

REPOSITIONING LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

As sound is to music, so is language to humans. In this paper, attempts were made at defining the key words, language and education, as well as the role of language education. The place of the national policy on education in Nigeria was considered. Consequently, some recommendations were reached on how best language education can be repositioned in the Nigeria educational system. In conclusion, parents, teachers, students, the government and the public in general have a role to play at reviving language education from its present state.

Introduction

Language is the human communication amongst a given people, e.g., the Dutch people, the Edo people, the French people, the Igbo people, etc. (Okenrentie, 2007). For effective integration among a people in any society, language must first be in place. Language is the lifewire of a society, an integral part of culture and a vehicle of cultural transmission (Inyang, 2006). Language is vital in the process of achieving national development in a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic nation, like Nigeria (Ansa, 2003).

Nigeria is the most linguistically complex country in Africa with over two hundred languages spoken all around (most of which, of course, are yet to have orthography) (Blench, 1998). The language complexity nature which Nigeria possesses is of great challenge to the democratic sustenance of our country because sustainability and national integration depend greatly on the capability of the citizens to communicate effectively with one another. A society without language will amount to chaos, contrary to one with one language and unity, which led to exemplary strength and resourcefulness in the building of the Tower of Babel in the Holy Bible. Language is, therefore, imperative for society's survival and development.

Language, to a large extent, paves the way for acceptability of an individual in a community. For instance, an Hausa man travels to Edo state, his ability to speak the Edo language gives him an upper hand over another who is unable to speak the language, and vice versa. A Nigerian travelling out of the country to France, for instance, will be better received in France due to his ability to speak French, compared to another who does not understand the French language. Language, therefore, is of immense value to any nation, and must thus be recognized in our educational system.

Education

Education is the process by which one's mind develops through learning (Nwagbara, 2008). The learning process can be carried out in a school, college or university (formal education). It can also take place at home (informal education). In its broadest sense, education is the life-long learning, both formal and informal, in an individual. Education is laying a lifelong solid foundation right from early childhood (Lassa, 1996).

Education is concerned with the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation through formal or informal education, so as to help the average citizen will be helped to cope adequately with the problems of meeting his basic needs, such as food, shelter, clothing and good health, manage with ease his economic affairs, his role in the

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community and family life (Enoh, 2000). The main purpose of education, according to Joad in Vernon (1980), includes: to enable the individual make his living, equip him to play his part as a citizen and to enable the individual develop his latent powers and faculties in order to enjoy a good life. Education, therefore, enables the individual to become self reliant. With education, the individual, rather than becoming a parasite to parents, guardians, or well-meaning friends, becomes a functional member of the society, thereby, contributing to societal development economically, financially, socially, politically, etc.

Education is unarguably a must for every individual in any society, considering its benefits. Also, in this present dispensation of information communications technologies (ICTs), the need for education becomes more vital than ever. This is so because with ICT making the world a global village, anyone that is still educationally lame will find it difficult to survive in such a global village.

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Language plays a dual role in any educational system. It serves as both a subject in the curriculum and also a means of communication. Without language, learning cannot take place. In all fields of learning, language is vital. In a class of computer science for instance, the teacher requires language to transfer information. In a biology class, language is also required.

According to Banjo (1976), with the introduction of western education in Nigeria by Christian missionaries, the teaching and learning of indigenous languages received greater attention. This is so because it was believed that the African child could best be taught in his native language. Also, the Christian religion could well be propagated in the native language. In a bid to solve the language problem in Nigeria, the colonial government ignored all smaller languages and choose four major languages; Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo and Ibibio from the three linguistic and cultural regions. After independence in 1960, English language was adopted as the official

language of the country. This is because of its universality and acceptability. This was due to the fact that some people saw the indigenous language as being limited and that the product of educational system through indigenous language could not suit them in international issues. Therefore, the government encouraged and enforced the study of English language in schools. Thus, English language was to be taught as a school subject from the first year of primary education and a language of instruction from primary four to tertiary level of education.

As a result of the introduction of the national policy on education, the Federal Government laid emphasis on indigenous languages which are viewed as vehicles to maintain, preserve, culture and harness national integration. According to Awobuluyi (2004), people saw the need to teach the major indigenous languages to enable them serve as alternative to English and as an official means of communication. Thus, the Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE 2004) states that:

- a) In the Primary School, a child must study two languages - mother tongue if available for study or indigenous language of wider coverage in his area of domicile and English language.
- b) In the Junior Secondary, he must study three languages including English language, a mother tongue (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba), and a mother tongue of wider coverage in his area of domicile (that is, one of the three major indigenous languages of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba).
- c) In the Senior Secondary School, he must study two languages: mother tongue or indigenous language in his area of domicile and English language.

According to Fafunwa (1991: 7), a child who studied a major indigenous language is exposed only to his major zone and, therefore, has to study another indigenous language as his second language.

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French and Arabic, however, remain optional languages. However, according to Ajani (2005), the Federal Government under the late General Sani Abacha, in 1996, did not only promote and support language education in Nigeria, but also made an attempt to make French language the second official language in Nigeria because of its international status and values. This was also to resolve the conflict among minority groups, who felt cheated over the inclusion of some indigenous languages, such as Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo, in the educational curriculum. According to Omosehin (2000), French language would help to build a dynamic nation. In the light of the above, Jinadu (2001) stated that no nation could survive without a proper promotion of language, most especially a foreign language. Through it (foreign language), a nation could link up with the external world.

The importance of language education in Nigerian tertiary institutions cannot be overemphasized, as it constitutes the bedrock of all educational practices. Language education in tertiary institution, with its numerous benefits, is like the blood to the human body. As no human being can survive without any drop of blood in his/her system, also our educational system cannot thrive without language. Language is unique and beautiful. With its aesthetic values, it makes learning a pleasurable experience.

It is worthy of note that language education is not being given its rightful place and support in our tertiary institution today. This will further buttress the fact why the admission records over the years in the field of language education is low. Researches have shown that the numbers of candidate who, on their own volition, opt for courses like French, Edo, Ibo, etc., is quite low, compared to other fields of learning, like medicine, engineering, biochemistry, etc. This is as a result of decadence in the field of language education. How could this decay be remedied? In the words of the Minister of Information, Prof. Dora Akunyili, "Rebranding and repositioning is the answer." Therefore, there is the need for language repositioning in our educational system.

Recommendations

Education, according to Odo (2000), is so basic to nation building that nations all over the world strive to make it available not only to the few who can afford it but to all citizens. Bearing this in mind, language education could be better funded by the Government and some kind-spirited individuals. To save language education from its present state, there is the need for repositioning and rebranding of language education. Government, parents, teachers, and students alike, should awake to the challenges facing language education. This is a clarion call to all and sundry to arise and save language education from the present hurdle. If we, as an individual as well as a nation, must forge ahead politically, academically, socially, economically and otherwise, then let us embrace language education for national development.

Language laboratories well equipped to date; language teachers sponsored to seminars, workshops and conferences both within and outside the country; scholarships given to language students to encourage and motivate them; enlightenment campaign carried out at all levels of education; etc. are some of the areas for urgent concern. This is to create awareness in the minds of the public on the usefulness of language education. Parents should encourage their children and wards on the needs for language education. At home, the habit of speaking only the English language and total neglect for our indigenous language should be discouraged.

Conclusion

Indigenous language has so much been relegated to the extent that children now prefer English names to names in our local dialect. This is to further show that the place of indigenous languages is gradually phasing out if the situation is not remedied. On the contrary, it has been observed that language education cannot be removed from our educational system. This is so because, without language our educational system will crumble.

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