



RESTRUCTURING NATIONAL LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIA: A NEW DIRECTION TO EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

The emergence of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Programme in Nigeria was in September 1999. The Programme was amended in 2008 by the Federal Government of Nigeria, through the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC). This yielded a great landmark for introducing and developing the 9-Year Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) which was aimed enabling every Nigerian citizen access to equivalent education comprehensively and coeducationally. Similarly, Nigeria's national language policy which focused on the official structure of the English language as an official medium of instruction from primary four to subsequent levels of education, while the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community to be the medium of instruction at pre-primary and early primary levels has left a wide gap which may serve as one of the factors or reasons that may affect the communicative competence of pupils or learners in handling English as a subject or medium of instruction. Especially, considering the designed objectives of inculcating in the school childrens' permanent literacy, numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively which lays the concrete educational foundation of pupils in terms of language development. The common criticisms or observations that this paper may raise on the issue of language policy and that of UBE is lack of a well-articulated transition from the mother tongue to English, or lack of proper implementation of the policy, as language cannot be properly taught using another language. Therefore, the paper draws the attention of policymakers and curriculum designers in revising and restructuring the language policy in order to ascertain the objectives designed by UBE and the educational policy in general.

Keywords: policy, first language, mother tongue, medium of instruction, challenges

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1. Introduction

Language as a Medium of Instruction has for long been a controversial issue in Nigeria. As a multiethnic and multi-lingual nation, with over 500 indigenous languages spoken within its borders (Blench, 2002), Nigeria has language problems to be solved. This has attracted the attention of many stakeholders in education and triggered interesting debates in academia. The genesis of the issue started with the arrival of the Christian Missionaries who came to teach the gospel by converting natives to Christianity. The first response was establishing church-schools to teach the natives the language of the bible and train them to become catechists through English language, and later teach with local languages. With the advent of colonial masters to colonize the land, the educational system witnessed a curriculum shift. English language was now used in schools to train natives as clerks, messengers, and the language became the tool with which the new territory would be administered. Hence, the language became the language of education and administration (Bamgbose, 1991). And it occupied the official domains and the lives of the colonized. Therefore, as schools were built to teach western education, the language became a prestigious language in the land. In 1882, the colonial government intervened in the system by promulgating a law that made English the language of instruction at schools and as a subject that must be taught at all stages of educational growth (Adetugbo, 1979).

Notwithstanding, the major goal of education in the colonial era was to make the natives assimilate into the colonial culture. However, the indigenous languages were allowed to be taught in schools alongside English (but not as the primary medium of instruction). English language as the medium of instruction has particularly been largely spoken in the Southern part of Nigeria. This is as result of the earlier contact and response of the region to Christianity and western education compared to the Northern region where Islamic Missionaries had a stronghold. In the Southern region, the natives readily sent their children to schools to be educated in the English language. That became a ladder to attaining social mobility under the Imperial Government. Hence, the English language became not only the language of administration and religion but the symbol of a dignified class. In the Northern region, the response and attitude to English was quite different, Christian Missionaries were not as successful as they were in the Southern region. There were rejections by the Northern natives because of the held notion that western education was introduced to spread the gospel, to which they resisted because of their existing Islamic beliefs.

The initial acceptance of western education, with the conquest of Northern Nigeria, was concentrated only on the traditional Northern feudal class. The Hausas took to their Arabo-Asiatic language and their Islamic religion while a meager percentage of the inhabitant embraced Christianity. This dichotomy between the North and the South along linguistic, cultural, and religious lines still exists today. Without paying much cognizance to these differences, the colonial authority amalgamated the Southern and the Northern Protectorates in 1914 for ease of governance and made the English language an

official national language of administering linguistically heterogeneous lands. A remarkable landmark in colonial system of education was recorded in 1927 when the British Advisory Committee on Native Education in Tropical Africa recommended that native languages should be incorporated in schools to serve as the medium of instruction in the lower years of primary education (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). That was the genesis of official teaching of the students in their native languages, thereafter, there was a transition to the English language. That transition limited the use of local languages as the medium of instruction in schools up till today. On this note Bamgbose (1991) said that the introduction of formal education and the subsequent adoption of English as the medium of instruction hindered the exclusive use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in education in Nigeria. However, it has become the official policy in Nigeria that the medium of instruction at Lower Basic Education (the first three years of education) should be the Mother Tongue (MT), or the Language of the Immediate Environment (LIC) while at Upper Basic Education (primary four and above), the medium of instruction should be English language. While the major indigenous language of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba should be thought as school subjects (FRN, 1999).

2. The National Language Policy

There are different conceptions of the term “policy.” It is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary as the plan of action, statement of aims and ideas, especially one made by the government, political party, Business Company, etc. Technically, it has been conceived by Terry (1977) as an overall guide that states the general limitations and directions in which administrative action of an organization are to be conducted. This implies that policy is an organizational statement defining the unanimous decisions on the aims and objectives of the organization put forward for implementation. Therefore, a policy can be understood as a government or nongovernmental statement of intent on a particular program directed for implementation.

From the above conceptions, Spolsky (2004) described Language Policy as a consensus that is made up of three interrelated but independent components. These components are:

- 1) The language practices of the speech community: this involves the variety they use for different communicative functions. This includes the variants they use with various interlocutors, the rules agreed for speech and silence, for dealing with common topics, and for expressing or concealing identity (Spolsky, 2004). He stated that this is described by sociolinguists as the ecology or the ethnography of speech, exceptions to which may mark the speaker as alien or rebellious.
- 2) Different values for different language varieties: this involves the differentiation of values for different language varieties in the society. These values are attached according to the beliefs and the importance of these language varieties to the speech community. At times, the beliefs may be organized into ideologies

(Blommaert, 2006). It can be a more elaborate combinations of the values shared by certain members of the community.

- 3) The 'planning' and what Spolsky (2004) prefer to call 'management' of the language varieties: this deals with the efforts of some members of a speech community who have or believe they have authority over other members to modify their language practice by changing them to adopt a different variety (Spolsky, 2004).

The National Language Policy in Nigeria has no single document. The Policy is an extract of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999 as amended) and the National Policy on Education 2013 (as revised). In the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999), it stated that:

- 1) That business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in any of the three major Nigerian languages when adequate arrangement had been made.
- 2) That the states shall conduct the business of the House in English or any other language as approved by the members of the House.

In the National Policy on Education (2013), the following were identified by Orekan (2010) as the language policy provision:

- 1) That the mother-tongue and/or other languages of the immediate community are to be used as the language of the pre-basic and early basic levels as well as in adult/non-formal education;
- 2) That the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo) are to be used as the languages of national culture and integration at L2.
- 3) That the English, as the official language, is the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, post-basic and higher education, the law courts and of international communication; and
- 4) That the Selected extra exoglossic languages, especially French and Arabic, are the languages of international communication and discourse.

These are the policy provision that were formulated to produce multilingual students in the country. However, this is not explicit within the NPE. Emenanjo in Orekan (2010) stressed; that in terms of unstated policy, the NPE policy on languages suggested the following:

- 1) Advocacy for multilingualism as the national goal;
- 2) Recognition of English as the official language;
- 3) Consideration of the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as potential national languages which are to be developed and used as LO and L2 throughout the formal education system;
- 4) Recognition of all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction, including in lifelong and other non-formal education.

The debate over language policy was proposed by some authors that there should be consensus among educators, linguists, and politicians that a National Language should evolve through the educational process rather than be imposed. This is what

informs the Language provisions in the National Policy on Education (NPE) of the country. In this policy, education is viewed as an instrument of national progress and development. The policy was formulated with the intent of transforming an individual into a sound and effective member of the society and to provide equal educational opportunities for all citizens irrespective of their tribe or creed. This can be in form of the nation's public primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels.

However, pedagogically it aims at achieving the following:

- 1) Inculcating national consciousness and national unity among the students,
- 2) Inculcating the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society,
- 3) The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around, and
- 4) The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities, and competencies, both mental and physical as equipment for the individual to live in and contribute to the development of his or her society.

3. The National Language Policy in Basic Education Curricula

The consideration of education as an instrument per excellence for effecting national growth and development, unity and literacy, and as a dynamic instrument of inventions and innovations, the Federal Government of Nigeria, in the NPE (2013), stated:

“Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures. Thus, every child shall learn the Language of the Immediate Environment (FRN 1981). And enhancing national unity, every Nigerian child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba.”

The above prescribed that the Mother Tongue (MT) or the Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) should serve as the medium of instruction at both Pre-basic and Early Basic Education levels (Primary 1-3) while the English language serves as a subject of study. At the beginning of the middle basic education level (Primary 4 and above), they're will be a reverse of functions. Some codified local languages like Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo, used as MT/LIE/L1 reverts to subjects of study and the English language serve as the medium of instruction. The English language remains as a medium of instruction and subject of study through Post-Basic (Junior Secondary School) and Secondary Schools Educational levels in the country.

However, the policy stated that in the interest of national unity each Nigerian school child will, in addition to his MT, be required to learn one of the three major languages of Nigeria namely, Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo (Zarruk, 2002). In a nutshell, the hierarchical structure of the English language as a Medium of Instruction in the new Education Policy is:

- 1) Pre-primary Mother Tongue or Language of the immediate community only
- 2) Primary 1-3 Mother Tongue/Language of immediate Community (English as a subject)
- 3) Primary 4-6 English as the medium of communication (Mother Tongue continues as subject).

The above structure considered MT as a Medium of Instructions. This can affect the stated objectives of maintaining unity in diversity in the country. This is because of the diverse languages spoken within the country. This makes it difficult for a teacher to choose a particular language to be used to carry all the pupils along. The dilemma, therefore, may lead to a call for revising and re-implementing of the formulated policy in the country.

4. Challenges in the Implementation of Language Policy in Nigeria

There have been many pieces of research and observations made by scholars and some Nigerian elites to assess the significance of the implementation of the National Language Policy provision in the country. The results and recommendations recorded varying and amazing findings and opinions. This strengthens this paper in advocating for readjustment by revising the policy for the successful implementation of English as the Medium of Instruction in the country to smoothly attain the designed objectives. This is due to the consideration of the difficulties that learners/pupils encounter in using MT/L1 to learn the English language. This can also alleviate linguistic complexities in L1, LIE, or MT perception as the medium of instructions at Pre-and-Early Basic Education levels in the country. It is important at this juncture to review researches conducted to establish facts on the issues in the National Language Policy implementation at hand.

Table 1: Studies on the implementation of National Language Policy in Nigeria

Research Author and Date	Research Topic	Findings
Mohammed, A., & Zarruk, R. (1992).	Implementing the National Language Policy in Nigerian Schools: Problems and Prospects.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Government commitment and current development of materials are seen as promising signs. 2) Multilingual approach is advantageous.
Adejimola, A. S. (2010)	Language policy provisions and curriculum issues: The challenges for secondary schools in Nigeria	There was language implementation crisis.
Orekan, G. (2010)	Language Policy and Educational Development in Africa: The Case of Nigeria	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) There is a gap between intention and outcome. 2) Favorable attitudes to English. 3) NPE has no special recognition in Nigeria.
Olagbaju, O. O. (2014).	Multilingual education in Nigeria: Policy, practice, challenges and solutions.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students show a strong preference for instruction in English.

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		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2) Parents prefer the use of English language than multilingual education. 3) Teachers lack adequate materials. 4) Teachers do not implement the NPE.
Omotoyinbo, D. W. (2016).	Language Policy in Nigeria: Prospect for National Unity	There are socio-economic challenges, and political behavior.
Ibrahim, J., & Gwandu, S. A. (2016)	Language policy on education in Nigeria: Challenges of multilingual education and future of English language	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students prefer to be taught in English language 2) Majority of the teachers do not put the policy into practice 3) The government has not taken the implementation serious; 4) No competent teachers to handle subjects in the indigenous languages; 5) No adequate instructional materials in indigenous languages; 6) Teachers are proud of their skills in the English language 7) Indigenous languages cannot compete with English language 8) The future of English language is very bright.
Araromi, M.O. (2018)	Language Policy Implementation in Multilingual Nigeria: French and Mother-Tongue Experience	There is urgent need for stakeholders in Education to make concerted efforts to re-engineer and re- address the language policy provisions.
Owojecho, F. (2020).	Implementation Challenges of National Language Policy in Nigeria: The Roles of the Indigenous Languages	Lack of adequate implementation

From the Table 1, one can understand that every language teacher at some point has felt guilty, puzzled, and frustrated about the students' perceived overuse of the MT in the classroom. In a monolingual context, that is to say where all students speak the same MT (a classroom reality for the majority of language teachers), this perception can become quite a problem.

The best way to deal with the problem (at least for some teachers) is to deny the students' use of the mother tongue and encourage them to speak in English. There is nothing wrong with this strategy as far as it goes, but it rarely allows the teacher or the students a chance to understand why L1 was being used in the first place. Another strategy is the language teacher to be proactive. This means that the teacher should actively control and influence how and when the MT is used (Kumar, 2014).

However, Mohammed (1989) stressed that some of the challenges of the policy provision is that the transition from MT to English medium has not been properly worked out and may pose serious psychological problems to the pupils. Again, the pupils that are made to learn too many languages within a short time (MT/LIC + English + a major

NL other than the child's language). Furthermore, there are several factors responsible for failure in the implementation of language policy in the country. Some of these are analyzed below: approach to proper implementation of the policy:

- a. Teachers' factor,
- b. Environmental/family background factor,
- c. Subjects factor,
- d. Material/resources factor,
- e. Language factor.

a. Teachers' Factor

In the area of education, especially primary schools, teachers play a vital role in training pupils for a strong educational foundation. Language as a medium of instruction is used as a vehicle through which the proper understanding of a given learning experience can be delivered. Referral to the policy statement that pupils from kindergarten to primary shall be taught using mother tongue or language of the immediate environment, some teachers find it difficult to handle the task when they don't share the same mother tongue with all pupils, they may only use their mother tongue which is in the favor of those sharing the same language with them, while others are marginalized. Therefore, the implementation of the policy in this regard fails. So, there is need for the policy to be restructured to enable every teacher to use English as an L2 as a medium of instruction from pre-basic education level.

b. Environmental/Family Background Factor

As a multi-cultural, multilingual country, there are different representations of the languages in the classrooms. Teachers always find it difficult to handle or carry all the pupils along, in terms of communication or instruction. This is as a result of different linguistic backgrounds the teacher encounter in the course of teaching English as the target language.

c. Subject Factor

the English language as a subject of study need to be revisited. It is clear that some subjects have some terminologies difficult to be translated into the MT or LIE. Where such terminologies are encountered, with little to know translation in the mother-tongue, teachers will be forced to revert to English Language.

d. Material/Resources Factor

There are inadequate provisions of the instructional material in MT and LIE for the successful implementation of the policy. The language teachers and learners find language teaching and learning difficult due to inadequate instructional resources. The attachment of language with culture, norms and values underlines this fact. Learning another language is learning different elements of values, beliefs, and norms. In Nigeria, for instance, learning a minimum of three languages is learning three different cultural

norms. Again, there is the lack of adequate vocabulary for most indigenous languages to compete with English in science, technology, and vocational programs. The problem is accentuated with school subjects like mathematics, sciences, and vocational education content areas where words in the local language will not exactly name concepts except to describe them (Musa, 2012).

e. Language Factor

Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba were chosen to serve as national languages instead of having one. The so-called “big three” assume the dominating role over about 500 living languages in the country. The disadvantage of multiplicity of language is unanimous consensus and mutual intelligibility of other languages to be used in education system. Yet, the speakers of that language may not agree to surrender their language for the learning of the “big-three.” This is evident that these languages are relegated to electives especially to science students. There is anxiety in the policy which proposes the use of MT or LIC for the 1st three years of primary education. This constitute a challenge in laying a concrete linguistics background to students who are being prepared to learn English at later state of education. The transition between MT and English has given a wide gap that yields to the incompetency of pupils in term of alphabetical or phonemic realization. Many learners find it difficult to appropriately voice English sounds correctly as a result of MT interference at the early experience.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shed light on some challenges which language teaching and learning pose to the success of the UBE scheme that was likely connected to the language policy. The aforementioned factors in one way or the other affect the implementation of the policy by rendering it handicap. As is obvious, the multi-lingual setting of Nigeria leads to linguistically diverse classrooms that might make teaching and learning difficult for the attainment of the designed goals of the UBE. The same can be said about the other factors e.g teaching some subjects or provision of learning instructional materials in the mother tongue proves difficult. In a nutshell, the UBE scheme will surely succeed provided that the Federal Government makes an attempt in revising and amending the policy by using English as a medium of instruction right from kindergarten to a higher level of education.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

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