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LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

By

W. ADEGBITE

Abstract

This study raises and discusses some crucial issues pertaining to language education and educational development in Nigeria. While recognising certain earlier positions of scholars pertaining to mother tongue education and bi-/multilingual education in the country, the work does a re-assessment and re-appraisal of some familiar issues from aspects of language and education in order to open up new ways and dimensions of exploring language and educational problems in Nigeria. The paper identifies components of the language education programme and relates the programme to educational development in Nigeria. Lastly, the paper highlights some problems in the programme for consideration and discussion.

Introduction

Development is a desirable goal of every nation. Hence, it is not surprising that the word occurs with consistent regularity in practically all attempts to confront national issues and problems. In discussions about the Nigerian condition vis-à-vis the lives and standard of living of citizens of the nation the term 'national development' continues to feature prominently, in collocation with such terms as political, social, economic, educational and technological development which are considered as its main features.

This paper as of relevance intends to address some issues pertaining to the development (in the evaluative sense of the term, rather than historical) of education in Nigeria. The issues discussed pertain to language education and its optimum planning and utilization for educational development.

There is substantial literature available on the relationship between language and education in Nigeria; and the various roles of language in educational development and education in language development have been examined in the literature (see e.g. Language in Education in Nigeria Vols. I and II). This paper does not claim or aspire to be original in any way on any of the issues raised in it. It only seeks to make a re-assessment and re-appraisal of certain familiar issues from aspects of language and education in order to stimulate new ways and dimensions of exploring language education and educational problems in Nigeria with a view to suggesting ways and means of finding solutions to mitigate such problems. The paper supports the earlier positions of scholars pertaining to mother tongue education. (Bamgbose 1976, Afolayan 1979, Awoniyi 1980, and Fafunwa 1982) bi-multilingual education in Nigeria

(Afolayan 1984a and 1991, Banjo 1992) and relates these positions to the concept of education for individual and social development.

Language Education in Nigeria

It is certain that any attempt to discuss 'language education' in a developing country like Nigeria will have so many issues to consider. It is even possible for a discussion in this area to have succeeded in raising many issues and considering only a few of them. If the discussion in this paper thus raises far more issues than the paper can discuss, it is hoped that undiscussed issues can be taken up at some other time.

Primarily, one sees language education as being concerned with issues pertaining to language as the subject matter of education. Such issues will involve a discussion of how mother tongues are acquired and other tongues learnt. They will also observe, as consequences of language acquisition and learning, the uses to which particular languages are put by users and the positive or negative orientations of such uses. The remaining part of this section will consider three main issues: the identification of languages to acquire or learn, the environmental conditions under which such languages have to be properly learnt and the levels at which such languages ought to be learnt.

A Suggestion of Languages for Language Education

Nigeria is already recognised as a multilingual multiethnic nation with over 250 ethnic groups and about 400 languages. Among the languages are the three main (or 'major') (or 'major') languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, which are spoken by over 80% of the Nigerian population, and 391 minority languages (cf. Jibril 1990). Added to these are two foreign languages, English and Arabic which play prominent roles in the lives of the people: for while English serves as the official language of Nigeria, Arabic plays a restricted role of the language of religion of Islam in the country. The above language situation in Nigeria makes it inevitable for the Nigerian citizen to become bi- or multilingual in order to participate fully and efficiently in the governance of the nation. However, the fact that majority of Nigerians are still mono-lingual shows why it has not been easy to effectively mobilize the people for collective participation in developmental tasks of the nation.

Effective participation in the developmental activities of the Nigerian nation requires that an individual should at least be functionally bilingual, barring other local and foreign languages which he might wish to learn voluntarily for some personal specific purposes. Regarding the languages which are socially functional, a speaker whose mother tongue is the dominant indigenous language of a state would need to acquire his mother tongue (L1) and then learn English (national L2) as a second language. Thus, he becomes a bilingual in his L1 and L2. If however, the mother tongue is different from the dominant language of a state, the speaker would need to further learn the dominant language of the state (local L2) and become trilingual. The speaker's repertoire might even extend to quadri-lingualism if none of the indigenous languages he has learnt includes Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (national indigenous L2) in view of the government's intention to seek national integration via its language policy statement from the National Policy on Education (NPE, Section 1:8).

"In addition to appreciating the importance of 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 that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major 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".

Undoubtedly, there must be a limit to the number of languages one can learn and use efficiently. Unless in cases where some polyglots speak four or more languages, it is doubtful whether most people can go beyond three languages. The doubt in the achievement of quadrilingualism by learners is given expression in the statement of Paul Christopherson (1948:2) below cited by Banjo (1992:17):

Keeping up two languages can sometimes be a stream, even if one has known them both from childhood, and two languages are as much as most people can manage. A few specially-favoured individuals seem to be able to manage three languages perfectly: I do not believe that anybody can do more than that.

Thus one would like to support the proposal of trilingual education of the Nigerian pupil in his mother tongue, English and a major indigenous language, as contained in the NPE, Section 1:8, quoted above.

Conditions for Language Teaching/ Learning in Language Education

Following the three languages suggested for the language education programme above, the conditions for teaching/learning the languages are examined in this

section. These conditions are looked at by discussing why, where and when each language is taught in the programme.

The mother tongue is a natural endowment of every normal human being. It is the language in which a speaker has the greatest linguistic facility and intuitive knowledge. Because of its primary role in the education of a person, the mother tongue should form the basis of language education.

The child's acquisition of the mother tongue and early education in it begin at home via non-formal education. Through his mother tongue, a child views his society, expresses his thoughts and interacts with people. It is through this language that the child's personality and early intellectual experience are formed (Fafunwa 1982). The mother tongue is an asset to every speaker and this asset must be utilized fully in his total education (UNESCO 1953 (a) and (b)). In the best interest of the child and the society, acquiring the mother tongue ought to proceed from home to school and he has to mature in it in order to concretize his knowledge of the world and his immediate environment (NPE, Section 23, II(3) and Section 3, 15 (4)). The mother tongue should thus be given the priority attention it deserves in Nigerian education. Not only must it serve as a medium of instruction in early education - pre-primary and primary - and in the education of illiterate adults, it also has to be the medium of instruction in advanced education courses for specialists and teachers in mother tongue development (Abimbola 1985). Lastly, it should be taught as a subject to all pupils at the Senior secondary Schools and to specialists in the mother tongue in tertiary and teacher education.

The second language, English, also plays a major role in the life of the Nigerian nation. It is the official language, language of education, administration and internationalization. For a long time English will remain the language of governance of the nation as the language of its political-economic unification and nationalism (Afolayan 1984b). Although the indigenous languages have gained ground in both the school curriculum and political considerations in recent years, the problems of selecting an indigenous national language for the nation and using indigenous languages for advanced education make the retention of English inevitable.

In spite of the importance of English in the nation, it has not been effectively utilized for the development of the nation because of the failure of the government and the people to properly recognize its role in especially the educational system. There has always been the tendency for people to overrate English and believe that it is the only language that can be used to formally educate Nigerians. This wrong notion must be corrected. The true position is that since English is secondary to the mother tongues in the lives of Nigerians, it should serve to

complement them rather than replace them in the educational system. Also because of the advancement of the language, it should serve as a source of providing terms and concepts for the modernization of the less developed indigenous languages.

Although English can be taught as a subject in primary education, it should not be used at all as medium of instruction at this level if pupils are to benefit fully from primary education. At the secondary school, it is expected that pupils will have learnt enough of English to make them acquire education through the language.

A third language which is indigenous to Nigerians is also to be learnt by pupils in order to enhance national integration of the people in the country (NPE, Section 1, 8). The intention is to make Nigerians learn the languages of their neighbours so that they can understand and appreciate other people's culture. Onuigbo (1987:36) writes thus:

To speak the same language as one's neighbours expresses solidarity with those neighbours; to speak a different language from one's neighbours expresses social distance or even hostility.

Many Nigerian scholars have suggested that apart from a speaker's mother tongue, one of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba should be learnt as a major language in the country in addition to English. This suggestion, which is based on the large population of speakers of the above languages, tallies with the position of the NPE (Section 1, 8).

However, the non-total commitment of all Nigerians to this suggestion has been partially responsible for its improper implementation. Some Nigerians, especially from the minority ethnic groups in the country decry the suggestion of languages of the dominant groups as such a suggestion will give an unfair advantage to some Nigerians and undue attention will be paid to their languages at the expense of those other Nigerians. It seems that these people would prefer that the principle of fair selection of languages be explicitly seen to accompany many other criteria of selection that must have been used. Thus, if languages were selected on the basis of states of the federation or, more economically, a few linguistic zones spread evenly over the country, more major languages would be available for Nigerians to select from, out of which one or some might emerge naturally as national language(s).

Following the above decision, the language(s) can then be included in the curriculum and taught as a local second language, in addition to the pupils mother tongue and English (Adegbite 1993).

Language Education and Educational Development

It is essential at this juncture to discuss the implications of features of language education above for educational development in Nigeria. Educational

development here is related to the principles of 'functionalism', where education is regarded as a means to an end and not as an end in itself (Fafunwa 1991). The emphasis of such education was on individual intellectual development, social responsibility, job orientation, political participation and spiritual and moral values. How does language education relate to these?

The language education programme proposed for Nigeria is a bi/trilingual one in which different languages equip the learner with both traditional and modern values and experience. The mother tongue not only binds the learner emotionally and psychologically to the cultural and moral values of his immediate social environment. It also, according to Fafunwa (1982:295) encourages him from the early part of his life.

"— to develop curiosity, initiative, industry, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, manual dexterity, mechanical comprehension and the coordination of hand and age—".

Apart from the above, mother tongue education can enhance the development of more Nigerian languages and make them capable of expressing modern scientific, technological and literary concepts; this will create the speakers' spirit of social awareness and increase the rate of their responses to mass mobilization campaigns. While this is the core part of the education programme, both English and the other major language complement it by providing the learner with a window to see the world and other people's cultures and to relate and apply his knowledge of such cultures to his own.

Some Implementation Problems

One hopes that the presentation so far does not create the impression that there are no problems of implementing the language education programme. A mention of three issues among those that have generated debate may perhaps be appropriate here. Two of these pertain to mother tongue education.

Some people fear that the use of a mother tongue as medium of instruction in cosmopolitan cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna, Enugu, etc. will give children who are indigenes undue advantages over non-indigenes. This ordinarily need not present any problem since even children who are non-indigenes learn other languages fast outside their own native environment; they should thus feel at home and learn the language of their new environment. However, for parents who are so ethnic-conscious, a few primary schools may be founded in which English or some other mother tongues are used to teach their children.

A second problem about mother tongue education borders on the fact that not many of the 394 mother tongues can be used for education for now: Emenanjo (1990:91) observes that only 44 languages among them

have standardized orthographies. While Emenanjo (1990) advises owners of minority languages to develop their languages along the lines of the majors, scholars like Jibril (1990) suggest that the number of minority languages to be used as medium of instruction should be narrowed down to those languages which have one million or more speakers. These include Fulfulde, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, Ijaw, Edo, Annang, Nupe, Urhobo and Igala. One only hopes that this suggestion reflects equitable geo-political considerations; otherwise, one would suggest that the issue of which mother tongues or languages of immediate community would serve as media of instruction should be left to individual local governments to resolve, these being the closest tier of government to primary education.

Lastly, one should recognize the tendency of the Nigerian citizen to prefer to learn English more than his mother tongue. While one can relate this to the socio-economic gains which the knowledge of English can bring to the speaker, one can also link this with the colonial mentality still permeating the Nigerian society. Or how else can one explain Nigerians' penchant for foreign goods even when the same goods are available in Nigeria? No doubt, Nigerians need proper education and enlightenment to re-orientate them towards appreciating indigenous national and local values.

Conclusion

This paper has raised some crucial issues about the language education programme and the development of education in Nigeria. While supporting a bi- or trilingual oriented language education programme, it has provided justification for the mother tongues, English and other (indigenous major) tongue as component languages in the programme. Also, it has examined the conditions under which these languages can be taught. And it has considered the implications of the language education programme discussed for educational development in Nigeria. Finally, it has highlighted some problematic issues in language education for consideration. It is opined in the paper that a proper language education programme is desirable for the development of the intellectual capabilities of learners, their vocational skills and their social environment.

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