

BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: PRACTICE, ATTITUDE AND PROSPECTS.

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ABSTRACT

The Nigerian policy on Education today provides for a multilingual policy involving the learning of child's LI or language of the immediate Community/environment (LIC), one of the three major national languages (i.e. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) and English. That this policy has not been effectively implemented is an understatement. This paper seeks to review the problems, challenges and prospects of bilingualism in Nigerian education as well as suggest ways in which bilingual programmes may be implemented successfully as to maximize benefit on the part of the student on one hand and the entire nation on the other. The attitude of students, teachers, parents and administrations towards bilingualism education were also reviewed.

Key Words: MT, LIC, LI, L2

INTRODUCTION

Bilingualism is an aspect of applied linguistics which exists whenever a native speaker of a language say Igbo, makes use of second language say English no matter how partially or impartially. Nigeria with about 400 Languages is a multilingual country (Adegbiya, 1997) and operates an educational policy system that allows Trilingual education in the mother tongue (MT), a national language and English. In practice however, it is only the three major languages (Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba) that has widespread use at the primary level especially in state where they are used as LI along with side English language. This history of education as it concern the use of three main languages of the Country dates back to the first half of the 19th century when Christian missionaries introduced their teaching with dual mandate to develop the Nigeria child and serve their own interest as well. The 1977 policy on education that was revisited in 1981 makes provision for initial literacy in child's LI or the language of the immediate community (LIC) at the primary and junior primary levels within this period of teaching from the fourth year of primary school level when the transition of English medium of instruction takes place, the MT/LIC continues to be studied. In Junior Secondary School (JSS), that lasts for three years, the child must study three languages which includes her/his MT, LIC, the English and any one of the three major languages as L2 for NATIONAL INTEGRATION: In the senior secondary school (SSS), which is another three years duration, the child must study two languages- an indigenous language plus English. It is not just enough to establish good educational policies, its implementation is even more important. In practice, policy is rarely implemented. Even among the states that own the three major languages. The nursery and primary schools owned by private individuals seen not to even know that part of the educational policy of the country. The policies patterns of ethnic languages as well as language loyalty for some minority languages has continued to affect negatively the complete implementation of the bilingual education in Nigeria especially in linguistic minority areas whose speakers often approach this government policy to promote the three major languages for national integration purposes as being in direct conflict with education in minority Languages. Awobuluyi (1992) shows evidence that some of minority languages (e.g Efik, Edo, Fulfude, Idoma, Igala, Ijaw, Kanuri, Nupe and Tiv) are being taught in some schools within the states where such languages are used however the teaching of these languages is difficult to be sustained due to insufficient learning materials, teachers as well as the discontinuation of their study after JSS level as provided by NPE (Essien, 2003). Although bilingual teaching is implemented in many public schools in major language speaking states, according to Emenanjo (1992) a panel set up in 1985 by the Imo state government on the

teaching of Igbo language in the state school system as well as implementation of the national Language policy observed among other things that there is still lack of awareness on the part of highly placed ministry officials (Supervisors/inspectors of education, principal/head masters of schools) and practicing teachers of the language policy as stated in the NPE. This lack of awareness, on its part is responsible for the relatively inferior states accorded Nigerian languages in the school system in particular and the society in general. Igbo is not being taught or tolerated in most nursery schools in the state, it is not seriously and consistently used as a medium of instruction in the 'Junior Primary classes'. In the secondary school, Igbo has fewer periods a week on the time table than any other subject in the curriculum Emenanjo (1992). The above submission can be said to be applicable to the entire country. Although the current policy for primary schools in the country project a transitional bilingual design that builds on MT literacy and MT means of instruction before transiting to English from primary 4. In practice there is some level of confusion about how the policy is to be implemented. Furthermore while most educational personnel at different levels showed that they are grounded in interpreting the policy, fewer demonstrated an understanding of what the use of mother tongue or language of environmental as a medium of instruction means.

At this juncture it is important to reference international findings and opinions as regards this topics for this paper will be inconclusive it is fails to site international findings. A large body of international research has demonstrated the significance of MT medium of instruction in the child's early years of schooling, especially for the purpose of language and cognitive development (UNESCO, 1953; Horberge, 2002; Krashen, 1999) etc. studies and experiments also show that there is enough evidence that bilingual schooling can improve basic education in developing countries. The use of Li to study and learn helps teachers and learners to interact more naturally and negotiate together (Benson, 2004). Bringing the culture and language of the home into the school is important for identity, personal as well as for group empowerment. According to (Benson, 2002) Bilingual programmers address educational quality issues by promoting successful literacy acquisition and literacy. (Hornsberge,2002) and effective factors as improved motivation and self esteem. The benefits of bilingualism MT emphasis are documented world over. Bilingualism experimental findings in Nigeria education system. (See Afolayan,1991; William,1996) Niger and Guinea Bissau, Bolivia and Mozambique (see Benson,2000,2004) and often developing countries reveal commendable successes for initial literacy in L1. All these possible results notwithstanding, the Nigerian Ministry of Education still lacks what it takes to fully implement a bilingual educational school system for the maximum advantage of individual child and society. The need to look into the practices, attitudes and prospects of bilingual education with MT emphasis by this paper cannot be overemphasized.

IMPORTANCE OF MOTHER TONGUE-BASED BILIGUAL EDUCATION

Many children speak a home language that differs from the language of instruction in education programme. It is needed to emphasize the fact that children learn best in their mother tongue which helps to prepare them to learn more languages in future. Studies shows that six to eight years of education in mother tongue is required in developing the literacy and verbal proficiency necessary for academic achievement in secondary school. Again children's ability to learn an additional language be it a lingua franca or an international language or does not suffer when their mother tongue is the primary language of instruction throughout primary school. Fluency and literacy in the mother tongue lay a cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning a second language as well as understanding subject contents better. They do not only learn the second language quickly, if they are opportuned to develop their first language skills in secondary school, they emerge as full bilinguals or multilingual learners. On the other hand, if children are forced to switch abruptly too soon from learning in their mother tongue to schooling in a second language, their first language acquisition is likely to be attenuated or even lost. More importantly is the fact

that their self-confidence as learners and their interest in what they are learning may decline leading to lack of motivation, failure and early school leaving. Given this background, one can see that the

importance of mother tongue at the school system especially at the early stages of learning cannot be overemphasized. It ranges from historical precedents which through studies, and research has proved that theories and ideologies in favour of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction in school through motivations and building self confidence and new ideology by bringing some new dimension of mother tongue schooling which emphasizes that "Cultural Freedom and African Emancipation... cannot be cultivated, expanded or developed where the language in which people are "most creative and innovative" are not language of instruction (Prah, 2003-17).

PRACTICE OF MOTHER TONGUE IN NIGERIA EDUCATION SYSTEM

The NPE advocates the practice of multilingual education but like we have earlier established in this paper the reality of practice of such policy is far from the provisions of the policy. While government schools are trying to carry out the policy, the private schools especially nursery and primary schools teach even pre-primary and junior primary classes in English language without any restriction from the ministry of education officials. These private schools do not allow the use of other languages of instruction or a school subject except English language. They sometimes go as far as prohibiting the speaking of vernacular in their school. Ogunbiyi (2008) affirms that despite the provision of the NPE and the position of the government on the status of the English language and other Nigerian languages in education, some schools still relegate Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English and French languages. Emenanjo (1985) opined that the policy statements as contained in the NPE is ambiguous and therefore difficult to implement. Schools that are outside or that are not in the areas of the three major languages are also equally as equity as the private schools). The areas of lapses in the policy are numerous. It is disheartening that most of the stakeholders in education industry are not aware of the multilingual provision of the NPE which is mostly as a result of infiltration of the teaching profession by individuals who have not studied education in their higher institution of learning.

ATTITUDE TOWARDS MOTHER TONGUE BASED TEACHING

Very few studies have been carried out to measure public opinion on bilingual education, especially as it concerns the views of students at different educational levels, teachers, parents, administrators and officials of the ministry of education. It is vital to note however that the extent of support for, the opinion of speakers towards, bilingualism and its education in any given nation are important element that determines a country's linguistic situation. According to Youseff (2002:183), who has shown with respect to Caribbean, attitudes to the languages of a society can be critical in the determination of languages education policies. It is important in the study of bilingual education that the views of key participants in the bilingual programmes as well as those of the community are sought, considering the fact that the future of bilingual education and bilingualism in a society depends on the option of the community and that in turn reflects in the attitudes and interest of its people. While government can decide on the languages of the education based on research and expected result but if the attitude of the people is negative it will not achieve set goals. Nigeria with 400 languages has three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) people who do not belong to those language group who take pride in their own language find it difficult to have the children settle for one, they will rather have their children being taught in English and at the level of education where it is compulsory to write a major language in an exam they will choose French. There is also a misconception by the parents who believe that their children should be taught with English language to enable them have access to better employment opportunity. On the part of the teachers, there is a mix up in policy implementation of the language policy. (Teachers who teach mother tongue (vernacular) are sometimes regarded as unskilled) while

teaching is done in mother tongue, exams are administered in English language. Policy makers do not provide for materials in the mother tongue languages which present it like a child play. The attitude of the locals to teachers can be demoralizing to them. This is because despite their knowledge on the benefits of the language policy and effort to implement it, they are looked down upon as unskilled for teaching in vernacular. A good teacher is assessed based on how much

grammar he/she can dazzle people with which leads them into doing the wrong things to save their faces. Same goes to the students who want to be heard speaking English language or broken English and keeping quiet or pretending to understand what is being taught in the class while in reality he/she will understand the subject content better in mother tongue.

THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND THE STATE OF INDIGENIOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria being colonized by Britain has English language as its National official languages. It is the dominant language of administration, commerce, mass media, the judiciary, legislative and medium of instruction in the educational system. English is a vital tool to securing good jobs and a credit pass in it is a prerequisite for admission into Universities. Since the language provides educational and economic opportunities, it is obvious that attitude towards it is highly positive. The association of English with honor, strength and opportunities has been the driving forces for the preference of many parents to have their children be taught in that language children. This preference also has resulted in the loss of children speaking indigenous languages and a great number of them being monolingual and literate only in English. (Essien, 2006; Igboanusi, 2006; Ohiri-Aniche, 1997; Qulolabi, 2006). On the other hand, studies have provided useful observations on the linguistics situation of Nigeria, particularly as it concerns the state of indigenous languages. Bamgbose (1992) noted that Nigerian language are often grouped into 'Major Languages' and 'Minority language based on factors as numbers of speakers, status in education acquisition as a second language and availability of written materials. The major languages Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are the most developed indigenous languages as Ebir, Edo, Efik, Fulfude, Idoma, Igala, Ijo (Izon), Kanuri, Nupe, and Tiv, have a populace of over a million speakers, each (Cf. Adegbiya, 2004). The population of either minority languages ranges from less than a million to below one hundred. While the major languages – Hausa (in the North) Igbo (in the South-East) and Yoruba (in the South-west) are used as lingua franca for regional communication (Igboanusi, 2002) the minority languages are used for local rural communication and are functionally marginalized to the 'primary domains of life (Webb, 1994:181), such as family and friends, local markets and domestics services, traditional social institutions and Religion of Nigeria's too indigenous languages, stand advised orthographies are available for only about 60 languages (Adegbiya, 2004).

CONCLUSION

In as much as Nigerians understand the importance of mother tongue education and efforts are being made to effect its usage as a medium of instruction in schools at least to some level, it is also clear that it has not fared well. The use of bilingual education where it exists is only a bridge to learning English which does not help the development of indigenous languages and culture. There is poor commitment on the part of the education ministry in the implementation of bilingual education policy in schools. Teachers do not have enough training and self esteem as regards the use of bilingual methods. Finally, the role of the media in language policy implementation has not really been well considered and appreciated therefore this paper recommends thus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❖ A radical review of the education policy should be carried out to reflect the introduction of a long term bilingual education of quality six years in primary education. There should be provision for learning and examination of minority language up to SSCE level as well as

their teaching at the colleges of education and universities for degrees or certificates courses.

- ❖ The ministry of education should develop and implement uniform bilingual schooling system that will serve the entire school-aged populations quarantining them relevant basic education. Similar model of bilingualism should be practiced in all schools in the country. In doing this the languages and culture of the students must be taken into consideration.

- ❖ Teacher training should adopt programmes aimed at promoting the understanding and use of bilingual methods. There is a very important need to train and retain teachers in literacy and language development as well as in effective L1 and L2 teaching methods. Bilingual teachers should be literate in both L1 and English. This is a major way in ensuring that they are proficient in the language of instruction and familiar with bilingual methods. In order to produce sufficient teachers for bilingual programmes in minority languages, federal universities and colleges of education should run degree certificate courses in minority languages.
- ❖ Most importantly, the role of the media in this language policy implementation cannot be overemphasized the media can be sought to assist in providing publicity for bilingual programmes as well as in attempting to convince those especially parents whose attitudes towards the programme is negative. Once parents are convinced about the usefulness of the programme, the rest will be history as they will demand themselves that their children should be taught in their mother tongue.

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