

AN APPRAISAL OF THE LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA**AMAKIRI, ASIKIYA (PhD)**

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ABSTRACT: *The paper examined the language policy in Nigeria. It reviewed the inception of English language in Nigeria, and discovered that it has been the official language of Nigeria, the language of business and education for more than four decades. The paper took a critical look at the desire to introduce three indigenous languages; namely, Hausa Yoruba and Igbo including French in the face of the dwindling standard of the English language in the country. In order to forestall retrogression in the country, the paper concludes that the lapses in both spoken and written English should be given a remedial attention at all levels, and teachers of English language should be trained and retrained. Also, English language should be allowed to enjoy the status of a second language in Nigeria, due its global status.*

INTRODUCTION

The English language was introduced into Nigeria through the missionaries from Britain, who came to evangelize Nigeria. What followed the evangelization was colonization. That meant that, the country was to be administered which could only be possible through a common language. Aghesi and Abamgbose in Ufomata (1996), note that communication among people with diverse languages was going to be difficult without a common language. Consequently, the English language became Nigeria's second language.

After Nigeria gained independence, the language continued to enjoy a prominent status. This was because according to Kachru (1986), competence in English language had a lot of advantages as the language stood as a symbol of modernization. Ufomata (1996) observes that the English language has a wider geographical spread than any of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. Today, the language functions as the language of politics, business and education. It is the official language of the country. Boots (1981) attests to the fact that English language is regarded as the language of science and technology.

It is the realization of this fact that the Federal and state Government invest their resources in order to produce the needed manpower in essential subject like English language as well as Mathematics. Ufomata (1996), and David-West (1993), note that a credit at O'level English is a prerequisite to gaining admission into any tertiary institution. The English language is also introduced a subject from first year in secondary school. A use of English course is compulsorily done by first year students in tertiary institutions. It is also the language of instruction in the educational milieu as a whole.

ENGLISH IN NIGERIA

Ali (2003:1), reporting “on the health of the lingua franca” asserts that four decades after independence, the standard of English is still poor, with problems in grammar, structure, and writing. He report that both the private sector and the government is seeking a way out of the prevailing situation. The British Council according to him, has offered to assist through the internet and radio broadcast; although, one does not see the feasibility of much success in that kind of training that is not one-on-one, in a country with a limited access to the internet, and a high level of poverty. Also, such training does not incorporate the teachers of English language, which would have been an issue of training the trainers.

The role Language plays in communication is quite invaluable. Language is capable of bringing about social interaction. National cohesion, and preservation of culture. That is why the Federal Government in section1, subsection 10 of the National Policy on Education, third edition stated that:

..... Every child shall learn the language of the immediate environment. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. For smooth interaction with our neighbor, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools.

Suggesting this policy in the face of the dwindling standard of English Language is seen by David-West (1993) as confusing. One wonders the wisdom of introducing other official languages, more than twenty years after independence. This paper thought that the ideal thing would have been a clear policy to improve the standard of spoken and written English in Nigeria, since it has been functioning as a second language for a long time. The paper is skeptical about the hasty introduction of three indigenous languages, and another foreign language to function as the second official language in Nigeria.

THE WAY FORWARD

It is pertinent to note that there is nothing wrong in learning the language of ones environment, especially for the families of the educated elites, who prefer communicating in English language, to communicating in their mother tongue (LI). Ali (2003), notes that though, such parents communicates with their children in English language because they desire an early exposure to English language, it is expedient for then to also communicate with their children in their mother tongue. Such teaching can be done naturally, since we can not train teachers for all the four hundred (400) languages in Nigeria.

According to Ufomata (1996), Nigeria had about four hundred (400) languages, that was why the English language was introduced, to serve as common means of interaction. It is therefore not clear how the introduction of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba can make for national unity.

The reality is that immediately one chooses any of the three languages, one automatically excludes oneself from speakers of the other two languages. It is also not very easy to learn the three languages. Consequently, national cohesion and unity cannot be achieved by the introduction of three Nigerian languages. Awobuluyi (2006) notes that the teaching of three (3) major languages as second language has not happened elsewhere. It is an innovation that appears confusing.

Nigeria has several neighbors. Looking at the world map, and west Africa in particular, it may not be a bad ideal to learn to interact with any of our neighbours; however, the compulsion attached to this policy, spurs one to want to ascertain the preparedness of government in terms of human and material resources to implement the policy.

At present, a comprehensive statistics of the number of French teachers and books in the country may not be available; nevertheless, considering the challenges posed by the policy, it appears that they may not be adequate. This is because, even the much propagated indigenous languages have a long way to go in terms of human and material resources. Awobuluyi, notes that, even among the three Nigerian languages, only Yoruba can boast of enough teachers. According to him, although French had existed as an elective course in secondary school curriculum, since it is a foreign language, pupils do not readily find models to interact with on a daily basis; therefore, it is difficult for it to grow beyond the chalkboard.

SUMMARY

The ability to make a viable language policy is the desire of every country including Nigeria. Looking at the role language plays in the communication, social interaction, national cohesion etc, education and language experts should begin to appreciate the oblivious implications of the trends in the issue of Nigerians language policy- English Language, three indigenous languages on one hand and French on the other hand.

CONCLUSION

The paper traced the origin of the commencement of English language as the official language in Nigeria. It also ascertained the fact that the use of English language in this capacity had lasted for more than four decades. The fact also remains that English language is occupying a high status globally; therefore, the federal government of Nigeria should re-examine its language policy

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper is of the view that to forestall retrogression as a result of what we may term a 'shaky' language policy in Nigeria, both spoken and written English should be given a remedial attention at all levels. Also, teachers of English language should be trained and retrained, while English language should be allowed to enjoy the status of a second language in Nigeria, without any rivalry. This indeed could be a step in the right direction.

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