

A Critical Evaluation of the Implementation of the Nigerian Language Policy at the Pre-Primary and Primary School Levels

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Abstract

The National Policy on Education is the document that expresses the mind of the government on various educational matters. All the stakeholders in the educational theatre must abide by the dictates of this legal document. This paper examines the pronouncements of the Nigerian government on the use of indigenous language(s) in our schools especially at the elementary stages. This is with a view to improving the quality of education in this country through adequate implementation of the language policy statements. This paper also critically examines the state of classroom instructions in primary schools and suggests virile steps towards improving Nigerian system of education through the use of indigenous languages at the lower primary school level as stipulated in the National language policy.

Key words: Evaluation, Implementation, Nigerian Language Policy, Pre-Primary and Primary School Levels

1. Introduction

Policy, according to Chambers 20th Century Dictionary is “a set of coordinated programme of action guided more by interest than by principle of a government or a business corporate body”. According to Akindele and Adegbite (2005), a policy is a government statement on the planned course of action, contained in national documents such as the Constitution and the National Policy on Education. Language policy therefore, is the plan of course of action of a dynamic programme in directing language affairs as needed by government. As language is a vehicle of thought which shapes the most characteristics of human faculty (Olaoye, 2007), the strategic position occupied by language in human affairs can never be exaggerated. Whatever scientific and technological breakthroughs achieved by man to date is attributed to the existence of language. In language education, goals are usually determined by the role which a particular language is expected to play in and outside the school curriculum (Olaoye, 2007). This explains why any meaningful national policy on education must include a policy on language or languages that would serve as a medium of instruction in order to achieve the desired goals. According to Awoniyi (1995), an independent monolingual and mono-cultural country has little problem of choosing its own language (if it wishes) as a medium of teaching and/or learning. However, many countries in the world, particularly in Africa, are multi-linguistic and multi-cultural within their territories, thereby have problem in assigning roles to languages. The various historical, political, religious, social and other factors which brought these about are not to be discussed in this paper. As it has been the concern of many scholars such as Fafunwa (1982), Awoniyi (1995), Akindele and Adegbite (2005) etc., the relevant pedagogic issues, faced with the reality of the moment are:

- (i) Examining the position of mother tongue in education policy.
- (ii) Implementation of mother tongue education in education policy.

2. Educational Language Policy Consideration for Nigeria

According to Ogunsiji (2001), the linguistic map of Nigeria depicts it as a multilingual nation. This is predicated on the fact that there are diverse ethnic groups with their varying languages in each of the regions that make up the nation, Nigeria. As pointed out by Brann (1978), it has been estimated that more than four hundred languages are spoken natively by members of more than two hundred and fifty ethnic groups that inhabit the country. This estimated number of languages does not include a multiplicity of dialects identifiable with each of these languages. Thus, disadvantages of having such diversity and multiplicity of languages in one country are apparent. However, by learning or using these indigenous languages as media of instruction at certain stages in the child's life, the government does not only expect every pupil to become familiar with the world around him but also expect him to appreciate the positive and negative values and attitudes recorded in such languages with a view to recognizing the prospects and problems of developing the pupil's own immediate environment (Akindele & Adegbite, 2005). More importantly, language teaching deserves serious attention because language is the symbol of every group identity. It carries the unique features of the people in form of traditions and

cultural heritage (Odumuh 2002). Mother tongue has been posing a serious challenge to Nigerian educational system. Scholars such as Fafunwa (1989), Emenanjo (1990) and Bamgbose (1991) are of the opinion that mother tongue should serve as a medium of instruction in the formative years (1-12) and that this should extend to as late a stage as possible. This according to Fafunwa (1989) will offer the child opportunity to explore his natural environment, develop curiosity, communicate in the nature language, develop reasoning ability, and engender self confidence as practised in many countries such as China, India, Kenya, Tanzania, Malaysia, Japan, Hong Kong etc. It was on this note that the government pronounced a policy on each particular level of education to solve language education problem in Nigeria. The focus of this paper is therefore on pre-primary and primary education.

2.1 Language Provision in Pre-Primary Education

The “Federal Government of Nigeria National Policy on Education” published in 1977 and revised in 1981 and 1998 has specific pronouncements on the importance of language in the educational system. The policy states thus:

“Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community”. NPE para.11(3): Pre-primary.

In particular, recognition is given to:

- (i) the use of the mother tongue and the English Language in education;
- (ii) the use of some Nigerian languages for achieving national unity.

The Federal Government Policy statement at this level is very clear. The relevant statement appears in section two entitled “pre-primary education”. Pre-primary education is defined in the document as “the education given in an education institution to children aged 3 to 5+, prior to their entering the primary school. A number of goals is discussed for pre-primary education including among others:

- (i) effecting a smooth transition from home to school; and
- (ii) preparing the child for the primary level of education.

To achieve these objectives, “government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community, and to this end will:

- (a) develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages and
- (b) produce textbooks on Nigerian languages.

Apart from the above statements, no further references on the use of mother tongue in education are made throughout the 36 pages of the document; neither with respect to the primary, secondary or tertiary levels of education. The policy clearly states the position of the medium of instruction for pre-primary education. To collaborate the policy statement, scholars such as Bamgbose (1976), Afolayan (1988), Fafunwa (1982) agree that mother tongues ought to be the medium of instruction of children who are still on their mother’s laps, in other words, at the early stages of their lives. According Akindele and Adegbite (2005), using the mother tongue at the nursery school will complement children’s acquisition of the language at home and this helps them to further learn their environments’ socio-cultural norms. It is, however, disheartening that this position exists only on paper as the government finds the enforcement of mother tongue instruction difficult. On the contrary, what operates in reality is different from the policy statement at the pre-primary school level where English is used as the medium of instruction. It should be noted that since most of the pre-primary schools are privately owned, the government finds it difficult to control the language of instruction at this level. Omojuwa (1983) in Akindele and Adegbite (2005) observed that pre-primary schools are elite institutions attended by a negligible number of the nation’s children and it is the wish of the proprietors of these institutions and elite parents’ of the children that English be used as a medium of instruction. To many parents, speaking or instructing their children in mother tongue is a signal to poor academic performance. Thus, parents pay exorbitantly to send their children to private owned nursery schools where English is used to communicate. Those parents who send their children to English-speaking nursery schools may have their children at a disadvantage later when they will have to use their mother tongue for primary education if the policy is properly implemented. As part of solution to the problem Akindele and Adegbite (2005), however, suggest that government should either disengage its interest in pre-primary education or let parents raise their children as they wish before they get to the primary school, or set up its own nursery schools and get more involved in the implementation and monitoring of the language policy; the latter suggestion is preferable. It should be noted that the Nigerian constitution or any policy statement is binding on

all the citizenry. Thus, there is the need for all the stakeholders in education industry to ensure that the implementation of the policy is fully entrenched at the pre-primary level.

2.2 Language Provision in Primary Education

The language policy for primary education recognizes the importance of both the mother tongue and English at this level. It recognizes the appropriateness of the mother tongue to childhood. And it requires English to assist the mother tongues “at a later stage” in the primary school when it believes the resources of the mother tongues may not be sophisticated enough for the expression of concepts and for teaching other subjects (Akindele and Adegbite, 2005). The policy states thus:

“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”. NPE para.15(4): Primary Education.

Effective language planning is crucial to the success of primary education in a multi-lingual setting in which the language of the home – mother tongue is quite often different from that of the school. MT and English are used to be uncoordinated thereby resulting in a serious medium transition problem (Olaoye 2007). A critical look at the policy statement reveals that the policy does not state precisely when at the later stage the medium of instruction should change from the mother tongue to English. At present, we cannot really pinpoint the medium of instruction at the primary school level. The sudden shift from MT to English which is effected in primary four (4) is too abrupt as the pupils are not likely to be sufficiently prepared for the change. It is also simultaneous because the switch will affect all subjects on the school curriculum. Olaoye (2007) opines that the pupils are likely to be handicapped because their level of proficiency in English in primary four (4) is such that cannot help them benefit from lessons all taught in English. Subjects which involve the teaching of many concepts would be difficult to teach in pure English. Olaoye (2007) therefore observes that the situation can be best described as double tragedy in the sense that pupils are not likely to be well grounded in their mother tongue by the time they change to English language as a medium of instruction nor are they sufficiently knowledgeable or literate in English to enjoy lessons in such areas as sciences taught in English.

Also, the policy does not state specifically the status of MT and English in the curriculum. For instance, while the mother tongue and English are recognized as media of instruction, they are not identified as subjects in the curriculum however mother-tongue is not given a peculiar role in the implementation of the curriculum content. And nothing is said about the other indigenous language (i.e. Local L2) which pupil ought to begin to learn in the primary school rather than in the secondary school although, it is stated in the policy that the Local L2 (as subject) should begin at this level. This can be found in the following policy extract:

In addition appreciating the importance of a language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people’s culture the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than their own mother tongue. In the connection the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (NPE Para 8).

From the above, we can see that policy states clearly the three major languages which are considered as Local L2 but does not state precisely when the Local L2 could be introduced and how the child could be motivated or encouraged to learn the Local L2.

The mother tongue is the most useful language to a bilingual child in the formative stage of life. It is also the means by which his/her attitudes and aptitudes are best developed. The child should thus be encouraged in his first twelve years in life to master his/her mother tongue for the positive development of his physical, mental and intellectual potentials.

2.3 Language Policy and Educational Services

It should be noted that the impact of facilities of educational services (centres, materials and equipment) on the development of language resources in the educational programme cannot be overemphasized.

Also, in-service training, better remunerations and better conditions of service should be given priority attention in order to encourage teachers for quality services. Akindele and Adegbite (2005) observe that two facilities that are important for language development in the educational process are the library and laboratory services. It should be noted that successful learning of a language, especially the oral-aural skills, depends on the availability of a good language laboratory equipped with tape-recorders and speech measuring instruments.

Generally, it is observed that many primary schools do not have library and some that are available are ill equipped. Also, book production in the indigenous languages is quantitatively far less than that in English. Akindele and Adegbite (2005) state that out of this low rate of publication in the indigenous languages about 90% of the publications concentrate on the major languages, with Yoruba accounting for over 50%. Olaofe (1990) quoted by Akindele and Adegbite (2005) claims that very few books have been published in the minor languages because educational materials have not been fully developed in them and publishing materials in these languages is not the priority of the major publishing houses.

As found in the policy, there is emphasis on the teaching and learning of the indigenous languages in addition to the English. This statement is predicated on the following reasons. First, it is suggested that a child learns better in his or her mother tongue based on researches (A six - year Ife project 1970 – 1978, Odumuh 2000, Teacher Professional Support Programme (TPSP) 2003). This is because it is the language that he/she is used to at home, at play and in most cases, the language of interaction and socialization. The school only helps to perfect the learning of such indigenous languages. Secondly, concepts are best learned in indigenous languages and are therefore more meaningful to the child than those learned in a foreign language. The child could learn better if he/she is made to be familiar with these foreign concepts by translating and adapting them to his/her mode of experience. The full involvement of indigenous language teachers in the translation process is necessary if the Nigerian child is to make progress in his/her learning of science and technology.

3. 2003 UBE Intervention Project

Several observations and experiment have been made and carried out by scholars on the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary school level. One of such was the six – year - Ife Project 1970-1978. In the same vein, the UBE organized and sponsored a Teacher Professional Programme (TPSP) in 2003. The cluster in-service training and mentoring programme was one way of providing teachers professional support to equip them with necessary skills needed to disseminate instructions in the mother tongue. The programme was also an attempt to bring teachers together in clusters and facilitate a process where they would become creative in problem solving, production of teaching and learning materials, preparation of lesson plans and classroom management. The emphasis then was the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in primaries 1 – 3 in the three core subjects namely; Mathematics, Social Studies and primary science while English was taught as a school subject. For the purpose of the project, nineteen (19) states out of the 36 states of the federation were involved; One Local Government Education Area (LGEA) was selected from each of the 19 states, making a total of 19 LGEAS that was used for the project.

The project was in three phases. Each phase was to cover five schools in each selected LGEA. Thus, for the three phases which covered a whole academic session fifteen schools were involved per LGEA. A team of qualified consultants worked with the primaries 1- 3 teachers in a cluster of five schools per term, per LGEA for the three terms.

The findings reveal that the pupils learnt better in their mother tongue than when English was being used as a medium of instruction. The project was also an eye opener for teachers, parents and the government; yet Nigerian language policy particularly at the basic level has not been properly implemented.

4. Recommendations

Considering the role of mother tongue as the vehicle of formal education at the early stage and as a means of imparting the cultural values of a society into children, the issue of the mother tongue education in the school system should be given all the support it needs to ensure that the genius in a Nigerian child is developed and maximally used for the economic and technological growth of the Nigerian society. For it is this, and future generations of children that will usher in a brighter tomorrow with respect to the much expected idea of national development. Based on this, the Federal Government should provide funds for the general implementation of the language policy by carefully worked out stages by which the policy can be gradually implemented and evaluated. For effective implementation therefore, the following should be duly considered:

- The production of textbooks, readers, and other literacy materials should be attended to by the stakeholders in education industry.
- The training of teachers in the use of the English language, the mother tongues and other indigenous languages should be given priority by the government.
- Linguistic experts need to work out the following modalities before the policy can be implemented:
 - i. The need to specify and justify the levels at which the media of instruction (English and mother tongue) will be adopted.

- ii. The need to establish and identify the sequential relationship between the mother tongue and the English language in such a way that early learning of L1 skills will facilitate the later acquisition of L2 literacy skills.
- iii. Provision for principal guidelines for the choice of the language to be used for mother tongue education in a geopolitical zone with a diversity of mother tongues, to ensure that the issue is not abused and as a result undermining the desired goal of national unity and national integration through the learning of major national languages as envisioned by the policy.

Omojuwa (1997) asserts that the minimum basic requirements for a language to be used as a medium of instruction which is not met by many African languages include:

- (i) Linguistic analysis of the phonology (sound system) and the grammar of the language.
- (ii) Devising a practical orthography for the mother tongue based on the linguistic analysis of languages.
- (iii) Preparation and evaluation of primers, readers (including supplementary readers), teacher's notes and manuals to guide teachers/pupils/readers on the use of primers.

For the development of the languages to be used as media of instruction, more basic requirements need to be met viz:

- (i) Preparation of a glossary of technical terms in the mother tongue for all the core subjects (e.g. Mathematics, Social Studies, Primary Science etc).
 - (ii) Preparation of adequate curricular in the various subjects in the appropriate language.
 - (iii) Development of written literature in indigenous languages for pupils to be familiar with their socio-cultural environments.
- Each Local Government Education Authority should saddle its supervisory unit with the responsibility of ensuring adequate monitoring of the implementation of the language policy at the basic levels.

Generally speaking, book production in the core subjects (Mathematics, Primary Science and Social Studies) in indigenous languages has not been given serious attention by language experts. Many Nigerian languages are still struggling with many of these basic requirements with all their financial, political, technical and other inhibitions. However, with the aid of the government, many more Nigerian languages can be developed to meet these requirements and the desired goal of science and technological development and national unity will be surely attained.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the language policy provision for the pre-primary and primary educational systems in Nigeria and the practices of most of the institutions in these categories in the dissemination of knowledge. It is realized that the policy only exists on paper and it is not taken seriously by the educational practitioners. The paper, therefore, concludes that through effective education and enlightenment of the people, the country will readily accept the policy and our educational system will be worthy of emulation the world over.

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