

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA THROUGH INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract

This paper discusses overcoming challenges to sustainable development in Nigeria through indigenous languages. Globalization is mostly about communication and the acquisition of knowledge, which abound in books, the worldwide web, and the internet and in the print and electronic media. Knowledge and communication are generally conveyed through language. Governments are aware of the power of language and so intervene in the use of language in their countries through the provision of a language policy. Such policy states the languages to be taught in schools, those to be used as official language and those to be used as medium of instruction. Governments equally recognize the need for people to speak language(s) other than their mother tongue. This paper sees a correlation between the use of indigenous language in educating the child both formally and informally and the futuristic powers of the child in the areas of self-unfolding and self-actualization. The future of the child is largely shaped in the present by different means, one of which is language, his/her mother tongue. Sustainability is one great factor in development. The findings of this paper include the neglect of indigenous languages by a great number in the upbringing of the child and the celebration of foreign languages as evidences of literacy and civilization. The paper therefore calls for the use of indigenous languages in the home, in the schools, in the church and mosque, in the market, in the parliament and everywhere as a tool for conveying our moral culture, expressing our thought patterns, celebrating our identities and sustaining development.

Key words: Overcoming Challenges, Literacy, Sustainable Development, Mother Tongue, Nigeria

Introduction

The Meaning of Language

Language has been defined by many scholars, identifying both the features and functions. In the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Crystal (1981) defines language as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings and members of a social group and participants of its culture communicate. Bolinger (1980) sees language as a system of vocal-auditory communication, interacting with the experiences of its users, employing conventional signs composed at arbitrary patterned sound and assembled according to set rules.

Language therefore is an essential instrument for acquiring ideas, relating ideas, sharing ideas, hiding and distorting ideas among other things. Language is the most important factor for all forms of learning. It is basic for cognitive development, a fundamental instrument for thinking, understanding and application of concepts which are all active ingredients for effective learning. The process of learning, imparting and or transfer of knowledge in form of values, attitudes, and acquisition of skills and competence are essentially through the instrument of language. Language therefore is an indispensable tool in education. For effective communication especially at early childhood, the language of the mother otherwise known as

the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment is considered the best that can yield optimal result.

The Concept of Mother Tongue

Mother Tongue is the first language that one learns from the cradle. It is a general term for the language of the childhood home, learned at one's mother's knee. Mother tongue has been described as the language in which a child first learns to express ideas about himself and about the world in which he lives (UNESCO 1953). The efficacy of any classroom instruction depends to a large extent on the medium of instruction especially at the lower level of education. At infancy, a child interacts with the parents, particularly the mother, through the mother tongue. The child socializes with his peers and siblings through this medium. It is on this premise that Babalola (1991:19) posits: *It is a tie that binds individuals to the community and the culture into which he was born; it is the means by which the activities of the community are learned and shared by its members including the young ones.*

At home in its formative years, the child interacts and learns in the mother tongue. When the child starts schooling at pre-primary or nursery, it is expected that the same mother tongue be used as medium of instruction. This will make for a smooth transition from the home to the school. The child finds no difficulty in interacting with his peers and the teacher since he is familiar with the medium of communication. The child thus sees the school as an extension of the community. Babalola (1991) submits that mother tongue is therefore a repertoire of a people's quintessence and the medium for the expression of its output as well as the perception of the people's creativity. It equips the child with adequate linguistic facility or intuitive knowledge. Mother tongue is therefore the language a child comes in contact with and by implications he thinks, reasons, expresses and builds his thought, vocabulary and world I it.

The Importance of Mother Tongue in Education

Education experts recognize the crucial and enviable role of mother tongue or the language of immediate environment in education. In 1923, Philips Strokes commission of enquiry into native education in British African Dependencies which was a direct offshoot of the 1911 Imperial Education Conference in London, favour the use of Local Languages as the Medium of instruction for the African Child. Three years later, the 1926 Advisory Committee and the 1925 Memorandum on. Education Policy on the place of vernacular in Native Education in Tropical Africa instructed that:

- i. No medium of instruction other than the vernacular or English shall be used in any school without the express sanction of the Director (of schools).
- ii. Among the infants and children, all instruction should as far as possible be given in vernacular ...the development of their minds must not be hampered by making the assimilation of ideas unnecessarily difficult by presenting them (ideas) in language not readily understood. Hence, the vernacular should be the medium of instruction where its use will aid in the through assimilation of school subjects.

UNESCO (1963) after a thorough research recommended the use of mother tongue in education. This recommendation enjoys credibility and incontestability. Grant (1978:135) advanced three major reasons why the vernacular should be a medium of communication and instruction as follows:

1. The child conceives ideas and thinks on the idea in his own language. This will equally help the child in speaking quite good English. The use of vernacular will encourage the child to think for himself.
2. The vernacular is the child's contact with the home, family and village. It is therefore proper that education should give him better understanding and contact with the home and village.
3. The culture of his people is found in the child's own language. Through the use of vernacular as medium of instruction the child appreciates the literature and world view of his people.

Fafunwa in Owolabi (2006: 14-15) summarized the advantage of learning in mother tongue thus:

1. To deprive the indigenous speaker of the use of his language for education is like removing his soul.

2. Education in the mother tongue removes all the inhibitions that beset the use of a foreign language.
3. It is possible for a learner to give free reins to his thoughts and express same in creative language thus paving way for a meaningful education.
4. Frees knowledge from the preserve of a microscopic elite in a foreign tongue to the disadvantage of the majority;
5. Mother tongue offers equal them to a large number of people and enable them to participate actively in national construction and reconstruction.
6. Compels decentralization of information and ensure free as opposed to controlled media;
7. Gives greater number of people greater accesses to education and personal development, so that the rural population can learn agriculture, improved business methods etc.

Empirical Evidences of the Merits of Mother Tongue (MT) Medium

The controversy over which medium of instruction offers the best chance of learning has led to the mounting of different experiments. The Ford foundation Six Year Yoruba Project (SYYP) 1970-1976 of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, designed to compare pupils taught in Yoruba with those taught in English established that the experimental classes performed better than the control classes justifying that indigenes of Yoruba learn better when taught all subjects through the medium of Yoruba language, (Fafunwa 1989). The Iloilo experiment in the Philippines which examined the relative effect of using Hiligaynon language instead of English as a medium of instruction established that the experimental group taught in the indigenous language performed better than the control group and even caught up with them in English within six months after being exposed to English language (Bangbose 1991). The Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Primary Education Improvement Project (PEID) yielded same result.

To conclude this section, we would consider two scenarios. Lakoju (1996) in Matemilola (1999:898) records a scenario of a village mechanic 'Oyems' who knows little or no English but excel in his mechanic work than many unsuccessful holders of HND certificate in Mechanical Engineering. Adesokan (2004:119) records that Nigerian footballers who have excelled and distinguished themselves in the game of footballers did so because they learnt the skills as children in indigenous language.

National Policy on Education and Indigenous Language

The use of indigenous language as instruction media has its immediate background in the language provision of Nigeria's National Policy on Education in NPE (1977). Policies are subject to evolution/review hence we have 1977, 1981, 1998 and 2004. They are consequences/results of intellectual assertions vis-a-vis the initiatives of international agencies and bodies. In reality there is no document which can be ascribed the 'Nigerian Language Policy was made to improve the learners' effectiveness and efficiency in learning. In recognition of the importance of the indigenous language to early childhood education the Federal government made a rule on how indigenous language will be used in the training of the Nigerian child at various levels of education in the National Policy on Education (2004) The NPE section 2, subsection, 14(a) (Pre-primary) states that Federal Government shall:

- i. Ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to that end.
 - ii. Develop the orthographies of many more Nigerian languages, and produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.
 - iii. Regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education.
- In section 4 subsection 18 (Primary) the Federal Government shall;
- i. Lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking.
 - ii. The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years (Junior Primary) during this period, English shall be taught as a subject.
- In section 5 subsection 22 (Secondary) The Federal Government shall:
- i. Develop and promote Nigerian languages, art and culture in the context of world's cultural heritage.

- ii. Language of the environment to be taught as L1.
- iii. One major Nigerian Language other than that of the environment to be taught as L2.

By implication, every Nigerian child is expected to learn the language of immediate environment (L1) and one of the three major Nigerian languages as L2 and if adequately implemented, in no distant time every Nigerian child should be speaking Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba.

Level of Implementation of the NPE

Having considered the advantages of the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction, the Federal Government pronouncements on the three levels of education in pre-primary, primary and post primary or secondary education in relation to the use of indigenous languages and the functions of a policy, it is necessary to consider and evaluate the extent of implementation of those policy statements. Despite the fact that the NPE has been reviewed for several times, experience has shown that government:

1. Did not ensure that indigenous languages are used as medium of instruction in pre-primary schools;
2. Has not produced textbooks in Nigerian languages for pre-primary schools as promised;
3. Has not developed the orthographies of many more Nigerian languages;
4. Did not ensure that the medium of instruction in the first three years of primary school is the language of the immediate environment;
5. Did not ensure that every Nigerian offers the language of the environment (L1) as a core subject in the SSCE neither did they ensure that students study or offer one major Nigerian Language as L2; and
6. Has failed in controlling and regulating the indigenous language policy statements as enshrined in the National Policy on Education.

Problems Associated with the Implementation of NPE

The National Policy on Education pronouncements on Nigerian language use has lots of inherent problems ranging from lack of specifications to ambiguity. Adeyanju (1985) argues that:

1. Nigerian Language Policy is a melting pot biased in favour of the languages of the wider community rather than a maintenance policy that caters for the development of all languages as the language right of the children.
2. It is a transitional policy since there is a change to English at a later date usually in the fourth year of the primary school.
3. It does not state unambiguously what the medium of change will be and it is inflexible in assuming a simple lock step approach for all pupils.
4. The policy makes no provision for children of migrants' parents from outside the domain of the language of the wider community being used as medium of instruction.
5. The policy does not specify any procedure for implementation.

Another fault inherent in the NPE is based on the unwarranted assumptions:

- i. Minority group children have no right to be taught in their languages but shall accept the *LinguaFranca*, Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba in their regions without questions.
- ii. Language variable is the greatest obstacle that affect school learning rather than adequately trained competent teachers operating in the languages, appropriately developed teaching materials or social factors.
- iii. The inherent contradictions in the NPE. The NPE made a democratic promise of equal opportunity for all but limit the scope of indigenous languages to the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria Aliyu (2006) observes that the NPE has expressed statements that only suggest ample reassurance at least on the surface value. He identifies key areas of disappointments in the document:
 1. No further application is given to this concise statement.
 2. No penalty is specified for potential defaulters.

3. No suggestions are made as to the resources to be employed effect compliance with the declaration.
4. No further explanation is given to the key phrase government will see to it.
5. No definition is advanced for initially.

Other problems affecting the use of indigenous languages in instruction abound.

1. The most important obstacle affecting the use of indigenous language in Nigeria is the undue premium placed on English language. At independence in 1960, English was entrenched as the language of parliament in Nigeria constitution and today, English has acquired the language of prestige. it has so many designations such as 'second language' 'official language' 'national language' 'language of higher education' 'language of inter-ethnic communication' the key to decent employment' and so on.
2. One striking issue is that the government did not see to the implementation of the stipulations as contained in the National Policy on Education. This is the hallmark of the flaws of NPE. Pre-primary education in this country is mostly handled by private proprietors. Most of them see the language of the immediate environment as inferior but that is far from the truth because most of the proprietors are educationists and know the undisputable advantages of mother tongue in education over an alien language. They use the advantage of the erroneous belief of parents that acquisition of knowledge is measured by the level of eloquent or fluent one is in the use of English. Thus they promote foreign languages in order to attract the patronage of people and boost their enrollment. One may not be surprise of this development since private enterprises are profit oriented. It therefore follows that the government is working against the policy they instituted. The above phenomenon most prevalent at the primary school level where the language of the immediate community is supposed to be the language of instruction; the reverse is the case both at private and public schools. It is not common to find bold inscriptions like SPEAKING VERNACULAR IS PROHIBITED especially in private schools. Consequently defaulters are either punished or fined. The government has been unable to enforce compliance with the indigenous language policy provision on FGN of 2004.
3. The teaching of indigenous languages is not enforced in all schools and even in the Federal Government Unity Schools. The National Policy on Education says that every Nigerian child should learn the mother tongue of the language of the immediate environment plus one of the three major Nigerian languages in the interest of national unity. Today, no such thing is obtained partly because there are no teachers of these languages and partly because speakers of other languages are apprehensive of the overbearing influence of the major language groups. Thus, the dynamics of politics and the problem of multi-lingual confederacy often act as stumbling block to policy.
4. Multi-lingual nature of the country. Nigeria is multi-lingual nation, with its attendant problems. The precise figure of the number of languages spoken in Nigeria is yet not certain. Linguists and other language experts such as Awoniyi (1995:443) give an estimate of about 400. This large number of languages poses a problem as to which language to develop and use as medium of instruction in community having about five different languages. Consequently, some people feel that one language is superior to the other.
5. Lack of Teachers: Another problem confronting the use of indigenous languages is the issue of competent teachers. How many competent indigenous language teachers do we have? Most youths do not have interest in the study of Nigerian languages. Parents do not encourage their children to study Nigerian Languages. Moreover in recent time attention has been shifted to computer education, thereby reducing the number of people pursuing Nigerian languages in tertiary institutions. This has resulted to gross reduction of indigenous language teachers.
6. Government promised to develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages so that many more Nigerian children can benefit from the numerous advantages attached to mother tongue in education. Government has not done enough work in this regard.

7. Akin to this is the government's promise to produce textbooks in Nigerian languages. Nigerian languages are faced with inadequate textbooks in the various categories of language, literature, mythology etc.
8. It is a belief that Nigerian languages are not sufficiently developed to give expression to modern science and technology. This erroneous belief has since been handled by research and development bodies like Language and Development Centre (LDC), Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NEERDC), National Institute for Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Association of Nigerian Language Teacher (ANLAT). These bodies have produced standard reference textbooks and journals on contemporary issues in science, commerce, and technology.
9. No high powered monitoring body to oversee the implementation of the indigenous language provision guideline.

Sustainable Development and the Prospects of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria

Having examined the role of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction and the numerous advantages embedded in it; the various factors, militating against its proper implementation as stated in the National Policy in Education, it becomes evidently obvious that every effort has to be made to keep to the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in our schools. This has the advantage and prospects of overcoming the challenges of sustainable development in Nigeria and elsewhere. According to Ele (2019:31-32), "The contemporary conceptualized alternative model, *sustainable development* is a necessity borne out of the deficiencies of previous development approaches which disconnected the present from the future, the economy from the ecology, the person from his environment and made one-sided process absolute over a multi-faceted process. So, sustainable development is all about steps to ensure that the quality of human life is guaranteed as it unfolds comprehensively and in its interconnectedness both locally and globally; and these positive impacts on man and his environment which are in their best shapes and grades are enjoyed now, in the near and far future". Ele (2016:19) maintained that "sustainable development is essentially a human and ecology-centered model. It seeks to guarantee the welfare of every citizen and the well-being of the yet unborn, future generations in its total dimension". In this light, therefore, sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (*World Commission on Environment and Development*, 1987: 43 in Ele, 2019: 31). One sees immediately with Romaine (s.d.: p.1) the links which mother tongue has with sustainable development. According to her, "...children can more easily learn to read in a language they know, mother tongue literacy represents the best foundation for acquiring proficiency levels needed for understanding school materials, and learning additional languages to access wider opportunities and participate in life beyond their communities. She continued that "Literacy in local languages is key to sustainable development because literacy is a core component of the right to education and an indispensable prerequisite to lifelong learning". It is therefore deficient, traumatic and retrogressive to expose children and infants to literacy and numeracy in languages at variance with their mother tongue. Through the mother tongue literacy, sustainable development as global is localized in specific indigenous contexts. As adults are the stakeholders of sustainable development in the present, children and infants are the conveyors of these development values to the future (Ele: 2016:19). At infancy and childhood stage the African morality is learnt; without morality, both man and his environment would suffer grave harm which suffocates sustainable development.

Conclusion

Mother tongue is supposedly a foundational language for every child. This is the language of the immediate environment of the child. Nigerian parents whether at home or in diaspora should endeavor to begin at the cradle to *speak* to their child in their mother tongue. The adult population in the office, market, church or mosque, parliament, shops and indeed everywhere should communicate good values and express their thoughts in the indigenous languages. The projections that some African languages will go into

extinction in a couple of decades from now cannot come true if we cherish, celebrate our mother tongue and use same to advance the course in our education and enlarge the cause and coast of the goals of sustainable development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The prospects of indigenous languages and their links with sustainable development will be effectively and adequately harnessed if these recommendations are applied. They are:

1. **Restoring/according high status to indigenous language.** Today, English is the language of administration, government, policy, international relation, commerce and official publications are made in English. The constitution and other related documents are written in English. Government has given much power and recognition to English language to the detriment of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), the relegation of these Nigerian languages to the background in preference to English language has negative effect on Nigerian languages. Emphasis should be given to the use of indigenous languages in our daily activities especially in this democratic dispensation. It is in line with this that we advocate for the use of indigenous languages in all deliberations in the Local Government Council, State and National Assembly. It implies that new roles and more decisive functions should be conferred on Nigerian languages as language of government, education at all levels, commerce, mass media etc.
2. The Federal government should keep to its promise as spelt out in the NPE exerting influence on the various state governments that register private schools by specifying the requirements and conditions and at the same time set up monitoring unit that will enforce the implementation of the NPE indigenous languages policy.
3. Government should stand firm on the policy that every Nigerian child should learn one indigenous language apart from his mother tongue. The requirement of NPE that one Nigerian language is made compulsory for SSCE candidates should be strictly adhered to.
4. The West African Examination Council (WAEC) should upgrade the status accorded to indigenous languages. This examination body grants English three credit levels of English language, Literature in English and Oral English but would not apply the same criterion to Nigeria Languages.
5. Government should be strongly and genuinely committed to the development of Nigerian languages. The Federal government should bear in mind that what it classified as minority language is more than majority in order settings. They should ensure that orthographies for more Nigerian languages are developed. This will enable teachers to instruct in the various languages of the immediate environment, at least for the first three years of formal education. The reduction of other languages into writing, provision of orthographies and writing of primers is important. The various linguistic departments, Nigerian/African language, NERDC, NINLAN, LDC and other related bodies should work towards realizing this goal. More language centers should be created. Linguists and language experts should be encouraged to undertake researches that can lead to the development of indigenous languages.
6. As it is in other developed countries of the world, Nigeria should as a matter of urgency, enact Nigerian language law. Reforms are essential for improving the society. Education serves as a vehicle for all forms of reform. There is therefore the need for enlightenment campaign to reorient and redirect Nigerians especially parents on the importance of mother tongue not only in fostering unity, peace and stability but for proper all round development of a child. The public should be made to understand and appreciate the fact that indigenous language remains the only vehicle through which Nigeria can make any meaningful reform. On this note, parents should encourage the use of indigenous language at home. This will provide a good background, motivation and encourage our children to the use study of Nigerian Languages.
7. Concerted effort should be made by both government and corporate organizations to promote the status of Nigerian Languages. Refresher courses in form of training and re-training of Nigerian language teacher should be organized periodically. In similar manner, conferences, seminars and workshops

should be organized in order to keep teachers abreast of new developments on the language and methodology.

8. To enhance the development and implementation of the use of Nigerian Languages as a medium of instruction teachers need to be highly motivated in form of incentives such as teaching allowance for Nigerian Language teachers. Government should produce learning materials both electronic and no-electronic.

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