

Multilingual Education for Nation Building: The Case for French Language

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Abstract

Language is man's essence and his vehicle for communication with people. Given her heterogeneous linguistic nature, Nigerian citizens tend to have ethnic consciousness rather than national loyalty. Bearing the Nigerian background in mind one may hardly see the need for another foreign language in the Nigerian educational system. But Nigeria, being an Anglophone country cannot remain alone. She is surrounded by French-speaking neighbours with whom she has to interact and enter into international cooperation. Together, these countries in the sub-region can then form a front to find solutions to their common problems of poverty, underdevelopment and unnecessary inter-tribal wars. This paper proposes to review multilingual education and highlight how French language can contribute towards the national development and building of our country.

Introduction

Language offers opportunities for man to communicate his feelings, opinions with fellow beings, and at the same time, enables him to learn new ideas and information from them. In the course of interacting with other people, he acquaints himself with new ideas and information available within his environment. It is the vehicle of communicating both individual and collective norms of the society. It embodies peoples' culture and their societal values. When people are deprived of the use of their language, they lose their self-

identity. If it is well harnessed, promotes national unity and development .But, if it is not well managed, breeds the negative sentiments of animosity and rivalry within a country.

According to an article in *Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia* : “Multilingualism is the act of using or promoting the use of multiple languages either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multilingual speakers outnumber monolingual speakers in the world’s population. Multilingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalization and cultural openness” (accessed 23rd, March 2011).

A number of factors could be responsible for the multilingual nature of a child. It could be that through the policy of the government a language other than the mother-tongue has been declared the official language of the community, like English in Nigeria. It then becomes incumbent upon all the citizens to learn it in order to communicate, especially in official circumstances. In addition to his mother-tongue which he learns naturally at home, he has to struggle to learn the rudiments of this official language. Also his parents may decide to relocate to another part of the country or the world. In order to adjust and interact with his neighbours, it becomes pertinent that he learns the language which is dominant in his new environment. This last example is the case of a story told by Gibert Dalgalian in his book, *Enfances Plurilingues* about Rakesh. Both parents were Indians, so naturally their mother-tongue was Hindi. She had accompanied her parents to France where they were to work at a biological institute. Their language of communication at home was Hindi, but she learnt French language at school. She not only spoke these languages fluently, but also learnt a bit of German language from other immigrant children who played with her on the

streets. About six years later, she learnt English language in Washington D.C where her parents had migrated to do another work (22).

Whatever the reason may be one finds that nowadays multilingualism is becoming a common phenomenon. Richards and Rodgers remarked that :<<It has been estimated that some 60% of today's world is multilingual. Both from a contemporary and historical perspective, bilingualism is the norm rather than the exception>>(1)

R.I.Trask shows that “In New Guinea, or in the Amazon rain forest where many different languages are often spoken in quite small areas, people routinely learn the languages of two or three neighbouring: groups, and the same was true of Australia before the European settlement virtually destroyed the indigenous culture (87).

Whatever may be the reason of an individual becoming multilingual; it is a gift that has lots of potentials for him in life. “A multilingual person, in a broad definition, is one who can communicate in more than one language, be it actively through speaking, writing, or signing or passively (through listening, reading or perceiving” (Wikipedia, free encyclopedia, 23rd March 2011,)A multilingual person has more advantages in terms of adaptation to his immediate environment in which he can communicate freely with acquaintances. It has been proved that multilingual children feel very confident and comfortable with their individual identity, and at the same time accept that of the wider community to which they now belong. To buttress this assertion, Romaine narrates this story about a child living in the US;

Mario was bilingual and bicultural with full awareness of these facts. He was well adjusted and had positive feelings about his own identity. His self-confidence in both languages was so

great that he spoke spontaneously to his parents in Spanish when they came to visit the school (195).

Multilingualism is a key that unlocks the door to untold riches, especially in areas of employment and business opportunities. In as much as we advocate for the compulsory teaching of indigenous languages in our primary and secondary schools, we should also see the need to promote the teaching of French language to our students in these levels of education. That will expose them to a wider perspective of choice of professions in the future. It broadens their ideas on international politics of co-operation and integration with other peoples of the world. Multilingualism also enhances their knowledge of scientific and technological expertise. Romaine, Suzanne, supported this idea when she revealed that "sometimes multilingual children performed better than the monolinguals on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence "(195).

In order to realize the dynamics of nation building such as poverty-eradication, unity, patriotism, political stability, technological and infrastructural development, Nigeria has to pursue an educational policy that will encourage the active participation of the masses from the grassroots. The government of the day should, through the use of the indigenous and official languages sensitize and communicate to the people of the need to generate positive ideals that will make our nation to grow and become developed. To buttress this point, Bamgbose emphasizes that "effective communication is an essential goal of language policy this becomes more crucial in a multilingual country especially for the purposes of administering the state"(3).

No government (no matter how well its objectives may seem) can achieve the herculean task of nation building

without the active participation of its citizens. There is need to carry its people along, be they in the urban or in the rural areas. One instrument of ensuring lasting unity, economic and technological advancement of a country is by ensuring an education policy that will actually encourage greater co-operation among the individuals and create within the people a sense of loyalty to the nation. This will help to eliminate the feelings of insecurity and marginalization felt by some ethnic groups, especially the minor ones. When people know their political and economic rights they can develop the abilities and skills that can help them to be self-actualized. According to Opara;

Functional education implies that citizens should not only be law-abiding and co-operative but should also involve themselves and contribute to national survival... The concern is essentially with inculcating the obligation of good citizenship rather than developing the capacities and skills that enable citizens to enjoy the advantages of a democratic citizenry i.e. contributing to the growth of the society not just to enjoy the fruits of citizenship. It consists of whatever the individual needs to know, understand, and not only to survive but to participate successfully and contribute to the survival of the society. The individual will be able to do this if he can realize his potentials (1).

The Nigeria Education Policy

In order to prepare her citizens for nation building therefore, Nigeria has adopted some tenets and principles of education, which are written in the National Policy of Education (NPE). Here are the main goals of the policy:

- Self realization and self reliance

- Relating appropriately to others.
- Social and technological awareness
- Faith In man's ability to make rational decisions
- Respect for the worth and dignity of individuals
- Moral and spiritual principle in interpersonal and human relations
- Share responsibility for the common good of society.
- Promotion of the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children.

These objectives of the Nigeria Policy on Education generally agree with this definition of the concept. According to *Collier's Encyclopedia*;

Education has always been a process by means of which a community, society or nation has sought to transmit to the emergent generation those traditional aspects of its culture which it considered fundamental and vital for its stability and survival (564).

Multilingual Education for Nation Building

The National Policy on Education makes adequate provision to encourage multilingualism. It stipulates that;

... 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, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Given the peculiar case of Nigeria as a multilingual country, made up of many ethnic groups, policy that promotes unity should always be pursued. This will encourage the people to co-operate and have a unity of

purpose, which will help to build a strong and virile nation. In view of this goal this paper advocates multilingual education. Bamgbose remarked that, "although multilingualism is often seen as a disadvantage, the fact is that it is more appropriately to be considered as a challenge and an opportunity, for cultural enrichment and pluralism"(1).

No language should be marginalized because this attitude tends only to engender hatred and ethnocentric sentiments among the citizens. Rask,R.I revealed that years ago the British authorities punished and persecuted children for speaking Welsh, a minority language in the school. This created within the Welsh people, a lot of aggression and acrimony against the British until the authorities reviewed it and adopted a more enlightened policy towards its minority languages (88).

Thus, multilingualism *is a resource to be cultivated rather than a problem to be overcome*. As many children are encouraged to know and use the mother-tongue in order to project their very essence and culture, their teachers should not hesitate to expose them to other languages of the world. People who become over-protective of their mother-tongue run the risk of being ignorant of what is happening in the world. To illustrate this point, increased attention was given to foreign language learning towards the end of 1950s in the USA.

According to Richards and Rodgers :

The need for a radical change or rethinking of foreign language teaching methodology was prompted by the launching of the first Russian Satellite in 1957. Thus US Government acknowledged the need for a more intensive effort to teach foreign languages in order to

prevent Americans from becoming isolated from scientific advances made in other countries (47).

As the world progressively turns to a global village, people of diverse languages and cultures have realized their need for mutual and peaceful co-existence. Nations have formed international associations such as the United Nations Organisation, European Union, African Union and others for meaningful co-operation and integration. Apart from the United Nations, there are other international organizations like the African Union and the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS) to which Nigeria belongs. And their languages of transaction are English and French. For Nigeria to maximize her benefits from these organizations she needs to encourage the learning of French in her schools.

To illustrate this the need for more co-operation on the national and international scales, Roger et al. have this to say:

There are no longer any remote islands or isolated peoples. An ever-denser web of crisscrossing links and mutual dependence enfolds all nations. It is now increasingly necessary for them to turn from passive interdependence to deliberate solidarity which can make their diversity a source of continuous vitality and mutual enrichment so that the future of each one may be increasingly sustained by its many links with all the others(6).

Nigerians need to be French literate in order not to be left out of the circulation and dissemination of information on academic and scientific discoveries in the global trend. In

terms language of international diplomacy, French is among the "big twos", Nigerians should not hesitate to learn French. There is need for Nigeria known as "the giant of Africa" to be in the mainstream of the educational, economic, technological and political activities of Africa. She cannot afford to be ignored in the struggle for the total emancipation and progress of Africa,

The Importance of French Language in Nigeria

With the current globalization of the world the traditional methods of communication as cablegrams, telegrams and mailed letters are becoming obsolete. Sophisticated data networks commonly referred to as the "information super highway" which include fax machine, electronic-mail system (e-mail), computers, cable, Internet, and satellite television are now replacing them. And their modes of communication are mainly English and French. Nigeria and France have had strong bilateral trade agreements and these have created job opportunities within Nigeria. Many French companies have important investments in some strategic industries as banking, automobile, oil exploration and marketing and road construction. Ate and Akinterinwa remark thus:

Of great importance is the fact that France has been helping the Nigerian economy in very critical areas other western countries have not been willing to invest in, and which Nigeria considers crucial in its bid for industrial development. This can be seen in the Ajaokuta iron and steel project... Again in the automobile sector, French government assisted PAN with completely knocked down (CKD) parts to help

PAN stay in business and to alleviate transportation problems in Nigeria (212).

The late General Sani Abacha declared French language as Nigeria's second official language. He declared the "need for Nigerians to be literate in French within the shortest possible time" and initiated moves to make it compulsory in the primary school. Some people who criticize this policy maintain that the child's attention and intelligence will be divided, because there are too many subjects that he has to grapple with. Language is natural and children learn it easily once they have cultivated the habit. According to Romaine, "a study done by Geissler offered evidence that children could learn up to four languages without confusion even in the absence of clear demarcation in the input"(195).

This demonstrates that multilingualism can even contribute to a child's mental alertness and help him to develop a sense of confidence and superiority over his colleagues. In the same way it is very necessary that more Nigerians should be French literate. Through the effective dissemination of information on current research and technology, which are available mainly in English and French, Nigeria can improve the lot of her people,

Nigeria also has a lot to offer the world in terms of arts and culture. Her artists and writers would reach a wider audience if they communicate both in English and French languages. Some Nigerians live in English speaking countries while others are in French speaking countries. Also many Nigerian sports men are highly rated all over the world. Some of them might never have had the modern facilities and expert training through which they developed their talents.

Moreover, with the computer being the trend nowadays, many people find that a good knowledge of some foreign languages and the computer gives them better

employment opportunities, especially in the international and the multinational companies like the Nestle Foods, Nigeria, E1F, Michelin and in the foreign missions and embassies.

Conclusion

This paper has so far examined the concept of multilingualism, the advantages of this attribute to an individual. It has also highlighted how education can be an instrument through which a government will mobilize its people for mass participation in nation building. Multilingualism is an opportunity to be exploited so should not be viewed as a menace or problem to be avoided. If its potentials are fully put in use, they will contribute to the cultural enrichment of the members of the society. French language can contribute towards the societal and technological development of the Nigerian populace .More Nigerians need to be French literate in order to enhance international co-operations and promote bilateral trade agreements with our Francophone neighbours. French language has not come to compete with our indigenous languages, but rather to compliment them.

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