

Teaching and Learning of Nigerian Languages: Relevance, Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract

Teaching and learning process in modern age has witnessed several approaches to the extent that electronic and computer-based instruction dominates classroom activities. For some authors, teaching in modern age cannot be done with traditional teaching approach- hence the need for teaching gadgets, whereas subject and or topic of instruction influence the medium of instruction in most cases. Trailing the divergent views, this paper emerged to examine the teaching and learning of native languages in Nigeria with great attention to its relevance, challenges and way forward. By and large, every state or region of this country is characterized by a particular language but there seems to be no growth recorded in the area of native language promotion. It is on this basis, the paper explicates the concept of native language and its significant role in Nigerian context. The paper unraveled factors affecting the growth of native language. Among others, it was recommended that sufficient qualified native language teachers be employed; and the paper concluded by emphasizing the need to cherish our cultural heritage and national prides because if we fail to blow our trumpet, nobody will blow it for us.

Keywords: Native language, importance, plight, solution, medium of instruction

Introduction

One of the inherent characteristics of man is communication. In fact, the importance of communication to man is incalculable, considering the fact that man is a social animal who constantly engages in political and social policy. In other words, language functions as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication based on its cultural importance as a tool of the dominant ideology (Danladi, 2013). Simply put, language plays a crucial role in the social, political and economic life of the people in a given geographic entity. For Olusoji (2012), language is a powerful tool of control used by ethnic duet. Put differently, language is a cultural component which is used by a people to identify themselves as members of a group or taking decisions to be primarily self-identified as members of a given community. It further suggests the mode of communication within any cultural setting thereby influencing individuals' decisions and promotes social accountability as required for understanding a variety of issues be it political, economic or social in any society.

The assertion above explains why Richards (2010) construes language as the human vocal 'noise' or arbitrary graphic representation of the

'noise' in writing used systematically and conventionally by a speech community for purposes of communication. That is, it is a vital tool for human communication in human communities. Fafunwa (1990) cited in Ashofor, Ekele and Mikah (2016), states that language does not only permit enormous condensation of knowledge but also enables human beings to turn knowledge into hypothetical forms so that they may consider alternatives without having to act them in the form of trial and error. This is supported by Emenanjo (1996) that the training of the mind in the understanding of the world around us is best done and realized in the languages in which the children are most familiar. In his dictum on the potency of home languages as a medium of instruction in modern education, Oluwole (2008) was of the view that in teaching and learning processes, the home language(s) of the children is of utmost importance.

By implication, in one side, language categorizes a large part of the children's environment by naming the objects, actions, ideas, attributes that are important to these children as well as society. Simply put, home language(s) or Nigerian languages are the most



viable tools to convey the theme, concepts and subject matter of what is to be learnt to the Nigerian children. On the other hand, language education is the study of the art of language which involves the understanding of the nature and importance of language as a vehicle for communication. Mgbodile (2009) argued that language education is a derivation of general importance of language as an essential tool for man's activities, and is built on the rationale that language is the chief means of inculcating knowledge, skills and competencies into learners. Therefore, there is the need to have some specialized knowledge and understanding of the mechanics of language. In this wise, language education is expected to provide the children with a deeper understanding of the science of language and prepare them for achieving communicative competence, socio-linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and strategic competence.

Again, despite all perceived roles of Nigerian languages to Nigerians, an all-embracing interpretation of them especially for pedagogical quest and epistemological claims continue to elude us. Of course, the National Policy on Education favours the development and use of the indigenous languages at lower basic level of education but beyond this, very little importance is attached to Nigerian languages in education sector. Contrary to other studies that have showed the links between mother-tongue and academic performance of primary school pupils (see Ashofor, Ekele, & Milcah, 2016). This paper discusses the challenges and ways forwards in the teaching and learning of major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), and also brings to the fore its significant roles to all and sundry.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study which requires gathering relevant information from articles and books to analyze the current situation and discourses on the challenges in teaching and learning of Nigerian languages.

Definition of Language

Language has been defined in different ways based on the linguistic formation of the user(s). In most of the definitions given, language is

considered as a cultural component employed by a group of people to identify their members in the community. That is why Fafunwa (1990) contends that language is a tool that permits human beings to turn knowledge into imaginary picture so as to consider alternatives without being in the state of uncertainty. According to Alikali (2008), language is a manifestation of culture, a wealth of cognitive instrument at the service of thought, a critical instrument for the individual to regulate his own higher cognitive functions and above all, a coherent set of deep meaning towards problems. Perhaps Ladan (2004) was right to have viewed language as a key to the heart of the people. This is because it influences the way people perceive things in their environment. The author stressed that language influences the way we think, the way we act and speak, as well as the way we behave in any given social context.

The above points to the fact that language is an aspect of cultural control mechanism which influences individuals' decisions and promotes social accountability which is a social capital needed for understanding a variety of issues be it political, economic or social in any society. For Richards (2010), language is the human vocal 'noise' or arbitrary graphic representation of the 'noise' in writing used systematically and conventionally by a speech community for purpose of communication. Hence, language is the key instrument for shaping thoughts and contouring the mind. For Olarewaju (2002), it is essentially an important tool, which is used to communicate with others. The author further noted that language is the principal medium of communicating ideas, emotions, attitudes and information. Alkali, (2010) sees it as a vehicle of thinking that helps a child to understand whatever knowledge is being imparted to him. So all thought, feelings, ideas etc are expressed through language. In short language facilitates the acquisition and exchange of information and ideas.

Languages in Nigerian Context

Nigeria is one of the multilingual countries in the world. In fact, Nigeria has one of the highest numbers of 'Mutually Unintelligible'



languages spoken on the African continent today. According to Olutoye (2010), the latest number of languages spoken within the political confines of Nigeria is now being put at 521. By 'Mutually Unintelligible', the author explicated that the majority of the speakers of these 521 languages do not understand one another when they speak, except for so cases like Efik/ Anang and Ibibio speakers. George (2006) observed that out of this large number of languages, only very comparatively few of them are written or codified. In other words, most Nigerian languages are oral languages 'being spoken only and not written'.

Little wonder, Rafiu (2010) contended that most of Nigerian languages are not languages of literacy, as they are not used in the teaching of reading and writing in native languages in Nigeria. In other words, they are not used beyond the primary school level of Nigeria's Basic Education System; and that most Nigerian languages have no local or official alphabet. For Crystal (2002), it is obvious today that many Nigerian languages face the risk of death due to non-codification. Simply put, uncodified languages face the risk of dying out of existence either because they are not being spoken by those to whom the language is a native language or the native speakers find it more convenient to speak other languages which serve as the language of wider communication.

Conversely, the three major languages or native languages in Nigeria (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) are regarded as languages of literacy because each has a vast body of literature. Olutoye (2010) referred to language of literacy as language(s) used to teach people how to read and write. Of course, literacy level of Nigeria is generally low and first language literacy is even terrible. Williams (2009) considered first language of a child as part of his personal, social and cultural identity. Stressing further that first language brings about the reflection and learning of successful social patterns of acting and speaking, thereby fosters their linguistic competence. This supports why Federal Government of Nigeria (2004) emphasized on the use of local language as medium of instruction at

lower arm of basic education.

Significant Roles of Nigerian Languages: An Overview

At this juncture, it must be reiterated that the three native languages are paraded as the major languages and enjoyed statutory stamp in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Government of Nigeria. By this status, each of these languages may be used at the state level where they are dominant to perform the roles that English is performing for Nigeria. Succinctly, the Federal Government of Nigeria (1999) stated that native languages could be used to:-

- Conduct debates in the various Houses of Assembly and Local Government Councils;
- Keep records of House of Assembly and Council proceedings;
- Conduct programmes in the state owned media houses;
- Print newspapers;
- Keep official records; and
- Teach as instructional mediums in the basic education school.

In the same vein, Henry (2009) justified the use of native languages on the notion that Nigeria desires to use the languages to convey her national ideals, pride and aspirations. For this author, the recognition and encouragement of the functional rise reassures that Nigeria is not blind to her languages. Contrary to that, Tunde (2009) argued that Nigeria through the three languages is carrying out an experiment in trilingualism with the hope that one of the three languages will rise to become Nigeria's officially recognized national language. That is, the lingering problem that could not be solved since 1960 when Nigeria became independent, where the three languages were identified with the three political regions during colonial era. To this end, it could be deduced that the three languages served as a tribute to our nationalists who represented their people and language in an attempt to wrestle political power from the colonial masters; and that the three languages are given equal footing, as such no region was given an edge over the other. Indeed, it is a laudable approach to keep



Nigeria politically and socio-linguistically balanced.

Moreover, Olutoye (2011) affirmed that each of the three languages attracted the attention of the Federal Government of Nigeria in numerous ways. The author highlighted the special privileges enjoyed as follows:

- They attract official attention from the federal Government of Nigeria;
- They have official orthography each;
- They have a national curriculum description;
- There are textbooks published in each of them to enhance its learning by both indigenous and non-indigenous speakers;
- They have accumulated literature in almost all human endeavors;
- They serve as languages for literacy; and
- They assumed the role of second language status.

From the above, it is obvious that native language is very important because it is the language with which the child established initial rapport with his immediate environment. According to Bilkis (2013), in educational linguistics circles, it is believed that the native language and not just any language is more effective in learning, therefore native language should be used as the medium of instruction in schools. This is because it is the language, which a group of people in an area acquire in their early years and which normally becomes their instrument of thought and communication. Bilkis (2013) listed significance of native language(s) to include:-

- i. Promotion of emotional and mental growth: Native language has a very powerful impact in the information of the individual thought, emotion, psychological behaviour and personality.
- ii. Trait of cultural identity: A child connects to his parents, family, relatives, culture, history, identity and religion through his native language and it links the child with the culture of the society.
- iii. Basis for learning other languages: Jim Cummins also underscores the

importance of preserving native language; “children who come to school with a strong foundation in their mother tongue excel”.

- iv. The languages are examinable subjects at the Secondary School Certificate level. At least, one of them is a mandatory subject for Nigerian children writing the Senior Secondary Certificate in Nigeria.
- v. The Nigerian educational system prepares teachers up to the Nigeria Certificate of Education (NCE) level to teach these languages as subjects at the basic.
- vi. The three languages are areas of academic discipline and specialization in Nigerian universities and in universities outside Nigeria.

From the foregoing, it is evident that native languages are essential to children’s learning and the public at large. For instance, at a higher level of education, there is issue of the gown and town, the contribution of institutions to their immediate environments. The school must be seen as meeting the socio-cultural needs of its immediate environment. At the secondary school level, there is reflection of the environment in the school curriculum. In this respect, one sees how much of the immediate language environment is reflected in the teaching and its behavioral outcome in such areas as expressing social distance, food eaten with the immediate environment of the language, greeting styles, mode of dressing, religious beliefs and practices and so on. Thus, when the socio-cultural aspect of the language is reflected in the texts, it is important to translate it into reality for your students in teaching your language of interest.

Teaching and Learning of Native Languages: The Challenges in Nigeria

Again, in spite of numerous achievements of native languages, yet native languages in Nigeria are bedeviled in some areas. Taiwo (1976) cited in Ashofor et al (2016) was quick to point to the fact that Nigerian languages are rich in traditional settings, but they are generally insufficient to cope with the modern curriculum and concludes



that this insufficiency is a major problem. Considering language as a tool for expressing our innermost views, feelings, desires, thoughts and experiences, the challenge therefore is that there are certain concepts in modern education which may not be adequately conveyed by any of the Nigerian native languages. Oladotun and Francis (2014) identified the following challenges:

1. Generally, the number of teachers available to teach the major languages is very numerically small compared to the teaching needs and demands of the languages. Pertinent to the numerical challenges is the need for the second language teacher to be a native speaker of the second language.
2. Student apathy to studying Nigerian languages in the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.
3. Low incentive to learn and specialize in Nigerian languages: this is because the English language is made compulsory in Nigerian secondary schools and also as a major pre-requisite for admission into higher institutions of learning while any of the Nigerian languages is not.
4. Insufficient funds to the development of materials such as textbooks, teaching aids and other instructional materials in Nigerian languages.
5. Negative attitude of the elite parents: most of the elites and educated parents prefer to communicate with their children in English language. They feel that on leaving school, a student should have attained an acceptable level of achievement in English. Some illiterates would rather employ the service of a teacher of English language to take their children in extra lessons than a teacher of any of the Nigerian languages. Ogunbiyi (2008) opines, 'Most Nigerian parents prefer to send their children to English speaking schools. Some parents even go to the extent of not allowing their children to watch films in Nigerian language as that hinders their acquisition

of the English language (according to those parents).

6. The parents, teachers, students and society at large view fluency in the use of the English language as a symbol or emblem of being educated. Parents believe that the only proof of literacy that their children can exhibit is to communicate in English and they tend to look down on friends and children that cannot express themselves in the English language as uneducated or uncivilized. Unfortunately, even in religious circles, clerics that cannot preach in the English language are seen as uneducated, local or crude. Thus, everyone keeps struggling to speak and learn the foreign language because by the attitude or standard of the society; it offers a kind of prestige or class to its speakers.

Teaching and Learning of Languages in Nigeria: Solutions

Based on the afore-mentioned problems, it is expected that the experts in the field of languages should meet periodically on how to improve on the standard of language literacy and press in the necessary buttons for the development of Nigerian language agencies. Also, issues surrounding teachers' adequacy and qualifications are central to the success of any educational programmes. In fact, there is every need to train qualified teachers to cater for the teaching of the languages.

Moreover, relevant textbooks, audio-visual and educational materials in the Nigerian languages should be developed while obsolete ones be improved upon or upgraded to cope with the present realities of modern education. At this point, there is a need for national re-orientation and awareness on the benefits attached to making use of Nigerian languages in modern education, while both the Federal and State Governments should be committed to implement fully the National policy on 'Language education. Parents, students, teachers and other stakeholders in education need to be sensitized on the dangers of relegating our native or indigenous languages for a foreign language. The government needs to



come up with a policy that makes a sound knowledge of and/or success in at least one Nigerian language part of the criteria for securing gainful employment in the country.

Recommendations

This paper recommends that teachers generally should be provided adequately for all subjects and Nigerian languages in particular. Also, parents and universities management have to team up on how to encourage Nigerians to study Nigerian languages. They should also encourage them, on graduating, to go into the teaching of Nigerian languages. In this sense, Nigerian Government should make teaching profession attractive to retain and absorb the young ones in the field. Next to the availability of personnel is making material resources available to teach Nigerian languages. Such resources include creating a conducive learning environment and all that is required to promote the teaching of the languages.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a cursory look at the teaching and learning of native languages in Nigeria with special attention to its relevance in our day-to-day activities, factors affecting its

growth as well as its way forward. Dwelling on various discourses on the subject matter, the paper underscored the significant roles of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) to the realization of political and socio-linguistically balanced nation. Of great importance to this paper is the notion that language is used to identify a group of ethnic/cultural people whose norms and beliefs are kept generationally in their native language.

The paper exerts that native languages should be given accolade than its present status to the extent that the national assembly's could set aside days/dates when second official languages (native languages) be used for parliamentary duties. For me, this will erase negativity of our youths towards native languages; even the elite parents will embrace the gesture. As a mark of recognition for native language, all government owned secondary schools should conduct their assemblies in native language at least once a week. Needless to say, it is high time we cherished our cultural heritage and national pride. If we fail to blow our trumpet, no one will blow it for us!

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