

PRIORITIZING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Innovation is a catalyst that enhances positive development in education and this has been receiving attention of educationists and researchers across the globe. In organizational context, innovation is viewed as deliberately bringing into existence and practice something new, so as to enhance performance and growth through improvement in efficiency and effectiveness. This paper examines the importance of indigenous languages in the development and transformation of nations. For Nigeria to be positively transformed, it has to pay adequate attention to codifying its languages (that is developing orthographies, dictionaries and grammar). It further examines the various ways in which the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be harnessed in the service of the continent. The indigenous speakers of these languages should change their negative attitudes towards these languages. Technological and Scientific terms should be translated into the various languages to make teaching and learning easier.

Keywords: Innovation, transformation, codifying, indigenous languages.

Globally, countries are increasingly becoming concerned about

fostering national transformation, and African countries including Nigeria should not be exempted. As many of these nations are struggling to improve their economic and related

developmental indicators, it is pertinent to underscore the vital role of indigenous language as a catalyst for national transformation and sustainable development.

Significantly, the major area of current concern with respect to Africa as a whole is the transformation process and outcomes. It seems that fundamental questions about the potency of indigenous language and literacy are ignored in the pursuit of transformational initiative in Africa and Nigeria to be specific. Partly, this is as a result of the understandable focus on such econometric indicators as GDP, GNP, capital flows, oil receipts and related financial information. It is pertinent to note however, that the variables of quality of life and democracy are values that optimally thrive in highly literate societies. Hence the important role played by open discussion in the language that is widely understood by all (Buba, 2006). Nettle and Romane (2000:166) noted that:

“...the problem of transformation and sustainable development is more likely to be solved if indigenous systems of knowledge and languages are valued and brought into play”.

Adebite (2004: 13) pointed out that the lack of development of (African) countries such as Nigeria is partly attributable to the understated role of African languages and cultures in people’s daily transactional discourses.

We wonder if any meaningful accelerated transformational development can be realized, while we ignore these diverse linguistic resources of our nation. Surprisingly it is a recurring problem that African governments policy makers and planners appear to fail to notice that languages, particularly our indigenous languages, possess the greatest potentials and capacity to enhance our development as individuals and societies (Bodomo 1996; Buba 2006). This is more evident when viewed in the context of literacy and economic advancement that accompanies high literacy rate in a nation (Collier, 2008).

Transformation is a fundamental shift in the orientation of a person, an organisation or a nation. This makes the person concerned to see the world in new ways and new actions and results that were impossible before the transformation become possible (Alebiosu, 2013). National transformation implies fundamental change of a nation, changes in the social economic infrastructure and landscape of a nation.

As it were, one of the most important steps to national transformation is the ability to create vision. A vision is a mental picture of a desired future. Vision helps to direct the change that drives the nation. Therefore it is important to communicate a vision clearly. In order to visualize a new world or country, that is possible, one

needs to use every vehicle possible to build people that are interested in the mission.

This paper is an attempt to explore further how the diverse linguistic resources of Africa could be deployed to foster transformation in the continent, particularly in our focus country, Nigeria.

Education and Language for National Transformation

Education is the most powerful instrument for social progress. It is the greatest power yet known to man for his own improvement. For the writers, education is seen as a tool used for the integration of the individual into the society so that he can achieve self-realization, develop national consciousness, promote unity and strive for social, economic, political, scientific and cultural and technological progress. Education unlocks a society's potential. The energies and talents of the society are the greatest resources needed for national transformation. Education is a potent vehicle for national transformation. The society can realize its intellectual potential, develop its ability and follow its aspirations. Education broadens opportunities and builds capabilities to determine the kind of future any nation wants to have. A nation's future socio-economic success will depend on the ability of its people to deal with global environment that is knowledge driven. Education is the key to sustainable transformation.

The Nigerian transformation agenda, need to be vigorously pursued with full commitment. In view of the centrality to the consolidation of democracy and development in Nigeria, the Goodluck administration brought a development strategy called the transformation agenda that will last for four years (2011 – 2015). The policy aims at improving on the crucial needs of the Nigerian people. Nigeria's transformation agenda is the developmental strategy of the president that aims at bringing about positive change in the life of Nigerian people. The policy plans to deal with the problems of good governance, insecurity, power, unemployment, education, health care delivery, and roads. It is the blueprint of the Jonathan's administration for the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. The transformation agenda is also directed toward achieving the vision 20:2020 of the country. Nigeria is expected by the year 2020 to be among the twenty top largest economies in the world.

Events have shown that the active participation and use of indigenous languages by the people have not been considered very important in the transformation agenda. This shows that the notion of the success of the transformation agenda is not taken seriously. Nigeria has not done well to promote and use the indigenous languages for the effective transformation of the country. Advanced

nations notably Japan, China and Russia have achieved growth and development because they see their indigenous languages as tools for transformation and have made efforts in integrating them in their developmental strategies. The disregard for the promotion and use of the indigenous languages came to fore when the African Union made 2006 as the year of Africa's indigenous languages. Unfortunately, it was the year Nigeria closed the institute for the study of Nigerian languages in Aba. All developed and developing countries make use of their indigenous languages for development.

Language is central to the sustenance of a group of people for it is the vehicle through which other constituents of culture are communicated. It is the primary vehicle through which human culture is acquired, shared and transmitted. Without language, there is bound to be problem in the society for thoughts, ideas, information, and the society would become incommunicado. Hence, Schaefer (2000:52) in Hanafi (2013) sees language as the foundation of every culture. According to him,

“Language is an abstract system of word, meaning and symbols for all aspects of culture which include speech, written characters, numerals, symbols and gestures and expressions of non-verbal communication”.

Language is “central to the interactive process” (Bewaji, 2002) in Ademowo (2012), identifies four ways by which language is used in the society, namely, as a means of expression, for the purposes of record to set matter in motion and as an instrument of thinking. It will not be wrong for culture to be described as inconceivable outside of language, it is with language that such non-material aspects of cultures which give identity to a group, such as folklore, proverbs are conceived, shared and transmitted. This explains why languages are regarded as a reservoir of culture which controls human thought and behaviour and sets the boundaries of the worldview of its users. (Alebiosu, 2013).

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations. Indigenous languages are not necessarily national languages. There are about 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, and only few of these languages have written forms (Adeniyi and Bello, 2006). Grimes (2000) reported that there are about 500 languages in Nigeria. These languages comprise both minority and majority languages as well as some few non-Nigeria languages such as English, French and Arabic.

Among these languages three are considered as major by the 1999

constitution of Nigeria. The major languages are Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. These languages have acquired their majority status solely on the demographic strength of their speakers, and not because of any inherent qualities they possess that other languages lack (Idem, 2002:188). More than one third of the Nigerian population are illiterates and live in the rural areas, they neither understand nor speak English (Alyebo, 2012), the official language of Nigeria.

Despite the importance of language as a reservoir of culture, unfortunately, indigenous languages in Nigeria are often neglected virtually in every use, that is in the media and educational policies to the benefit of the foreign 'colonial' languages in most African states (Amfani, 2010). It is proper here to recognize the effort of the United Nations Scientific and cultural organisation (UNESCO), which organized an Intergovernmental conference on language policies in Africa in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1997 (Mohochi, 2004 in Ademowo, 2012). The outcome of that conference was a resolution tagged Harare Declaration on language policy in Africa which specifically challenges all African governments to review their National Language Policy in such a way that the indigenous languages will have more social, political and educational use in their polity. The Harare declaration like so many others before it, such as the African Languages Bureau, turned out to be a mere rhetoric.

As it were, experiences from Philippine, Mexico, Wales, Canada, Russia, Yugoslavia and Japan have, however, shown that the indigenous languages are fit for all levels of education as effective media of instruction that are capable of eliminating pedagogical difficulties on learning and thereby enhancing better understanding. As a matter of fact, studies in the fields of education, linguistics, anthropology and cognitive psychology all agree that students who enter school with a primary language other than the national or dominant language perform significantly better on academic tasks when they receive consistent and cumulative academic support in the native heritage language when used as instructional purpose, as research results have shown, many scholars have contended that it is capable of enhancing cognitive understanding and removing pedagogical barrier in learning. Some of these researchers are: The Native American Language Research, the University of Bradford Research, the Ife Six-Year Primary Project and the Swahili Research.

Beyond the issue of rights, it is important to note that language and literacy are very crucial for societal development. A society develops into modernity when its citizens are literate in the languages of the masses. In other words, it is not possible to reach modernity if the language(s) of literacy and education are only within the

intellectual ambit of small minorities. Historically, the jump towards expanded knowledge production and reproduction in societies has only been possible when the languages of social majorities have been centrally placed. To this end, Mazrui & Mazrui (2002) feel that no nation can develop without the use of its native languages.

Linguists, notably Trudell (2007) and Brock-Utne (2000) stress that 'Education for All' development initiatives held so highly by the World Bank and other bilateral donors are meaningless unless the quality of the education received is also worked upon. More literature today are of the view that educative programme or curriculum at the primary level will take place in a child's mother-tongue; education that is relevant to a child's environment is far better than an estranged curriculum based on foreign cultures and values taught through a foreign language. Bunyi (1999) cites the 1951 UNESCO report on language and education in support of this. The report states that psychological benefits along with sociological ones, namely that mother tongue education will help identification among members of the community to which a child belongs. Moreover, there are educational benefits in that children are said to learn faster through a familiar linguistic medium.

The Language Situation in Africa

African continent harbour the most multilingual and multi-ethnic

societies in the world. Nigeria for instance have over 450 indigenous languages while Cameroun have over 250 languages. Both countries are in the region of the top ten (10) most diverse nations in the world. In addition to the hundreds of indigenous languages, most of which have not been reduced to writing, there are a handful of 'super languages', serving either as official languages of government, education, science and technology and the economy, for example English, French and Arabic, or as languages of wider social interaction within and across African speech communities, notably, Swahili, Amharic, Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, Krio and Pidgin and speakers of these languages number into tens of millions (Crystal, 2000). Many other indigenous languages abound in states of the Nigerian Federation, such as Nupe, Gbagyi, Kanuri, Ijaw, and others. At the other end of the written language spectrum are smaller languages with a fairly large currency in big towns and at local authority level. These include Igede, Ika, Edo, Bini, C'lela and Ikwerre. And it is this complex picture of plurality and diversity that appears to entrench a language-deficit perspective on African countries such as Nigeria.

The issue of what to do with the numerous languages in Africa and Nigeria in particular, need not cause endless debates, so long as there is the political will to popularly utilize the benefits that the nation can derive from appropriating the abundant linguistic

resources for national transformation. Countries with similar language problems like Tanzania, South Africa, Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, did not only succeed in addressing the issue successfully, but have also invested in their languages.

As it were, the emergence of South Africa as a science and technological giant of Africa, for example, might not be unconnected to, among other things an effective language policy. Buba (2006:8) reports that:

“it is in recognition of the need for indigenous languages to be part of the rapidly expanding technological environment that eleven (11) indigenous languages (representing 98% of the population) were adopted as official languages”.

He further reports that South Africa’s government see language policy framework as fundamental to the management of “...diverse language resources and the achievement of government’s goal to promote democracy, justice, equity and national unity” (See the South African Constitution, Section 6, Act No. 108 of 1996).

Tanzania is another nation which has achieved a considerably high degree of democratization through deliberate language choice and language policy (Mazrui, 2002). This has resulted

in the replacement of English with Swahili as the sole language of parliamentary business, which has enabled Tanzanians to have greater chance of participating in political and legislative matters. Ordinarily Tanzanians could now compete for parliamentary seats, as they could use their Swahili oratorical skills effectively to seek the votes of the electorate.

Broadly speaking, the extent to which a multilingual society can enjoy the gains of language diversity will depend largely on its language policy, among other factors. The fact is that linguistic diversity need not always be a serious disadvantage (Elugbe, 1985; Bangbose, 1991). Undoubtedly, the Nigerian linguistic situation may look peculiar, but it is not unique. It is true that Nigeria is faced with linguistic and other diversities but, in the midst of these diversities often lies the country’s strength.

Indigenous Languages and Nigeria’s Transformation

Language development is seen in this direction partly as the attainment of proper codification by a given language. The language must also be in constant use by its speakers. Most indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be fully codified. They lack systematic descriptions and are not documented. Speakers of indigenous Nigeria languages must strive to have the languages codified. It is pertinent for speakers of non-codified languages to

note that gone are the days when government codifies languages. It is now the responsibility of ethnic communities to sponsor the codification of their languages. The codification will facilitate development on various fronts. Fully codified languages are taught in schools due to availability of orthographies. The writing facility can allow their thoughts on paper and such documents will facilitate faster growth and development. Linguistic development is the first step towards any other meaningful and desirable development. Scientific or technological development for example, cannot be attained by a people who have not developed linguistically. All technologically developed nations and societies must have attained wonderful linguistic scientific or technological developments.

Validation of the country's Indigenous System of knowledge is vital to Africa's development because, it can help Africans to utilize and improve upon their health (and related therapeutic) practices, craft and traditional industries, agriculture and so on. Generations to come will also be able to learn about indigenous tools for agricultural development, smithing, mining, and drugs development and administration (Bunza, 2006). Africa's development can therefore be sustained if they do not neglect their indigenous languages and cultures. Unfortunately, this vital message of African Renaissance seems to fall on deaf ears,

as they downplay and undermine their languages and cultures in preference for what is perceived as global culture.

Africa's economic dependency may be linked to, among other things, her inability to utilize local languages to tap the indigenous knowledge bases of the Africans. African people may be able to participate in serious businesses and other important economic activities or financial transactions if their indigenous languages are used in such processes. So many inhabitants in the rural areas lamented that they are finding it difficult to use Automated Teller Machine (ATM) and related benefits from the current "cashless/cashlite" micro-economic policies of Nigeria simply because they are not literate in English and no provision has so far been made for the use of indigenous languages in the implementation of such policies. Active participation of this significant percentage of the population of Nigeria in these essential economic activities could certainly contribute immensely to the transformation of Nigeria's economy. Bringing financial inclusion to the citizens is necessary for the development of a country's economy because, as Ansre (1976:3) noted "*...the greater the number of those who benefit from it, the better*" for the nation. Hence, there is need to get rid of factors such as 'language barrier' which restrict people from active participation in national economic activities.

It is rather unfortunate that leaders in Nigeria view the multi-lingual make-up of the country as an obstacle, and not a veritable resource; they strive relentlessly to overcome it with large sweeping policies of language of the wider community (LWC), preference in political, social and economic matters. This alienates the most disenfranchised speakers of minority languages further from the decision making process. Bangbose (1991) sees this apparent lack of will or desire for innovation with regard to language policy as a historical hang-up from the colonial times – what he terms the ‘inheritance situation’. By this term, he means that the roles of both indigenous and colonial languages have maintained their respective statuses as subservient and dominant. Colonial languages as those of the ruling white are dominating all levels of higher education and politics, while African languages remained, if not entirely excluded, as they were in the French and Portuguese colonies, then at most as the language used at the lower echelons of society, such as initial literacy or the medium of instruction at the primary schools in British territories. Putting a stop to these roles has become so difficult if not impossible to date.

Frankly speaking, for the nation to compete favourably with other developed countries in the world, the language of each tribe should be held sacrosanct. Parents and guardians should cultivate the habit of communicating with their wards in their indigenous

languages with emphasis that preservation of indigenous languages would bring about rapid development. Protecting culture and preserving indigenous languages are tasks before all of us that must be done. So whether as teachers, students, parents, guardians or government, must continue to make efforts towards ensuring that indigenous languages do not die or go into extinction. Language is not only root and heritage, but also our identity. He who have no language has mortgaged his identity. Therefore, “all must make this happen by cultivating the habit of speaking to children in mother tongue at home and facilitating the learning of indigenous languages in schools, as Eye on the Future is doing today” (Akinsanmi, 2013:1). As a matter of fact, there is need to rearrange or set priorities straight if the country is to be transformed. Must sincerely accept that have a responsibility of not only preserving individual cultural and linguistic identities but also utilize indigenous languages in the enterprise of education.

Indigenous Nigerian Languages: Prospects and Challenges

Languages, whether local or foreign, have lots of challenges as well as prospects in a multilingual setting like Nigeria.

Majority of Nigerians today, especially parents want their children to express themselves in English. In most of the private nursery and primary

schools, pupils are not allowed to express themselves in their local languages or language of their immediate environment. Even at home, quite a good number of parents will prefer to address their children in English. The outcome of this is that such children will not be competent in their local languages and at the same time, competence in English will be lacking especially when it comes to the correctness, rules and grammaticality, of the language.

Most indigenous Nigerian languages are yet to be fully codified. They lack systematic descriptions and not documented. Hence, speakers of indigenous Nigerian languages must strive to have their indigenous languages codified.

Much as there are challenges in the teaching and learning of indigenous Nigerian languages, there are also prospects. There is the need to disabuse the minds of people from the wrong connotation people often have for their mother tongue. No language is inferior to the other inasmuch as such a language serves the purpose it is expected to serve. Local languages should be honoured because if we see our language as inferior, it is like saying that our culture is also inferior since language and culture are inseparable.

Nigerian local languages as well enhance her culture, social status and the overall development if Nigerians are able to put them in the proper pedestal.

Citizens hear and see the role that local languages are playing in many technologically and politically developed countries these days. This means that no language can be seen as backward, much depends on how the owners of the language handle their languages.

Linguistic Crisis and the Role of the Teacher of Indigenous Nigerian Languages

There is a general agreement that there is crisis in the usage and teaching of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The following are some of the factors responsible for this:

1. The national language policy Statement regarding indigenous Nigerian languages is really an expression of good intention but there is no concomitant supply of teachers to realize the laudable objective.
2. Inadequate scope and depth of few available texts.
3. Lack of library facilities and other language equipments.
4. Government's lack of appreciation of the peculiar problems of teaching indigenous Nigeria languages.
5. Incompetence and lack of motivation by qualified indigenous language teachers.

In view of the above predicaments, let consider the role of the teacher. As emphasized earlier in this paper, the teacher is the mainstay or a prime mover of the educational system.

He is the input operator into the educational system. The teacher plays a big role in the conversion of raw materials (students) into finished products (graduates).

The indigenous language teachers must exhibit full commitment in the discharge of his duty.

He must ensure that Nigeria's indigenous languages compete favourably with the colonial master's language.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to justify why and how indigenous African and specifically Nigerian languages should be employed in teaching Science and technology – based subjects in the educational system through codification. It did not entirely disown Use of English as education medium, rather what the paper is advocating is that both should be officially approved, and the indigenous languages should be developed and adopted accordingly, as classroom media with consequential provision of scientific books in both languages. It is also of the view that English must be domesticated to meet the needs of the society. The writers further argued for the recognition of indigenous language as an economic resource with attributes comparable to other natural resources available and deployed by a nation. Finally, linguistic inclusion (marriage of foreign and local languages) can complement and propel political inclusion, as well as facilitate

socio-economic empowerment. These are the optimal conditions favourable for the eradication of poverty, ethnic and gender inequalities, culminating in an inclusive development and Nigeria's transformation.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that the Nigerian language policy must be redirected towards improvement of indigenous languages and their proper utilization for the attainment of transformational goals.

Regarding the importance of indigenous languages from the developed countries cited in this paper in both the transformation and development of a country, the paper therefore recommends that the codification of the various indigenous languages should be undertaken. This appears to be a herculean task for the government alone to shoulder the responsibility of codification—that is, orthography, producing reading materials, grammar, dictionaries and so on, the linguistic group should assist in getting at least, orthography for their languages.

The teaching and learning of indigenous languages should be made interesting with the use of new technologies and strategies. Parents should speak to their children in their various indigenous languages. They should not rely on the language of the immediate community. All languages

have their uses and prestige which only the speakers of the languages can portray. Indigenous languages can be made richer, by finding ways of including new science and technology terms in the languages. This will nullify the erroneous belief that only English language have means to explain such concepts.

Parents should change their negative attitudes towards the indigenous languages, the notion that prosperity comes from only foreign language should be discarded. Countries like China, Russia, Germany, Japan and others have progressed using their indigenous languages.

The Nigerian policy on Education should not be a mere statement of intention. School inspectors and all stakeholders are to be involved in ensuring that the language policy is followed with full implementation. Indigenous language learning should not be left at the primary school level, it should be encouraged even at the tertiary institutions.

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