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National Language Policy on Primary Education and the Challenges of Language Teaching and Learning in the UBE Programme

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Abstract

The challenges of language teaching and learning in our schools today constitute the foremost issues in language Education. The tremendous role that language, especially English language plays in the development of every individual and the nation educationally cannot be relegated to the background. Language Education is very important in the educational system of the Nigerian nation due to the multilingual nature of the society. English language is the medium of instruction across all educational levels and hence the bedrock of the teaching and learning process in our schools. The English language teacher therefore, is faced with the task of achieving this laudable educational objective. The paper set out to x-ray and take cursory look at the National language policy on primary education, the prevailing situation on implementation process of the policy. It examines the challenges and the way forward emanating from the National language policy on primary Education.

Introduction

Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (1995) defines language as the system of sounds and words used by human to express their thought and feelings. Language according to the Hutchinson's Encyclopedia refers to human communication through speech, writing or both. The term language, it expounds:

Is also used for systems of communication with language like qualities, such as animal language (the way animals communicate), body language (gestures and expression used to communicate ideas), sign language (gestures as among deaf or for use as language franca as among native Americans), and computer language (such as BASIC and COBOL) (Helicon, 199:611, quoted in Onyemelukwe, 2000).

Language can be described as code (Adeyanju, 1989, Onyemelukwe, 2000) for the purpose of discussion in this paper, our limit is to the definition of language as human communication through speech, writing or both. This brings to bear the role of language as a vehicle for expressing the culture of a group as the medium of instruction in our school; be it formal, non-formal or informal or traditional. Having explicated the term, language. The paper takes a cursory look at the languages which feature in primary school curriculum, either as a medium of instruction or as a school subject.

National Language Policy in the Primary School Curriculum

The federal Government in adopting education as an instrument per excellence for effecting national development and as a dynamic instrument of change made the following pronouncement:

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment (FRN 1981). And enhancing national unity, every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Of primary education, it states that Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in primary school is initially the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC) and at a later stage, English. More explicitly put, the language of the immediate environment or mother tongue (MT) of the learner shall be used as the medium of instruction up to class 3. That is, to teach other subjects such as maths, CRS, Health Education, in school curriculum, the teacher will have to use Hausa in a school located in Zaria, Yoruba in a school located in Ibadan and Ibo in a school located in Onitsha. From class 4, English language shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction. The heterogeneous or multi-lingual representation in the classroom by learners especially in urban centres is not taken into consideration. Besides the identity of the teacher should be considered that is, whether he/she is from the language speaking group and whether he/she is trained in the act of instructing with the language. These also should be taken into consideration for effective implementation.

Apart from the language of immediate environment, every pupil shall learn English language as a subject (FRN. 1981). A few private primary schools like Zaria Children School, A.B.U, Staff School and Therbow school, all in Zaria, teach French.

The challenges of teaching and learning all these languages, that is, the effective implementation of the policy are great, not only for the pupils and their teachers but for the entire primary educational system.

National Language Policy and Language Teaching and Learning in Primary School.

Multi-lingual setting

The trio-lingual policy adopted by the government has indeed raised the status of the three major languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba to national languages so that instead of having one national language, we eventually have three. Besides, the number of languages spoken in the country is not certain Greenberg puts it at 248, Tiffen at over 150 languages and Bamgbose at about 400 languages cited in Uche (1999). What is certain, however, is that there are hundreds of languages used in Nigeria and the disadvantages of having such a multiplicity of mutually intelligible languages in a single country's educational set-up calls for concern. The anxiety should arise as a result of the policy which proposes the use of LIC or MT for the 1st three years of primary education. This situation is worsened by the fact that the policy lacks effective implementation mechanism like availability of quality staff to do the teaching, lack of materials in the language for the subject targeted and even inadequate supervision for proper and guided implementation and coordination etc. The cost of such a laudable programme is equally ignored. So, the challenges of teaching and

learning in all these languages are great not only for the pupils but for the teachers in particular on whose shoulders rest the class management and administration.

The situation presented above has created the problem of multilingualism and accelerated interference problem in L2/L1 learning. Out of about 6000 languages existing all over the world, Nigeria alone has about 300. These do not include dialects or regional variations of a particular language. The UBE scheme has actually generated large pupil/student population explosion in primary schools. The implication of this development is that, there will be many more pupils with diversities of linguistics portrates placed together in a class, resulting in a sharp increase the problems of teachers in L2/L3 teaching and learning. Researches abound pointing to the sociolinguistic problems in a multilingual setting; for example, code-switching, code-mixing and mother tongue (MT) interference in foreign language acquisition (*Adeiran, 1990; Ogunremi.1992; Lawal.1991; Onyenmelukwe, 1994; 1997*)

Code-switching means the successive alternate use of two or more different languages within the same discourse. Code-mixing also referred to as language interlarding in the use of the lexical while communicating principally in another language (*Lawal, 1991, Olaoya, 1991*).

Although, some researchers like Olaoye (*1991*) quoted in Onyemelukwe (*2000*) find code-switching and code-mixing useful, others see them as disastrous in foreign language study (*Adeniran, 1990; Ogunrenmi, 1992; Lawal, 1991. Onyemelukwe, (1997)*). For Lawal (op.cit), these sociolinguistic phenomena cause linguistic confusion. Onyemelukwe (*1997*) also found that code-switching and code-mixing generate language borrowing, negative transfer and inhibition among other linguistic problems causing poor expression and ineffective communication in French. She argues that the practice of code-switching and mixing should be discouraged among language learners.

Speaking a language demands the ability to produce the sounds characteristics of that particular language competently. However, some problems militate against this demand. According to Onyemelukwe (*2000*), these problems include:

1. Teaching-induced problems (involving factors such as the teacher, syllabus, methods and classroom situation).
2. Intralingua problems (such problems that even native speakers may have).
3. Approximate system (i.e. developmental or maturational errors).
4. Physiological or pathological problems caused by speech organ deformity;
5. Psycho-social problems as triggered of by shyness;
6. Inter-linguistic problem such as Native Language (NL) or MT interference (*Onyemelukwe, 1997*).

We are concerned here with MT interference. Opinions are divided over the role of MT in L2 OR L3 acquisition. Perhaps, as a result of ‘vague and varying use’ of the terms ‘interference’ and ‘transfer’ (*Duley et. Al 1982*). Whereas scholars such as Weinriech (*1953/68*), Haugen (*1953*) and Kwofie (*1985*) use interference to describe cross-linguistic influence like linguistic borrowing and code-switching; what Odlin (*1989*) tags borrowing transfer. We, like some others, use interference as synonymous of negative transfer.

Interference means the negative influence that the MT or previously learnt languages exert on target language causing various problems for the learner. For example, the rendition of /f/ as /p/ by Hausa learners of English for example ‘porm’, ‘pour’ for ‘form’, ‘four’. Contrastive analysis has

establish that Igbo learners of English have statistically significant pronunciation with sound distributed here in a descending order of difficulty: /e/,/r/,/ʔ/,/ð/ etc. The difficulty emanating from MT interference.

We need highlight here, in other to ally the fear of parents and perhaps, teachers, that teaching several languages to primary school child is not disastrous. It is not a challenge per se. this is because, as we observe elsewhere, there is research evidence that children have great ability for language learning and are able to learn and speak many languages with as near native ascent as possible if taught early (below age 8 years) (*Onyemelukwe,1999*). The challenge for language teaching and language learning stems from MT interference in a multi-lingual setting. Pupils should be encouraged to learn MT right from home and continue in school were possible as stipulated in the **National Policy on Education**. This will help avert impending problem of some Nigeria languages that are running the risk of being fossilized and the alienation of Nigerian language from their language roots.

➤ Paucity of Language Teachers

Language teachers as typical of specially trained teachers are often rare to come-by. William, (1990) harped on the grave shortage of Foreign Language Teachers (FLT). Several researchers confirm the acute shortage of French language teachers (*Onyenmelukwe, 1996*) Needless to say that the problems of paucity of language teachers and teachers generally will be compounded by the UBE programme. Take, for example, Bayelsa state has 3034 for 304,886 pupils that is, very high teacher pupil-ratio of 1:100. This is bound to explode in the UBE scheme. The government is faced with a great challenge of recruiting within a year academically and professionally qualified language teachers to feed all the arms of the UBE. Mediocre teachers are out of question. We need recall that these are foundation years of future leaders of Nigeria and we cannot afford to toy with their education especially in the area of language, where faulty pronunciation tend to become persistent pronunciation problem, very difficult to eradicate in later years.

The minimum teaching qualification for primary school teachers according to the National Policy on Education is National Certificate in Education (NCE). Where can we get enough NCE holders for all our UBE primary school? . This disturbing issue has attracted various suggestions in the pages of our dailies. Jahun as observed by Garba (1999:3) maintain that unless government reintroduced the teachers training program, the UBE would not succeed. Government, probably feels the way out of this problem is deployment of youth corpers in UBE primary schools. Jatto in the same account by Garba (1999) condemns the Government decision. He cautions that:

A number of sewing mistresses, unemployed housewives, young farmers, and other jobless youth took advantage of the government gestures and were admitted into the Grade II Teachers Colleges, not necessary because they had interest in teaching but because of the financial and material gains accruable from the exercise.(Garba, 1999).

He launched that, that system of education produced “half baked teachers” who contributed to the poor performance of their products of the West Africa School Certificate Examination. Adeniran (1990) noted that the Federal Government is to recruit qualified teachers to ensure the success of the UBE. According to Adeniran, a crash program for untrained teachers as government would be committed to providing teachers aids and regular payment of teachers salaries (*Ibrahim, 1999*).

The Institution of Education, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria has been vigorously mounting workshops for training of trainers for various states of Nigeria. Notably, Gombe State. The subject

areas covered in such workshop include: Mathematics, Science and English language. These are some of the ways of meeting up the challenges of insufficient language teachers. Some francophone teachers have been specially trained to be absorbed in our school to teach French with the elevation of French to the status of compulsory subject in schools and second official language in Nigeria. Government should be committed to the training of more Foreign Language Teachers (FLT) to beef-up the existing language teaching personnel.

➤ **Lack of appropriate texts**

Lack of appropriate language books has been a problem facing the teaching and learning of foreign language in Nigeria. Our library shelf are dressed with outdated books by foreign authors, books which present to the Nigerians foreign culture and environment, what goes somewhat to make perception and learning difficult.

We need to signal here that Nigeria has human resources. What she needs do is to encourage gifted and talented individuals or groups to write language course books adapting modern western trends to suit our environment. The Nigeria language book writers should aim at originality, creativity and resourcefulness.

➤ **Inadequate Funding**

Heads of the schools are faced with the problem of in adequate funding for day-to-day running of schools. The government is to vote enough money for purchase of recommended textbooks and instructional materials. The ministry of education is to decentralize some of its power to the schools.

➤ **Lack of Instructional Material**

It is to be ensured that language teachers are making adequate use of instructional materials. Admittedly, instructional materials are scarce because of the cost which in some cases is outrageous. Nevertheless, creativity on the part of language teachers will curb the problem of lack considering the pupils' population explosion. It will be unrealistic to think of modern audio-visual aids like the satellite, computer, internet, multi-media, auto apprenticeship and language laboratory because of the high cost of technological equipment. Nevertheless, private schools can afford to install them for language teachers' use in a language class.

As for other instruction material –tape recorder, radio, flannelsboards and their figurines, flash cards, sketches, drawing, dramatization, pictures, concrete objects. All language teachers in both private and public schools should be able to use them effectively in teaching as the use of instructional materials enhances perception and facilitates learning.

Heads of school through constant and effective supervision should ensure that teachers improvise their own instructional materials especially were they are lacking.

➤ **Lacking Teachers' Efficiency**

The Head is to supervise language teachers closely among others to ensure that they are productive, that they are teaching effectively using child-centered approach/methods, communicative activities, communicative method among other modern methods. Needless to say, the teacher is not to be slave to any particular method. A good language teacher is flexible, innovative and adapts his method and approaches to suit the learning environment. Variety is an important factor to learners to learn.

The HM will be faced with The great challenges of promoting the language teachers' professional development through creating opportunity for them to attend workshops, seminars, in-service training, on-the-job training; bringing them into contact to educational opportunity available to language teachers as well as scholarship awards and support service at their disposal. Take, for example French language teachers should be made to get in touch with the nearest Alliance française, French cultural center and the French linguistic attaches just as English language teachers will make contact with British council. Language teachers should be encouraged to join their professional association. Active participation in such association will help boost language teachers' efficiency and effectiveness.

➤ **Motivation of Language Teachers**

The government had to vigorously motivate language teachers by giving them (the language teachers) allowance to elicit their total commitment to language teaching which is very demanding, more tasking than teaching other subjects especially with communicative approaches.

The HMs will face the challenges of the negligence of teachers' welfare as in lack in tenure appointment and good pension plan, lack of school amenities e.g. recreational centre's, poor remuneration and lack of prompt payment of teachers' salary at primary school which is quite demoralizing. How many primary school teachers school have so far benefitted from the Abdulsami let Obasanjo;s package. For the UBE scheme to succeed, Government must strive to carter for teachers welfare and extirpate low teacher image (esteem). One way of doing it is by upward review of teachers' salary in the light of the new minimum wage. This is of paramount important considering as we noted else were, that perceive status, is usually in direct proportion to earned income. A high level of financial reward calls for child centeredness and deep commitment to teaching; whereas a low level of salary structure unavoidably induces a low level of commitment leading to more lose of the professional standing and public image (*Onyemelukwe 1991; 2000*).

Motivation is the key word. When the language teacher is sufficiently motivated, he/she will teach with deep commitment and efficiency. The target language, be it the language of the immediate environment-the medium of instruction in primary 1-3, or L2 (English language) or L3/L4/L5 as the case may be (French). This will directly or indirectly induce pupils motivation and higher achievement. Staff motivation will also promote staff stability which further enhances educational attainment of pupil. Having said this, we are not unmindful of the fact that motivation of language teachers/teachers generally in the UBE talk of the junior secondary sector of the UBE scheme. It, therefore, poses a great challenge with education.

Conclusion

The challenges which language teaching and learning poses to the success of UBE scheme may be enormous but not insurmountable. There is no denying the fact that a host of questions are going through concerned people's minds.

Can the Universal Basic Education be truly free? Is government capable of funding all the needs of the community schools with inevitable population explosion in primary and junior secondary school? A growing fear is perhaps the inevitability of policy shift on the subject in the cause of time and socio-economic and psychological consequences on our people.

Fear or no fear, the UBE scheme will surely succeed provided that Federal Government does not waiver from its initial firm resolve to embark on this laudable project. All it takes is careful and adequate planning for its smooth take off and continuity, accurate projection and continued planning

for a successful continuation of the scheme. Infrastructural facilities should be improved upon on a regular basis to be commensurate with the ever soaring pupil/students population at all level of implementation of the UBE scheme. Effective implementation of suggestion proffered in this paper will contribute in no small measure to the success of the universal basic education scheme.

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