Straight for English as a medium of education in Nigeria: Towards enhancing quality and national development

G. B. Akande
Department of English
Osun State College of Education,
Ila-Orangun

Abstract
Within the Nigerian socio-linguistic and socio-political contexts, the English language plays many significant roles, for instance, as a lingua franca, primary language, official language etc. Thus, it is the most important and the most effective means of communication in Nigeria. The pre-eminent position occupied by English over other Nigerian languages justifies Oyelaran's (1982) opinion that, as long as a language plays crucial roles in every aspect of the daily life of people, it should be used as a medium of instruction especially when such use does not hinder the development of the indigenous languages. This paper therefore, examines the roles that the English language plays in the Nigerian body polity and postulates that the present educational policy be reviewed in favour of its use as a medium of instruction from the primary to the University level. This will enhance quality of education and national development in the country.

1.0 Introduction

In Nigeria, English has come a long way from the missionary era through the colonial times to the contemporary post-independence period. Sybil (1979) identifies three main functions of English in Nigeria-communication, accommodation and integration. It is the language of education, the language of national politics and government, banking, commerce and mass media and most of written communication. With the diverse number of languages available in Nigeria today, inter-ethnic communication is not easy. As such, the English language is the only language in the country that readily makes inter-ethnic communication possible. Thus, the English language is playing a unifying role in the Nigerian body politic. For, when a country speaks with over 150 different voices (Olagoke, 1979) mutual understanding becomes extremely difficult. This has been a major cause of bitterness and suspicion among the different linguistic groups in the country; as it is very easy to misinterpret or misunderstand what the other

has said. The linguistic condition has also encouraged favouritism, nepotism, tribalism and other social ills, as many Nigerians in positions of influence and authority naturally tend to favour at the expense and to the annoyance of the members of other linguistic groups, those who come from the same ethnic group with them.

Very close to this is the fact that it is impossible to establish an efficient network of communication throughout the country without the English language. All the very important roles that the English language is playing in the country make it relevant in our educational system. Hence many people including Ibe (1995:3) have suggested that the adoption of the English language as the medium of instruction at all levels of education should be given continued patronage. Also, Oyelaran (1982) observes that there is no doubt that social and parental attitudes towards the acquisition of Enlgish are exuberantly enthusiastic in Nigeria. This, according to him, will constitute a major hurdle for any educational programme that intends to use Yoruba (or any of the other Nigerian languages for that matter as a medium of instruction.

Against the background of the foregoing, this work stresses the need for the choice of the English language as the medium of instruction right from the primary school while the mother tongue is taught as a subject.

2.0 Pre-primary/primary education and language of instruction

As far as language education is concerned, Section 1 of the National Policy on Education which embodies the philosophy of Nigerian education under sub-title "The importance of language" states as follows":

> In addition to appreciating the educational process and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the 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, Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (NPE, p.9).

Moreover, the policy provides that instruction in the pre-primary schools "will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community..." (NPE, p.10), and for primary education the stipulation is "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" (NPE, p.13).

The foregoing suggests that the child is expected to be able to communicate effectively in the mother tongue in the first two or three years in the primary school, before changing to English for the rest of his studies. However, there have been criticisms against this practice, that is, the use of the mother tongue and English as media of instruction in schools. It is observed that the practice does not augur well for Nigerian children. It is noted that after the completion of primary education, many of them are neither proficient in English nor the mother tongue, "consequently, many primary school children leave primary school without achieving permanent literacy in either English or the mother tongue" (Fafunwa, 1975:213-227). That is, the education of the children in general at that level is adversely affected. They can neither operate effectively in English nor the Mother Tongue.

The clamour now, therefore, is for the use of the English language as a medium of instruction right from the kindergarten or primary school. This is based on the belief that it is through the early usage of the language that pupils can quickly and effectively gain its mastery for the purpose of primary and higher level of education. According to Gbadamosi (2000:8), primary education is the bedrock of other levels of education.

For the purpose of attaining the ability of wider communication therefore there is the need for restricting the scope of the use of the mother tongue at that level of education. This is more crisply put by Tiffen (1968:65), when he says,

> More recently, doubts have arisen as to the value of the mother tongue policy. Is there any point in educating children in the vernacular at the beginning if they have to be educated in English after a few years anyway? Why not go straight for English? Teaching a language as a subject rather than using it as a medium does not usually give the necessary mastery...

Many educationists have come to believe that the answer to poor academic performance in Nigerian schools lies in using English as a medium of instruction as early as possible if not right from the very beginning of a child's school career (Lawani, 1995:3). There are reservations as regards the use of the mother tongue in the teaching of other school subjects. The local languages such as Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba it is held, are not fully developed to cope with the teaching of subjects like those of the sciences, Mathematics, Geography etc. Also, there is the belief that children taught merely in the mother tongue will be so much tied to the language (Yoruba or Igbo for example) and culture of the environment and that it would jeopardize national unity and integration.

3.0 English in education and the attainment of educational goals and objectives in Nigeria

Straight for English in education has some advantages: it will provide for Nigerians access to greater educational opportunities irrespective of ethnic, religious or creed background. This will help "to promote our national yearnings and aspirations, common goals and ideals, above all, the whims and caprices of ethnicism and statism in the country" (Odumosu, 1990). In fact, it will make an effective tool for imparting education to pluralistic linguistic and ethnic groups in Nigeria and impart all Nigeria the awareness and consciousness that underline the cultural unity of the country.

The choice of English as the medium of instruction in schools will strengthen the socio-cultural integration at the national level in the country. It will evolve a new culture, national in outlook, which does not see a Nigerian as Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba but a true Nigerian who by virtue of his ability to speak and write the English language can work in any of the 36 states of the federation. It will also evolve for Nigeria, a common tongue acquired through formal education, which can be used to defend Nigeria's unity and uphold her honour and glory. Thus, in the words of Banjo (1985), learning English in Nigeria will no longer create psychological dilemma, culture conflict or self alienation from the society. Instead, it will orientate the learner towards Nigeria's ideals, honour and dignity.

Nigeria's choice of English as the medium of education will have social, economic and cultural values. For instance, researches have shown that the English language constitutes a significant factor in socio-economic transformation of Nigerians educated within the country (Odumosu, 1991). Particularly, Odumosu avers that there is a great correlation between high proficiency in the English language and socio-economic success in trades and in federal and state civil services in Nigeria: men like carpenters, tailors, motor mechanics, printers etc. whose performance in the English language can be identified as somehow near standard English have better organized and developed establishments than their counterparts whose English is substandard, while civil servants with high command of English do better in the discharge of their duties and consequently rise faster.

4.0 The challenges associated with the use English in education

According to Lawani (1995:5), to be able to achieve the objective of inculcating "permanent literacy and numeracy and the ability to communicate effectively" in English or any other language depends on a number of factors, such as teacher's

competence, amount of exposure of pupils to the language and use of instructional materials.

(a) Teacher's competence: This is the most important factor of all. According to Wilkins quoted in Lawani (1995:5), "What the teachers are able to achieve will be limited to what their own command of language permits". Even, with modern aids available, it is the teacher's language, which remains the principal model for the pupil. A teacher is not going to succeed in giving his pupils a command of spoken language without being able to give the correct model. One way of addressing the problem of teachers' incompetence in the use of English therefore, is for the government to make it compulsory for anybody who wants to teach in the primary or secondary school to have a credit pass in the English language. Also old methods of teaching language as being persistently used by teachers should stop. This involves the learning of grammatical rules, translation into and from the first and second language. There is also emphasis on the written form of the language to the detriment of other skills like listening and speaking. All this should be redressed for teachers to develop communicative competence of their pupils.

(b) Limited amount of exposure: This is essentially true of English language in the Nigerian situation. In most cases, learners only have contact with the language in the school environment or even just within the classroom. More practice is neither done nor encouraged at home especially with illiterate parents. Both the school and the home should provide the necessary facilities (e.g. textbooks) and guide for the pupils to gain mastery of English both as the language in instruction and of instruction in schools. Language teaching strategies such as simulation, systematization, situationalization, careful selection and grading of language items, repetition and reinforcement should be adopted.

Added to the above is the problem of linguistic interference. It is one of the problems both the teacher and the learner have to cope with. Linguistic interference occurs at the levels of grammar, phonology, semantics and syntax of language. In an attempt to use the second language, the rules guiding the first language which have been thoroughly mastered by the learners are brought into the second. For example, in the area of phonology, lack of certain sounds of English in the Mother Tongue often constitutes problems for the learners. English sounds such as /v/ and /z/ which are not found as in the native language of the learner are pronounced

as /f/ and /s/ respectively by Yoruba/English bilinguals. Also, it is always difficult for such people to distinguish between long and short vowels of English. Thus, a Yoruba/English bilingual may pronounce feet as fit or sheet as shit. All this calls for good model from the teacher as he teaches the pupils. Emphasis should shift from mere reading and writing to listening and speaking as the pupils learn the English language.

(c) **Use of instructional materials:** The use of instructional materials cannot be over-emphasized in the teaching of language. On this, Lawani (1995:6) quotes Wilkins as saying "...conversely, the absence of certain resources will place serious limitations on what the teacher can achieve ...". Materials such as audio-visual recordings, charts, posters, real objects, cue cards etc will go a long way in improving the pupils' acquisition of language. Inadequate funds and government support could be factors against the use of instructional materials. This could be responsible for the poor performance of learners in language especially in public schools. Teachers need be provided with and encouraged to use relevant teaching aids as they teach the target language.

5.0 Conclusion

This work has examined the current language education policy in Nigeria and established the rationale for a review in favour of English as the sole medium of education right from the primary school. The writer also highlights and discusses the challenges that the choice of English as the medium of instruction will pose as well as ways of addressing such challenges. The paper believes that if effective teaching and learning of English takes place in our schools, it will bring about an overall improvement on the quality of education.

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