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A Festschrift for Oladele Awobuluyi



Issues in Contemporary **African Linguistics**

A Festschrift for Oladele Awobuluyi

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3. The Nigerian Language Policy: Theory or Practice?

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The language provision in the National Policy of Education (1977) prescribes among others that 'in the interest of national unity, each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages' (i.e. Hausa, Igbo, and Yorùbá). Scholars have frowned at the language used in couching the recommendations. For instance, Bamgbose (2000b) opines that some 'escape-clauses' were woven into the recommendations, such that stakeholders in education can violate them with impunity. This study was carried out to find out whether the three major languages are being taught in secondary schools as subtly prescribed by the language policy. In the course of the study, thirty-five schools spread across three states – Òyó, Ògùn, and Lagos - were sampled. Information gathered show that Yorùbá is taught in all the schools, whereas Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are taught only in four of them, while Igbo is taught in seven of them. From this, we deduced that only four schools teach the three major languages. Three of them are located in Lagos State while one is located in Oyo State. None of the schools visited in Ogun State teaches the three major languages.

Keywords: Language Policy, theory and practice, escape clauses, education

1. Introduction: The Linguistic Situation in Nigeria

So much has been said about the linguistic situation in this country that we do not need to waste time on the issue here but give a kind of summary to avoid repeating what others have said. The fact that Nigeria is one of the multilingual nations in the world has been repeatedly pointed out by scholars. Among them are Adeniran (2008), Bamgbose (2006b), Igboanusi (2005), Egbokhare (2004), etc. The highest figure given before was 500 (see Hansford, et al, 1975; Crozier and Blench, 1992; Egbokhare, 2004). However, the 2005 Ethnologic Data listed 521 languages for Nigeria. These languages fall into three categories. First, we have the (decamillionaire) languages, namely, Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá, which the constitution describes as the 'major languages.' According to Adeniran (2008), these languages account for 55% of the entire population.

Second, are the languages that are usually referred to as the medium-size languages, each of which has some millions of speakers and are

dominant in their respective states. They are state languages, which are used on radio and television stations. Among these are Edo, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfulde, Kanuri, Izon, Nupe, Tiv and Urhobo. In the third category, we have the minority languages over 400 in number. Language surveys reveal that many of them are seriously endangered on account of the very small number of people who speak them. Many of them have less than 1000 speakers. In fact, Fakuade (2004) asserts that some are dead. Apart from this, we have the Nigerian Pidgin (NP), which is a hybrid of English and various indigenous languages. Finally, we have the foreign languages. English language is the most prominent among these because it can no longer be referred to as a foreign language. The constitution gives it many roles. For instance, it is the language of instruction from primary IV to the tertiary level; it is the language of governance (official), etc. The other ones are French (which has also been elevated to become Nigeria's second official language), German and Russian (which are taught in the university level) and Arabic (which has a variety that is natively spoken by the Shuwa Arabs of the North-east corner of Nigeria, apart from its role as the language of Islam.)

2. Background to the Study

The 1977 National Policy on Education makes three basic recommendations as regards the use of language in education. We can break these recommendations down as follows:

- (i) The first part prescribes the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community as the language of pre-primary education and the initial stage of primary education (i.e. Primary 1-3)
- (ii) The second part prescribes English Language as the language of education from primary IV to the tertiary level of education.
- (iii) The third part is a subtle recommendation, that each secondary school pupil should learn one of the three major languages (i.e. Hausa, Yorùbá and Igbo) in addition to his mother tongue. Fadoro (2009) carried out a research on the first aspect of this language policy in Ibadan metropolis in which 110 private secondary schools were visited. Only 12, which constitutes 10.9% of the schools used the Mother Tongue or the language of the immediate community (which in both cases is Yoruba) as the medium of instruction at the pre-primary and initial stage of primary education as prescribed by the language policy. seventy six (i.e. 69.1%) did not use MT or LIC

at all. Twenty-two (i.e. 20.0%) used it only occasionally. One of the proprietors even claimed that he was not aware of the policy at all.

The second part of the policy which has to do with English Language seems to be the only aspect acceptable to all the schools. In fact, many of these schools actually use English as their medium of instruction from the very first day the child is enrolled, and this continues throughout. So, there is no need of carrying out any study on this aspect. However, the third aspect needs to be investigated. This time around, three major states in the South West – Lagos, Oyo and Ogun States were selected for the study.

2.1. The Policy

With respect to pre-primary education, section two, paragraph 11 of the document states that the government will ensure that:

The medium of instruction will be principally the – mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and to this end will develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages.

With regards to the primary level, in section three, paragraph 15, it also declares that government will see to it that:

The medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage (e.g. Pry IV-VI) English.

With respect to secondary education, the document states that:

In addition, to appreciate the importance of language in the educational process and as a means of preserving the peoples 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 mother tongue*. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

At this point, let us ask an important question: How is the child expected to learn one of the three major languages, other than his mother tongue, if these major languages are not being taught in these secondary schools? We posit an answer to this question by asserting that the best way for the

students to do this is for the secondary schools to teach these languages. Actually, any two of the three major languages are to be taught as core subjects at the J.S.S. level. At the S.S.S., a chosen major indigenous language must be studied up to the certificate level and have examination written in it. Now this major language should not be the mother tongue of the child if the policy prescription is faithfully adhered to.

2.2. The Escape Clauses

To understand this issue closely, let us quote from Bamgbose (2000b:105):

The policies are riddled with *escape clauses*, which make non-implementation very easy. For example, the use of the major Nigerian languages in the National Assembly was to be *subject to the possibility of arrangements being made for it*, and the requirement of teaching a major Nigerian language in the Junior Secondary School is made *subject to the availability of teachers*. Hence, waivers are routinely granted for certification without a pass in such a language. Fourth, owing to the non-implementation of the policies, the attitude of speakers of the non-major languages has started to be hostile, with a feeling on their part that English might as well continue in its former and current roles. The Nigerian experience shows that a good policy not implemented is simply maintenance of the status quo. As long as the confusion continues, English will remain a default language for use in virtually all major public domains.

As can be seen from the above, the Nigerian language policy appears to be straight forward but its implementation has not been easy. First, the issue of the attitudes of the minority language speakers towards the three major languages is a problem. According to Adeniran (2008), native speakers of other languages object to the primacy accorded to the major languages because they regard it as a policy leading through linguistic subjugation to their cultural annihilation. To compound the problem, Ministries of Education in some states have found reasons to frustrate the implementation of the policy. Major indigenous language teachers are either not employed or literacy and other instructional materials are said to be unavailable. Schools in their jurisdiction then seek to obtain curriculum and examination waivers to the core status of the languages (Adeniran 2008). Finally, the conditions to which the implementation of the policy is subjected make it easy for schools to violate the policy with impunity.

3. Objectives of this Study

The major objective of this research was to find out if the three or at least two of the major languages of Nigeria – Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are being taught in secondary schools as suggested by the language policy or not. Another related aim of the study was to find out the attitudes of proprietors and proprietresses of these schools towards the policy – are they positively disposed towards this policy or not. If not, why?

3.1. Schools Visited

Thirty-five schools were selected for the study, and all of them are private secondary schools. These schools were selected on the basis of the fact that they are very prestigious in their respective states and they attract patronage from the so-called elite class of the society. Thirteen of these schools are from Lagos State, twelve are from Oyo and ten are from Ogun State. The names of these schools are not mentioned because many of the proprietors and proprietresses are not willing to own up to anything. In fact, that was one of the conditions laid down before they agreed to the idea of the study being conducted in their schools.

3.2. Research Questions

The researcher set out with six major research questions. The research questions are highlighted below:

- a. Are the proprietors/proprietresses of private secondary schools aware of this policy prescription?
- b. What is their attitude towards the policy?
- c. To what extent is the policy statement adhered to?
- d. If there are schools that are not adhering to this policy prescription, why are they not adhering to it?
- e. How many periods do these schools allot to the teaching of indigenous languages per week?
- f. What is the attitude of these school owners to the teaching of indigenous languages?

3.3. Data Presentation/Analysis

We are going to use the data obtained from the study to answer the six research questions presented above one after the other.

Research Question 1: Are the proprietors/proprietresses of private secondary schools aware of this policy statement?

Out of the thirty-five schools visited, 23 of the respondents (who are either proprietors, proprietresses or in some cases, principals) answered 'Yes', while 12 said 'No'. Let us present this on a table.

Table 1: Proprietor's/proprietress' awareness about the Policy

	Frequency	Percent
No	12	34.3
Yes	23	65.7
Total	35	100.0

Research Question 2: What is the attitude of these school owners towards the policy?

Only 15 of these school owners expressed a positive attitude towards the policy from the responses gathered. According to them, they are willing to implement the policy if they have teachers who can competently teach them. They are not happy that Nigerian languages are endangered as a result of the predominant status of English. They all accept English as the language of education, but according to them, the indigenous languages should also be allowed to play their own part as recommended by the policy. Sixteen (16) of them however are averse to the policy. According to them, in this age of science, computer and technology, the promotion of the indigenous languages sounds strange. Their emphasis is science and technology and they believe the language through which this can be expressed is the English Language. The remaining 4 seem to be neutral, because from their responses, they are neither here nor there. Let us present this in a table as shown below:

Table 2: What are the Proprietors'/proprietress' attitudes towards this Language Policy?

	Frequency	Percent
Valid Negative attitude	16	45.7
Undecided	4	11.4
Positive attitude	15	42.9
Total	35	100.0

Research Question 3: To what extent is the policy adhered to?

Our findings reveal that the three major languages, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo are taught in four schools. Three of these schools are located in Lagos State while one is in Oyo State. The respondents who are all men spoke glowingly about the policy. According to them, the teachers handling the languages are very competent teachers and speakers of their respective languages. They are also happy that parents who patronize them are particularly interested in that aspect of the curriculum. Some of the teachers were around and they seem to enjoy the cooperation of the students. In seven (7) of the schools – Yoruba and Igbo are taught. The respondents from these schools said that they are willing to introduce the teaching of Hausa Language as soon as they are able to get competent teachers of the language. In all the thirty-five schools, Yoruba language is taught. In the remaining schools, opinions are divided. Some of them said they will be willing to teach the languages on two conditions: one, availability of competent teachers; two, co-operation of their customers, that is, parents who bring their children to their schools. According to them, they would have to consult their clients first. Let us summarize this on a table as shown below:

<i>Location of Schools</i>	<i>Languages Taught: (Yoruba/Igbo and Hausa)</i>	<i>Languages Taught: (Yoruba/Igbo)</i>	<i>Language Taught: (Yoruba only)</i>
Lagos State	3 schools	7 schools	35 schools
Oyo State	1 school		
Total	4 schools		

Research Question 4: If there are schools that are not adhering to this policy, why are they not adhering to it?

This question has been partially answered under research question 3 above. Twenty-four schools are not adhering to this policy in that they only make provision for the teaching of Yoruba language alone. According to them, they are teaching Yoruba, because majority of their clients are Yoruba and some of them specifically request that their children should be exposed to Yoruba language. Twelve of the respondents who claimed that they were not aware of the policy at all simply cleft to their ignorance as the basis for not adhering to the policy. Some others stuck to the problem of getting competent teachers. While others claimed that their clients are not interested in such a practice and since they are more interested in their business than any other thing, they do not want to implement such a policy.

Research Question 5: How many periods do they allot to the teaching of indigenous languages on the time table?

From the responses gathered from those four schools that teach the three major languages, two (2) periods are allotted to each language per week. One may be quick to say that two periods are not sufficient to the teaching of each language; however, when we think that in all these schools, English and French are also taught as subjects, one will not blame them for allocating only two periods to the teaching of each of the three major languages. However, they can be encouraged to allot more periods to the teaching of these languages after being commended for what they are already doing. What about the other schools? In all the seven schools where Yoruba and Igbo Languages are taught, each language is allotted three (3) periods on the time table.

In thirteen (13) out of the schools which teach only Yoruba, three periods are allotted to Yoruba every week. In the remaining schools, five periods are allotted to the teaching of Yoruba each week. These schools could be commended for the number of periods allotted to the teaching of Yorùbá. But the fact that they are not teaching the other two languages is a problem.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Since we are dealing with government policy here, the starting point is what the government should do. The policy statement itself should be revisited. For instance the aspect of the policy which says: "... each child should be encouraged to..."

Should be revised to read: ... *each child must...*

So that we have:

In addition, to appreciate the importance of language in 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 must learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother tongue.

If this is done, then it will be obvious that the policy statement is an obligation and not an option for every Nigerian child.

Apart from this, a separate entity of the policy addressed to schools should be stated thus: "Each secondary school (private or public) must employ competent teachers to teach the three major languages from JSS 1 – JSS III".

Then as part of government's readiness to implement the policy, teachers should be trained in the major languages and regarded as specialists, and be entitled to the benefits of such specialization. School inspectors should be made to visit all the secondary schools regularly to ensure that the policy is being implemented. Any school that violates it should be promptly closed down. Those schools that are already implementing the policy should be given incentives. They deserve, not only commendation, but also incentives should be given to them by the Federal and State Governments. If the educational aspect of this policy is implemented, in the near future, the problem of implementing the official aspect will disappear because the three major languages will have spread sufficiently in every part of the country.

Before rounding off, we need to emphasize that the role of the minority languages should not be neglected. They already have their place in the policy, since they are mother tongues of many Nigerians. The government should see to it that they are used at the pre-primary level of education, as well as at the initial stage of primary education as stipulated by the policy. Moreover, the speakers should be assisted to develop their languages and the government should allocate more prestigious functions to the languages in national discourse.

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