

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Language is very important in every human interaction. It is the medium of education. This paper explains the fact that in Nigeria, to be educated is synonymous with literacy and proficiency in English Language. English being the official language. This paper examines the concepts of Universal Basic Education (UBE) and English Language in terms of definition, origin, purpose, relevance and prospects. It concludes that if both concepts are properly harnessed, synthesized and implemented, it will encourage, promote and sustain national development in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Education is as old as the existence of man on earth. The early man learnt to adapt to his social and physical environment by observation and precarious learning. Later generations were taught to cope with their environments by the process of socialization. Over the years, governments have evolved national objectives to be attained through education because education has been acclaimed as the instrument for the development of a nation. It is a tool that appears to have been utilized by developed nations to attain national development.

Developing nations particularly countries in Africa have sought national development by using education to attain desired objectives. In Nigeria, after over four decades of Independence, the degree of illiteracy is still alarming and the standard of education is fading at an irredeemable rate. In view of the above that the Federal Government of Nigeria evolved the Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme 1976 and the Universal Basic Education (UBE) in 1999.

Again, it is quite obvious that there is no need questioning the use of English Language serving as an effective medium of communication and instruction in the educational sector in Nigeria. This is so because we are aware of the historical forces that have denied or suffocated the possibilities of the triumph of indigenous languages and ensured the continual dominance of the English Language in Nigeria.

UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) IN NIGERIA

Historical Perspective

One of the challenges confronting Nigeria as a young democratic nation relates to the issue of achieving a greater measure of national development. Going by world history, this can only be achieved through education because according to Ehiametalor (2002), education is the single most important energy that moves a nation on a fast lane of economic development. Education creates human capital for the actualization of industrial and services outputs. As a result, the productive capacity of any nation depends solely on its ability to recognize the immeasurable ability of manpower.

After forty-two years of independence, there is still a greater continuing need to provide for our children and indeed for all our citizens, the basic educational skills they require to be useful citizens in their communities, country and world at large. Education is better understood when we see it as a means of instilling, especially in our young ones, the importance of a number of fundamental values, such as devotion to the well-being of our motherland, respect for our constitution and the importance of democratic governance, a sense of the dignity of work and moral uprightness as well as respect for the rights of other citizens. Instead of education achieving the above and producing future leaders with sound and progressive minds, what we now have is the failure of those goals with its attendant woes: rampaging cultism, examination mal-practices, mal-

adjustment, low level of students' intelligence, fraud, murder, advance free fraud, and perversion of the otherwise sacrosanct educational institution. These have also further lead to wanton reduction in the intellectual and psychological fitness, readiness and quality of the labour force.

It is in the light of the above, that the Federal Government of Nigeria is determined to restore within our society the interest and dignity of learning and scholarship along with general consensus and concern that education should be made universally available. This growing concern for making education available to all has been translated in many countries, including Nigeria, into universal education schemes. In Nigeria, it blossomed into the famous 1976 Universal Primary Education scheme which for one reason or the other collapsed in the 1980's and in 1999, there was the birth and launching of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) by president Olusegun Obasanjo to take off from where the Universal Primary Education (UPE) had failed. Universal Basic Education (UBE) by definition provides a minimum level of education. This is to say a level of education below which no one in the particular society is allowed to fall and for which sanctions may be applied on those who may prevent their wards from taking advantage of it. The term "Universal" of course suggests a programme that is made to affect the entire spectrum of the society, regardless of social and economic circumstances and physical condition. That is to say such a programme is not only fully supported by government and in some cases non-governmental agencies but also that every section of the society is sufficiently sensitised to take advantage. The other operation term "Basic" implies provision of a minimum level of education that can make the individual function effectively in his society. What is basic is, in general understanding, what is serving as a base. It is thus, that which is fundamentally essential, primary, bottom line or root in relation to something else. This something else can either be knowledge or life. Thus, knowledge which is basic, is that which is essential in appreciating or knowing higher forms. Education on its own is seen as an activity systematically organized by respective societies to achieve certain aims and objectives. The central aim of education is the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes considered useful and desirable by the particular society. Thus, teaching and learning remain the quintessential education tasks.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is almost the same as the old Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme. It is free and universal like before, but now in addition, it will be compulsory and has a wider scope and better coverage. Thus, the new Universal Basic Education (UBE) now extends to all children from age six of age fifteen. It provides a nine-year universal, free and compulsory education covering primary and junior secondary education as well as rural population, nomadic population, persons in physical isolated settlements, urban slums, adult illiterates, street children, children and adolescents with special needs, the 'girl child', the 'boy child' and other special areas of need.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A FACILITATOR IN UBE IMPLEMENTATION

Education appears to maintain its position as the pivot on which the wheel of the progress of our nation rotates. The development of ideas, scientific advancement, technological breakthrough, economic development etc of any nation are made possible by educational theories and practices formulated and implemented through language. The question now is, what is language and what are its function as it relates specifically to education? Sapir (1970) defines language as:

a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols... It is the tool of significant experience.

Present in this definition is the fact that language is very important in everyday human interactions. Language enables the individual to communicate his thoughts to others by means of speech. Gladstone et al (1969) asserts that language is the medium of education and that a speaker's cultural attitude is reflected in his speech patterns.

Commenting specifically on the use of English as a language, Obanya et al (1987) characterised English as:

The language of commerce and the law, of politics and

administration, education and of culture at all levels above the locale. An adequate knowledge of English is an indispensable requirement for anyone to rise above or to live in any wider context than the village.

This shows that at a certain level in Nigeria one cannot get by with just being monolingual. Today, English remains the language of Nigeria's national survival. Her national policy on Education recognises this and so does the Constitution.

The National Policy states that:

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English.

Thus, the pride of place given to English in the educational system is very obvious. English exists as a second subject in early primary school and displaces the mother tongue as a medium of expression in later primary school. Throughout Secondary and Tertiary Institution, English remains the medium of instruction. Thus, the role of English in education is a confirmation of its status as the language of national survival as well as the official language. English, being the official language of communication in Nigeria, serves national and international purposes. It is the language of instruction in the school and constitutes part of the means of the education process. It provides the setting for meeting the educational goals of the country and must address itself to the task of realising the purposes of education which is, to help the child towards relating appropriately to others and acquiring Scientific and Technological awareness among others.

English, as part of the means of the education process thus, provides opportunities for meeting the language needs of the individual in the society. A moderate level of English is expected of every average Nigerian for the purpose of transacting business and coping with demands of professions both nationally and internationally. It is partly for these reasons that English has become part of the total education of the ordinary child and partly an indispensable subject in the school curriculum and in the nascent Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme in Nigeria.

UBE, ENGLISH AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

According to the dictionary definition, a Nation is "a large community of people usually speaking a single language and usually living a political character or political aspiration". This definition appears to qualify Nigeria as a nation because a single language-English (though foreign) remains the lingua franca for now and she reflects a common political character. On the issue of national development, it is pertinent to have a cursory working idea of what "Development" and "National Development" consist in, so as to enable us know how best Universal Basic Education (UBE) and English language can play its role in advancing the course of national development. Although the term national development had been misconceived largely in economic terms, and forgetting the fact that education as the purveyor of knowledge par excellence is the one instrument that makes the most direct input to our national development. Without fear of contradiction, one can posit that Nigeria's dismal showing in the arena of national development since Independence is largely attributable to our inability to tap the enormous resources of education.

The question now is, what is development? The Director General of UNESCO in his address to the conference of the International Council for Adult Education in 1982 had this to say:

Development then, is a process that encompasses all aspects of community life, draws the specific contributions of all social groups and enables them all to reap the fruit of national endeavour, it entails the general mobilisation of the resources of

each people's power and creativity, the continuous development of its capacity for mastering modern scientific and technical knowledge.

In the light of the above, National Development involves fundamental phenomenon. These embrace economic, social, political and administrative reforms, attitudinal changes of people to work, acceptance of discipline in private and public life. According to Obanewa (2000), National Development touches all aspects of a society and the lives of individuals in it. Old habits and ways of life have to be discarded or modified, age-long customs have to yield place to modern ones, traditional technology is replaced by modern and more efficient technology, values are forced out by new ones. The developmental process may be painful. It brings about change in all facets of life. It is an overall social process which is dependent upon the outcome of man's effort to deal with his natural environment.

However, National Development and progress will remain circumscribed for as long as ignorance prevails as a result of inadequate education. It follows that without that level of compulsory education contained in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme, we cannot even begin to think of becoming part of the knowledge driven, information-conscious, high-tech controlled, and economically competitive world of the 21st century. Therefore, if Nigeria is to move forward fast enough to be a forceful member of the global world in the 21st century, her human capital has to be empowered through basic education as recommended by the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme using the instrument of the English language to enable her play a key role in the great task of socio-political and economic transformations that lies ahead. On the issue of relevance of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) and its contribution to National development, we may recall that the Universal Declaration of Human Right which the UN General Assembly adopted in 1984 asserted that "Everyone has a right to education". Hence the basic aim of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) is geared towards equipping individuals with such knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them; live meaningful and fulfilling lives, contribute to the development of the society, derive maximum social, economic and cultural benefits from the society and discharge this civic obligations competently among others.

The report of the Jomtien conference further posits that apart from acquisition of knowledge for its own sake, the UBE:

Empowers individuals and confers upon them a responsibility to respect and build upon their collective cultural, linguistic and spiritual heritage to further the course of social justice... to be tolerant toward social, political and religious system which differ from their own.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme therefore offers this nation another golden opportunity to wake up from sleep and resume the race for national development, a race in which we have been left behind by many countries that were comparatively at the same level of development with us at independence in 1960.

CONCLUSION

Educationists believe that all processes of education are undertaken towards the end goal of transferring knowledge and skill to the learner. This is taken as the ultimate aim of education where the learner is made to absorb past experiences of practices in education in order to be well equipped as an individual to face life in all its ramifications. He is thus, given the necessary skills and the mental orientation to become a balanced member of his society. The whole process of making an individual a good member of his society is an important way of making him contribute his won quota to the development of the society, hence the educational system in Nigeria use the medium of English Language being the lingua franca to enable the individual contribute his quota to his own personal and national development. The essence of English in the Universal Basic Education (UBE) implementation is to ensure that the recipient receive the kind of education that will facilitate the communicative competence and 'know-how' in their chosen careers.

The level of awareness and acceptance of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) has increased since the launching of the programme in 1999. From all indication, the proper implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE), will help to educate the mind and develop the learner's intellect and rational thinking ability that will enable learners strive for truth, justice and fair play in national matters. Thus, the Universal Basic Education (UBE) programme is capable of becoming a light that could eradicate illiteracy and ignorance, turn our country into a land where the old and the young, male and female are prepared to work hard by learning skills and science with a view to applying the latter for the improvement of their living conditions.

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