

## MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: CONTEMPORARY ISSUES AND THE WAY FORWARD

By

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### **Abstract**

*The concept of multilingualism as it affects Education in societies is quite relevant because of its delicate nature. The choice of the Language to be used as a medium of instruction can be quite tricky if not properly handled. While there is a wide agreement that the mother tongue should be adopted as a medium of instruction, UNESCO (2003) suggests that a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning and providing access to global languages of communication through education. This paper examines the challenges of multilingual Education in Nigeria in the implementation of the National Policy of Education (NPE, 2004) and proffers solutions to the problems discovered.*

### **Introduction**

There have been profound political transformations leading to new language policies. Hundreds of languages have disappeared throughout the world and many more remain endangered; migratory movements on a large scale have brought new and varied languages to other countries and continents; the internet has also dramatically affected the way in which language languages are used for communication and indeed for learning; and rapidly accelerating globalization.

As a linguistic heterogeneous nation, Nigeria is a multilingual nation with over 400 living languages and its accompanying problems of language choice, language planning and policy implementation. According to Olagbaju (2009:4), Nigeria is a perfect example of a multilingual nation with the resultant effect of the majority of her citizens having access to a minimum of two languages. Therefore, there are individuals who are bilingual or multilingual either in the indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) or in the indigenous languages and the English language (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba and English).

The National Policy on Education allows the use of more than one language in the Nigerian educational system due to the linguistic plurality in Nigeria. Although, English later assumes the status of the language of instruction from the fourth year of the primary school education, other languages still function alongside the English language in the school system. By implication, the policy intends to expose an average Nigerian child to at least three languages in the course of his or her education.

Emenanjo (1985) describes the NPE as a multidimensional, multi-lingual three tier political statement which tries to capture the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of Nigeria. The three tier approach of the National Policy on Education provides for the mother-tongue (MT) and/or

Language of the immediate community (LIC), the three major national languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages of national culture and integration) and English (the official language) as the language of formal literacy, Administration, Government, Media and the Judiciary etc. The policy also makes provision for French (as the second official language) in order to ensure smooth interaction between Nigerians and their French speaking neighbours.

Awobuluyi (1992) captures the sincerity of the government at making every Nigerian learner a multilingual through the multilingual provisions in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Awobuluyi (1992) cites a portion of the 1989 constitution dealing with the educational objectives of state policy. The subsection in question, viz: sub-section 19(4), states that "Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages."

Although, it is not providentially cast in such general terms as allows it to be easily read as fully sanctioning everything the Government had done up to that point in time in regard to the teaching of the indigenous languages. But in a way, it sanctions the NPE which requires the teaching (both at the Primary and Junior Secondary School levels) of the child's mother tongue or, in the alternative, some indigenous language of immediate community. Awobuluyi (1992) concludes that since there is nothing specifically said there to the contrary, it can also be readily construed as permitting the teaching of the three major indigenous languages. To what extent have these policies been effectively implemented? Is the question teachers and Education policy makers should be asking.

### **Multilingual Education**

UNESCO adopted the term Multilingual Education in 1999 in the General Conference Resolution to refer to the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language and international language. The resolution supported the views that the requirements of global and national participation and the specific needs of particular, culturally and linguistically distinct communities can be by multilingual education. In regions where the language of the learner is not the official or national language of the country, bilingual and multilingual education can make mother tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country and the world such as English language, French and Chinese languages.

### **The Role of Mother Tongue in Multilingual Education**

The term "Mother Tongue", though widely used may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements; the language one knows best and the language one uses most. It also may be referred to as primary or first language. Mother tongue is essential for as a part of intellectual ability. Mother tongue is the language human beings acquire from birth. It helps the child in his /her mental, moral, and emotional development. Plessis (2008) suggests that much of a child's future social and intellectual development hinges on the milestone of mother tongue.

The mother tongue clearly is beneficial and crucial to an individual's cognitive development but how can this be carefully selected to ensure that a larger number of the Nigerian pupils benefit immensely from this reality? Policy makers and other stake holders in the Educational sector have

an enormous responsibility in ensuring that the final choice of the language(s) to be used for instruction must be appropriate.

When curriculum content is presented in an unfamiliar language, an enormous amount of time must be spent first teaching children to understand, speak, read and write L2 or a foreign language, something that is extremely difficult and wastes valuable years in the early grades that could be spent learning to read and learning academic concepts in L1. Moreover, children who cannot understand the languages used in the classroom are unable to demonstrate what they know, ask questions, and participate actively. In contrast, providing children with an opportunity to learn in a language they understand starting on the first day of school – confers significant advantages for the education system, teachers, parents, and students.

The benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction are numerous; it helps improve access to Education, (Smith, et al, 2008), Improves learning outcomes, (Ball, 2010), Facilitates learning a second or foreign language, improves children's self concept and identity and supports local culture and parental involvement.

### **Multilingual Education in Nigeria: Challenges**

The NPE supports the practice of multilingual education but the reality on ground is far from the provisions of the policy. Olagbaju (2009: 3) opines that although the National Policy on Education supports multilingualism education; in practice, most private nursery and primary schools teach even the pre-primary and Junior primary classes using the English language as the medium of instruction without any restriction from the ministry of education officials who are never available. These so called 'private schools' do not allow the use of other languages either as the language of instruction or a school subject apart from the English language in the school system. Ogunbiyi (2008) asserts that despite the provisions of the NPE and the position of the Government on the status of the English language and other Nigerian languages in education, some schools still relegate Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English and French languages. Emenanjo (1985) opines that the policy is difficult to implement because the statements contained in the NPE are laced with ambiguity.

### **Multilingual Education in Nigeria: The Challenges.**

The multi – ethnic nature of Nigeria is a barrier to the successful implementation of the multilingual provisions of the policy. Oyetade (2003) asserts that the problems associated with the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction or as school subjects as stated in the NPE (that every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages in addition to his own) has not been implemented. This is supposed to be progressively implemented from the fourth year of the primary school to the Junior Secondary School level, but this provision is being waived in many schools.

The use of indigenous languages in education as contained in the NPE cannot be fully implemented. This is because only a few of the languages have enough materials to sustain teaching them as they really ought to be taught at any level. In practice, only the three 'major' indigenous languages - Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba can be said to satisfy this implied criterion of teaching materials for Primary and Secondary Schools, and to varying degrees for the tertiary level also. Other indigenous languages like Efik/Ibibio can satisfy that same criterion for Primary and Secondary School levels,

but not for degree level. Awobuluyi (1992) opines that the majority of the indigenous languages in Nigeria have a very long way to go yet in terms of availability of educational resource materials, particularly for the languages that lack standard orthography or are yet to be codified.

In addition, scarcity of qualified language teachers in indigenous languages is another obstacle to the successful implementation of the multilingual education provisions of the NPE. Awobuluyi (1992) and Olagbaju (2009) assert that only the three major indigenous languages can actually boast of enough teachers at all levels. Olagbaju (2009) termed the inadequacy of indigenous language teachers as a product of some attitudinal factors. These factors include: the status of the English language and other foreign languages in Nigeria, negative attitude of the elite parents and other societal – related sentiments.

Language is not only a tool for communication and knowledge but also a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for an individual and the group.

The multiplicity of languages may worsen, aggravate or exacerbate the difficulty of providing Education in each mother tongue and Inter- ethnic marriages also hinder indigenous language learning leaving a greater number of young children with very little or no knowledge of their indigenous languages.

### **Solution and Recommendations**

The debate on the shortcoming of the National Policy on Education has gone on for so long. The government, stake holders and Education policy makers have to go back to the drawing board to review the policy as against the present realities of multilingual education in Nigeria and budgeting funds for the development of our indigenous languages.

Obanya (1998) suggests that more educational resources in indigenous languages outside the school system (traditional poetry and drama and cinematographic resources) still have to be fully developed in order to be able to cope effectively with the demands of multilingual education.

The federal and state ministries of education need to do more in the enforcement of the multilingual provisions of the NPE. There is a dire need for constant inspection of what goes in the private and public nursery and primary schools in order to enforce total adherence to the use of Nigerian languages in modern education.

Though Nigerian languages have been described as grossly insufficient to meet the demands of modern Education (Taiwo1976)), they should therefore be developed and the orthography needs to be improved upon. In addition, Emenanjo (1985) is of the view that something drastic needs to be done concerning the orthography of most Nigerian languages. Taiwo (1976) and Awobuluyi (1992) are of the view that the orthographies of the three ‘major’ Nigerian languages – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have been fully developed while Emenanjo (1996) reinstates that more should be done in the area of developing the orthography of the minority languages in Nigeria. It is therefore important that textbooks and educational materials in Nigerian languages should be developed while obsolete ones should be improved upon or upgraded to cope with the present realities of multilingual education.

The government needs to embark on a radical campaign on the benefits of Nigerian languages in modern education. Parents, students, teachers and other stake holders in education need to be educated on the dangers of relegating our local or indigenous languages to the background. It is also suggested that government should come up with a policy that will make at least a credit pass in any of the indigenous languages a pre – requisite for admission into any of the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.

Emenanjo (1985) while proffering a solution to the death of indigenous language teachers in Nigeria suggests that producing graduate teachers in the right quantity and quality for all Nigerian languages is the only way by which we can meet the demands of multilingual education as contained in the NPE.

Emenanjo (1985) concludes that in - service teachers of Nigerian languages need to be updated in content, methods and language technology.

### **Conclusion**

Multilingual education provisions of the NPE should be implemented to the letter in the Nigerian educational system because it motivates students to learn and fosters understanding in class. The government needs to tackle the issue of minority languages squarely by developing more materials for teaching and learning in other indigenous languages so that the ambiguity associated with the choice of a mother tongue (MT) and language of the immediate environment (LIC) in the NPE will be addressed.

There is also a need for a more comprehensive in - service training for teachers in the primary and junior secondary schools on the importance of multilingualism education. Government should improve on the level of supervision or inspection to school so that strict compliance to the provisions of the NPE can be achieved. The National Orientation Agency (NOA) through the mass media and other relevant bodies should sensitize Nigerians on the need to allow our indigenous languages to grow and function in the education of our children.

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