

LANGUAGE PROVISIONS OF NIGERIA'S NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION: DECLARATION WITHOUT IMPLEMENTATION

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From 1977 since the first edition of the *National Policy on Education* (NPE) first appeared, there have been five further editions in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013. Each edition adds more sections or chapters or effects a re-arrangement of subjects in the curriculum at different levels of primary and secondary education. The most extensive so far is the 6th Edition of 2013, which virtually modifies the basis and scope of the previous versions of the Policy. It is, of course, not unusual for policies to be modified after a period of their operation. By observation and evaluation of an existing policy, it is normal to come up with a revised policy. However, a close examination of the NPE will show that the frequency of the revisions of the Policy has little to do with experience during the operation of a previous Policy. In fact, several of the provisions have not even been implemented before new changes are introduced.

The main reason given for frequent changes in the NPE is that certain educational developments have taken place that necessitate the revision of a former policy. For example, the introduction of Basic Education of a duration of 9 years, which replaces the former primary and junior secondary education, led to the introduction of a new Section 3 in the 4th Edition of the Policy in 2004. While some of the additions are well motivated, others appear to be the doing of some bureaucrats who would like to reflect the prevailing agenda of the current head of government. For example, one of the reasons for updating the 2007 Edition, as stated in the Foreword written by the then Minister of Education to the 2013 Edition, is the need to "accommodate...recent developments in the context of the Transformational Agenda". A document published by the Federal Ministry of Education in 2012, *4-Year Strategic Plan for the Development of the Education Sector 2011-2015*, also states that the revision of the same 2007 Edition is "informed by the need to reflect on Mr. President's Transformational Agenda with Education as a key priority area" (Section 1.1).

A notorious example of an ill-motivated amendment to the NPE is the one that concerns the introduction of French as a compulsory subject. During the military rule of General Sani Abacha (1993-1998) when Nigeria was isolated by the English-speaking Commonwealth and the United States of America, General Abacha turned to France for succour, and, in a desire to spite his assumed adversaries, he decided to elevate the status of French in the school system in Nigeria. The result was that a major revision was made to the curriculum in which French, which was merely an elective subject at both junior and senior secondary education as in the 1981 Edition of the NPE, became enshrined in the 1998 Edition as a compulsory subject at primary, junior secondary and senior secondary education. The motivation for this amendment to the Policy had nothing to do with any deficiency in the then existing NPE. (See Bamgbose 2001).

Policy Declaration without Implementation

Declaration of policy without implementation has been identified as one of the characteristics of language planning in Africa and three forms of this particular characteristic have been further identified:

- (a) Declaration of a policy which policy-makers are aware cannot be implemented

- (b) Built-in escape clauses to justify non-implementation
- (c) Avoidance of specifying implementation procedures (See Bamgbose 1991:116-120).

We shall shortly be examining the language provisions of the NPE in light of these forms of the characteristic of policy declaration without implementation.

By way of comparison, let us examine one or two of the non-language provisions of the NPE to underline the fact that declaration without implementation is a general feature not restricted to language. To cite just two examples, first, the provision of primary education: The NPE provides that "Primary Education shall be tuition-free, universal and compulsory" (Section 17(a) 1998, Section 19(a) 2004). Evidence that this is a mere paper declaration can be readily found in the statistics of out-of-school children and shortfall in school enrolment, which is one of the issues addressed in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Standards differ from State to State and there are several States in which primary education is neither universal nor compulsory. As to its being tuition free, this is only technically so, as fees are collected in different guises in quite a number of States, which, of course, will not be labelled "tuition". Second, the 2013 Edition of NPE Section 12 states that "Basic Education, to be provided by Government, shall be compulsory, free, universal and qualitative. It comprises: 1yr Pre-Primary, 6yrs of Primary and 3yrs of Junior Secondary Education". Anyone who knows about the school system in Nigeria must be aware that pre-primary education is generally offered in private fee-paying schools and not in any government-owned public schools. Hence, this is a policy declaration which the policy-makers know cannot be implemented.

Policy and Languages in NPE

The languages that feature in the NPE are Mother tongue / Language of the Immediate Community, Major Language, English, French, and Arabic.

(a) Mother Tongue (MT) / Language of the Immediate Community (LIC)

The medium of instruction in pre-primary education is supposed to be MT or LIC (Some versions of the NPE also refer to the LIC as the Language of the Environment). Conscious of the fact that several mother tongues have no orthography and no reading materials, the Policy goes on to undertake that orthographies will be developed for many more languages and textbooks will be produced (NPE 1981, 1998, 2004, 2013). Two things are wrong with this language provision. First, since pre-primary education is run by private schools, this provision is empty and cannot be enforced. In actual fact, most pre-primary schools use English as a medium of instruction and those responsible for this declaration know that it cannot be enforced. Second, no implementation strategies have been worked out for developing orthographies and textbooks in languages that lack these resources. To this extent, this language provision remains a mere paper policy.

The medium of instruction in primary education is also supposed to be the MT or LIC for the first three years or the first four years of basic education (NPE 2013). Beyond the level when it ceases to be used as a medium of instruction, it will continue to be taught as a subject. It is only in the 1998 and 2004 Editions of NPE that only LIC is stipulated for the first three years as a medium of primary education. Could this be an admission that MT is no longer feasible, particularly as the language development activities that should make the use of MT feasible have not been undertaken? Since this practice is one that has been with us for a very long time, it is a failure of

planning and implementation that mother tongue education should be open to question decades after its entrenchment in the school system.

LIC is also stipulated as a subject in junior secondary education and a vocational elective subject in senior secondary education. But curiously, the caveat is also given that "it shall be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on orality as L2" (NPE 2004, Section 24). Notice that LIC would have been used as compulsory medium of instruction in the lower classes of primary education, how then can the question of it having an orthography or literature still arise when it is taught as a subject at a higher level? How can a language native to its speakers be taught as L2? These escape clauses are built into the Policy to provide an alibi for non-implementation.

(b) Major Language (ML)

From the inception of the NPE in 1977, it has been a cardinal principle of the Policy that each child should learn one of the three major Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. All the various editions of the Policy, with the exception of the 2013 Edition, state this and the reason given for the provision is to facilitate national unity. Hence, ML is a core subject in junior and senior secondary education. However, the very purpose of learning one of the three major languages is vitiated by the following measures which show clearly that this language provision is mainly declaration without implementation:

(i) An escape clause is built into the teaching of major languages that they will be taught "subject to availability of teachers" (NPE 1981). It is well-known that there is a shortage of teachers of these languages and this is one of the reasons for establishing the National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN) at Aba. But to say that a particular subject is to be taught only when teachers are available amounts to saying that it will not be taught at all. There aren't many teachers of physics. In spite of this, one can never imagine anyone saying that physics will only be taught, subject to availability of physics teachers.

(ii) Given the shortage of teachers and the time lag between training of new teachers and commencement of the language policy, the Implementation Committee for the NPE seriously suggested that personnel resident outside their States of origin such as Youth Corps members be employed to teach oral forms of their language, just as local artisans and craftsmen are employed to teach vocational courses (See Section 37 of *Guidelines for 6-3-3-4 Education System 1977-1987*). Obviously, this is a misconception of what L2 teaching of a language means. As indicated above, the idea of L2 teaching conveyed by the NPE is concentration on oral skills. This is, no doubt, grossly inadequate in the context of learning a major language and being examined in it.

(iii) Since ML is a core subject at junior and senior secondary education, it follows that to obtain a certificate at each level, candidates must pass in it. However, since on account of shortage of teachers, many schools may not be able to teach the subject at all or teach it effectively, the Ministry of Education has adopted the device of giving waivers so that candidates can obtain their certificates without passing in the subject (Bamgbose 1994: 7). Again, this is a clever way of circumventing a major language provision in the NPE.

(iv) Perhaps as a result of the inability to implement the ML provision, the 2013 Edition of the NPE has completely abandoned the requirement that every child should learn one of the three major Nigerian languages. This provision which has featured in all previous editions of the NPE is totally missing in the 2013 Edition. Besides, at both junior and secondary education, no specific mention is made of ML. Rather, in junior secondary education, provision is made for "One Nigerian Language" which, presumably could be any language, and in senior secondary education, any student taking the Humanities option, can take "Any Nigerian Language that has curriculum" (with "curriculum" presumably meaning orthography and literature). If a policy that has been in existence for over three decades can be so lightly abandoned, it shows that the policy has not really seriously been entrenched owing to partial or even non-implementation.

(c) English

The English language is obviously the most dominant language in Nigeria's language policy in education. Because of the legacy of colonial language policy and the continuing role of English as the country's official language, it is the one language that is found at virtually all levels of education. Although in theory, English is supposed to be taught as a subject in the first three years of primary education and as a medium of instruction thereafter until tertiary education, in practice, English looms much larger because in pre-primary education where the medium of instruction is supposed to be MT or LIC, most pre-primary schools pay only lip service to the prescribed policy and start teaching English in such schools. This is what most parents, who send their children to such schools and pay handsomely for doing so, expect. This violation of the policy finds support in the *Guidelines* mentioned above which states in Section 7 that English may be used as a medium in the so-called multinational pre-primary schools. Even in primary education where LIC has long been prescribed as a medium in the lower classes, Section 20 (d) of NPE 2013 now states categorically that this requirement is only for "monolingual communities". The fact that children easily learn a language of a community which is not their mother tongue is ignored in this calculation.

The traditional limitation of LIC as a medium in the lower classes of primary education yielding to English as a medium in the fourth year has been variously challenged in theory and practice and it has been the subject of observation and experimentation in a number of countries. The main argument about lack of readiness at the time transition takes place has been made again and again in the literature. Here in Nigeria, the now world famous Six-Year Primary Project run at the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University) Ile-Ife, has demonstrated clearly that having LIC for the entire duration of primary education and teaching English as a subject yields better results than the traditional practice. Why various editions of the NPE have not taken any cognizance of this outcome and to recommend it, even as an experimental alternative to the current provisions is something one cannot understand. The massive failure recorded year-in year-out in the Secondary School Certificate and General Certificate Examinations is a pointer to the need to review a policy that leads to poor mastery of English and consequently poor performance in the subject as well as other subjects taught in English.

(d) French

In the 1981 Edition of NPE, French was only an elective at both junior and senior secondary education. One could finish secondary education without learning any French at all. In fact, several students who went on to distinguish themselves in French started learning French at university level. However, following General Abacha's romance with French, the 1998 Edition gave French

a new status not only in the school system but also in the nation, for it states: "For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in schools" (Section 10).

Whoever is responsible for this language policy statement is obviously ignorant of the sociolinguistic role of language in a community and the nation. How can every Nigerian speak French? What are the avenues open to them to acquire the language? Obviously, this is a language declaration which is not capable of being implemented. Also, to say that French is an official language is to elevate it to a status second only to English. As an official language, it must be a language of record, that is, all official communication must be in English as well as in French. That this has not happened at all is evidence of the emptiness of this so-called policy statement.

Translated into school curriculum, French is expected to be introduced and taught as a subject in the last three years of primary education. It is also a core subject in junior and senior secondary education (NPE 1998). It does not require much effort to see that this is merely a propaganda language provision. At a time when there is a dearth of teachers of French in secondary schools (even when French is an elective), how can one hope to have enough teachers to teach French as a compulsory subject not only in secondary schools but also in primary schools? I have never heard of any public primary school in Nigeria in which French is taught as a subject. Those responsible for making this policy know that it cannot be implemented. It is one prime example of declaration without implementation. Perhaps the realization that this so-called policy is an impossible one is what has informed subsequent editions of the NPE. For example, from the 2004 Edition onwards, French has been removed from the core subjects in senior secondary education and relegated to the group of electives, even though the fiction that it can be taught in primary education is still maintained.

The story of French in our school system clearly shows the need to consult experts in designing language policy provisions. If the advice of language experts had been sought, this egregious error would not have been committed. Unfortunately, once an error is made, the chances are that it will be perpetuated, not just from one version of the NPE to another but also between one administration and another. This is the case with a news item which appeared recently in which the Minister of State for Education, Professor Anthony Anwukah, is reported to have declared that "Students from primary to tertiary institutions will henceforth learn [the] French language compulsorily..." The Minister appealed to the French Ambassador to assist Nigeria with teachers of French and the latter pointedly suggested that the Internet might be an alternative source of instruction if there were no sufficient teachers. The Minister then announced the establishment of French clinics in 104 Federal Government Colleges (*The Nation*, Sunday, January 31, p.7). Notice that the Minister's statement is at variance with the current NPE which makes French an elective in senior secondary education only for those intending to study in the field of Humanities. At tertiary level, unless a student is studying French as a major or taking it as an elective, he or she is not obliged to take any lesson in French. Is this going to change?

(e) Arabic

Arabic as a subject has always been an elective at junior and senior secondary education. It is perhaps the only language subject that has remained stable in the curriculum. Even when the 2013 Edition moves Arabic up to the list of 10 subjects in the curriculum, no change is effected as

"optional" is put in parentheses after it. It must be noted that until the metamorphosis of French, both Arabic and French were in the same category of electives.

Implications of Policy Declaration without Implementation

Since policy formulation as an aspect of language planning is to ensure certain outcomes, it follows that making declaration without implementation is virtually ensuring that the expected outcomes cannot be attained. This has been the bane of most of the language policy provisions in the NPE. We want our children to be proficient in their mother tongue or LIC yet we have not made adequate provisions to achieve this. We want children to learn one of the major Nigerian languages yet we have not made provision for teachers to teach these languages. We want French to be taught as a subject in primary schools, yet we have no plan to train and supply teachers for this purpose. The result is retardation and non-attainment of expected outcomes.

Non-implementation of one policy makes it easy to declare another policy. This usually results in musical chairs in which languages are shuffled and re-shuffled. A classical example is the non-implementation of the language policy concerning the three major languages, which has made it possible to re-interpret it as just any language.

The rationale for setting up NINLAN in 1993 is precisely to implement the language provision of the NPE on the major languages. Given the severe shortage of teachers and the inability of university departments of languages to produce teachers in adequate numbers for the implementation of the policy, candidates to be admitted to the Institute for a 4-year B.A. degree programme are to study two major Nigerian languages with relevant courses in linguistics, education and general studies. Various combinations of L1 and L2 are designed to cater for students, depending on what languages they speak. Holders of NCE graduates in languages will start at 200 level, while a conversion course leading to a one-year Postgraduate Diploma will be available for graduates in Humanities who have no qualification in Nigerian languages. These programmes were largely stalled.

The non-implementation of the policy that gave rise to NINLAN is one of the causes of the impediment to the progress of the Institute. If the policy had been vigorously implemented, NINLAN would not have become a pawn in the power game at the different levels of government with different agencies trying to interfere with its mandate and the law setting it up. Instead of its abandonment of its envisaged core programme and diversion into acculturation and proficiency courses, it would today have become a formidable machine for the production of high-powered teachers of Nigerian languages, including, not just of the three major languages, but also of the main languages that have assumed a significant role at the State level.

Previous Implementation Proposals

Lest I give the wrong impression that, in launching the NPE, the Federal Government did not pay any attention to implementation, I should quickly say here that from 1977 when the first NPE was first published, an Implementation Committee, with Professor Sanya Onabamiro as Chairman, was set up to work out how the policies formulated were to be implemented. The report of this Committee was published as *Blueprint 1978-79*. With the death of Professor Onabamiro, this Implementation Committee was reconstituted with Dr. J.A.O. Sofolahan as Chairman. A document

based on the cumulative recommendations of the Implementation Committee as approved by the National Council on Education 1977-87 was later published as *Guidelines*.

As may be expected, the Implementation Committee was largely dominated by educationists. It is therefore not surprising that language provisions received very little attention in terms of implementation. I have had course to refer above to some of the provisions in the *Guidelines*. In general, they betray lack of expertise in language, especially when they refer to native speakers of Nigerian languages being employed to teach oral forms of Nigerian languages outside their States of origin.

The two other implementation efforts which contrast sharply with the earlier ones are those organized by the National Language Centre 1977 and the Language Development Centre of the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 1991. The participants at both the Symposium and the Seminar were predominantly language experts. In fact, the then Minister of Education, Professor Aliu Babatunde Fafunwa, who had participated in the 1977 Symposium before he became a Minister, gave the opening address and actively engaged the experts in the debates and arguments brought up. Because the focus was on the language provisions of the NPE, detailed discussions and recommendations for implementation emerged from the proceedings unlike the minimal attention to language in the *Blueprint* and *Guidelines*.

Subsuming the recommendations of the Kaduna Symposium of 1977 published as *Language in Education in Nigeria 1980* under those of the Ota Seminar of 1991, the Proceedings of which were published as *Implementation Strategies for the Language Provisions of the National Policy on Education 1992*, the two sets can be summarized as in the general headings in the latter as Language policy [review], Language curriculum and material design, Training of teachers, Language research, Language teaching, and Evaluation *Implementation Strategies 1992* (p.39). Detailed recommendations and proposals were made under each heading but, as is usually the case, revisions of the NPE after 1992 do not appear to have taken the recommendations seriously. (This is in spite of the fact that those who could have taken action were aware of the recommendations. For instance, in my capacity as the then Chairman of the National Language Centre Working Committee, I passed on the recommendations from the Kaduna Symposium of 1977 to Professor Onabamiro, the first Chairman of the Implementation Committee. His successor as Chairman, Dr. Sofolahan, was also a participant at the Ota Seminar of 1991). Take, for example, the following specific recommendations:

- The language provisions of the NPE should be reviewed and restated in a clearer and more definite form to facilitate implementation
- Model MT/LIC pre-primary schools should be set up by states or local governments as a way of encouraging the use of MT/LIC as medium of instruction at this level of education
- Native speakers who are untrained as language teachers should only be used as teaching assistants and under no circumstances should they replace trained language teachers
- All aspects of the implementation of the language provisions of the NPE should be constantly monitored
- In all matters relating to language, it is strongly recommended that government should involve linguists and specialists in language.

If some of these recommendations had been acted upon, we would definitely have avoided such infelicitous policy somersault as that concerning the declaration of French as Nigeria's second language to be taught as a subject at all levels of education.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the twists and turns of the implementation, or lack thereof, of the language provisions of the NPE since its inception in 1977, I have come to the irresistible conclusion that the time has come to undertake a complete overhaul of these language provisions. Many of them are simply decorative and need to be jettisoned. Besides, a situation in which a government functionary makes language policy pronouncements, which have not been subjected to a thorough examination as to feasibility, should be discouraged. In this regard, I propose that the NERDC be asked to organize a language-in-education summit comprising language experts and educationists, with a view to re-examining and revising the language provisions and working out feasible implementation procedures. This proposal may look odd in view of the fact that the NPE has been with us for almost forty years. The question we should ask ourselves is: Are the language provisions of the NPE working or are we merely fooling ourselves? This initiative by NINLAN of organizing a National Conference that focuses on the language provisions of the NPE is a laudable first step in what I see as a general overhaul of the language-in-education policy in Nigeria.

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