

Language policy provisions and curriculum issues: The challenges for secondary schools in Nigeria

Amuseghan Sunday Adejimola

(Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko 23434, Nigeria)

Abstract: Language, language policy and curriculum issues occupy very important and strategic places in educational planning in any society. In a multilingual Nigerian society as well as in similar countries like Australia, India or even in seemingly homogenous linguistic societies like Britain, language planning, development and policies are *sin qua non*. In this paper, the author has tried to look from the perspectives of the provisions of the National Policy on Education (1981) and the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979), and examine the curriculum issues arising from the language and policy aspects in achieving the national educational aims, goals, objectives and development. This paper takes a cursory look at the constitutional and policy documents as well as the realities on ground in the secondary schools. It is discovered that, this sub-sector of education is characterized with language implementation crisis. The disturbing issue is that, since the language of instruction is bedeviled with crisis, the whole educational system itself becomes a failure. The paper recommends that, Nigeria should carry out a language policy reforms that will be acceptable and effective bearing in mind the role of language and language policy in education.

Key words: language policy; curriculum issues; challenges; planning; implementation; strategy; effective

1. Introduction

Language has been widely studied and acclaimed as the most invaluable human endowment which is indispensable in all spheres of life. Crystal (1987) conceptualized it as having, perhaps, “magical and mystical” and “unique role in capturing the breath of human thought and endeavors”. In view of this, certain functions have been identified, among others, through a progressive expansion and application of such works as Edward Sapir, Benjamin Wharf and others on the relationship between language and thought. The famous Sapir-Wharf hypothesis of “linguistic determinism” and “linguistic relativity”, which give significant insights into the nature of and the relationship between language and thought, is a living development. Such relationship clearly shows that language is the vehicle for thought. Apart from this, the relationship between language and thought has been celebrated in many works, such as Okarkley (1951), Kohler (1927) and Emenanjo (2000).

Language is, therefore, very important and crucial as an instrument of communication and sustenance of social, cultural, political, economic, educational, industrial and technological development in any society or nation, especially in an ultra multilingual nation. This linguistic network is also needed to facilitate national cohesion and ensure smooth international interaction.

The undisputable fact that language has long effect implications for national unity, cultural identity and

Amuseghan Sunday Adejimola, Ph.D., Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Adekunle Ajasin University; research fields: applied linguistics, teacher education, communication arts, English studies.

development makes governments to endeavor to plan and manage resources within their territory. With the direct planning and management of language with the desire of achieving national peace, unity and development, formulation of language policies evolves.

In multilingual countries, usage has assigned some roles to an individual or each linguistic group (Adekunle, 1995). In Nigeria, roles and functions of languages are based on the following recognized languages:

- (1) The indigenous languages;
- (2) The English language;
- (3) Pidgin English;
- (4) Foreign languages (French and Classical Arabic).

It is observed from Table 1 that the languages have different roles and functions, though some of them overlap. The British colonial language (English) influence continues to prevail as an official language and the language of post-primary education, while Nigerian languages are restricted to the lower primary education and the cultural domain. It is believed that the numerous Nigerian languages, with the inconsistent statistical information of linguistic realities. Nevertheless, the dominating and popular language in a mutually recognized and agreed area or zone could be adopted for MT (mother tongue) or LIC (languages of immediate community). Factors, such as number of speakers, socio-economic status of speakers, legal status and domains of use are often regarded as possible indicators of dominance. English enjoys dominance mostly in the former British colonies because of its elite status, political influence, higher socioeconomic opportunities and its neutrality, though the colonial impostors were in minority when it was introduced. Such is the case of Nigeria. This is possible for English because of a variety of instruments, which include constitutional and educational policy provisions, decrees, ministerial directives, government “White Paper” and supplementary orders and regulations.

Table 1 Roles and functions of languages in Nigeria

Language categories	Cultural identity	Interethnic communication	Science and tech	Educ., lit and art	Official transaction and mass media	National identity	International communication
English	-	◆◆	◆◆	◆◆◆	◆◆◆	-	◆◆◆
Indigenous language	◆◆◆	◆◆	-	◆◆	◆◆	-	◆
Pidgin English	-	◆◆◆	-	◆	◆	-	◆
French	-	-	-	◆	◆	-	◆◆
Arabic	-	◆	-	◆	◆	-	◆

Note: ◆◆◆=Very high-frequency use; ◆◆=High-frequency use; ◆=Not-so-frequent use.

Source: Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas (1995, p. 58).

2. Educational language policy provisions

It is very important to be familiar with the nature and feature of the aspect of language treatment on which the government is embarking. According to Jernudd (1973), language treatment policy and its implementation deal with the following:

- (1) Language determination or language allocation: This refers to decisions relating to the functional distribution of language varieties in a community and which of the languages should serve as national language. And the role of Pidgin English and regional indigenous languages properly belong to this aspect of language treatment;
- (2) Language development, codification and elaboration: This deals with decisions concerning the

standardization and unification of language use by means of grammars, spelling manuals, word lists, etc.. In Nigerian situation, this could mean identification and codification of varieties of Nigerian English (literary, written or spoken) as well as mother tongues;

(3) Language policy implementation: This means the process initiated by directives given through legislative acts, decrees, policy statements, laws or guidelines. At this stage, attempts are made to influence language use through educational institutions, the media and private and public organizations by applying the decisions on language determination and policy.

The above variables are considered in any country in evolving a pragmatic language policy and its implementation. It must be clearly stated that the linguistic principle, which makes all languages equal on the basis that there is no concept that cannot be expressed in any language if need to do so arises, is considered very elementary when it comes to legislative and educational matters, especially in a multilingual setting, such as Nigeria (Amuseghan, 2008). The adduced reason for the above claim is that all languages are not equal because of the differences in language function in terms of: (1) range of domains; (2) economic reason; (3) educational value; and (4) cultural identity.

In supporting the above, Mackey (1984, p. 43) said,

There is hardly a sovereign state on earth that does not contain a language minority; some have several, including aboriginal, colonial or immigrant language groups. Yet although of equal potential, the languages of these minorities are not of equal education value. All languages are equal only before God and the linguist!

By concentrating on language structure and potentiality of language use, the linguist emphasizes language equality; while by concentrating on language function and language attitudes, the educationist and the sociologist emphasize language inequality (Amuseghan, 2008). This is precisely the basis of what is done in language planning when one compares the functions a language is expected to perform, areas of deficiency in such performance, and what steps are required to be taken to enable the language to perform such functions effectively.

In Nigeria, the language policies have continued to foster inequality between English and Nigerian languages on the one hand, and among the Nigerian languages on the other hand. English continues to reflect in the dominant role as an official language, the main medium for learning and teaching, the language of inter-ethnic communication and of commerce and technology.

It must be reiterated that language policy, which refers to a particular area of planning, is “conscious governmental efforts to affect the structure and function of language varieties” (Fisherman, 1996). Policy is 2-dimensional, that is, formulation and implementation. The first attempt at language policy formulation in West Africa with implications for Nigeria is contained in the recommendations of the Colonial Office Advisory Committee on Native Education in 1927. The Committee recommends that:

- (1) In the early stages of the elementary school, the vernacular should be used;
- (2) In the middle or secondary schools and technical schools, English must of necessity be used.

The above recommendations gave concerned Nigerians a big challenge. Subsequently, several attempts were made to make the present language policy in Nigeria. All these attempts, however, resulted into the most celebrated Curriculum Conference in 1969. The conference led to the publication of the National Policy on Education in 1977. The following language policy provisions are extracted for the author’s discussion in this paper:

In section 1 paragraph 8 of the National Policy on Education, it is stated that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the

people's culture, the Government considers it to be the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the major languages other than his own mother tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

It is pertinent to note the use of the very weak and diffident expression, "should be encouraged to learn" in the paragraph above. It is also obvious that languages development and instruction in the above section are aimed at: (1) assisting the educational process; (2) preserving the people's culture; and (3) promoting national unity.

The appreciation of the language policy above can be done from 3 perspectives:

(1) Its impact on the intellectual development of children: The communicative functions will give deeper knowledge of the structures and processes of communication;

(2) The cultural and social contexts;

(3) The economic interest.

The goals of the language policy in Nigeria are far from being comprehensive in achieving (1)-(3) above, because the sociolinguistic habits of the target community and the social interaction basis for language policy formulation are inadequate. This statement can best be explained by looking at the use of very weak and diffident expressions, such as "should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue". And the mother tongue is estimated to be about 400 or more. Majority of these are regarded as minority languages, whose usages do not go beyond their small linguistic communities or environments, and in most cases, no development of code, orthography or meta-language. Also, the statement which says, "Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue ..." shows that there is no commitment to this pronouncement. Referring to the business of the National Assembly, the policy states that the business "shall be conducted in English language and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba" with an adverbial clause of time "when adequate arrangements have been made there". It is almost 3 decades of operation and such arrangements have not been put in place.

3. Language policy and attitudes of the affected people

Attitude is one of the psychological dispositions of man. Attitudes have been found by Morgan and King (1956) to act on objects categorized or discriminated according to motives and goals. The significance of attitudes to the survival or decay, love or hatred, the prominence or marginalization of languages cannot be overstressed. Lewis (1981) opined that:

Any policy for language, especially in the system of education, has to take account of the attitudes of those likely to be affected. In the long run no policy will succeed which does not do one of 3 things: conform to the expressed attitudes of those involved; persuade those who expressed attitudes about the rightness of the policy; or seek to remove the causer of the disagreement. In any case, knowledge about attitudes is fundamental to the formulation of a policy as well as success in its implementation.

People have developed different attitudes to each category of languages. Because of the roles that English, Arabic and other languages have been playing in the various sectors of life in the Nigerian speech community, discriminatory acts: hatred, aversion, condemnation, love, affection, tolerance and acceptance have been openly and loudly displayed. While it may be true that value judgments may be attributed to roles and functions that languages perform, such languages that are not socially, politically, economically and internationally favored are often ignored and not likely be educationally supported in the instructional and curriculum-oriented academic

experiences even by their native speakers. Thus, educationist and the socio-linguist emphasize language differential value in planning and policy provisions. Irrespective of either socio-linguistic or economic factors, some languages will be rated higher or lower than others.

Consequently, the differential rating of mother tongues among themselves, and of other languages compared with them, according to Coulmas (1992):

It is a delusion to assume that mother tongue languages are of equal value, and that value differences become apparent on the foreign language market only. Language shift ... attests to the fact that some languages are not thought valuable enough in a given socio-historical setting to be transmitted to the next generation, and that others are objectively of greater economic utility.

Due to the attitudes of individuals and ethnic groups towards indigenous languages and English as well as foreign languages, the languages and the language policies on pre-primary, primary and secondary education in terms of indigenous and English languages have not been fully implemented. Most of the pre-primary schools in Nigeria are not government owned and government has not ensured the implementation at this level. At the primary school level, the sudden shift from the indigenous language used in the lower stages (1-3 years) to English language at the upper stages (4-6 years) becomes blurred and confused, because it is either English throughout in the urban schools or a mixture of English and indigenous languages mostly in the rural schools. A lot of parents encourage "straight for English" right from nursery/primary schools. This is as a result of their positive attitudes towards English and negative attitudes Nigerian languages.

Generally speaking, many people develop aversion or negative attitudes towards indigenous language and create positive attitudes towards English for social and economic reasons. These reasons and some others affect what schools children go and what language-subjects they offer in the secondary schools. For instance, credit in English is required for admission for tertiary education and, of course, instruction will be given in English when admitted. It is also required for jobs. These reasons capture the attitudes of governments, parents and students towards English and Nigerian languages and their subsequent treatment either in the National Policy on Education 1977 or Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979.

A critical look at the language policy provisions of Nigeria's National Policy on Education 1977 (Revised 1981), one would realize that there is a multiplicity of language constituting a significant proportion of the contents of the school curriculum at the primary and secondary levels. The policy stipulates that the MT should be used as the language of instruction in pre-primary education and that every primary school child should be taught in his/her MT or LIC for the first 3 years and thereafter in English. English is to be taught as a subject in the curriculum at the primary school level. At the secondary school level, the policy states that at every junior secondary school level, the policy states that every JSS (junior secondary school) pupil should learn one major Nigerian language (i.e., Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba) in addition to his/her own MT. At the SSS (Senior Secondary School) level, only one major Nigerian language is to be studied as a subject and English is to be used as a medium of instruction at all levels of secondary school education (Akere, 1995; Akinnaso, 1991).

In spite of these comprehensive language policy provisions, according to Akere (1995), the language situation in Nigeria's educational system remains confused. The major problem, of course, has been the lack of seriousness to fully support and implement its own policies. English continues to be the dominant language of instruction in the educational system and a subject-language in the curriculum. The implementation of the MT education policy at the pre-primary school levels has been elusive because of a lot of sociological variables,

among which are attitudes to the indigenous languages by parents, teachers and students (Araromi, 2005), inadequate provisions of pedagogical materials and declined supply of language teachers (Afolayan, 1991).

What eventually emerged as Nigeria’s language policy in education comprised provisions made in the NPE for languages as media of instruction and as subjects of study in the curricula at the various levels in the educational system. The categories of language provided for in the NPE are: MT, LIC, MNL (Major Nigerian languages) (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba), and English and foreign languages (Arabic and French).

The roles assigned to the different categories of languages in the Nigerian educational system, according to Akere (1995), are as indicated below:

Table 2 NPE provisions for languages in the curriculum

Educational level	Languages	Language role/status	
Pre-primary	(1) MT		Medium
Primary	(2) LIC		Medium
	(1) MT/LIC (Yrs 1-3)		Medium
	(2) English	<div style="display: inline-block; vertical-align: middle;"> { </div> Years 4-6 Years 1-6	Medium
			Subject
JSS	(1) English	Subjects**	Medium**
	(2) MNL (2)		Subject**
	(3) Arabic/French		Subject*
SSS	(1) English	Subject	Medium
	(2) MNL (1) as L ₂		Subject**

Note: **=Compulsory; *=Elective.

Source: Bamgbose, Banjo and Thomas (1995, p. 185).

Table 2 summarizes the educational levels, languages and language role/status as contained in NPE (1977). These language provisions were later reinforced by the inclusion of specific language policy statements in the Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution (1979) and the Political Bureau Report (1987). These documents have woefully failed to address the attitudes and the socio-linguistic realities of the peoples of Nigeria. Since the language curriculum derives the role/status assigned to each language at each educational level from the failed documents, the language curriculum is also bound to fail.

4. Curriculum issues and challenges to secondary schools in Nigeria

The following issues, according to Oderinde (2005), are considered very pertinent in the language curriculum in the educational delivery system in Nigeria:

- (1) Appreciating language as an important tool in the educational process in promoting: preservation of the people’s culture; national unity; and social interaction;
- (2) MT (L1) and/or LIC as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and the junior primary levels, and of adult and non-formal education;
- (3) The 3 major (national) languages—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as L₂—as the languages of national culture and integration;
- (4) English—the official language—as the language of formal literacy, the bureaucracy, secondary and higher

education, the law court, etc.;

(5) Selected foreign languages, especially French and Arabic, as the languages of international communication and discourse. These languages are to be learnt as the second official languages and for smooth interaction with Nigeria's neighbor (NPE, 1998, pp. 9-10).

The secondary schools are to promote:

(1) Developing and promoting Nigerian languages, arts and culture in the interest of world cultural heritage at the secondary school level (NPE, 1998, p. 17);

(2) Fostering national unity through language policy provisions in the diversified cultures and languages (the 3 major languages—Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba);

(3) Ensuring the teaching and learning of 3 or 4 languages at the JSS level: English, French, LIE and NL2 as core subjects (NPE, 1998, p. 17);

(4) Ensuring that LIE is taught as L1 where the orthography is developed and available as well as its literature and taught as L2 with emphasis on oracy where it does not (NPE, 1998, p. 18); and

(5) Ensuring that Arabic is taught as non-prevocational elective (NPE, 1998, pp. 19, 21).

Linguists have demonstrated that language and thought are inextricably interwoven and that for their cognitive development, all children need a language on which to pin and develop their thoughts. The question is asked: In which language do people think—MT or the target second or foreign language? It is evidently expressed through empirical studies that it is not possible or seem logical that one would think in a language one is alienated or a language one is not versed in. This has implications for the importance a nation places on the language planning and development of its children as regards language policies in providing the roles and functions of MT or the target second or foreign language. This is a great concern to policy-makers and the curriculum planners or developers. In a multilingual country, such as Nigeria, the issue of minority linguistic communities is a great language policy concern.

In all, the policy has the implications of advocating multilingualism as the national goal. It also recognizes English as the de facto official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of the formal education. It makes provisions for the treatment of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as potential national languages, which are to be developed and used as L1 and L2 in the formal educational system. In addition, it recognizes all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction in initial literacy and life-long and non-formal education, thus giving due recognition to the linguistic rights of the speakers of all languages.

One of the assumptions held by every Nigerian is that, literacy is the ability to speak and/or write English. If after 200 years of English learning in Nigeria, less than 20% of Nigerians are able to speak and/or write some forms of English, there lies their deceit and folly!

5. The challenges for secondary schools

The teachers, principals, language specialists, parents, governments and individuals are challenged by the language policy provisions as related to curriculum issues in the Nigerian educational delivery system, especially in terms of:

- (1) preservation of the people's culture;
- (2) national unity;
- (3) social interaction;
- (4) language for academic purpose;

- (5) language for science and technology;
- (6) education as a tool per excellence for national development;
- (7) communicative competence.

These challenges are necessitated by the fact that, language is conceptualized as having a powerful and unique role in capturing the breath of human thought and endeavors; and the schools are constitutionally entrusted to actualize the national goals, objectives and desirable development. This cannot be achieved without language, because it is the vehicle for thought and communication of the curriculum contents.

Today, there is non-implementation of the language policy at the secondary school level as well as the foundation level (nursery/primary level). Although in the Nigerian curriculum setting, English is a main study language from the nursery/primary schools. It must be mentioned that, English to the student can be anything from second to a third or fourth language. The implication of this is the considerable variety in the standards of English of students who go to higher institutions. The English curriculum contents and methods of teaching as well as instructional materials no longer have application to the necessities of the required standards and demands of higher institutions. In addition, a credit pass in English is mandatory for admission into universities in Nigeria irrespective of courses.

To meet this challenge, secondary schools in Nigeria must pedagogically perform the expectation of the academic requirements and challenges. Therefore, the English curriculum in the secondary schools calls for a pragmatic review and implementation. The poor examination outcomes in especially English and mathematics in recent times of secondary school students in the various external examinations, such as the West African Examinations Council and the National Examinations Council, are challenges to the curriculum planners and all the stakeholders of education in Nigeria. The reason is that, English is the language of instruction and mathematics is the language of science. Consequently, the secondary school system is supposed to be the benchmark for entering higher institutions in Nigeria. Beside, Nigerian students together with their parents have negative attitudes to Nigerian languages. How do we therefore achieve the beautiful and the ambitious secondary school language policy in the curriculum and the constitution?

6. Recommendations

This paper recommends an urgent need to organize another curriculum conference in order to provide an effective policy on language that will constitute a realistic programme for implementation. This is necessary because of the centrality of language to the teaching-learning process, the importance of Nigerian languages to the protection, preservation and promotion of Nigerian culture and the enhancement of human dignity, national unity and integration as well as communication to the neighboring countries and the entire world. Training of qualified teachers should be practically embarked upon and continuity of the training should be secured or backed up with funds and facilities. Also, implementation strategies together with enforcement of the policy should be pursued vigorously and religiously. More efforts on ensuring effective teaching of the English language as the language of instruction should be embarked upon. Finally, effective evaluation instruments and strategies should also be put in place for modifications from time to time.

7. Conclusion

The present instrumental advantages of English for admission and job opportunities, “world lingua franca” as

well as the language of science and technology make English enjoy continued dominance and positive attitude of governments, parents and students. In line with all the available research findings all over the world and the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) recommendations on developmental needs of the linguistic and cognitive abilities of the children at the formative stage, more roles/status should be given to the MT education, especially in the first 14 years of the educational system in Nigeria. Again, the English language curriculum in the secondary schools should be reviewed to allow for the effective usage in line with the pragmatic teaching methodologies and instructional materials. The final position of this paper is that, it is not too late for Nigeria to re-awake and “talk and act” decisively on more realistic language policy for all-round development. Therefore, people should review the constitution and hold again a curriculum conference just like they did 39 years ago (1969).

References:

- Adekunle, M. (1995). English in Nigeria: Attitudes, policy and communicative realities. In: Bamgbose, A., Banjo, A., Thomas, A. (Eds.). *New Englishes: A west African perspective*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers, 57-86.
- Afolayan, A. (1991). The concept of English as a second language (ESL) as an applied linguistic policy for development. *Journal of English as a Second Language*, 3, 6-21.
- Akere, F. (1995). Language in the curriculum: An assessment of the role of English and other languages in education delivery process in Nigeria. In: Bamgbose, A., Banjo, A. & Thomas, A. (Eds.). *New Englishes: A west African perspective*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers, 178-199.
- Akinnaso, F. N. (1991). On the mother-tongue education policy in Nigeria. *Education Review*, 43, 89-106.
- Amuseghan, S. A. (2008). Language policy provisions and curriculum issues and challenges in Nigeria. A paper presented at the 53rd Annual Conference of International Linguistic Association, Sunny College, Old Westbury, New York, USA, April 11-13, 2008.
- Araromi, M. (2005). The mother-tongue, language of instruction and issues in methodology: The Nigerian experience. In: Dada, A., Abimbola, A. & Kolawole, O. O. (Eds.). *Issues in language, communication and education*. Ibadan: Counstellations Books.
- Bamgbose, A., Banjo, A. & Thomas, A. (1995). *New Englishes: A west African perspective*. Ibadan: Mosuro Publishers.
- Coulmas, F. (1992). *Language and economy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Crystal, D. (1987). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of linguistics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Emenanjo, E. N. (2000). Culture, Nigerian languages and national development. *Journal of Nigerian Languages and Cultures*, 2, 1-16.
- Federal Ministry of Education. (1981). *National Policy on Education (Revised)*. Lagos: Federal Government Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1979). *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1979)*. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information.
- Jernudd, B. (1973). Language planning as a type of language treatment. In: Rubin, J. & Shuy, R. (Eds.). *Language planning: Current issues and research*. Washington, DC: George Town University Press.
- Kohler, W. (1927). *The mentality of apes (2nd ed.)*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Lewis, E. G. (1981). *Bilingualism and bilingual education*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Mackey, W. (1984). Mother-tongue education: Problems and prospects. *Prospects*, 14(1), 37-50.
- Morgan, C. & King, R. (1956). *Introduction to psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Oderinde, B. B. (2005). Language, communication and curriculum issues. In: Dada, A., Abimbola, A. & Kolawole, O. O. (Eds.). *Issues in language, communication and education*. Ibadan: Counstellations Books.

(Edited by Nicole and Sunny)