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Language Education In Nigeria

LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THEORY, POLICY AND PRACTICE - Oladele Awobuluyi

INTRODUCTION

Natural language has many unique properties among which is that it plays dual role in most known formal educational systems. Thus it features, on the one hand, as a subject on the school curriculum, and accordingly permits one to talk of Language Education in much the same way that one would talk of Physics Education, Science Education, Economics Education, etc. On the other hand and completely unlike any of the other subjects on the curriculum, it also serves all over the world as the medium of instruction in all subjects, including itself. This latter role of it is fully captured under the title of Language in Education. Thus, Language Education and Language in Education refer to the two distinct roles that natural language plays in Education. Only the former of these two roles will be touched upon in the present discussion.

Early Efforts in Language Education

Formal Western type education was introduced into the country by Christian Missionaries just before the middle of the nineteenth century. For about four decades after that initial date, both the nature and main thrust of Language Education in the country were completely left to those missionaries to decide (Taiwo 1980: 10 - 11; Fafunwa 1974:92). And given the well-known belief of most such missionaries, first, that the African child was best taught in his native language (Hair 1967:6), and, second, that the interests of Christianity would best be served by actually propagating that religion in indigenous languages, it is not at all surprising that the teaching and learning of indigenous languages received much genuine attention in those early days of Western type education in the country.

But not everybody liked or approved of the products of such a system of education. Quite the contrary; members of the then elite were widely of the view that the people turned out under that system of education were not well enough suited to the job market of those days, whose unsatisfied needs were for persons with training in English rather than in the indigenous languages (Taiwo 1980:11). Influenced perhaps only in part by such views, the governments in the country began as from the early 1980's gradually to intervene in Education of the country with a view to according English a lot more prominence in it. Over time, that policy succeeded so well that interest in language education in the country shifted substantially away from the indigenous languages towards English, the language of the colonial masters. Proof of this was that, first, pupils and their parents gradually formed the opinion, which is regrettably still widely held even today, that it was financially more rewarding to study English than any of the indigenous languages; second, certification became conditional upon passing English; and, finally, the various governments in the country from the colonial times till well past the attainment of political independence in 1960 rarely felt that they had any duty to promote the study of the indigenous languages whereas they considered themselves obliged to encourage and even enforce the study of English.

Luckily for the indigenous languages, however, the realities of the situation then, as now, were such that the teaching of the indigenous few school children, if any at all, in those days spoke any English before actually entering school. Such children therefore had willy-nilly to be instructed in the medium of their mother-tongues until they had gained enough proficiency in English by their fourth, fifth or even sixth year in school to be able to receive all or most formal instruction in it. But even up to this stage the mother-tongue existed as an optional subject on the curriculum, particularly in the case of those languages like Efik, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba that were lucky enough not only to have been reduced to writing but to also have sufficient reading materials both sacred and secular for use in teaching school children.

The Birth of National Policy on Language Education

Not only have some indigenous languages thus been taught in schools since formal Western type education was first introduced into the country, after the attainment of political independence in 1960, the wisdom of giving English so much importance in Government and Education also began gradually to be questioned. Thus, some people felt, and openly canvassed in Parliament for English to be replaced as official language by one of our indigenous languages some twenty years after independence (Bamgbose 1976:12 - 13). Others who were particularly worried by the problem most people in the country actually have in understanding English and communicating well in it, advised that more effort should be put into the teaching of the major indigenous languages to enable them to serve as an alternative to English as official means of communication in Government and Business (Osaji 1979: 159 quoting the White Paper on the Udoji Report).

The overall effect of suggestions and pressures of this kind was to bring about an important shift in the attitude of the Government, particularly at the Federal level, to the indigenous languages. The shift took, to begin with, the form of an admission by Government of what had long been known to linguists and anthropologists, namely, that a language is simultaneously a vehicle for a people's culture and a means of maintaining and indefinitely preserving that culture. The implication of this, which Government came to see and appreciate, is that if we are not ultimately to lose our national identity together with our rich indigenous cultures, then we must begin to pay more attention to the teaching of our indigenous languages. In addition to seeing the relationship between language and culture, the Government also came to see the indigenous languages more clearly for what they had all along been, viz, a veritable and practical means of communication, some of which could very easily be harnessed for effecting national integration, a matter of paramount importance for a country still struggling to consolidate its independence.

What with these considerations, made somewhat explicit in Section 1, paragraph 8 of NPE (See below), the Federal Government began from the late 1970's onward to take official interest in, and make policy pronouncements on the teaching of the indigenous languages, instead of concerning itself solely with English as hitherto. Thus, in an official document first published in 1977, revised in 1981, and titled Federal Republic of Nigeria National Policy on Education (NPE), the Federal Government for the first time laid it down as a policy for the whole country that:

- (a) in primary School, which lasts six years, each child must study two languages, namely:
 - (i) his mother-tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile, and
 - (ii) English language;
- (b) in Junior Secondary School (JSS), which is of three years' duration, the child must study three languages, viz:
 - (i) his mother-tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile,
 - (ii) English language, and
 - (iii) just any one of the three major indigenous language in the country, namely, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, provided the Language chosen is distinct from the child's mother-tongue;
- (c) in Senior Secondary School (SSS), which also lasts three years, the child must study two languages, viz:
 - (i) an indigenous language, and
 - (ii) English language.

French and Arabic exist under the policy as language options at both the Junior and Senior Secondary School levels.

No specific prescriptions are made in the policy document under reference for language education at the tertiary level of education, it being felt, presumably, that the choice of subjects at that high level will necessarily be determined by the choices already made at the Primary and Secondary School levels. Given what was said earlier, it can be seen that the teaching of English in the schools is of course not a new policy initiated by the NPE. Similarly for the teaching of the indigenous languages, or at least the teaching of some of them, as mother tongues. These two types of languages have continuously featured in the country's schools since the middle of the nineteenth century. As it actually turns out, the only innovation in the NPE as far as language education is concerned is the teaching of the three major indigenous languages as second languages. That had never happened before in the country, at least

within the formal school system.

Constitutional Backing for Language Education

The Government as government had and continues to have inherent power to formulate policies regarding all aspects of life in the country, including that of education. But as if to make assurance doubly sure that the Government's power in this particular matter is placed well beyond doubt or dispute, a brand new subsection was written into that portion of the country's 1989 constitution dealing with the educational objectives of state policy. The subsection in question, viz: sub-section 19(4), says simply that "Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages." It is providentially cast in such general terms as allows it to be easily read as fully sanctioning everything the Government had done up to that point in time in regard to the teaching of the indigenous languages. Thus, it sanctions the policy requiring the teaching at the Primary and Junior Secondary School levels of the child's mother tongue or, in the alternative, some indigenous language of wider communication in his place of domicile. There being nothing specifically said there to the contrary, it can also be readily construed as permitting the teaching of the three major indigenous languages as second languages.

Mother Tongue Teaching

The country is believed to have about four hundred distinct indigenous languages. As each of the languages is by definition a mother tongue, in theory they all qualify to be taught as school subjects under the NPE policy on language education in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools. However, because most of them each have such small numbers of speakers, it would not appear at all practical to actually teach them as school subjects. For precisely this reason, according to Brann (1977:47), the former National Language Center, now transformed into the current Language Development Center (LDC) and placed under the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC), in 1976 suggested that, in addition to the three major languages, viz: Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, only the following nine of the remaining 387 or so indigenous languages in the country should be allowed to feature in the country's formal school system: Edo, Fulfulde, Ibibio, Idoma, Igala, Ijo, Kanuri, Nupe, and Tiv.

Technically very sound as that suggestion may actually be, it overlooks or completely ignores the degree of loyalty some of the so called minority groups feel towards their respective languages, as a result of which they appear ready to go to any length to ensure that such languages are formally taught to their children in school. One such group is formed by the Urhobos of Delta State, for whose language commercially printed Primers and Readers have existed for about ten years now. Another group is that of the Ghotuos of Edo State, whose language, according to Elugbe (1991), is currently being reduced to writing preparatory to the production of Primers and Readers for teaching it in Primary School. Some other groups further afield that would appear to fall under this category are the Ebiras of Kogi State, the Gwaris of Niger, Kebbi, and Kaduna States, and the Jukuns and Kutebs of Taraba State. The loyalty that members of these groups feel towards their individual languages, particularly in the case of the Jukuns and Kutebs, is so strong that it appears somewhat unlikely that they would be prepared to give up such languages altogether and adopt another indigenous language of wider communication instead.

Accordingly, one would expect that, with time, the number of indigenous languages featuring in the nation's schools would rise beyond the twelve suggested by the former National Language Center.

Whatever the number of such languages may eventually turn out to be, however, what seems very clear for now is that only very few of them are currently being adequately taught. The three major indigenous languages that have always been taught in the schools since the second half of the nineteenth century belong to this small group. Not only are the three languages fully taught and examined as mother tongues in Primary and Secondary Schools, they have for the past twenty or so years now also been taught and examined as Single Honours subjects at first and higher degree levels, particularly in the case of Yoruba and Hausa. Efik/Ibibio has also long featured as a school subject. It is, together with the three major languages, in the very small class of four indigenous languages examined for several decades now by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC), and may by now have started being examined at Certificate and first degree levels as well. Edo and Kanuri are currently taught for some years in Primary School, and are also taught at Certificate level and as part of first degree programme, all in an attempt to increase the number of people that could be employed and deployed to teach the two languages in Primary School. The University of Maiduguri has at least on its books programme for teaching fulfulde at Certificate level preparatory to the teaching of the language in Primary School. Similarly, it would appear, for some of the Rivers State languages taught at the University of Port-Harcourt.

Other than the above mentioned languages and perhaps a few others taught at some of the newer State-owned Colleges of Education, none of the other indigenous languages in the country are regularly taught in the nation's schools. The reason for this is two-fold. First, only a few of the languages have enough materials to sustain teaching them as they really ought to be taught at any level. Only Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba can at all be said to satisfy this implied criterion of teaching materials for Primary and Secondary Schools, and to varying degrees for the tertiary level also. Efik/Ibibio would seem to satisfy that same criterion for Primary and Secondary School levels, but not for degree level. The remaining indigenous languages each have a very long way to go yet in this regard, particularly for those of them that are yet to be reduced to writing. Second, and once again, only the three major indigenous languages can actually boast of enough teachers at all levels, this being more so for Yoruba than for the other two languages. While Efik/Ibibio may have teachers fully trained to teach that language at Primary and Secondary school levels, it would not appear to have enough people who could teach it at the tertiary level.

The Teaching of Indigenous Second Languages

The teaching of the three major indigenous languages as second languages is faced with both logistic and conceptual problems. To take the latter first, the National Policy on Education, as indicated earlier, requires each school child at the Junior Secondary School level to study one of those three languages in addition to his mother tongue. However, for practical reasons, as also indicated earlier, many school children cannot actually study their mother tongues but must study an indigenous language of wider communication instead in Primary School as well as at the junior Secondary School. This being the case, suppose the language of wider communication that some such children have to study as their mother tongue or first language (L1) is one of the three major indigenous languages, as could well be the case for children in Bauchi, Plateau, and Kaduna States, for example, where Hausa would appear to serve as a language of wider communication, and in parts of Ondo, Edo, and Kogi States, where Yoruba similarly serves as a language of wider communication. In that event, should such children be required to study yet another major indigenous language as their second language (L2)? This is an important policy question to which different answers have been given by different observers of the scene in the country. Thus, Bamgbose (1977:23), for example, feels that such children, by having indigenous language as their L1 would have satisfied both the letter and the spirit of Section 1, Paragraph 8 of NPE, which says:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba.

Awobuluyi (1966: 17 - 18, 1979: 19; 1991b) on the other hand is of the opinion that children of the kind in question would only have satisfied the letter but not the spirit of the above quoted NPE language provision. The spirit of that provision, which derives from the needs of national unity, would seem to Awobuluyi to require each school child in the country to be able to communicate in a major indigenous language native to some major cultural zone in the country other than his own. That being the case, a child who has studied a major indigenous language as his first language has thereby only been exposed to his own major cultural zone, and must therefore study yet another major indigenous language as his second language in order to fulfil the real spirit of the language provision in question.

What these two divergent answers clearly reveal is that a substantial issue of policy requiring urgent clarification remains concerning the teaching of the three major languages as second languages. Yet another relevant issue of policy which has, however, tentatively unofficially been clarified concerns the one Nigerian language required to be studied as a core subject at the Senior Secondary School level. As NPE regrettably omits to indicate whether the language should be the child's L1 or his L2, different states in the country initially tended to interpret the language provision concerned differently, to suit their individual purposes or biases. Later, however, the National Council on Education (NCE), the highest policy-making body for Education in the country, ruled that the language must be the child's L2. But then, as pointed out in Awobuluyi (1991a), that ruling of the NCE's is certain to prove very injurious to the growth and development of the three major languages, as it would in effect prevent them from being studied as L1 beyond the Junior Secondary School level. Similarly for all the other indigenous languages

that qualify to be studied as L1 in the nation's schools. To avoid this most undesirable consequence, therefore, it has been suggested and also recommended to the Government in (Bamgbose and Akere 1991:3.8) that the single Nigerian language each child must study as a core subject at the Senior Secondary School level should be either his L1 or his L2. An early decision by the Government on this particular recommendation would completely eliminate the uncertainty and confusion that have hitherto both characterised and bedeviled the teaching of the three major indigenous languages as L2 in the country's secondary schools.

Lack of suitable pedagogical materials in the form of bilingual dictionaries and L2 pupils' and teachers' printed and/or tape-recorded texts, and an acute inadequacy of suitable trained L2 teachers for the three major indigenous languages have also constituted a very major problem militating against teaching them as L2 in Secondary Schools throughout the country, so much so that probably no more than ten percent of such schools actually currently teach any of the languages as L2, ten or so years after they should have started being so taught in all Secondary schools. A very noteworthy positive step was recently taken in this connection with the establishment in Aba, Imo State, of the Institute of Nigerian Languages, whose main functions, one gathers, are to train L2 teachers and produce audio-visual materials for teaching the three major indigenous languages. However, the Institute, even after becoming fully operational, will not be able to produce more than a very small percentage of the teachers actually needed for teaching the languages in question as L2 throughout the country. That being the case, it would seem advisable to involve the conventional universities also in the project for training L2 teachers for those languages.

The Teaching of English

English, as indicated much earlier, has for well over a century now continued to enjoy the pride of place in the nation's educational system. Thus, whereas indigenous languages are rarely given more than three lesson periods a week on the school time-table, English never has less than five periods, and may even be given as many as seven or eight periods particularly in schools that prepare students for the Oral English examination. Avidly patronised by commercial publishers, the language enjoys a profusion of pedagogical materials, and in this respect contrasts sharply with the indigenous languages, the vast majority of which lack enough materials for teaching them as L1 even for a few years in Primary School. Nevertheless, the teaching of the language in the nation's schools has its own problems too, just as the teaching of the indigenous languages does, as indicated above. By far the most serious of such problems has to do with the quality of the teachers available for teaching the language. Nearly all such teachers are L2 speakers. Few L2 speakers who were themselves taught by other L2 speakers who, in their turn, had learned the language necessarily imperfectly from other L2 speakers of English in the nation's schools today have a good enough command of the written and spoken forms of the language, particularly the latter, that they could impart with confidence to their pupils. To make matters worse still, most such teachers have no training in Contrastive Linguistics and therefore are unable to understand and consequently devise effective pedagogical strategies for combating the mostly mother-tongue induced kinds of learners' errors that recur in their pupils' written and oral performances in the language. Another problem besetting the teaching of English relates to the books that are available locally in the language. Although the country has come a long way in regard to the production of locally written texts in English, a lot of books particularly for children nevertheless still have to be imported from abroad. And as such books are written and meant for other cultures than ours, one of their glaring shortcomings as books for the nation's schools is their cultural inappropriateness.

The teaching and examination syllabuses for the language in Primary and Secondary Schools would appear to be over ambitious and therefore inappropriate for those two levels. Thus, primary school children being prepared for the Common Entrance Exam (used for determining admission into Secondary Schools) are expected to be able to tell, for instance, what verb forms, whether singular or plural, the English conjunctions "and" and "as well as" require, a matter which even most adult native speakers of English would not know for certain and would therefore tend to avoid. Similarly, final year students in Secondary Schools are expected in their written English to display mastery and control of various registers, even though their control of the very basics of that language is so shaky that they scarcely can produce two to three grammatically flawless sentences at a time.

While the latter two problems of suitable textual materials and communicatively appropriate syllabuses can perhaps easily be solved with hard work and determination, this is not the case for the unsatisfactory quality of the teachers of English available for the nation's schools. Ideally, the language ought to be taught in the country by its specially trained native speakers, but given the current down-turn in the

country's economy and the great demand for such teachers in other parts of the world such as the Gulf states that can better afford to pay them, the chances of being able to recruit those teachers in adequate numbers for the nation's schools are nil. Accordingly, the possibility of effecting appreciable improvement in the quality of the English spoken in the country as a whole would appear very remote indeed.

The Teaching of French and Arabic

Although French and Arabic are elective subjects on the Secondary School Curriculum, both Junior and Senior, the Government is fully aware of the problems that are sure to attend the teaching of both languages in the nation's schools, seeing that they are foreign languages for which pupils will not readily find models to interact with on a daily basis. Accordingly, it has now established two Special language villages, one for Arabic in the north-east of the country, and another for French in the South-West, where students can, over periods ranging from six months to one whole year, experience full immersion in those two languages.

This approach to the teaching of French and Arabic has the unexpected benefit of pointing at or highlighting what would appear to be a fundamental fallacy in the teaching of English, namely, the assumption that the language is a second rather than a foreign language in Nigeria. As long as this assumption continues to hold sway, with the result that English is not seen as a foreign language and taught as such, the very low level of proficiency attained in it by teachers and necessarily by their pupils also will persist in the nation's school system.

CONCLUSION

A comparison between the present state of language education in the country and its state, say, at the turn of the last century is certain to show that much progress has been made in the intervening period. The purpose of highlighting the many problems currently besetting particularly the teaching of English and the indigenous languages in the nation's school system is not to deny that progress, which would be an intellectually dishonest thing to do. Rather it is to lay the basis for further or future progress in that order and at the same time provide a sort of reference point against which to meet or assess such progress.

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