

FIFTEEN YEARS OF THE NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION: HOW FAR HAS LANGUAGE FARED?

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It is indeed a pleasure for me to give this keynote address at the Colloquium organised in honour of Professor Adebisi Afolayan to mark his retirement from the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife. Although Professor Afolayan is best known as pioneer in English as Second language in Nigeria, it is entirely appropriate that the Colloquium in his honour should be on the theme "Language in Education", for his interests are by no means limited to the teaching of English but extend to the role of all languages (particularly the mother tongue). He is the major language consultant in the Six-Year Primary Project and has taken part in efforts at the national level to evolve a realistic language policy for Nigeria as well as to ensure an effective implementation of the National Policy on Education. A painstaking and thorough researcher, a diligent teacher and dogged and uncompromising fighter for what he believes to be right, Professor Afolayan entirely deserves the honour that this colloquium represents. I join his numerous colleagues, friends and students in wishing him a happy retirement.

The role of language in education is usually taken for granted by linguists. Since acquisition of knowledge is most effectively carried out through the mediation of language, it comes naturally to linguists to assume that any educational policy must devote a substantial part to language. A look at the *National Policy on Education (NPE) 1977*, (revised 1981) will however show that this expectation is misplaced, for of the 107 paragraphs in the NPE, language is only specifically mentioned in nine paragraphs in the NPE, language is only specifically mentioned in nine paragraphs, the most substantial being only four (paragraphs 8, 11, 15, and 19) dealing with medium of instruction at pre-primary and primary levels and language subjects in the secondary school curriculum.

That language does not feature more prominently in the NPE should not come as a surprise to those familiar with the Report of the 1969 Curriculum Conference (Adaralegbe 1972) from which the NPE emerged, we will find that its main preoccupations are with purpose, objectives, goals, structures, teacher training, ownership, funding etc. Only one paper in Chapter One has a section on "The Language of Instruction" arising from which there is a recommendation that "The Nigerian primary school child should be well-grounded in his mother tongue as well as learning English and/or any other language as second or third language" (Adaralegbe 1972:25). Against this background, the few language provisions in the NPE could be seen as major advances on the work of the 1969 Curriculum Conference.

Language Policy Thrust

The two major goals of the educational language policy as enshrined in the NPE are:

- (a) Mother tongue education which embraces the use of the mother tongue or language of the immediate community as a medium of instruction up to the third year of primary education and the teaching of this language as subject in secondary education.
- (b) Bilingual policy which involves the learning of one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) in addition to English. Such a language will be a subject from Junior Secondary School and possibly, up to Senior Secondary.

The language provisions of the NPE are generalized statements which require to be amplified and interpreted before adequate implementation can take place. The task of such amplification has been assigned to an Implementation Committee which has been advising implementers of the NPE at various levels, sometimes after obtaining clearance from the National Council on Education.

The NPE has built-in problems which are bound to impede implementation:

- i) The Federal Government does not necessarily control those involved in the implementation of the Policy. For example, because Nigeria operates a federal system of government, it is to be expected that different states will take different positions on the same issue. Although attempts are made to minimize such disparities through consultation, the fact is that quite a few still exist.
- ii) Certain policies involve substantial funding and, unless the Federal Government is prepared to back such policies with funds, they are not likely to be implemented. For example, it is pointless saying that "All teachers in our educational institutions, from pre-primary to university, will be professionally trained" (Paragraph 5a) unless definite financial provision has been made for such training.
- iii) Certain provisions are addressed to no one in particular, but are in the nature of a manifesto. For example, the provision that "Government will develop the orthography for many more Nigerian Languages: (Paragraph 11 (3)).

Some provisions refer to a non-existent situation. For example, although Paragraph 84(6) states that "Language Centres are being set up at Federal and State levels for enhancing the study of Languages, especially Nigerian languages", I know of no Language Centre at the State level, and the only Language Centre at the Federal level (renamed Language Development Centre) has become a unit of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC).

As far as language is concerned, the situation is complex in that not all languages are at the same stage of development. Hence, a policy that can be immediately applied to one language may not be practicable with another. This accounts for the differential application of the mother tongue medium policy in several parts of the country.

Escape clauses are deliberately built in to avoid the consequences of non-implementation. For example, the bilingual policy at Junior Secondary School is said to be subject to the availability of teachers, while it is true that L2 teachers of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba may not be available in the required numbers, I am sure the same can be said for teachers of Physics in many secondary schools; but would anyone dare to suggest that Physics should be taught subject to availability of teachers?

Implementation and Evaluation

A necessary aspect of any language planning is the constant monitoring of policy and its implementation. This task is being carried out by the Implementation Committee. However, one of the earliest attempts by language specialists to examine the language provisions of the NPE was at the Language Symposium of October 31 - November 4, 1977. Professor Sanya Onabamiro was one of the major participants at the Conference being at that time a member of the Working Committee of the National Language Centre. The Language Symposium came up with a set of recommendations on the implementation of the NPE covering language development, provision of materials, teacher training, language curriculum and expansion of the Language Centre (Bamgbose 1980; 170-172). These recommendations were discussed on by the present speaker in his capacity as Chairman of the National Language Centre Working Committee to the then Chairman of the Implementation Committee, the late Professor Sanya Onabamiro. Since no contact was made with us on the matter, it is difficult to tell what the outcome of our recommendations.

The NPE was revised in 1981 with more detailed information given on the Junior Secondary and Senior Secondary curricula. The Implementation Committee has continued the monitoring of the Policy with consequent modification where necessary. There is no doubt that the Committee has accomplished a lot in terms of stipulation of structures, institutions, organizational framework and quantification of school populations, teacher requirements and funding. Other notable success areas in the implementation of the language policy are the reform of the language curriculum both for first language (L1) and second language (L2), training of L1 and L2 teachers by Colleges of Education, and the establishment of the National Institute for Nigerian Languages at Abuja for the production of graduate L1 and L2 teachers.

It should be clear from the foregoing that language has not fared too well in the fifteen years of the NPE. Most of the modifications and interpretations particularly by the Implementation Committee have led to a watering down of the strong language provisions of the Policy.

In pursuance of the mother tongue education policy, the NPE stipulates a mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as a medium of instruction both at pre-primary and primary levels of education, except that at a later stage in the primary school, English will become a medium of instruction. Three aspects of this provision have been modified. First, the Implementation Committee in its Blueprint has fixed the duration of the mother tongue medium to the first three years of primary education. Second, the term "mother tongue" has been eliminated and replaced by "language of the immediate community". Third, English has been brought in as a medium of instruction in the so-called multinational schools as stated in the Committee's Guidelines:

"The medium of instruction in Pre-primary schools should be the language of the immediate community. In a multinational school English may be used as the medium of instruction but the language of the immediate community should be taught in the spoken form" (Implementation Committee 1987, paragraph 7).

Although in making the above modifications, the Implementation Committee may have been influenced by such factors as existing practice, the low development status of several languages which makes them unsuitable for immediate use as media of instruction, and the incidence of linguistically mixed classes particularly in urban areas, one single undocumented factor to which reference is hardly ever made is the attitude of parents and guardians. Every parent would like his or her child to have a headstart, and, for most of the elite

parents, this means an early introduction to the English language. Such parents have little faith in their own language and its ability to facilitate cognitive development in their own children. For them, the longer a child is exposed to English the better. Hence, even the language of interaction with the child in the home is artificially changed to English. Sending a child to a pre-primary school means sending it to start the early acquisition of the English language. Any policy that runs counter to this is bound to fail, particularly if, as in the case of the NPE, the policy-makers have no means of enforcing the policy.

The Six-Year Primary Project based here at Ife subsequently extended to several schools in Oyo and Osun States has demonstrated that Primary Education given in the mother tongue is not only viable but even superior to the present practice of transitional bilingual education in which English takes over as a medium of instruction well before pupils' competence in either English or Yoruba is assured. (Afolayan 1980, Fafunwa et al. 1989). A strict interpretation of the NPE will make the practice of a six-year mother tongue medium irregular. Fortunately, the spirit of the policy which makes the period of media transition flexible has been adhered to. This will make it possible for many more languages to be used as media of instruction for the entire primary education as soon as adequate materials are available in them.

The bilingual policy has been formulated against the background of the dominance of English and the absence of an indigenous lingua franca common to the entire country. It is recognized that although the three major languages are spoken by a sizeable number of the Nigerian population, none of them can lay claim to being a national vehicle of communication, since each is largely restricted to different geographical area of the country. It is recognized, however that because of their size, to learn one of them is to expose the learner to a fairly large population of speakers. If such acquisition is additional to another major language one already speaks, one will be able to reach a much larger population still. Given that there can be no unanimity at present on the choice of one of the three major languages as an indigenous lingua franca, the next best solution is to encourage the emergence of one of them through a gradual process of planned bilingualism. Should this fail to materialize, it is even possible to end up with a multilingual official language policy, much in the same way as a country like Switzerland which operates in four national languages.

The operative objective is couched in the clause, "the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue" (Para 8 of the NPE). Although mere learning another language will not necessarily induce unity, what is really intended is that the scope of

communication at the national level will be enhanced, and given other unity-inducing factors, a common language can help to reinforce a feeling of oneness.

The level at which the bilingual policy is to be reinforced is the Junior Secondary School where a major language joins another Nigerian Language (i.e. the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community already used as a medium of instruction in the primary school) as a core subject.

Although the seeds of non-implementation are already sown through making the teaching of the major language subject to the availability of teachers, the Implementation Committee went further to weaken the policy by putting language on the same footing as pre-vocational subjects such as Woodwork, Metal Work and Local Crafts which local artisans can be recruited to teach on a part-time basis. Thus, the Committee directs that "native speakers of various Nigerian Languages who are resident outside their States of origin (including students and NYSC members) could be employed to teach at least oral forms of Nigerian languages" (Implementation Committee 1987, paragraph 37).

There are two fallacies in the Committee's position. First, the age-old, but mistaken, belief that any native speaker of a language can teach it. Those who are conversant with the intricacies of language teaching know that this is not necessarily the case. Second, the novel proposal that all the knowledge that a junior secondary school pupil requires in his major language core subjects is just the oral form of the language. How deep and how permanent will this knowledge be, if the pupil is not able to read material written in the language? The problem becomes even more compounded where this language is carried into the senior secondary school as a core subject. What kind of certificate will the pupil have in this subject at the end of a six-year secondary school programmes.

It is a condition for the award of the Secondary School Certificate that a candidate must offer six core subjects, including one Nigerian Language. Since this language has been wrongly interpreted (and sanctioned by the National Council on Education) to mean a second Nigerian Language (NL2), most schools (including the Federal Secondary Schools) are confronted with a situation in which their Senior Secondary pupils cannot graduate because they have not been taught a NL2. However, this problem is not a grave one in the eyes of Ministry of Education officials. An ingenious scheme has been devised by which waivers are routinely granted by members of the Federal Inspectorate. All that a school head has to plead is that he had no teachers of

Hausa, Yoruba or Igbo, and his pupils can graduate without a Nigerian Language core subject.

A bizarre twist to the bilingual policy is the publication in the front of the *Sunday Concord* of November 1, 1992 under the banner headline "Unity Policy Crumbles". The publication, so far unrefuted, (although the Director of Higher education in the Federal Ministry of Education and Youth Development, Dr Augi tells me the publication is misleading), claims that every year since 1988, the Federal Ministry of Education has routinely asked the West African Examination Council to waive the indigenous language condition both as entry requirement and for the issuance of the Senior Secondary Certificate. It also asserts that at the 42nd session of the National Council on Education held at Owerri in October, a permanent waiver of the requirement until 1994 was decided upon.

Where do these developments leave the bilingual policy? How can the same Ministry that has been encouraging Colleges of Education to produce NL2 teachers and is about to set up a National Institute at Aba for the training of teachers of Nigerian Languages now turn round to waive the very condition on which the demand for such teachers is based? There can be no two ways about it: either the Government is serious in the prosecution of the bilingual policy or it should shelve it entirely as unworkable.

This brings me to the calls recently being made which appear to be a negation of the bilingual policy. It has been suggested that in addition to the three major languages, some state languages such as Kanuri in Borno State, Edo in Edo State or Urhobo in Delta State should be taught as NL2 at Junior Secondary School (Emenanjo 1985:126). Since the number of such languages can run into twelve or more, the original purpose of basing the bilingual policy on the three major languages will be defeated. No matter how well-intentioned, such a step will make it impossible for an indigenous national language or even three such languages ever to emerge in a millenium.

The second call which is not really new but which has gained renewed advocacy is that we are alright with English and English is alright for us. Hence, let's abandon all this "nonsense" about the mother tongue, NL2, and such "unprofitable" pursuits. At the recent 13th Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria, as many as five papers were devoted to the virtues of English as Nigeria's lingua franca and the basis of Nigeria's unity. I have read similar contributions in newspapers, but never have I been in a gathering of Linguists uncritically expressing such views. Considering that the persons concerned are mainly teachers of English Language in Department of English, I was constrained to observe that they had to defend their jobs. Here

is where earlier English Language specialists such as Professor Adebisi Afolayan and Professor Ayo Banjo present a sharp contrast. While actively devoted to research on the English language, they did not lose sight of the complementary role of Nigerian languages. Indeed, Professor Afolayan was for many years the Secretary of the Yoruba Studies Association of Nigeria in which capacity he supervised the Unesco-sponsored Yoruba Dictionary Project.

The English language understandably is in a dominant position in the Nigeria school system. It is a subject in lower primary and takes over as a medium of instruction from upper primary to the tertiary level of education. It is a core subject at both levels of the secondary school, and a compulsory requirement for the award of the Senior Secondary Certificate - a requirement that cannot be waived for lack of teachers. In spite of its strong position, performance in the language at the Senior Secondary Certificate Examination and the University Matriculation Examination often indicates low levels of competence. This shows that all is not well with English either. Although this provision was subsequently abandoned, I believe that the advantage of specialist primary school teachers of English who can provide adequate models for the pupils are such as to call for the issue to be reopened. Particularly in a context where a Nigerian language is used as a medium of instruction for the entire primary education, it makes good sense to allow only a few well-qualified teachers to teach English only, while the other mother-tongue-using teachers teach all the other subjects.

As mentioned earlier, an important aspect of any language planning is constant evaluation. Unfortunately, there is no in-built device for such evaluation in the NPE. The Seminar on the Implementation of the Language Provisions of the National Policy of Education held at the Gateway International Hotel, Ota in October 1991 and sponsored by the Federal Ministry of Education is a commendable effort at a general evaluation. The recommendations of this Seminar which cover various aspects of the implementation of the NPE deserve to be taken seriously by all implementers of the policy at various levels ranging from Ministries of Education to the classroom. Of particular importance is the recommendation that "All aspects of the implementation of the language provisions of the NPE should be constantly monitored" (Banghose & Akere 1991) particularly to assess their effectiveness and suitability.

In addition to constant implementation, there is also need to make available to the general public adequate information on the true implications of the language provisions of the NPE. Much of the popular debate, particularly in the newspapers, on the mother tongue education question has been based on ignorance. Some people think that mother tongue education in Nigeria

originates from the policies of the current Minister of Education and Youth Development, Professor Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa. Others believe that teaching the mother tongue will mean eliminating the English language as a medium of instruction. That such erroneous views are held by some members of the elite is a measure of the task that lies before all those connected with the implementation of the NPE. For our part as linguists, we must continue to play the role of facilitators as we also continue to offer constructive criticism. I am glad to say that today's guest of honour can be counted among those dedicated to this noble role.

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