

ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN SOME SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Lots of scholarly papers have been presented by linguists and other scholars on the need to practically implement the language provisions of the National Policy on Education in Nigerian schools. The need is borne out of the realisation that every innovation and development has its basis on language. While some documents like the Nigerian Constitution (1979), the National Policy on Education (1977, 1981, 2004, 2013), etc., may be regarded as attempts at providing language roadmaps for the country, what remains to be seen is the implementation. A situation whereby Nigerian indigenous languages are only talked about on papers without any concrete use in reality, or where every attempt starts and ends with proposals is no longer healthy. This study was carried out to assess the extent of implementation of the language provisions of the National Policy on Education at the Lower Basic classes in 13 schools in Osioma local government area of Abia State, Nigeria. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire called Language Policy Implementation Instrument [LPII]. The population comprised 40 teachers. Information collected was presented in tables and descriptive method of analyses and discussion were used. The result reveals that politics and frequent change in government, negative public attitudes, inadequate funding, lack of trained language teachers and facilities are among the factors facing the implementation of language policy in schools. The paper concluded by recommending a revolution of mind on the part of the government and the people.

1. Introduction

Language is a veritable tool for development and change. It is at the heart of every relationship, innovation and transformation. Language also possesses power for creativity. But, it does not possess this creative and transformative power on its own. The power of any language to bring about change is dependent on the people's use of it to communicate and carry out their daily activities. Thus, the native speakers of a language make their language what it is: either respecting and giving it value and prestige or making it look inferior. When groups do not make use of their language, it loses worth and the number of functions and uses it performs is reduced.

It is obvious that countries like China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, the Middle East, etc., have developed technologically through committed use of their indigenous languages. This is because they have policies that stipulate that knowledge be taught in the local languages. For any language to stand out, therefore, the people who own it must value, appreciate, and use it in such areas like education, administration, commerce, worship, etc. This goes to underscore the fact that the implementation of language policy in our schools is very crucial to the overall progress and development of the nation.

Nigeria is a multicultural society, with diverse indigenous languages. These languages are graded among other criteria, according to the number of speakers, into two basic groups: major and non-major languages. The major languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) have standard orthography and texts. They are widely used and enjoy national recognition. They occupy pride of place in communication, commerce, education, etc., at least at the local level. Notwithstanding this recognition, their present status does not guarantee them enough patronage as medium of instruction in schools.

The non-major languages, on the other hand, do not fare better. They are hardly recognised. They do not have well-developed orthography and texts on them are extant. In some instances, they are non-existent. This situation puts them at disadvantaged positions. But, whether major or non-major, “an indigenous language is an important symbol of one’s ethnic identity. It relates to one’s roots in the glorious past; a symbol of one’s cultural heritage” (Ituen, 2015:11). This being the case, the indigenous languages of Nigeria cannot be relegated or left in the dust bin; else their native speakers would be seen as people without culture and identity.

Given the fact that language is a human attribute that is at the heart of every human engagement and, every normal person and institution recognises and appreciates the strategic place and indispensable roles language plays in the affairs of a people, both at the local and international levels, the implementation of language policy becomes a matter of urgent priority. In this regard, therefore, the study looks at the present status of Nigerian language policy and the extent of implementation in schools from the following perspectives: (i) the introduction and delineation of operative concepts, (ii) the status of language policy in Nigeria, (iii) presentation and discussion of data, (iv) the constraints that impede implementation of language policy in schools and (v) recommendation and conclusion.

Key words: Language, Education, Policy, Language Policy, Implementation

2. Definition of Terms

Language: This is a means of communication by which a social group interacts or co-operates with one another, using all forms of internal and external representations like conventionalised signs, sounds, gestures, or marks having understandable meaning.

Education: This refers to the process of transmitting knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences from one person to another. It encompasses both the intended and unintended cues and behaviours exhibited by a person through which another can learn or copy from.

Policy: This is refers to the plan of action, statement of aims and ideas, made by an organisation, government, political party, etc.

Language policy refers to “the decisions of a polity regarding the acceptable language for those who are to carry out the political, economic, legal and social affairs of a nation or region of a nation” (Heath, 1985:2898). It serves to promote a language, giving it the status of official language. It also functions to protect and promote a regional or ethnic language whose viability is threatened.

Implementation here refers to the measures which provide strong force to achieve the goals of language policy. It is the plan by which a policy is to be put into use. It is the realisation of an application or execution of a plan, idea, model, design, specification, standard or policy. The best decision will amount to nothing unless it is implemented. Therefore, implementation is the action that must follow any preliminary thinking in order for something to actually happen.

3. The Status of Language Policy in Nigeria

Language policy planning is a function of language scientists and linguists whose duty is to describe the form of the language code and to spread, oversee its codification in dictionaries, grammar books and spellers (Ituen, 2015:9). It could also be seen as concerned with “both the symbolic function of language within a society and with the instrumental use that its speakers make of their language” (Hoffmann, 1991:204). Hence, peoples and nations work hard to make their indigenous languages count by using them in communication, poetry, drama, education, administration, commerce, religion, etc.

This is not to be the case in Nigeria where foreign languages (like English and French) have taken over these roles. The marginalisation of Nigerian indigenous languages dates back to the colonial periods when the language of the imperial masters became the dominant force in Nigeria’s socio-cultural, economic and political affairs. After many years of European rule and Nigeria gained her independence, the need to give the indigenous languages some level of recognition was felt. The Nigerian Constitution of 1999 in Section 55 took up this task and recommended that: “The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo (sic) and Yoruba when adequate arrangement have been made therefor”.

There was an extension of this same recognition to the other non-major languages, though indirectly, as Section 97 provided *inter alia*:

The business of a House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve.

Following this provision, the National Policy on Education (2004), affirmed government’s appreciation of the importance of language in the educational process and its interest to promote the indigenous languages to the level of curriculum subjects in schools, noting that language is “a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures”. In this regard, then, it recommended that:

Every child shall learn his/her mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in addition to his/her Mother Tongue [NPE, 2004, Para. 10a].

Hence, the three major languages are to be taught as subjects in schools. The NPE went beyond the teaching of the indigenous languages as school subjects to recommend that they should be used as medium of instruction from early childhood education to the first three years of primary education. “Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community... [NPE Para. 14c].

There have been other notable efforts at protecting and projecting the indigenous languages, as noted by Essien (2003:30) like, a terminology workshop on science and mathematics for primary schools organised in 1978 and sponsored by the National Language Centre, now Language Development Centre; the quadrilingual dictionary on legislative terminologies – in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba – published by National Educational Research Development Council (NERDC); the publication of curricular or syllabuses in Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik for both junior and senior secondary schools, etc.

In spite of these efforts, there are clear evidences to show that Nigeria has not had a language policy consciously planned and national in scope. Rather, there have been pockets of language policies whose emergences were to address certain immediate needs or pressures. The inability to have a concrete language policy is seen, on the one hand, as a major problem in the development of Nigerian indigenous languages.

But, it is not enough to have language policy. The more important thing is its implementation. Thus, an important aspect of language policy provision is ensuring the use of the languages in different areas ranging from the earliest years of schooling to the National Assembly (Ituen, 2015:9). In the next section, we shall provide data to show that the language policy on education in Nigeria is not being implemented in schools.

4. The Objective of the Study

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To ascertain the level of awareness of the existence of language policy on education;
2. To determine the extent of implementation and/or the constraints to the language policy implementation in schools;
3. To come up with practical measures that will ensure the implementation of language policy in schools.

5. Research Questions

1. What is the status of indigenous language policy on education in Nigerian schools?
2. What are the barriers to the implementation of language policy on education in schools?
3. To what extent is the language policy on education implemented in schools?

6. Data Collection, Sample Size, and Data Analysis

The study was carried out in 13 randomly selected Lower Basic schools in Osisioma Local Government Area of Abia State, Nigeria. The survey design method was used for the study because it provides data to describe the existing conditions at particular points in time. The instrument for data collection was a 15-item questionnaire requiring “yes” or “no” answers from respondents. It was administered to 40 teachers in the selected schools. The validity of the instrument was obtained on expert opinions of two senior lecturers on Measurement and Evaluation. Oral interviews and personal observations were also adopted to complement the questionnaire. The oral interview was to gather relevant information concerning events, work results, knowledge, opinions, perspectives, values, attitudes, and other face to face contents (Kubr & Prokopenko, 1989). 38 questionnaires were returned out of the 40 distributed and data analysed descriptively.

7. Presentation of data, analysis and discussions

Item 1 of the questionnaire sought to ascertain the level of awareness of the existence of language policy on education in Nigeria.

Table 1: Awareness on the existence of language policy

Awareness of language policy	Total frequency
Yes	36
No	2
Total	38

The information in table 1 above shows that 36 of the respondents, accounting for 98% are aware that there exists language provision in the NPE in Nigeria, while the remaining 2% of the respondents are unaware of it.

Item 2 sought to know if those who are aware of the existence of the language policy on education also have idea of its content. From the responses, those who have knowledge of the content of the NPE are in the majority, with a total of 96%, while the remaining 4% do not have idea about what the policy contains.

Item 3 was to investigate whether there is enough awareness on the part of the society on the existence of language policy on education in Nigeria. The researcher gathered that the awareness is lacking on the part of the society, with 30 respondents as against 8 who said that there is such awareness. The result of this lack of knowledge is that most people are not aware of the importance and contributions of indigenous languages to the acquisition of qualitative education and the intellectual development of their children. In fact, most people think that enforcing the use of mother tongue in the schools will run counter to their interests of having their children acquire the official language as early as possible.

Item 4 of the questionnaire sought to know if schools implement the language policy, while item 5 was directed at finding out whether schools encourage the teaching, learning and use of indigenous languages. The result of the respondents is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Implementation of language policy

Items	Yes	No
Does your school encourage the teaching, learning and use of indigenous language?	10	28
To what extent does your school implement or encourage the implementation of language policy?	5	33

Table 2 above reveals that the number of schools that encourage the teaching, learning and use of indigenous language is on the low side, with 5 respondents. The schools in this category, as the result revealed are mostly public schools. Most schools do not implement nor encourage the implementation of the language policy. A greater number of schools, represented by the 33 respondents, do not implement the national language policy on education. In fact, many schools prefer using English as medium of instruction right from the kindergarten to using Mother Tongue, while only a little percentage use code-mixing to teach the children.

The issue is worse in private schools, with 36 respondents affirming that private schools constitute serious hindrances to the language policy implementation. This result is corroborated by the observation of Enwere (2015:144), who notes that

Many private nursery and primary schools go as far as placing ban on the use of local languages on their premises to ensure that their pupils are not corrupted by a vernacular language. They even start to teach French in that early infancy. This attitude has never helped any Nigerian language policy to thrive.

The study equally revealed that native speakers' negative attitude towards their language and preference for foreign language is a serious hindrance to the implementation of language policy in the schools, with 34 respondents as against 4 who think otherwise.

Table 3: Native speakers' attitude

Do you agree that parents are opposed to the implementation of language policy in schools?	35	3
Do you think that native speakers' attitude to indigenous languages is a problem to their implementation in schools?	34	4

That native speakers are not proud of their language is further confirmed by Aziza (1990:117) thus:

There is the very serious problem of the attitude of the people themselves to teaching and learning the languages. No student wants to introduce himself as learning a Nigerian language. Students choose to study a Nigerian language only as a last resort if no other offer comes.

The attitude of rejecting indigenous languages cuts across all frontiers: individuals and institutions, the literate and the unlettered. Many parents and schools neither accept nor encourage the teaching, learning and use of mother tongue in their environments, as evidenced in table 3.

Instead, such parents always want their children to acquire English language right from the cradle. They do have the fear that the use of mother tongue will place their children at a disadvantage with respect to other children who study strictly in English (Sanusi, 2015:26).

Many parents frown at their children whenever they speak any indigenous language. They prefer communicating with them in foreign languages, especially English and sometimes, Pidgin. They “also feel embarrassed and ashamed to inform people that their children are studying a Nigerian language in the university” (Aziza, 1990:117).

The native speakers' aversion for indigenous languages has been attributed to foreign mentality as averred by Anukam (2015:1) who wanted to voice out her “age-long reservation against foreign language mentality”, but ended up a victim of the same mentality.

The language of this lecture, however, is not just an irony but the inescapable fallout of the same foreign language mentality. If this lecture was written in my mother tongue – Igbo language, about 90% of the reading public would not and could not have read it despite the status of Igbo as one of the three unity languages in Nigeria.

Justifying further why she wrote in foreign language and not Igbo, she said: “it is against the university culture in Nigeria to write such an official lecture outside the official language – English”. And so, finding reason to “succumb to this collective mentality at the national level”, she submitted: “*Ahughị nke e mere, e mee nke a hụrụ*” meaning that if the desirable is not available, the available is made desirable (Anukam, 2015:1).

Making the available desirable? There is the problem! Both the people and institutions that should project, safeguard and promote indigenous languages have no place for them. Yet, the indigenous languages are available to us. They are the Mother Tongue of their owners. The language in which a person is born, in which he grows, interacts, lives and even dies. Our mother tongue is part and parcel of us. It is our heritage; our identity. Why make it foreign to us? Why should we become strangers to our tongues?

Table 4: Government and implementation of language policy

Items	Yes	No
Do you think that the government has done enough to implement the language provisions of the NPE?	3	35
Do you agree that there is need for the government to enforce the implementation of language policy in schools?	33	5

The greatest shortcoming in the implementation of the language policy is traceable to the failure of the government at all levels to put into effect most of the measures it stated in the NPE aimed at ensuring that its objectives are actualised. For instance, section 32, subsection II of the policy states that government will (i) develop the orthography for many more Nigerian languages and (ii) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages. But, the result in table 4 clearly indicates that the government has not done much in the area of orthography development and production of textbooks, with 35 respondents, while only 3 think otherwise.

Further results reveal that there is also the problem of funding, which equally affects the training of qualified language teachers and providing other effective teaching and learning materials such as libraries, laboratories, CD tapes, etc. As a confirmation of the above, 33 respondents believe that the government still has a lot of works to do to ensure that the language provision of the NPE is actualised.

The incessant change of administration and lack of political will constitute other sources of worry in the implementation of the language policy. The Nigeria nation has witnessed 14 administrations between 1960 when Nigeria gained independence. And, since no succeeding government likes taking up projects begun by previous administrations, the result is that the money and personnel invested in such projects like language policy implementation are wasted.

Added to the above is the creation of states whereby some ethnic languages which were formerly regarded as minority languages have assumed more recognition. Consequently, some speakers of these minority languages disapprove of the recognition accorded the majority languages. They feel cheated and marginalised and see any move to raise any of them to the status of an official or national language as attempt to marginalise and relegate them to the background.

There can be no language policy implementation without language planners who have adequate knowledge of what is involved. A situation whereby an accountant by profession is made the Minister of Education or a lawyer heads a language institute will not augur well with the Nigerian education system or language policy implementation in schools. A necessary question then is: who plans our education and language policy: amateurs in language planning or language experts? It has to be noted that the best ideas cannot rule the world no matter how lofty and robust they may be, unless the right things are done and concrete steps taken to ensure that words are followed up with actions. According to Bamgbose (2003:13), “when an aspiration, proposal, or measure is unrealistic, it is as good as non-existent, as the chances of realising it are virtually nil”.

8. Recommendations and Conclusion

Language plays a major role in all thoughts, descriptions, analyses, and arguments that are so crucial in development. “Language is a constant, since no human activity can be envisaged without language” (Essien, 2003:25). For any meaningful progress to be made, the question of language use in the country must be addressed. In the light of the findings of this study, the following recommendations are put forward:

There should be a consciously planned and practicable (realisable) language policy for the nation. For this to be achievable, real linguists and language education scholars should be directly engaged. Furthermore, Nigerian linguists and language educationists should embrace the challenge of publishing works in Nigerian languages.

Leaders of governments at all levels should learn to take up, complete, and implement good projects begun by their predecessors. In addition, the Houses of Assembly of the various States should intensify efforts and adhere strictly to the provisions of the Constitution to conduct their sitting at times in the native language of their respective States.

Enough public awareness should be created through jingles, advertisements and announcements. Individuals, schools, communities, government, NGOs should organise seminars, workshops, and orientation programmes on the need to teach, learn and use indigenous languages in Nigerian schools. The mass media – telecommunications, newspapers, radio houses, television outfits, must intensify efforts at using Nigerian indigenous languages to disseminate information to the public.

Laws should be enacted that will make it a punishable offence for schools that ban the teaching, learning, and speaking of indigenous languages. Such schools should be closed down and those that implement the policy should be rewarded. Hence, the government should mandate every school in Nigeria to teach, learn and use Nigerian indigenous languages as stipulated in the NPE (Chinagorom, 2014:279).

Again, the study of any of the three major indigenous languages should be made compulsory at the nursery, primary and secondary levels of education and a good grade in the subject (at least a credit) should be an indispensable criterion for admission into the university, no matter what course one is offering (Asuoha, 2008).

The right people with good training, qualification and experience should be appointed into offices that have to do with language planning to ensure implementation.

The International Mother Language Day as declared by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which comes up every February 21st, should be made a national event and all schools mandated to observe it.

9. Conclusion

The study was conducted to ascertain the extent of implementation of language policy on education in Nigerian schools. It observed that there is no language policy consciously planned and national in scope, although some documents contain few directives on language. From the data collected and discussed, the study observed that there are serious constraints in the actualisation of language policy in schools. It therefore recommended that the achievement of the objectives of the language policy on education will require a revolution of the mind. The Nigerian people must take unanimous decision: peoples' will. All must see themselves as Chief Official Languages Implementation Officers responsible for the implementation of the language policy on education.

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