

## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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### ABSTRACT

Several decades post-colonial era, it is significant that the English language is an invaluable colonial legacy which has been used to express Nigerian culture. The English language is so indispensable to Nigeria that it still serves as a unifying language in the country. This paper examines the advent of English language into Nigeria and its role in the Nigerian educational system. The concepts of language and education are discussed; the Nigerian Language Policy (NLP) and the place of the English language in Nigeria are examined. In conclusion, possible steps to enhance the standard of English as a medium of consolidating Nigerian education are proffered. In response to the call for a unified Nigerian language, if there is going to be a change from the existing system, the change must be strategic taking into consideration the socio-political, economic, educational factors, along with linguistic pluralism and international connectivity. On the whole, the English language is found to be invaluable in Nigerian educational system and must be given proper attention in policy making and curriculum development.

### **Definition of Some Terms Used**

- i. Linguistic pluralism: this is a situation in which many dialects of various languages are spoken in a multi-lingual nation and not one of these languages is adopted as a national language.
- ii. Internationalism: this is a situation in which the scope of a language covers both national and international usage.
- iii. Linguistic assimilation means to choose, adopt and develop one of the many languages for the use as a national language
- iv. Vernacularization: the use of an indigenous language as the lingua franca.
- v. Lingua – Franca: this is a shared language of communication used among people whose main languages are different e.g. English is the lingua franca in Nigeria.
- vi. Neutral language: this is a language that is adopted for use without any political implication.
- vii. 6 – 3 – 3 – 4 educational system in Nigeria: this means six years primary education, three years junior secondary school education, three years senior secondary school education and four years' tertiary education.

- viii. 9 – 3 – 4: duration of education: means six years primary education plus three years junior secondary education for the nine years universal basic education (UBE), three years senior secondary and four years tertiary education.
- ix. Systemic functional linguistic (SFL): a theory of language that stipulates that the nature of language is closely related to the demands its speakers make on it i.e. Language function determines language structure.

### **Introduction**

The advent of the English language into Nigeria happened during the pre-colonial era in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, precisely 1472 in Calabar, Warri and brass predating the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Osuafor 2002:1) the main function of English language was influenced by missionary activities, trade and commerce. The missionaries used the language to win new converts into Christianity; the British used it to establish trading contacts in the west-African coast which later metamorphosed to colonial empires. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to come to Africa in their quest for human and material resources as well as sourced market for their finished products. The need to communicate with the African traders gave rise to what we call "pidgin" today. Pidgin was a mixture of the indigenous languages and the Portuguese dialect of ENGLISH LANGUAGE.

### **In Nigeria, the Little Opposition to the English Language came from the North**

This Resistance was more for religious rather than linguistic reasons. The northerners who were predominantly Moslems equated English to Christianity because it was the language of the Christian missionaries. Therefore, they held the language with suspicion and rather adopted Arabic as a language and a way of life. Osuafor (2002). Eventually, the British penetrated the north through the establishment of schools and colleges. The establishment of Katsina College in 1922 has been described as having far reaching social, cultural and political implications for the north. With the eventual penetration of the north by the British, the hold of the English language on Nigeria became total. Upon the amalgamation of northern and southern Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard who was the appointed governor- general, there was need for a language of communication to hold the two territories together. This was because the amalgamation brought together diverse people with diverse tongues and cultures that were merged into one nation called Nigeria. The English language came in as a unitary language to hold together the diverse people of Nigeria with their diverse languages. The position of the English language as a unifying force in Nigeria was succinctly put by Afolayan (in Osuafor 2002:120

*it is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language... (it) has been the language of the creation of the political entity itself and also the language of its politico-economic unification and administration.....furthermore,*

*the fact that it is now functioning as the language of Nigerian nationalism cannot be denied.*

Today, English language is made a core course in the educational system and it has become the dominant language through which access to other subjects is made. Despite the recent call by some Nigerians for a Nigerian language policy it is observed that Nigeria is yet to have a well-articulated and explicit national language policy that can be found in one document, though it is common knowledge that Nigeria does have a national policy for languages in education. This policy, sometimes explicitly and sometimes obliquely has stated in sections, the philosophy of Nigerian education at different levels (pre-primary education, primary education, secondary education, higher education, professional education, technical education, adult and non formal education); views of the government on 'national language' and recommendations of the political bureau (1987) on the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria (1989) and also the cultural policy for Nigeria (1988). The crux of the matter is that special issues in Nigerian politics in respect of a Nigerian national language are still to be resolved. Let us examine the concept of language.

### **Language**

Language is one of the greatest attributes that characterizes humans and is a major feature that makes human communication distinct from animals. Jiboku (2005) sees language as a tool which man uses to relate with other members in his society; he expresses his feelings and controls other variables through language. Science and technological developments are two of the ways through which man influences his society. Language helps him to manipulate and cause development. Adeniran (1997) sees language as the means of identification, categorization, perception, thinking, creative activity, technology, memory, transmitting knowledge across space and time and grasping the abstract and the supernatural. Jacoby (1966) in Adeniran, says that 'language is a system of using arbitrary signs, symbols and sounds to communicate ideas, desires and feelings by human beings.' a school of thought holds that language is not a mere tool devised for the representation of a pre – existent reality. It is, rather a constitutive part of reality, deeply implicated in the way the world is constructed. The Systemic – Functional Linguistics (SFL) associated With M.A.K. Halliday, views language as a social phenomenon. Some other schools of thought see language as a social practice which is effective in the formation and reproduction of ideas. Language is conventional because the meanings of words are determined by agreement by its users within given contexts of communication. It is a vehicle for transmission of social conventions within the framework of cultural and linguistic environment. Language as a social function is what systemic – functional grammar is all about.

### **Features of Language**

Language is unique to man and exhibits the following features:

- 1 Human language is systemic: it is made up of linked systems and structures. It contains elements of words according to certain rules of grammar. Whether spoken or written, language has a substance which may be phonic or graphic. Language also has a form, which is referred to as the organization and means of connecting sounds with meaning. It consists of an inventory of linguistic units and the system of rules for their combination, as in grammar
- 2 Language is arbitrary and conventional: the links between words and their meanings are conventional and arbitrary because there is no logic between a concept and the name given to it. Arbitrariness allows us to combine words and letters at will but the combinations do not have to match anything in nature. Conventionality means the agreement within the society that speaks the language. 'friendship' in English is translated as 'ore' in Yoruba, and 'Ota' in Ebirra language
- 3 Language is hierarchical: for utterances to be meaningful there has to be meaningful discrete units of sounds, words, paragraphs e.t.c
- 4 Language operates through vocal (speech) and auditory (listening) channels. Before anything can be described as human language, it must first be spoken and the speech must be meaningful.
- 5 Human language is embedded in gestures: the gesture may occur alone or as an accompaniment to verbal speech.
- 6 Productivity and creativity: with the use of language, it is possible to produce or re-enact a situation or say things that have never been said before and still people will understand e.g. In creative writings or storytelling.
- 7 Language is dynamic: it is changing and not static. Language changes by meeting different cultures across the world. Thus, we have American English, Nigerian English, Indian English e.t.c.
- 8 Element of cultural transmission: language is culture bound because the culture of a locality is transmitted to man through language. Man also learns the language of his immediate environment. Thus, a child born in Abeokuta (Nigeria) but grows up in England will speak Queen's English perfectly.

## **Education**

Right from the classical age of Aristotle and till today, education is seen as a means of enlightenment by which culture is transmitted from one generation to another formally or informally. The definition of education according to Mill as cited in Adesina and Ogunaju (1984:30-31), states: "education is the culture which each generation purposely gives to those who are to be its successor, in order to qualify them for at least keeping up, and if possible for raising the level of improvement which has been attained". This goes to show that education goes beyond the ability to read and write but also includes the type of education in our traditional society before the advent of western education. Another school of thought sees education as a phenomenon which helps to improve the attainment of every society, which

makes education an agent of change and development. The importance of language comes into focus. Behind this cultural transmission and change agent which education provides is language as the propelling force. Language is the vehicle of transmission of knowledge culturally, socially, politically, economically, scientifically and technologically.

### **The Nigerian Language Policy**

Language Policy is an official pronouncement on a set of programmed activities for selecting, organizing and developing the language resources of a country for the utilization and development of a people (Osuafor, 2002:163). It is the expression of policy statement in language planning. Language planning is described variously as language engineering, language standardization and language development. Language planning is necessitated by language problems such as:

- a. The linguistic diversity of most west African countries e.g. Nigeria
- b. The need to adapt to the communication needs of a changing society
- c. The need to harmonize the various languages through linguistic assimilation
- d. The desire to contain the necessity for linguistic pluralism
- e. The need to restore an indigenous language through vernacularization
- f. The need to adopt non-indigenous language for official, commercial and educational purpose through internationalism.

The National Language Policy's (NLP) of 1977/1981 stipulations are as follows:

#### **a. Philosophy of Nigeria Education**

On the importance of language in the educational process, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that a child should be encouraged to learn one of the three languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba

#### **b. Pre- Primary Education**

To achieve the above objectives, government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the Mother Tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will develop language Centres and produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.

#### **c. Primary Education**

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 community and at a later stage, English.

**d. The Junior Secondary School**

The junior secondary school will be both pre-vocational and academic. The curriculum should be structured such that in selecting two Nigerian languages, students should study language of their own area in addition to any of the three Nigerian Languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba subject to availability of teachers (NPE)

**e. Senior Secondary**

English and one Nigerian language should be offered at this stage.

Surprisingly, the 1977 language policy was not implemented until it was revised in 1981

In Nigeria today, there is an estimated number of 400-450 indigenous languages including other foreign languages like English, French and Arabic. The English language acts as the official language, French is taught and used as a foreign language while Latin and Arabic are special languages for religious worship. The goal of language planning is to harmonize the various languages and ethnic groups despite the political implications especially fear of domination. Language planning and policy are used to adapt to changing societal needs. For instance, the agitation for nationalism can lead to the choice of an indigenous language (other than a foreign language) for official transaction and communication. It is discovered in Nigeria linguistic pluralism and internationalism are more practicable than linguistic assimilation and vernacularization. All the Nigerian languages are political, there is no one politically neutral language that the diverse ethnic groups that make up the country will be comfortable with as the dominant language of the society. This is why we have linguistic pluralism. Three major languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are designated as "major languages". Emenyonu (1992) noted that Nigeria has chosen nine of its indigenous languages for educational purposes namely: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Edo, Efik, Fulfude, Ijaw, Kanuri and TIV.

In the same way, the Nigeria language policy has tended towards internationalism where the English language (a non indigenous language of wider communication) has been adopted as the language of officialdom, education and commerce. The issues raised against this positioning of the English language in Nigeria are many; a language imported into Nigeria from Europe. It is a second language in Nigeria and therefore not the language in which Nigerians expresses their innermost thoughts and world view; Nigerians can never achieve the same proficiency in English as the native speakers. Again English is an instrument of Imperialism, English should be replaced by an African language that is truly indicative of the African identity" The above expresses a truly nationalistic feeling, notwithstanding, the Nigerian linguistic reality does not favour the restoration of an indigenous language and its adoption as an official language, that is vernacularization, as in Israel (Hebrew) Indonesia (Bahasa)

or Papua new guinea (Malanesia) etc. The countries that practice linguistic pluralism and internationalism are Canada, Belgium, Ghana, Singapore and South Africa.

### **The Role of Language in Education**

It took Nigeria as a political entity over two decades before it could have its educational policy after independence in 1960. The four regions to which Nigeria was divided after independence each had an Educational Commission; these were the Onabamiro Commission, Willinck Commission and Ashby Commission on higher Education etc. The coming together of these commissions form the basis of the National Policy on Education (NPE) of 1981 which today has undergone series of revisions in line with changing philosophy of Nigerian educational system. We now have the revised edition of the NPE, 2004, which is based on the Obasanjo's universal basic education. We now talk about 9-3-4 instead of 6-3-3-4 duration of education in Nigeria. This is in line with the millennium development goal which envisioned all developing countries to provide education for its citizens before 2015. This programme is known as "Education for all" (E.F.A) before 2015.

### **The Place of English Language in Nigeria**

In the national policy on education, English language has been given pre-eminent position over all the other forms of language because of its international function and relevance to technological and scientific development. Even up to the university level, English is a must to be passed before a candidate can move on to the next educational level. As a result, English has become so invaluable to Nigeria as language of national unity and cohesion, all because of our linguistic pluralism and diversity. Mutual suspicion of political dominance among the multi-ethnic groups that make-up Nigeria has not allowed us to promote any of our indigenous languages to serve as our lingua-franca. The position of English language in Nigeria today is dominant above all other language. It has a prestigious status among the citizenry before independence; it has also succeeded in conferring some reasonable amount of prestige on whosoever adopts it. Proficiency in English provides influence, prestige and honour to the user. Crystal (1997) says that English language these days, has attained the status of a global language, the users of the language should learn to use it effectively and correctly for numerous purposes. Bamgbose (1995:9) states five dimensions of the influence of English Language in the educational, political, cultural, sociolinguistic and linguistic setting in Nigeria. This obvious dominance of English in all spheres of operation in Nigeria testifies to its usefulness and indispensability in the multilingual situation of the nation. In view of the status and numerous functions of English language in Nigeria as already discussed, it is obvious that the language is a vital factor to be considered in the process of consolidating Nigerian educational system. Historically, the Nigeria formal educational system originated from the language. One of the best ways to consolidate the educational system is to perfect its medium of transmission by giving the learner a good

grounding of the mechanics of the language, provision of learning materials, and an enabling environment. Continuity of our educational system should be ensured through transmission from one generation to another. The teaching methodology of transmitting the ethnic, concepts and values of an educational system should be formalized and systemic, using the medium of English, quantitative and effective teaching is required with English as the major medium of instruction. Provision of appropriate teaching aids using English language for instruction helps in meaningful and effective teaching. Teaching aids make learning more meaningful, more practical and result oriented. The use of textbooks is *sin-qua-non* in any educational system. It is the commonest means of transmitting information to students at different levels. Some people find textbooks as the cheapest medium of preserving values, knowledge and culture in our educational system. It is significant that most of the textbooks used in our educational system at all levels are written in English language. Hence, English is essential in consolidating Nigerian educational system. Again, in the area of computerization, English is one of the major languages used for computer programming and operation. English language facilitates cross-fertilization of ideas, knowledge and values through interactions with other people both within the nation and at the international level. Researches, reviews and innovations are carried out using the medium of English language. For the nation's technological development, English Language is one of the instruments used either for transfer of technology or adaptation of technology. The role of English Language in the nation's socio-economic development cannot be over-emphasized.

### **Conclusion**

From the fore-going observations, there is need to consolidate our educational system in the present economy so that the nation can cope with the rapid technological growth. The English Language is a major factor to be reckoned with in the process of consolidating Nigerian educational system because of the crucial role it plays in the social, economic, political and educational sectors of the nation.

### **Recommendation**

If there is going to be any change from using English Language as our *lingua-franca* to using one of the indigenous languages, it has to be gradual and definite, taking all other factors into consideration such as linguistic pluralism, and international connectivity . English and the indigenous languages should operate side by side pending when the indigenous languages will be developed enough to perform both national and international communications functions. Government should stop paying lip service to Nigerian language policy but tackle the issue of language policy more realistically because of its strategic position in education and national development. For instance, the following suggestions could be examined for a

### **Possible Adoption**

Introduction of language laboratories in secondary schools to facilitate teaching-learning of English. Training more English language teachers, if need be, employing extra hands from English-speaking African countries like Ghana and South Africa. Trusting teaching English to any arts or social science graduate eloquent in English as being currently practiced in our schools should cease. It takes more than fluency in spoken English to teach English. Reading culture should be restored in our schools. African writers should be encouraged to write more books on Literature-in-English, Theater plays and literary activities like writing, poem-reading, inter-school debates e.t.c. should also be re-introduced. All these combined, standard of English would improve and an annual failure in SSCE English would cease. Mass failure is essentially a product of inadequate grounding in English from the primary schools. Improvement in English will not only consolidate education but also promote transmission of culture from generations of students to the other. The policy of making a student to take a language other than his/her mother tongue has not even taken off. To achieve this, teachers in Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa languages should be produced en-mass to teach in various states of the nation. This done, the country should have been on her high way to achieving her much dreamed-of indigenous language of national and international transactions. The choice or creation of an indigenous language of unity for Nigeria, very much like the Afrikaans and Swahili is a subject for further research. On the whole, English Language is a tool through which Nigeria can attain her much desired functional education and should be given a prominent role in the nation's educational planning and curriculum development.

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**Reference** to this paper should be made as follows: Maria Olanrewaju Ewulo (2015), The Importance of English Language in the Nigerian Educational System *J. of Education and Leadership Development Vol. 7, No. 2, Pp. 11 – 20*.

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