

English Language, Nigerian Society, and Culture: Implications for Post-Colonialism

Dr. (Mrs) Patricia U. Mmegwa

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Jos, Jos. Nigeria.

And

Dr. (Mrs.) Eunice Fash

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Jos, Jos. Nigeria.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the role the English language has played and is still playing in making communication and unity possible in Nigeria. The multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages in Nigeria would have been a serious barrier to mutual interaction and communication among the diverse ethnic groups in the country but for the introduction of the English language. Although Hausa was the predominant language in Northern Nigeria during the pre-colonial period, not everybody in the north understood the language implying that communication was still a big challenge. The merging of the northern and southern protectorates by the colonialists might not have succeeded if there had not been a binding medium of communication between the two parts. The introduction of the English language brought about unity in the country. Nigeria has continued to benefit from the English language because as a world language, English connects Nigeria to the outside world. The English language bridged the language gap in the country thereby fostering unity, mutual trust, trade, commerce, and transportation and by implication, development. English is the lingua franca of Nigeria; it is the language of education, administration, commerce, and politics. Famous Nigerian authors such as Chinua Achebe, and Wole Soyinka among others were able to portray Nigerian society and culture to the world using the English language. Nigerians have access to science and technological developments, ICT, and interactions within and outside the country through the English language. Nigeria is what it is today because of the English language considering the numerous roles it plays in the country. The paper adopted the qualitative method which involved

consulting relevant literature on the topic under discussion. The thesis of the paper is that priority attention should be given to the teaching and learning of the English language in Nigeria. The government should ensure that teacher education is improved to have quality teachers and invariably quality products from the school system.

Keywords: Language, Nigeria, society, culture and post-colonialism

Introduction

Language is one of the most important features that distinguish humans from animals. Man uses language to communicate and make others understand him. Language is a compendium of words, phrases, clauses, and sentences that a user chooses from and arranges together systematically to express meanings that are appropriate in a particular context. Humans depend on language in all their social activities to do things. (Finegan, in Okeke, 2012) opines that people use language principally as a tool to do things: “request a favour, make a promise, report a piece of news, give directions, offer a greeting, seek information, extend an invitation, request help and do hundreds of other things ...” p.302

Researchers have different definitions of language and a few of them suffice here. Language is a system of human expression employing words; any system of signs, movements, etc. used to express meanings or feelings (Procter, in Makeri, 2004). Similarly, (Strang, Makeri, 2004) sees language as a system of arbitrary, vocal symbols that permit all people in a given culture, or other people who have learned the system of that culture to communicate or to interact. In the same vein, (Scott et. al, in Makeri, 2004) say that:

Language is on its own; it is different from anything else we take part in, and it is something we take part in, not merely a subject to learn about ... there is more to language than custom and fashion... It is clear that language has many purposes, but its main business is communication. (p.56)

The English language is undoubtedly the most important legacy of the British colonial masters in Nigeria (Banjo, 1976). The

English language has established itself in Nigeria, as a unifying force. Aside from being the lingua franca, it is like a rope that ties members of the different speech communities together in continuing interrelationships in Nigeria. It can be said that the English language complements the indigenous languages since it facilitates inter-ethnic interaction as well as international communication.

The implantation, acceptance, and role of English in the body politics of Nigeria started with it being adopted as a channel of instruction in 1882 and a vehicle for the training of the badly-needed manpower to run the fledging government services (Baldeh, 1990). Thus, English was seen as a prestigious language of success and power.

English has practically come in contact with all indigenous Nigerian languages over the years and therefore has expanded in its domain of usage, range, functions, and structural features. (Oluga & Babalola 2012). Thus, when Nigerians speak English, words and intonations from their various indigenous languages appear in their speech giving rise to a local variant of English.

English language, Nigerian Society and Culture

The origin of the English language in Nigeria dates back to the eighteenth century with the coming of the British to the coastal areas of Nigeria. One of the reasons for their coming was for trade, to colonize, and later for religious reasons. The legacy of the English language in Nigeria today was largely due to the efforts of the early missionaries who educated Nigerians in the English Language. (Bamgbose, in Ajulo, 1989) observes that of the entire heritage left behind by the British, none is perhaps more important than the English language.

In Nigeria, the English language serves as the lingua franca and the official medium of communication in diverse areas of functioning including schools, families, organizations, administration, government, trade, and commerce. Proficiency in oral and written expression in English is a critical requirement for admission into tertiary institutions of learning and access to jobs both in Nigeria and many countries of the world. (Mmegwa, 2014). This therefore implies that every Nigerian child needs assistance to acquire literacy in English considering its critical

role in Nigerian society. In short, schooling is synonymous with literacy acquisition in English in Nigeria, and being literate in English is necessary for meaningful participation in the social, professional, and educational life of Nigeria (Oyetunde, 2002). Hence, the paper advocates that adequate attention should be given to the proper teaching and learning of the English language in the educational system. Equally important is the proper training of teachers in the country.

The English language is part of the evolving history of many nations of the world. The language has played (and continues to play) a significant role in Nigeria's educational system. Historically, Nigerians generally place a very high value on the role of education in the development of the country and this is only possible through the English language. Again, the realisation that education determines one's meaningful participation in the modern world gave rise to the high demand for Western education which is majorly achieved through the English language in Nigeria.

At independence, the English language enjoyed the status of both national and official language and a prestigious school subject in the curricula at all levels of education in Nigeria to the extent that candidates who failed it could not be awarded the Cambridge Syndicate School Certificate in those days no matter how good the grades of such candidates in other subjects. However, the status of the English language in the scheme of things changed in the late seventies when credit in the English language was no longer required as a prerequisite for admission into some Nigerian Universities. At a point, some universities started admitting students without a credit pass in English Language and argued that it was not necessary for a candidate studying for a degree in Science or Engineering, for instance, to be required to have a 'credit' pass in school certificate English language paper. Such universities started admitting students in Science and Engineering without a credit pass in English (Ajulo, 1989). (p.51)

Expectedly, it did not take quite long before the effects of the neglect of the English language in the School Certificate Examinations began to manifest. Some university products could not write simple outlines or take minutes of meetings. It got to a point that some employers of labour wrote to the universities and

complained that some of their graduates' command of the English language was embarrassingly low. However, the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977, in Ajulo, 1989) cleared the doubt as regards the place of the English language in Nigerian Education coupled with the realisation of the significance of education in the growth and development of the individual and the country as a whole and which cannot be achieved if the English language is not there (Ajulo, 1989).

Language and National Development of Nigeria

The role of the English language in a multilingual, multicultural, and multi-religious country such as Nigeria is that of integration. The English language is the means of homogenizing the ethnically and culturally diverse Nigerian peoples. Nigeria is fortunate to have an international language such as English to interact with among the diverse citizens of the country and the outside world. Picture a situation where one does not understand English and finds oneself in a place outside the local dialect. The frustration is better imagined. This was the experience of a Somalian refugee and her daughter in the USA. Commenting on the efforts to communicate with the refugees who did not understand English at the time, Franks (2012) states thus, "Often teachers feel discouraged when trying to communicate with families who do not speak English, yet these first moments are when trying is most important". (p.21)

Though the National Policy on Education advocated the teaching of some indigenous languages in schools, it is obvious that not much would be learned about science and technology through these languages to foster development in the country. Again, it is obvious that knowledge of English gives a Nigerian child a lead in the acquisition of science and technology. Nigeria's development technologically and otherwise depends on the English language. Language is a technology that surpasses all the technologies because before one acquires individual technology, one must have speech technology conveyed in the English language. A society without language is a dead society (Makeri, 2004). Therefore, speech technology and industrial technology must interact before meaningful development will take place. The Federal Government of Nigeria has invested heavily in various industrial projects in the past to encourage technology transfer.

Despite all these efforts, Nigeria is still far behind in technological self-sufficiency.

The government should realize that there is a strong relationship between language, culture, technology, and development. The implication is that effective use of language is paramount in the interpretation and application of technological policies. A society with organised and developed technology owes its credit to language. It is imperative to use the language in which the technology is planted while factoring in the cultural background and experiences of the learners. It is also necessary to emphasize the need to base instructional methods on the students' cultural environment and societal needs when teaching. For instance, in teaching concepts like "Osmosis", "Photosynthesis", "Oxidation" etc. the teacher should adapt illustrations from the learners' socio-cultural environment rather than using photographs of scenes and phenomena represented in the instructions from England, Australia, or the United States of America (Ajulo, 1989).

Education is the function of English as the major language for creative writing in Nigeria. The writer's task of creating a dialogue that appeals to all Nigerians is complicated by the fact that Nigeria has diverse ethnic and cultural groups. So English became the major language used by creative writers for expressing their thoughts and feelings and also promoting the indigenous culture of the people to the outside world. Hence, Nigerian literary works are now read all over the world and many of them are translated into other languages. For example, Chinua Achebe's work: "Things Fall Apart" tells a story of functional society in pre-colonial Nigeria. These writers used English as a language of mutual communication between Nigerians and the outside world (Jatau, 2014).

Furthermore, the English language is the most extensively used in the print media in Nigeria. The majority of the daily newspapers in the country like the Vanguard, the Sun, Thisday, The Guardian, etc are written in English. English remains the most widely used language for newscasts, advertisements, and documentaries among others. Nigerian films are produced mainly in the English language. It is worthy of note that these films are not only popular in Nigeria but also outside the country. Traditional Nigerian music such as Juju music, Fuji, Apala, etc.

are also sung in English and that shows how far the English language has helped in portraying Nigerian culture.

The coming together of the English language with the indigenous languages in Nigeria brought about what is called middle-belt English, one which is not strictly British or Nigerian (Esimaje, 2004). This mixture came about because of two reasons: First, the natives already had their mother tongue which interfered with the new language, English. This gave rise to a version of English that reflected the natives' linguistic backgrounds which differed from British English in both content and form. Second, with the exit of the British colonizers and the missionaries, the teaching of English was left to Nigerian teachers who were not quite knowledgeable in the language. The standard of language education fell short of that of the teachers' missionary masters. This gave rise to what is known as Nigerian English today which is recognized as Nigerian variety of English. That notwithstanding, standard English is the official language in use in the country and efforts should be made by stakeholders to ensure that standard English in both the written and spoken forms are encouraged in the country's educational system.

For this paper, English refers to both the official variety and the Nigerian form. The truth is that the English language has come to stay in Nigeria and therefore justifies its adaptation to suit the socio-cultural milieu of Nigerians making it a binding force of all the people. This buttresses the belief that a people is bound by two inseparable features; their culture and language. Consequently, the acculturated English became a Nigerian symbol of identity and unity. As Esimaje (2004) observes,

Identity, because the English of a typical Nigerian bears the imprints of her cultures and world-views. This is manifested in the lexis, semantics, and sometimes syntax of their English. For instance ... direct translations, local idioms, and proverbs are common features of the written English of Nigerians. For a Nigeria to communicate his message effectively to a Nigerian audience, the message must have this local colour. And as every Nigerian user feels at home ... there lies the root of our integration through Nigerianised English (p.63)

English is a factor of unity because it is the one feature that is common to all Nigerians. Through the English language, Nigerians relate with and understand one another. The totality of Nigeria revolves around the English language. For instance, education, administration, commerce, information flow, and national and international communications are made possible through English.

The unifying power of language is evident in conflict resolution through effective communication using a common language. Effective communication is an essential tool in peacebuilding. As an important tool that binds societies together, language can be used to express constructive ideas and warm feelings, thus helping relationships to grow and flourish. On the contrary, words can be used to cause emotional pain and destroy relationships and in the case of Nigeria, English is the language (Mmegwa, 2014). In the words of Clark and Clinton (1994, as cited in Mmegwa, 2014)

Human beings need to communicate to feel included, to feel affection, and to feel some sense of control over their lives. To feel a sense of inclusion, they must develop relationships where they have a sense of belonging. To feel a sense of affection, human beings must develop relationships where they experience a sense of caring and being cared for. Psychologically, human beings need to communicate to develop a sense of identity with fellow human beings. This implies that people's relationships with others help them to define themselves.

This is where the English language comes in as a language of unity among the diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious groups in Nigeria. It would have been almost impossible for Nigerians to communicate with one another without the English language. English plays two different roles within the educational programme. First, it is a school subject. Second, it is a medium of instruction especially from the senior secondary level to the higher level of education as stipulated by the National Policy on Education.

Looking at English as a medium of instruction involves three things: the student, the teacher, and the instructional

material. Here demands that the levels of English language used in teaching the student be appropriate such that a secondary school graduate should be able to communicate efficiently in both oral and written English. Unfortunately, one sees learners who are ill-prepared for higher institution levels of education. There is a need for re-orientation of the present socio-cultural milieu of English in Nigeria. Every teacher in both secondary and high educational system in Nigeria must be responsible for promoting efficient and effective learning and use of English and not leave this responsibility to teachers of the English language.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show that education is a critical issue in Nigeria. It has also been established that education has always been recognized as a powerful catalyst for the growth and development of the citizens of Nigeria and Nigeria as a nation. In summary, Nigeria's educational program must be work-oriented, and this can only be achieved through the English language. This implies that the English language program in Nigeria should be such that will produce graduates who can perform efficiently in both the oral and written aspects of the English language by being able to write minutes of meetings and write reports of panels among others effectively. Above all, graduates of the program should be able to make well-reasoned, logical, and coherent public speech commensurate to their levels. It has been clearly stated that the English language plays a significant role as an inevitable instrument for expressing Nigeria's nationhood within and outside the country. Hence, English language and education in Nigeria cannot be separated. They work together to foster both human and national development in Nigeria.

Recommendations

1. The government should give the teaching and learning of English priority attention to have competent and efficient products from the educational system.
2. The government should ensure that teacher education is given priority attention.

3. Teachers at all levels of education should ensure that graduates at every level of education measure up to their level.

References

- Ajulo, E. B. (1989). The English language, National Language Policy and Human Resource Development in Multilingual and Multicultural Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Policy and Strategy*. 4, (2). p.47-74
- Baldeh, F. (1990), *Better English language learning and Teaching*. Nsukka: Fulladu Publish Company
- Banjo A. A. (1976). Historical view of English language in Nigeria, in the University and standardization of English Language in Nigeria. *Journal of Modern Languages*, I (January 1976) P. 63-67
- Esimaje, A. U. (2004). The role of the English Language in the integration of Nigerians in WIMJOT 1.(1), *WITED Multidisciplinary Journal for Teachers*. P.61-64.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education (Revised Edition)*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Franks, L. (2012). Breaking through and moving beyond the language barrier. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 56(1), 21.
- Makeri, A. T. (2004). *The role of language and Technology in National Growth*. WIMJOT (1) No 1 *WITED Multidisciplinary Journal for Teachers*.
- Mmegwa, P. U. (2014). *Effective communication as a bridge-building tool among conflicting communities in Nigeria*. *Nigerian Journal of Psychology*. An official Journal of the Nigeria Psychological Association, Abuja 20, (1). 193-202.
- Okeke, F. A. (2012). Language Can: Ensuring National Security through Effective Use of Language in African Research Review. *An International Multidisciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*. 6 (4). 216-233.
- Oluga, S. O. & Babalola, H. A. (2012). Official use of English and the result of Marginalization of indigenous African languages: the case of the three major Nigerians languages, *European Journal of Social Sciences*. 32, (4), 619 – 631
- Oyetunde, T. O. (2002). *Second-language reading*. Insights from Nigerian primary school. *The Reading Teacher*. 55, (8), 748-755.