal needs of the individuals of the society in terms of expressing emotions and giving and receiving information. Encydopedia Britanica (2002), posts that "language is a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which humans as members of a social group and participants in its culture communicate.

According to Brown (1987), language is the institution whereby human communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory symbols. Others see language as "human vocal noise (or the graphic representation of this noise in writing) used systematically and conventionally by a community for the purpose of communication". Similarly, to Wardhaugh (1987), "language means a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communications".

From the foregoing, it is deducible that language is fundamentally necessitated by the needs of people to communicate in a society. It involves a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols or that which is printed for the same purpose. It is a system of communication by the vocal sounds within a group of human beings who use these sounds to convey meaning. Language is conventionally meaning -laden at the disposal of man, and is used by him to convey his ideas, thoughts, and emotions as well as help him understand men and the environment around him.

Language is one means of communication in daily activities. We cannot communicate in any real sense without language. Because language help the people to socialize with each other and can give some kind of information. Language plays a very important role in human's life. In general, language is used to convey the messages, to interact with others, to express a lot of ideas as well as to achieve their desired intention.

The definition of a language is the most fundamental means of human communication. Language is considered to be a system of communicating with other people using sounds, symbol and words in expressing meaning, ideas or thought. Language is a systemic resource for expressing meaning in context and the study of how people exchange meanings through the use language. Language can be divided into two ways, spoken and written language. Everyday people communicate with each other in society using both spoken and written. Spoken language is typically more dependent on its content than written language. Newspaper is including to the written language and dialog including to spoken language. Spoken language usually refers to language utterance, and the written language is refers to language which is written down (Gerot & Wignell, 1994).

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.

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".

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.

Multilingual Policy on Language Education in Nigeria

The language of instruction in multilingual Nigeria has always been a matter of concern to educators and educational planners. The African situation is aptly captured by Ouattarago (2000) when he asserts that, "education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual situations". Due to this linguistic plurality, the government appreciated the

importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion as well as preserving culture. Thus, there was the need for language policy, planning and development as well as implementation. In 1977, an official document titled National Policy on Education was promulgated which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004. This document assigned different functions to the languages in the nation's education 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. However, in the interest of national unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, every child shall require 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 j 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 level, English shall be the languages 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 he taught as school subjects.

Levels of Education in Nigeria are:

1. Early childhood (pre-primary);
2. Basic education (9 years) - comprising Primary and Junior secondary
3. Education;
4. Senior Secondary Education (3 years);
5. Tertiary Education.

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. When this is done, more emphasis should be placed on the child learning his mother tongue. This is to enable the child remain fluent in using his mother tongue.
b. There is no need attaching much relevance to French language, since English language performs every national duty, with regards to official language. The attention that would be given to French language should be channeled to Nigeria's indigenous languages. This is a way of revival our languages going into extinction.
c. More emphasis should be given to the use of mother tongue at early childhood/pre-primary education. As 'native intelligence' is embedded in one's language, the children having mastery of their mother tongue will help them think outside the box, if the need arises.
d. Certain national examinations should be conducted in the three major indigenous languages. This is to practicalise the priority given to the Nigeria's three major indigenous languages.
e. At the tertiary level, there should be a general course on the three major languages. Each student should major on any of the three languages.

Recommendations

In line with the entire discussions in this review, the following recommendations may offer a working solution to the multilingual policy for Nigeria:

- The Federal government should fully develop more educational resources and orthographies of indigenous languages to meet the demands of multilingual education
- Nigerian scholars in the field of language should intensity efforts in the codification of aspects of indigenous languages and produce reading materials;
- The government should do more in the enforcement of the multilingual provisions in all sectors of education;
- A team of experts should be paying constant visits to schools to ensure total adherence to the provisions of multilingual education;

- A credit pass in any of the Nigerian should be made a prerequisite to gaining admission into any of the Nigerian Universities.

References

Brown, D. (1980). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. Prentice-Hall Publisher.

Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). National Policy on Education. Abuja: NERDC.

Gerot and Wignell, (1994). *Making Sense of Functional Grammar: An Introductory Workbook*. Antipodean Educational Enterprises.

Ouattarago, D. Z. Y. (2022). The Peripherisation of Ivorian Indigenous Languages: Shared Blame, What Can Be Done?. *Open Access Library Journal*, *9*(2), 1-18.

Stork, D. G. (1997). *Speech and language processing: Introduction to natural language*. MIT Press.

Wardhaugh, R. (1987*). Languages in competition*. Blackwell.

Yule, G. (1985). *The study of language*. Cambridge University Press.