

Conditions Restraining the Teaching of Major Nigerian Languages in Secondary School in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This descriptive survey was carried out in order to determine the conditions handicapping the teaching of major Nigerian languages in secondary schools in Ebonyi State, Nigeria. A random sample of 953 students and 602 language teachers completed a corresponding copies of questionnaire designed for the study. Out of 1555 copies of questionnaire distributed, about 1551 representing about 99.7% return rate was properly completed and returned. Data were analyzed using mean (\bar{x}), standard deviation. The results of the study showed that the conditions restraining the teaching of major Nigerian languages included inadequate trained Nigerian languages teachers, lack of materials for teaching the languages, lack of innovation on the part of teachers and lack of interest on the part of pupils. The study supports the need for Nigerian language teachers to show more commitment to the teaching of Nigerian languages.

Keywords: Nigerian language, handicap, teachers, students, Ebonyi State.

1. Introduction

In a multilingual and multicultural society like Nigeria, where many languages compete for national recognition and higher political status, there is the need for an integrating or unifying language to be used for national development. The English language, a foreign language with its cultural imperialism, was chosen as a lingua franca leading to an acute under utilization of Nigerian indigenous languages. In Nigeria, English is the principal language of educated Nigerians, the principal medium of instruction for secondary and tertiary education, the principal language of wider communication and the principal medium of literacy expression. English is the language of Nigeria's political administration, business, mass media, and education and particularly, it is the only language of inter-ethnic communication. It is the medium used for keeping most official and private records of transactions in administration and business (Agwu, 2013). This is why, at a point, Nigerians developed a fear that the continuous use of English as Nigeria's lingua franca has become so pervasive that the purity of the local tongues may be stained, if not completely eroded (Uguru, 2008).

In Nigeria, the English language is ascribed so much prestige that excellence and fluency in it is associated with academic brilliance. It is also a pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions. Furthermore, in the primary and secondary schools, more periods are allocated to the study of English. Unfortunately, many Nigerians particularly the rural dwellers and those of the lower class are not able to communicate in the English language. It is unlikely that such people would be carried along in the affairs of the government (Uguru, 2008). Therefore, in the early 1980s indigenous language awareness was created in the country. This followed a language conference held in Ghana in 1969 where a call was made for indigenous African languages to be given paramount attention. Though the indigenous language awareness has aided the study and development of these hitherto relegated languages, it sparked off unhealthy rivalries among Nigerian language groups, culminating into inter-ethnic rivalries and conflicts. In the face of this linguistic chaos, the use of English as the official language has thrived and the end of it is not in sight. Several factors have contributed to the continued use of English as the official language. The factors include and not limited to:

First, there appears to be a wrong understanding among most Nigerians of what language is all about. They fail to understand that no language is superior to the other. Most Nigerians, particularly those in the elite class are not enthusiastic about replacing English with an indigenous language. Such people tend to associate academic brilliance with competence or fluency in English. For them errors in spoken or written English are viewed as grave, humiliating and embarrassing. In contrast, such errors committed in any indigenous Nigerian language are dismissed with a wave of the hand. In fact, errors committed while speaking the indigenous languages are seen as indications that the speaker is a city dweller or so much educated that he or she has begun to lose grip of the indigenous language. The more a speaker of language uses 'big' jaw-breaking and unfamiliar English words, the more elated he or she feels and the higher the esteem to which the audience holds him or her, regardless of whether the audience understands the words or not. Most Nigerians have not understood that the goal of language is communication which means, passing of information from speaker to hearer and so, would speak

English to illiterate and semi-illiterate citizens when they could have spoken the indigenous language. This situation has placed a high prestige on English and the resultant effect is the unwillingness of those eloquent in it to welcome a change to an indigenous official language. Hence, many Nigerian families use English even at home to the detriment of mother tongue.

Another likely factor to the one above is the undue priority and attention given to English language in the Nigerian institutions of learning. More hours are allocated to its teaching and a poor performance in English denotes a poor performance in the examination in question. For instance, a minimum of credit pass in English is a pre-requisite for entry into higher institutions and it is rarely possible for someone, who failed English language to be allowed to study any course at all. Thus in many primary and post-primary schools, the use of any language other than English among students is forbidden.

Language is an important factor of human life as well as the most important tool in education. It has been variously defined by scholars. For instance, Adebite (1992) opines that language can be described as a system of sounds or vocal symbols which human beings use to communicate experiences. It is a special characteristic of human beings. Language is the most important factor in identifying who is who, where one comes from, what one is made of, one's culture, and tradition. It is a vehicle which is used to impart knowledge and so a vehicle of thought, culture and communication. It has a dual function; as a subject on the curriculum as well as a medium of instruction.

Language is the pivot around which every activity rotates hence it is an instrument of public relations, medium of imparting knowledge, means of national and political interaction and a gateway to national unity. According to Mgbodile (1998), language is the chief means of generating, maintaining and transferring culture and civilization. He stresses that man learns to speak a language in the way he learns to walk, to climb or swim. Consequently, language is the bedrock to nation building. For Aziza (1998) language is the most important tool with which society is organized and it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thought, ideas and needs.

Language also occupies an important place in any educational system. It is, therefore, the nucleus of any course of study (Ige, 2000). Prominent scholars like (Chomsky, 1957; Hall, 1969; Robinson 1979; Lyons, 1981) have defined language in different ways, but according to Osisanwe (1995); language is human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of the noise, used systematically by members of a speech community for purposes of communication.

Streeter (1972) puts it more succinctly when he notes that language is the basic factor in communication. To be communicative is to be understood. The degree to which the audience understands a thought is dependent, initially, upon the words used and their arrangement into thought units. The thoughts of the speaker become clear as they are translated into words, in meaningful combinations. Hence adequacy in the use of language is based upon the arrangement of words in sentences.

Arguing along the same line, Whatmough cited in Ojomo (2001) further states that language may be viewed as human culturally established and voluntarily acquired means of communicating information, ideas, emotions and desires by means of conventionalized symbol systems. These verbal symbols systems may depend upon any of man's perceptual senses, namely: auditory, visual or tactile-single or in combinations.

It could finally be concluded that these views and explanations of language revolve around communication. Communication is a social art. It is an art whereby ideas, opinions, thoughts and concepts are interchanged and shared between two people or more. Communication also entails interaction and it is a human activity (Widdowson, 1978).

Therefore the use of mother tongue in communication may not overemphasize and as a results man cannot afford to ignore or trifle with the use of indigenous language in communication for national development. Some advocates (Adewuyi, 1996; Ezejideaku, 1996) recommended the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, especially in primary and secondary schools. According to them, the understanding of instructions by the learner is of vital importance in carrying out the expected activities in the teaching-learning process. This is also corroborated by the provision made for mother tongue in the National Policy on Education (NPE) (Federal Republic of Nigeria [FRN], 2004). That language plays a vital role in education and social life of a people is not unexpected. However, caution needs to be exercised in the use of this instrument, which may serve as a two-edged sword. This is because as Brooks (1964) observes, language may help in either solving or creating problems depending on linguistic as well as extra-linguistic factors.

2. Language Acquisition Theory

Opara (2008) noted that there are many theories to explain how children acquire language. So far no theory has achieved satisfactory explanation of this wonderful achievement in the child. No theory, therefore, has been able to fully help teachers to understand and determine how to help children better with language acquisition. However, knowledge of theories of language acquisition can go a long way to helping teachers of language know how children acquire language. Language acquisition theory is classified under three sub-heading namely: imitation theory, reinforcement and cognitive theory.

2.1 Imitation theory

Skinner (1957) one of the founders of behaviorist's psychology proposed the imitation theory. He observed that children learn languages by imitation of what adult say, imitating the sound, the derivation and use of grammar, the meaning and the type of language spoken around them. The babbling sounds children make early in life are shaped after the sounds made by adults. Hence, a child in Igbo land will learn the Igbo language, the child in Yoruba land where Yoruba is spoken will learn the Yoruba language and so on.

However, the learning of languages by the imitation method only would demand a lot of time to learn the language. This is because the expressive language is narrower in breath than the impressive language. Associated with the imitation theory is the modeling or association theory whereby learning occurs faster when what is said is associated with the concrete representation of the object. The theory reveal that children learn languages by imitation of what adult say, imitating the sound, derivation and use of grammar, the meaning and type of language spoken around them. Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study as it shades light on the process in the learning of the Nigerian languages; hence it is from this learning of languages that helps the teachers of language to pattern their teaching with imitational skills that would help the child in the acquisition language.

2.2 Reinforcement theory

Skinner (1957) also propounded this theory that children learn language by reinforcement because they are rewarded. Each time a child approximates a sound made by an adult, he receives a positive response (e.g., a clap, a smile, a pat, a hug). The child tries to repeat that sound several times over so as to be rewarded. He also associated that sound with the meaning it has evoked in the adult's reaction. The more often he makes the sound the more he comes closer to the correct pattern. Gradually the sounds become words and the words become sentences that are correct and intelligible. As he wishes to get positive response, he makes efforts to speak better. However, there is more to language learning than this theory can explain. If a child waits until he is rewarded, then he will spend eternity to learn a language. It is very useful though in improving language development in slow learners. However, the child can build internal mechanism for self reinforcement. The above theory is relevant to this study in the sense that reinforcement is very useful though in improving language development in slow learners. When the learners make good attempt to speak or write any of these major Nigerian languages well, they should be given a positive reinforcement from the teacher as stipulated by the theory. Such reinforcement could be relegated to a simple clap of hands among others. This is the aspect of this theory that informs the basis of this study because it is an integral part of every good learning process.

2.3 The cognitive theory

Chomsky (1957) showed that language is a complex cognitive system that could be acquired by behaviorist principles. This describes the theory that focuses on what the child does on his own to learn a language. The child discovers or establishes a rule about what he hears according to his level of thinking and understanding. He tries out the rule based on observed movements, gestures, context and intention. These help him to guess the meanings and rules and applying them leads him to generate sentences he has never heard before. For example, when he discovers the rules for indicating past tense, that is, adding "-ed" to English verbs, he may add "-ed" to "come" to say "comed". Hence according to this theory, the child listens, observes, develops a rule, tests the rule, receives feedback and applies the rules again or in a modified form. Though this may not be correct according to conventional usage, but the child has observed and understood the rule or pattern. He can apply it successfully to some verbs that can take "ed". With more practice and observations, he begins to notice the exceptions to the rule and modifies them. When the child applies these rules and principles in learning language, progress is faster. The relevant of this theory to this study lies in the fact that language is a complex cognitive

system that could be acquired by behaviorist principle. This behaviorist principle implies that the child listens, observes, develop a rule, tests the rule, receives feedback and applies the rules again or in a modified form.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and setting

Between January and February 2015, a descriptive survey was carried out among 953 secondary school students and 602 language teachers. These students were drawn through the multi-stage sampling procedure while all the language teachers were included because of the manageable size of the population. The first stage involved delimitation of the three education zones in the area under survey into three mutually exclusive clusters namely: Abakaliki, Onueke and Afikpo. The second stage involved drawing 25% of the number of schools in each zone using the proportionate simple random sampling technique. One out of four schools, irrespective of type and location of school was chosen from each education zone. This process yielded a total of 16 schools from Abakaliki zone, 15 schools from Onueke zone and 20 schools from Afikpo zone. The third and the final stage involved a proportionate selection of 1% of the students from each of the three education zones. This yielded a total of 953 students.

3.2 Instrument

The researcher used a self-developed questionnaire called Nigerian Language Assessment Questionnaire (NLAQ) which consisted of 9 items arranged in two sections; A and B. section A, contained 4 items about the restraining conditions as perceived by teachers. Section B, consisted of 4 items on the restraining conditions as perceived by students.

The respondents were required to indicate on a 4-point scale, the handicapping conditions on the teaching of major Nigerian languages to a very great extent (VGE), to a great extent (GE), to a less extent (LE) and to a very less extent (VLE).

Five experts in language education from two institutions of higher learning in Enugu State, not included in the study, were used for validity the (NLAQ). Thirty secondary students and thirty language teachers of both genders in Enugu State, not included in the study were used for test of reliability. The data yielded a Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.875. The reliability coefficient was higher than Ogbazi and Okpala's (1994) criteria of 0.60 acceptable for good instruments.

3.3 Data collection

Permission was granted from the principal of each secondary school participating in the study prior to data collection. A consent note with the explanation for the research purpose, method of response and assurance of anonymity was attached to each copy of the NLAQ. Nine hundred and fifty-three copies of NLAQ were administered on the students and six hundred and two copies were also administered on language teachers and were collected after completion.

3.4 Data analysis

The completed copies of the NLAQ were examined for completeness of responses and copies that had incomplete responses were discarded. Out of 1555 copies of NLAQ administered; 1551 (952 students, 599 language teachers) representing about 97.7% return rate, were used for analysis. In describing the conditions handicapping the teaching of the major Nigerian languages among students and teachers mean (\bar{x}) of 3.1-4.0 implied that the teaching of the major Nigerian language are handicapped to a very great extent (VGE); 2.1-3.0 implied that the teaching of the major Nigerian languages are handicapped to a great extent (GE); 1.1-2.0 implied that the teaching of the major Nigerian languages are handicapped to a less extent (LE), 0.1-1.0 implied that the teaching of the major Nigerian languages are handicapped to a very less extent (VLE). Mean and standard were used to analyse the data. While mean was used for description, standard deviation was used to determine how the responses of the respondent varied. Data analysis was done with IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20.0 for windows

4. Results

Table 1: Mean, standard deviation of the conditions handicapping the teaching of the major Nigerian languages as perceived by teachers and students

S/N	Statement	Teachers			Students		
		\bar{x}	SD	Dec	\bar{x}	SD	Dec
1.	There are not enough trained Nigerian language teachers	2.95	1.10	GE	3.12	1.05	VGE
2.	They lack materials for teaching these languages	2.61	1.20	GE	2.50	0.89	GE
3.	Teachers lack innovations in teaching Nigerian language	2.75	1.99	GE	2.89	1.31	GE
4.	Pupils are not interested in learning Nigerian language	2.68	1.25	GE	2.40	1.22	GE
	Overall	2.75	0.83	GE	2.62	0.69	GE

In this Table 1, it shows that each of the items 1, 2, 3 and 4 conditions in the secondary schools constitute a handicap in the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a great extent as perceived by the teachers. The overall mean score of 2.75 implies that secondary schools in Ebonyi State are handicapped in the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a great extent. The standard deviations (range 0.83-1.25) indicate that the responses do not vary so widely.

In the Table 1 also, it shows that students perceive item 1 as a condition that handicaps the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a very great extent. On the other hand, the students perceived each of the items 2, 3 and 4 as conditions in the secondary schools that constitute a handicap in the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a great extent. The overall mean score of 2.62 implies that secondary schools in Ebonyi State are handicapped in the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a great extent as perceived by the students. The standard deviations (range 0.69-1.31) indicated that the responses do not vary so widely.

5. Discussion

Data in Table 1 showed that secondary schools in Ebonyi State are handicapped in the teaching of the major Nigerian languages to a great extent as perceived by both Nigerian language teachers and students. It is not surprising that both Nigerian language teachers and students perceived that secondary schools in Ebonyi State were handicapped in the teaching of Nigerian languages. The reason for this perception is obvious. For example, a visit to these secondary schools could reveal a lack of the facilities and equipment that are used in the teaching of languages. There is also an obvious inadequacy of the number of Nigerian language teachers in these secondary schools. This is an indication that the government has not been able to meet up with the provision of specialist teachers for the Nigerian languages. Although many institutions of learning, particularly the colleges of education are making reasonable efforts in this direction by increasing, their intake of students for Nigerian language studies, yet this effort does not seem level up the demand for Nigerian language teachers in the state. For example, Ebonyi State College of Education, Ikwo the number of students admitted to read Igbo increased from 49 to about 82 for the year 2003-2004 (EBSCOI, 2004) in order to produce the much needed manpower in Nigerian languages. Be that as it may, these institutions still lack the necessary funds materials, resources and government legislation to achieve the set objectives. It may not be an over statement to say that government has not ensured that there are enough qualified teachers on ground for the successful implementation of the Nigerian language policy. It is a common saying that no educational system could be adjudged better through the quality of its teachers. To corroborate the assertion given above, Ojomo cited in Chidi-Ehiem (2015) in outlining the problems that hinder the implementation of the language policy indicated that the number of trained teachers to teach every Nigerian language was inadequate. The implication of this inadequacy could be an obvious neglect of the teaching and learning of the Nigerian languages in secondary schools in Ebonyi State.

Finally, it is disheartening to note that the national institute for Nigerian language (NINLAN) at Aba with its established objectives has up till now not made a good majority of the Nigerians feel the impact of their existence. The National Teachers Institute (NTI) on the other hand which was conceived to provide courses of instruction leading to the development, upgrading and certification of teachers as specified in the relevant syllabus using distance education technique, has after 31 years of inception not, started programmes aimed at producing enough teachers in the area of Nigerian languages. Hence Oraeki in Chidi-Ehiem (2015) observed that the institute could have helped to increase the number of teachers needed for teaching these languages if their programmes had been well coordinated. Another probe lies in the contribution of universities in supplying Nigerian language experts. While the academic requirement to ensure a successful teaching and upgrading of the Nigerian languages is enormous, the number of staff needed to make the assertion attain its goal effectively is insufficient. As rightly pointed out by Eke (2003) in almost all cases, lecturers are only recruited on the basis of a 'good University honours degree' in the area of specialization...without any emphasis on the acquisition of the necessary technicalities involved in teaching itself. If this assertion is true of the universities, it is doubtful if the products of their language departments will be a part to assume a language teaching responsibility except if they have in addition, professional qualification in (language) teaching. The extent to which this ugly state of affairs affects the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages is quite disturbing.

6. Conclusion

In view of the findings and taking into consideration, the huge investment that has been made into the mother-tongue education in Nigeria. It would be out of place to allow the mother-tongue policy die of frustration". Consequently, in order to help achieve the laudable aims and objectives of this policy which include among others, the magnification of the various Nigerian ethnic groups.

There is need for the concerned authorities to revise the mother-tongue policy with a view to correcting the inherent loopholes within it. Nigerian language teachers who graduate successfully be given automatic employment. This will go a long way towards sustaining the zeal of others who would want to study Nigerian languages. If federal government can successfully promote the study of two international languages of English and French, one wonders why it could not encourage and sustain the study of its national languages. Nigerian language educators should on their part show more commitment to the teaching and learning of Nigerian languages. They could do this by attending re-fresher courses whereby they will be able to update their knowledge in their area of specialization. Students should put in more effort in terms of learning and using their language, as it is a means of getting job that can earn them a living.

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