

# FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: BRIDGING THE GAP IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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## Abstract

Language is one of the resources through which a nation or an individual can meet his needs. The statement contained in the National Policy on Education (1988) is therefore a perfect and noble desire. It is compulsory that students at the Secondary School level of education acquired proficiency in three languages: Immediate mother tongue, first foreign language (English) and one of the three major domestic languages. This paper examines these government prescriptions about language in the education system in line with the language practice i.e. what obtains in our schools and laments that the sooner we shifted from policy to practice the brighter the hope of English Language Education in Nigeria. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need to master first language before scrambling for the English Language.

## Introduction

The introduction of the English Language into Nigeria is credited to the early British traders and the missionaries who first visited the African west coast. Prior to this time, the language of communication between West Africans and the larger world was the Portuguese pidgin. The Portuguese were the first to trade along the West African coast as early as the 15th century. The coming of the British missionaries and educationists later saw the replacement of the Portuguese established pidgin with the English Language. The language “English” is a conglomerate of many languages and a nonnative language in Nigeria; but it has come to stay in Nigeria (E. Enang, 2009:1), (Enang, E. and Urujian V. 2013b:115).

It is obvious that English, because of its discernible relevance to the 21st Century technological development, English seems to be in high demand even from Nursery to Secondary and Tertiary levels of Education. According to (Greenman, 2000), language education in Nigeria should follow the direction of education in the 21st Century, that of empowering learners to become efficient, confident, independent and self directed learners that can lead productive lives. Scholars in many fields of study, journalists and legislators are asking how the nation's schools can be made to be more effective (Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 2013c:207) and (Urujzian V. 2016: 81). English language is required for the learning in other fields of studies, it should therefore be taught well.

According to Bamgbose (1970:4) cited in Enang, E. (2009), "Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language" (p.4). English Language is a second language in Nigeria. It is a basic tool for national growth ( Urujzian 2012:185). Today, English Language has become not only the medium of communication in Nigeria, but Bamgbose (1982) and Uno (1990) and (Urujzian V. 2020) posited that that it is the language of trade, administration of government, internal and external communication. For Wokoma (1997:1) and Enang, E. (2009), "English serves as Nigeria's inter-ethnic language; a language of commerce, education, public communication and administration". English equally serves as a language of social, religious and political interactions in 2020 Nigeria. This is the language Nigeria uses internationally.

Nigeria has adopted the English Language as a second language (L<sub>2</sub>), though a foreign language, a lingua franca among the educated elites, and an additional language, as labelled by linguists and non-linguists alike as a panacea for her inability to evolve an indigenous national language Because of the importance attached to English

Language as the basic language of formal education in Nigeria, the official language of government and private administration Communication and ...(Urujzian V. 2012 : 182), (Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 2013c). For example, in the contention as to whether or not any one of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) should be adopted as national language, Ogu (1999; 24) and Enang, E. (2009), concluded that English is the answer thus:

As long as Nigerians from other language groups and other ethnic groups feel marginalized by adoption of three main languages of Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo, so long will an indigenous lingua franca elude us and so long will English continue to gain dominance.

For Banjo (1995:4) and (Enang and Urujzian, 2013a:215), any attempt to drop English in favour of a Nigerian indigenous language would be considered-as "breaking a national Keg of gunpowder". In a bid to demonstrate how English is important as a unifying factor in Nigeria, Obasanjo, cited in Fadeiye, (1996) declares that: "English is the language that provides Nigeria with means of communication among groups. Searching for a lingua franca in Nigeria is therefore a fruitless and time wasting venture."

English Language is acquired mainly through the school system of formal teaching and learning. Nevertheless, as a second language, it constitutes some problem to its learners/users. Vocabulary, syntax and phonology are to some extent, strange to the learner/user and different from those of their mother tongues. The poor method and quality of teaching the language in our local set up by the non-native users of the language itself compounds and complicates the problem of the L2 learner in expressing themselves well in good grammar, especially the inconsistency inherent in the syntax of English or the English syntactic structures (NTA: 2003, Urujzian v. 2020 and Enang, E. 2009). In many

situations, there is very often, little difference between such non-native teachers and the learners of the language.

However, a significant aspect of the problems encountered by many Nigerian users of English is their inability to master its syntax, phonology and semantics completely. This inability does not only lie in knowing the discrete features of the English syntax, but the learner find it difficult to construct sentences that are error free in their use of English for communication in formal and non-formal settings. For example, teachers, researchers and educational examiners have continued to complain of the poor standard and performance of the secondary school students in the oral and written English especially in the West Africa Senior Schools Certificate Examination. For example, the West African Examination Council (1979: 16) reported that:

Every year for the past four years, the performance has tended to be worse than the previous years, but this year has been a noticeable decline in general and there is certainly great concern about the standard of English teaching in our schools.

Even as at 1999, WAEC reported persistent failure of Students in English (WAEC Report, 1999), considered from the direction of general realities, English will continue to play a significant role in the country's educational curriculum, efforts should be made to identify and bridge the gap in English Language Education in Nigeria.

### **The Place of English Language in the National Policy on Education**

The importance of English in this country is underscored in the Federal Republic of Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004) which stipulates under section 51 and 91 as follows:

The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made thereof (section 51). Again,

section 3 part 15 (14) of the National Policy on Education equally stresses that: Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage English. (p.8)

A critical examination of this language policy reveals some focus on English and indigenous languages as well. It does not advocate the replacement of English as an official language. It rather preaches co-existence. It pays attention to the multilingual nature of Nigeria. In the National Language Policy, we have the following: “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.

In section 2, subsection 11, paragraph 3, the policy in relation to pre-primary education indicates: “Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community” (Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 2013c:207).

For primary education, the policy stipulates in section 3, subsection 15, paragraph, 4, thus: “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.”

With regard to secondary education, the policy stipulates in section 4, subsection 19. paragraph 4(b) that Nigerians at the level of education are required to select and to study the language in their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian languages - Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers. Finally, for Adult and Non-formal Education, the policy stipulates in section 7,

subsection 52, paragraph 6, thus: “The National Commission will work out the overall strategy, for the inclusion of Nigerian Arts, Culture and Languages in Adult Education Programmes” (Enang, Urujzian and Udoka, 2013c:207).

The different sections of the policy also have specific requirements aimed at ensuring the successful implementation of the policy stipulations. Such include:

- (i) Linguistic analyses of the phonology and the syntax of each language concerned;
- (ii) Devising a practical orthography based on the linguistic analyses;
- (iii) Preparing and testing primers and readers as well as supplementary reading materials;
- (iv) Preparation of teachers notes;
- (v) Preparation of a dictionary and a practical grammar;
- (vi) Development of written literature in each language.

### **Problems of Implementation**

Despite Government's good intentions and stipulations regarding the language policy statements, there are problems of implementation. For example, the general stipulation talks about "three major languages" as if languages in Nigeria are categorized into major and minor. The linguistic facts are: in Nigeria, there are languages spoken by the larger ethnic groups and there are others spoken by the minor ethnic groups. A linguistic way to talk about them is to refer to major group languages (such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) and minor group languages (such as Ibibio, Tiv and Edo). In such an argument, the words major and minor describe the relative populations of the speakers (Enang, E. & Urujzian, V. 2013a.)

Also, the government does not sound firm on the matter. “...each child should be encouraged to learn...” For the policy at the pre-primary and primary levels "the language of the immediate community" is a problem because as it stands, the statement is entirely

open-ended. Where does the language of the immediate community begin and where does it stop? For the primary level, it is also open to all forms of interpretation. What does this expression mean? ".....and at a later stage?" Should English start at primary three or four? The policy would have been more helpful if it had indicated specifically what the "later stage" stands for.

Finally, at the secondary school level and at Adult Non-formal education stage, there are also problems. For instance, the expression "subject to availability of teachers", suggests that secondary school students will have no case to answer if they do not have teachers! Where there is a teacher for only one of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, the children may have no choice: they would then learn the language the teacher is ready to teach! For Adult and Non-formal Education, there is an indefinite proposal which impresses neither the teacher nor the student.

In the present circumstance therefore, the Nigerian student is expected to be exposed to at least two languages in his/her struggle to receive formal education. This case obviously generates problems which evolve when two or more languages are brought into contact. Problems tend to surface where there are differences between the mother tongue or first language (L1) and second language (L2) such differences are said to emanate from mother tongue interference in the L2. The problems generated by this contact situation can be addressed through contrastive analysis.

From the forgoing, many issues and questions have arisen. Educational policies have often not worked in Nigeria because of serious problems with the analytical work and the policy formulation process. The language policy has been besieged with problems.

If education which is the transmission of a society's way of life to the younger generation is made possible through language, then there should be certainty as to which language should be used at what stage to carry out this great task, (Enang, E. and Tsavmbu, A. 2022).

At the childhood stage, the National policy on language Education recognized that Education at this stage is the means of

initiating a child into the way of life of the society to enable him/her live and function in the society. It is suggested that Education at this stage should be in mother tongue or language of the environment. But this is not what obtains in nursery schools. English has become an elite's symbol, so pupils are taught in English from day one.

The language statement was skilfully crafted but not matched with implementation and delivery. The gulf between the intent and the execution has created a crises situation. Most Nigerians have lost the ingredients in other tongue and have not mastered English properly. Our students are neither proficient in English language nor their mother tongue. The nation's two policy documents- the constitution and the National Policy on Education (NE) - place the English Language as first among equals. As stated above, the constitution provides that the business of the National Assembly shall be coordinated in the English Language and in Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba after adequate arrangement have been made. However, for the unity of the Country and the utilitarian value of the English Language, "adequate arrangement" has never been made and will never be made since 1979 for the use of any Nigerian Language in the National Assembly (Enang, E. and Tsavmbu, A. 2022).

The NPE also provides for the use of the child's mother tongue or language of the immediate environment as the language of instruction at the nursery and the primary school levels, and English as the language of instruction from mid-primary to the University level. However, no Nigerian parent, not even the advocate of mother tongue education in the academic circle will send their children to a nursery or primary school in which the medium of instruction is an indigenous Nigerian language. This is because "English is the vehicle which discharges Nigerian talents at strategic places of developmental breakthrough across the globe" (Osakwe, 2005b:20) (Enang and Urujian, 2013b:215). English is no longer regarded as the first vestibule of colonialism but today being educated is synonymous with reading, writing and speaking the English Language. English Language has overwhelmed and conquered over 519 Nigerian indigenous



languages. English is now being used to appease the ancestors, serve the gods, perform rituals and incantation.

The consequences of this are the extinction of our indigenous cultures and the death of some local technologies embedded in our languages. According to Sapir (2007), "Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives". The death of a language connotes the death of the culture of a people. In the same vein Uguru (2007) and (Enang and Urujian, 2013b:215) bemoaned the death of local technologies embedded in our indigenous languages. To them, the technology of a native speaker (which is already embedded in the language) is better imparted through the language to the learner (104). Therefore, a relegation of the language directly affects the technology inherent in it.

In researches carried out by Dada (2007) and Enang, E. (2009), there is a consensus that majority of the respondent's chose English Language against an indigenous lingual Franca for reasons of unity. The big question now is where is this unity in the face of Boko Haram, OPC, Massob and Niger Delta Militancy? Can English Language be used to resolve current crises that have be fallen the giant of Africa? (Enang, E. and Tsavmbu, A. 2022).

A look at what obtains in our schools and evidence surrounding us show that the language education policy in Nigeria leaves much to be desired. The issue of permanent literacy in the four languages is a mirage as observed by (Enang and Urujian, 2013b) Udosen, 2005 (52a) "What we have is an unprecedented increase in functionally illiterate school leavers from the public, primary and secondary schools" Obanya (2002) and Enang, E. (2009) also observed that most learners have not sufficiently mastered the various languages to the extent of using them as tools for reasoning and logical presentation of thought.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has been shown that to formulate a policy is one thing but to effectively practice this policy is another. That

government's language policy is not adhered to, is brought to the fore. Virtually, every school will vote straight-for the English medium. The general scramble for the English Language has promoted "colonialism" inside independence, now English language is "colonizing" the indigenous Nigerian language. This scramble has resulted in poor mastery of English language and total neglect of mother tongues. Finally, this trend should be checked by encouraging the study of English language and other Nigerian languages.

### Remedies

- (1) English Language should be taught with the mother tongue (LI) or the language of a child's immediate environment at the developmental stage of a child. This will not only improve the child's lexis of the language but will offer the child the opportunity to compare English with his native vernacular thereby, improving his understanding of the English Language.
- (2) Facilities in schools such as classrooms, laboratories, workshops, sporting facilities and equipment should be provided and schools should compulsorily establish libraries stocked with current books and learning materials. If students should have access to current and interesting literature books, there will be improvement in the quality of English language and the target indigenous lingua Franca.
- (3) Government should chose one Nigerian language with a good autography and rich literature base and infuse resources for its immediate development for domestic use. The chosen language should be made a compulsory subject and more credit hours should be given for its study in Nigerian schools.
- (4) Teachers of the said subjects should be paid double to encourage research and further study in that language and Government should deploy funds for literature works, research and every activity that will promote the study of the said language.

- (5) Scholarship should be made available to Nigerians who choose to study this language at the Tertiary Education to encourage more scholarship in the chosen language.
- (6) Churches and media houses should present programmes in these languages and in carrying out this, learners' needs should be kept at the fore-front.
- (7) Finally, federal Government of Nigeria should make concerted efforts to implement the National Policy by putting visible structures in place to raise the policy from a mere paper work to a utilitarian policy ( Enang, E. 2009),

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