

## LANGUAGE, EDUCATION AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE

By

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### **Abstract**

*Language education is being considered in this paper as a veritable weapon or tool for youth empowerment. Particular attention is paid to Nigeria's National Policy on Education, specifically the National Language Policy and its implementation strategies. The essence of this approach is to ascertain whether or not these policies have any sound philosophical or ideological basis, and also whether or not there are pragmatic strategies for achieving the goals, especially that of youth empowerment. The paper posits that the education sector of the Nigerian society is supposed to be a very fertile ground for the generation and cultivation of new intellectual ideas, concepts and practices that can be applied to address the MDGs. To support this assertion, the author examines the documents on the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), and the State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDS). It was found that Education For All (EFA) goals - aspects of MDGs- are laudable but their achievement is fraught with some intractable problems. Crafting philosophically sound policies is one thing but implementing them religiously is a different ball game. It was recommended that; youths generally have a way of reinvigorating a society. They should adhere stubbornly to the do's and don'ts of their faith in order not to be distracted from their focus of nation development; parents should bear in mind that if they do not invest in their children who are around them, such children will not have peace. Parents should also live a godly life so as to lead their children aright.*

**Keywords:** Language, Education, Youth Empowerment, National Development

### **1.0 Introduction**

Empowerment is defined as the process whereby people are endowed or given the power and the opportunity to improve themselves in order to contribute to positive change (Olaoye, 2005). It can also be defined as a process of challenging the dominant power structures that may inhibit or hinder one's personal growth and advancement in the society, in order to gain recognition, control, and power. Empowerment takes many and varied dimensions, which include activities like individual self-assertion, self-improvement, collective bargaining or resistance, in order to challenge existing power relations.

Language is the most fundamental and important tool for your empowerment. It is a weapon for the uplift of the underprivileged, the marginalized, the un-informed or the illiterates in the society. Empowerment through language education ensures that the youth escapes from intellectual and economic poverty and oppression.

### **1.1 Attributes of the Youth**

What are the attributes or characteristics of the youth? The youths, whether male or female, form the most formidable, energetic work force of any nation, hence they are regarded as the life-wire of the economy of any country. They also form a large percentage of the students in our tertiary institutions. The youths constitute a big percentage of teaching workforce and the National Youth Service Corp members in Nigeria. The youths serve a nation in many capacities, for instance, as teachers, guidance counsellors, factory hands, farm hands, tradesmen and women, professionals in various fields, social workers, office workers or civil servants, politicians, spiritual leaders, military men and women, private sector engines of growth, media practitioners and vanguards of democracy, and unfortunately as armed robbers, cultists, prostitutes, drug addicts, examinations malpractice culprits, religious bigots, 419ners, economic saboteurs, and so forth. It is really unfortunate because these negative attributes are the consequences of the many years of neglect of the youths by successive governments who have failed to sufficiently empower the youths.

### **2.0 Empowering the Youth through Education**

Education is the most fundamental and important tool for youth empowerment, which in turn is a catalyst for social justice, equity, individual growth and national development. Education is a weapon for the uplift of the under-privileged, the marginalized, the un-informed and the oppressed in the society. The culture of reform initiated by the previous and present administration is to engender sustainable change in the society. This change is to be engineered through our education institutions. This is one of the Millennium Development Goals that runs through the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) at the federal level, and the state Economic Empowerment Strategy (SEEDS) at the state level (NPC 2004). These reforms are to be carried out through education (UNESCO 2005). Different types of education programmes for the empowerment of the youths have been designed. We have citizenship education, human rights education, peace education, vocational or entrepreneurship education, computer education and language education.

The objective of education in general is the improvement of the intellectual capabilities of the beneficiaries or the acquisition of some essential skills, and a further elevation of the persons from the position of low value or status to one of higher value and recognition (Lassa, 1996). The various fields under general education will further empower the youth to become well exposed, rational in thought and action, critical, sensible and responsible.

### **3.0 National Policy on Language Education**

Since education is given or delivered through language, either in the Mother Tongue (MT) or in The English Language, or whatever, the role of language in youth empowerment cannot be over-emphasized. Language is the vehicle through which knowledge is imparted; and knowledge is power. One of the cardinal points in (NEEDS) is education, and language education is a key tool and a bridge to the future. Mother Tongue education is a weapon for the empowerment of the child and the youth. Through MT the youths are introduced to their culture. It is a mark of identity. Language in general is a tool for national and global integration and sustainable democracy. It is a tool for actualizing human ingenuity and creativity.

Language education is as old as formal (Western) education in Nigeria. The 1926 Colonial Education Ordinance (CLO) can be said to be the first milestone in language education. It was however the 1952 and 1954 primary school syllabus for the Eastern and Western Regions of Nigeria that really emphasized the study of Nigerian Languages. Provisions were then made in the syllabi for Igbo and Efik in the Eastern Region, while Yoruba was for the Western Region, and Hausa for the Northern Region. These syllabi formed the foundation upon which the 1981 and the 1998 revised National Policy on Education was laid. The multilingual and historical experience of colonialism has had a major impact on language education policy in West Africa, particularly Nigeria. In most part of Africa, a persistent theme of national education meetings has often resulted in the utilization of African (Nigerian) languages as media of instruction in schools. The advantage derivable from this fact is that African Languages and tradition constitute the indispensable foundation of any educational and cultural advancement in Africa.

The principle of Mother Tongue education is closely tied to the education objective of cognitive development, and this is another millennium development goal for the youth. MT education has been strongly recommended by UNESCO, to the effect that every effort should be made to provide education in the MT. In other climes, children from developed countries explore their own natural environments, and communicate in their native languages, thus acquiring, at a very early stage, self-confidence, resourcefulness, creative reasoning and adaptability skills necessary for further physical, emotional and intellectual development. Teaching both the pupils and the youth three main Nigerian languages will also enable them know their cultures, and to respect other people's ideas and opinions, people's values and beliefs. Since indigenous languages transmit and preserve the people's culture, education given through MT is bound to produce children and youth with moral finesse, a sense of responsibility and the right attitude to life, thus making children and the youths shun ethnocentrism or cultural stereotypes and biases.

#### **4.0 Literature Review**

##### **4.1 The Conquest of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria**

There are approximately about 6,000 languages and dialects in the world and 50% of them are threatened. Nigeria alone has about 450 languages and none of these has up to 70 percent of the population as its speakers. Three major Nigerian languages are Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa. Other indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria include Echie, Efik, Ibibio, Kanuri, Ikwere, etc. These languages have since lost their position even as a Mother Tongue (MT) to some Nigerians, especially to those born in the cities in the last 25 years and among children of inter-tribal marriages.

The teaching of the English Language entered a new phase with the introduction of colonial rule in the 19th century. Thenceforth the English Language became the language of school programmes, administration and commerce. This marked the beginning of the decline of indigenous languages in Nigeria. Having lost social and economic privileges, indigenous languages in addition began to lose native speakers. According to Omolewa (1981) "any meaningful discussion of the status of any language must take account not just of the teaching method or classroom situation but of prevalent socio-political and economic situation."

One major constraint to the status of Nigerian languages is attitude. Attitudes are a set of beliefs, dispositions and human behaviour. The importance of attitude to the survival, decay or prominence of languages have been well acknowledged by Lewis (1981, cited in Adelin;r. 1995, p.59). Lewis states that: any “policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitudes of those like to be affected. In the long run no policy will succeed which does not do one of three things: conform to expressed negative attitudes of those involved; persuade those who express negative attitudes, the rightness of the policy; or seek to remove the causes of the disagreement” (cited in Adelin;r. 1995, p.59).

Because of the role English has been playing in various Nigerian societies. Nigerians, especially the elite, have developed various attitudes toward English and the various indigenous languages. Among the elite, there is a rigid/patterned language behaviour, and some have come to believe, rather erroneously that intelligence or knowledge is synonymous with competence in English. Adekunle (1995:61) makes a strong case for indigenous languages when he remarks that “the indigenous systems embody the much needed wisdom and knowledge needed for the scientific and technological resurgence of Africa”.

#### **4.2 Indigenous languages in National Development Plans**

We have seen that English language has a dominant status in Nigeria because of the functions. Nevertheless, the appreciation of the indigenous languages will foster improvement in National security, technology and even education. A focused plan on the development and codification of the indigenous languages will bring about (a) national unity and cultural awareness. “Cultural awareness involves the cultivation on a national scale, of group identity and solidarity motivated by the need for national self –determination in all its ramifications.....These national ideas and values can only be propagated and inculcated through the indigenous languages. In fact, it will be a contradiction to try to inculcate these values through a foreign language”. Adekunle, 1995, p.83).

Language is a cultural heritage, not just cultural but also an intellectual heritage. Language conveys knowledge and local know-how, and is therefore irreplaceable tool for sustainability. Fafunwa (1985) laments the lack of indigenous languages in national development plans. The consequence is the repeated and abysmal failure of such programmes. According to him, “We teach agriculture in English and Nigerian farmers farm in Igbo, Hausa, Efik, Nupe, Kanuri, etc” (cited in Adekunle, 1995, p. 61).

Traditionally, education for sustainable development places the promotion of mother tongues/indigenous languages as a priority in its objectives with the fight against illiteracy. Clearly the use of official languages tends to exclude people from participation in matters concerning their communities. Although many people in Nigeria are bilingual, their knowledge of outside languages outside their ethnic domain is restricted. Inevitably, the use of official languages excludes many people from participating in national dialogue, with issues of security and politics. Nigerian indigenous languages have an important part to play in fostering the emergent cultural nationalism. Studying indigenous languages will offer us an understanding of ourselves as Nigerian people. Knowing ourselves will enable us to strengthen our national values and interests. This is because having a sound knowledge of our culture is an essential element for safe-guarding our national interest.

### 4.3 Language and Youth Empowerment

Language is the most fundamental and important tool for youth empowerment. It is a weapon for the uplift of the underprivileged, the marginalized, the un-informed or the illiterates in the society. The culture of reforms initiated by the previous administration is designed to engender sustainable change in democratic governance. This reform is to be carried out through education, and language is the tool for doing this. This is one of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that runs through the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS). Youth empowerment is a re-branding enterprise, as the empowered youths are likely to shun corruption, and make positive contribution to national economic growth, peace, security and political stability.

Empowerment is the process whereby people are enabled or given the opportunity to improve in order to contribute to positive change. It takes varied forms and dimensions which include activities like individual self-assertion, self-improvement, collective bargaining or resistance in order to challenge existing power relations (Okeshola, 1995). Self - empowerment takes varied forms such as education, apprenticeship, usurpation, domination and force. Education is the most fundamental and important tool for empowerment or for the achievement of social justice and equity. Social scientists prescribe education as a tool for the up-lift of the underprivileged, the marginalized, and the oppressed within the society (Graham-Brown, 1991). Education is therefore a veritable instrument for promoting empowerment, and best done through the medium of languages.

Modern man can hardly contemplate communal life without the instrument of language. Performance, especially spoken language, defines personality. For the teacher, his credibility is almost entirely anchored on his competence in communicating ideas, and stimulating learning through the use of language. Articulate and well-spoken teachers always invariably win the hearts and respect of their students. Feminists have advanced the issue of empowerment of women through education as a means of challenging patriarchal ideology of male domination and women subordination. Empowerment entails life-long struggle for survival and transforming the structures and institutions (e.g. laws, social practice, political process, religious matters) that seem to perpetuate or reinforce gender discrimination and social inequality. According to Graham-Brown (1991), for the individual, empowerment through education promises an escape from poverty, oppression. It also promises greater social prestige, job mobility and better future prospect. Education empowers through language.

### 4.4 Indigenous Languages and Politics

Nigerian languages have a lot to contribute to the evolution and success of democratic culture (Emenanjo, 2004). Through a national language and literacy policy which recognizes egalitarian multilingualism, and the full empowerment of Nigerian languages as vehicles of communication through literacy, Nigerian languages can become veritable instruments for the full empowerment of the Nigerian youths, and this makes them to fully appreciate democracy, its workings, its values and indeed its *raison d'être*, as a way of life (Emenanjo, 2004).

The linguistic equivalent of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the 1996 Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights. These rights, according to Anikweze et al. (2005) are the right:

- to be recognized as a member of a language community
- to use one's language, both in private and in public.

- to the use of one's own name
- to associate with one's language community
- to maintain and develop one's own culture.
- to own their languages and cultures and for these to be taught.
- to have access to cultural services
- to an equitable utilization of one's language and culture in the media.

These rights have conferred on all Nigerian citizens, through their indigenous languages, the right and opportunity to participate in party politics, express their feelings and emotions through the media (Ogunranti,2000), and get involved in cultural shows, drama and exhibition of works of arts. This truism is supported by Njoku (2004) who believes that Nigerian languages are important instruments in the socio-political lives of all Nigerians. It is in recognition of the primacy of indigenous language that the Federal Government recommended in chapter 5, part 1, Article 55 of the 1999 constitution that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba The constitution as well as the NPE are fundamental documents that promote multilingualism Linguistic competence, indeed competence and performance in the indigenous languages can empower the youth to understand the constitution better and thus making the youths participate fully in democratic politics.

#### **4.5 Language, Literature and Culture**

Indigenous languages, literature and culture are inseparable as tools for national development. The trios are educative and humanistic resources for achieving national development. The three are complementary. There is no literature without language. Literature (poetry, prose, drama) depends on words (languages). Language is the vehicle through which records of events are kept, and people's culture transmitted. In literary language, satire is an artistic weapon used in communicating ideas, thoughts and feelings about what is going on in the society. Literature, through language, humanizes, entertains, warns people of dangerous practices, ridicules people, guides administrators with historical facts, and acts as the mirror of the society. Literature criticizes such evils like corruption, injustice, nepotism, bribery, economic and political sabotage, oppression, colonialism, neo-colonialism, dictatorship, power mongering and other anti-social and anti-democratic practices. The print and electronic media, through sensational and vitriolic language are capable of purging, cleansing or sanitizing the society of its socio-economic, religious and political filth. Language and literature empower the youth to imbibe the right values, and to shun anti-social behaviours.

Literature helps in improving the youths' cognitive and language skills, including their personality and the cultivation of aesthetic sense. Literature is akin to history, as it x-rays people past history. Literature is therefore a tool for social and cultural development. For instance, through folktales, stories, drama and dance, the youths are taught to imbibe good behaviour. Through indigenous poetry, human frayed nerves are relaxed. Through melodic songs and ballads, youths' worries, anxieties are removed or reduced. Through odes and lyrics perturbed minds are soothed. The transmission of cultural values is done through language. The way a person speaks or writes is, to a certain extent, determined by one's cultural experience, which is in turn determined by one's level of education. Language behaviour is governed by societal norms. Any breach of language rules attracts societal sanctions. People's world view is determined by one's language and culture, hence

the view proposed by Sapir (1929) and Whorf (1941) known as Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis of cultural relativism and linguistic determinism. The world is viewed from the perspective of our indigenous languages. What does not exist in one's culture has no name. Language is thus a shaper of ideas. We dissect the world through the instrumentality of our indigenous language. The youths' world view is constructed through language.

Indigenous languages have the capacity to change the society, while environment too is a social force to be reckoned with in language change. Language adaptation brings about language growth and development. Languages have to accommodate new inventions and ideas, through lexical modernization such as lexical coinage and borrowing. New words and expressions have entered into the lexicon of our indigenous languages through linguistic globalization. Man, as a political animal, has to adapt to the changing environment and language change. There is knowledge explosion brought about by the interplay of language and society. The world is fast becoming a global village through mass communication and information technology. The local languages are now being used in the teaching of science and technology including computer science, thus contributing to advancement in science, health, technology and national development. Indigenous language keyboard has been designed to facilitate language learning. The keyboard has such linguistic facilities as tone markers, diacritics, special orthographies, graphic and graphological cues. All these are aids to faster learning of computer appreciation. The youths get empowered faster through these linguistic facilities.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, based on the valued and cherished language education programmes of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, indigenous languages is a veritable tool for youth empowerment, is capable of achieving national development. It was found that the Nigerian Education policy; particularly National language policy is a good document which is capable of empowering the youth if well implemented. Empowerment through language education ensures that the youth escapes from intellectual and economic poverty and oppression. There is no doubt that an enlightened and effectively mobilized youths is a critical factor for good governance political stability as well as growth and development. It is the way the youth are mobilize that would determine the growth of any nation.

### **Recommendations**

The paper considers the following recommendations apposite:

1. Mentoring and leadership empowerment remain the most powerful tools to positively impact the next generation of leaders. The younger generation needs to be guided, inspired, encouraged and taught to imbibe the essential ingredients of success which include hard work, right attitude, moral values, determination, perseverance, passion and can-do spirit among several others (Akioye, 2015).
2. Entrepreneurship education has a central role to play as far as empowering our youths for national development is concerned. This has become necessary in all our manpower development efforts in Nigeria principally because few new employments are being created by government departments and private organizations for the employable graduates from our secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

3. More Nigerian youths should be trained as craftsmen, technicians to make for self-reliance. Anya (2005) laments that lack of the technical and vocational orientation and content in Nigerian education had limited ultimately the achievement of the growth potential of the economy. The outcome constrained the opportunities for employment leading to the high unemployment rate seen among products at all levels of the educational system but, much more, so among university graduates.
4. Non-government organizations (NGOs) have a crucial role to play in poverty alleviation. One of the areas requiring an urgent attention is the mobilization and sensitization of the people and communities to perform their expected roles.
5. Youths generally have a way of reinvigorating a society. They should adhere stubbornly to the do's and don'ts of their faith in order not to be distracted from their focus of nation development.
6. Parents should bear in mind that if they do not invest in their children who are around them, such children will not have peace. Parents should also live a godly life so as to lead their children aright.

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