

Second Language Acquisition, Attrition of Indigenous Languages in Nigeria: Cultural Implications

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Abstract: This paper discusses second language acquisition with reference to Nigeria and the effect of the English language on the languages and culture of the people. Also in focus is the Nigerian national language policy and the position of English language as a national language. Globalisation and communication advances since the evolution of information communication technology (ICT) from the 1990s are discussed with particular reference to their effects on Nigerian society, culture and language. There have in recent years been calls for a more open and inclusive approach to language teaching within the Nigerian National Language policy. This is in line with the practice in so many other countries where English is a second language (L₂). Such countries have decided to protect their national identities while simultaneously implementing English language programmes that suit the needs of their people. Successful policies have taken into account the relationship between language and culture and the dangers of creating language programmes that do not consider the consequences of acculturation. The paper in view of these observations among others recommends that Nigerian policy makers study the experiences and actions of other countries that have English as second language and other non English speaking countries, the current research available on language programmes worldwide in order to formulate a viable English programme that produces bilingual speakers who are literate in both English language and indigenous Nigerian languages. A call is made for an effective English language programme that will incorporate theory, practice and the experiences of other countries applied to the needs of Nigerian people in line with current global trends in language acquisition.

Key words: culture, languages, indigenous, programmes, bilingual.

I. Introduction

“A language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country” (Crystal, 1997 p.2). Clearly, the English language has achieved such a role. It has become the world’s lingua franca. Currently, because of its association with global economy, it is deemed to be “the natural choice for progress” (Crystal, 1997 p.75). (Phillipson, 2003), observes that English has acquired a narcotic power in many parts of the world, an addiction that has long-term consequences that are far from clear. As with the drugs trade in its legal and illegal branches there are major commercial interests involved in the global English industry.

Kumuravadivelu (2008) observes that just as we have to deal with the globality of the English language we also have to deal with its coloniality. According to some other researchers, the globality of the English language rode on the back of colonialism (Pennycook, 2001). There is also the indelible impact it has had on the identities of people around the world (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998), as well as practice of resistance (Canagarajah, 1999).

Formal western education was introduced into Nigeria by Christian Missionaries and for more than four decades the outcome of education was left entirely to the missionaries. These believed that the African child would be best taught in his native language and secondly that the interest of Christianity would be best served by actually propagating the religion in indigenous language. (Taiwo, 1994) thus the teaching and learning of indigenous languages received much genuine attention in the 1950s.

This approach, however, was not accepted by everybody especially the elite, who were of the view that the products of such education were not suited for the job market of those days. Those with reasonable command of the English language were in high demand. The result was that the government began as from early 1960s to gradually intervene in the education of their country with a view to, according the English language a lot more prominence. Over time, the education policy on language, initiated by the Nigerian government succeeded, shifting interest in language very much away from indigenous languages to English, the language of the colonial masters. Thus, the English language has a second language status in Nigeria. It is the official language used in all spheres of life.

In the teaching of English as a second and foreign language (ESL) (EFL), the realities of modern day globalization and economic interdependency have become very important factors. In the last half of the twentieth century, English has become more and more important as a significant factor leading to economic growth and stability (Brown, 2000). In the last decade, with the advent of the world wide web and cyberspace communication, English is seen as an essential tool for economic stability and political presence in the twenty-first century. Some countries, which experienced British or American imperialism a century earlier are now well positioned to participate globally, since English is already established as their second language. Brainbridge (2002) notes that the reasons for learning English as a second or foreign language in the 21st century, are often not discussed or considered in depth. On the surface, the economic and political importance of English acquisition often outweighs any serious consideration into why or more importantly how it should be acquired.

English has come to symbolize wealth and success, as well as political, intellectual and economic power. Speed and rapid decision-making characterize this new high-tech age. By implication, economic success in this global village requires that the population acquire English quickly and proficiently. This obsession may be true, but certainly there must be other factors that have traditionally led to economic success. Clearly, there are other factors that traditionally contributed to national wealth and prosperity such as first language literacy, work ethic, birthrate, education and social stability. The acquisition of English as a means to further economic success and political acumen may be a reality, but government must know and understand exactly why they believe that English proficiency is necessary and more importantly how non-implementation of the existing national language policy will continue to affect national culture and identity of Nigerians. Educational policies must be reviewed from time to time and tailored to the economic needs and cultural situation of the individual country.

In realization of this fact, the government should see the indigenous languages more clearly for what they had been all along, viz, a veritable and practical means of communication, some of which could very easily be harnessed for effecting national integration which is a matter of paramount importance for a country still struggling to consolidate its independence. These considerations are explicitly spelt out in section one, paragraph eight of the National Policy on Education, which is a document that contains the general objectives, philosophy, goals and aims of education in Nigeria (NPE, 2004).

II. Theoretical Background

The 1977 Nigerian National Policy on Education as revised (NPE, 2004) advocates the use of the mother, tongue or the language of the immediate community as medium of instruction in early formal education.

It also requires that every Nigerian child should learn one of the three major Nigerian languages. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba in addition to his own language and English taught by specialist teachers of English.

Omamor (1984) states that the 1981 revision of the 1977 policy statement outlines the importance of language in the educational process as a means of preserving the peoples culture, stressing in the process, the necessity in the interest of national unity.

III. Culture

Culture refers to the wide and varied influences that have shaped an area or country. It envelops historical, political, social and environmental factors that in turn create a sense of belonging and distinctiveness. Fishman quoted in (Baker, 1996 p:6) describes the extent to which language is part of culture at three major levels;

A language indexes its culture. A language and its attendant culture will have grown up together over a long period of history, and be in harmony with each other. Thus the language that has grown up round a culture best expresses that culture. Its vocabulary, idioms, metaphors are the ones that best explain at a cognitive and emotive level of that culture. 2) a language symbolizes its cultureA language tends to symbolize the status of that language. Speaking English often symbolizes money and modernity, affluence and achievement. English may also symbolize colonial subjugation. 3) Culture is partly created from its language. Much of a culture is enacted and transmitted verbally: the songs, hymns, prayers of a culture, its folk tales and shrewd sayings, its appropriate forms of greeting and living, its history and ideals are all wrapped up in its language. The taste and flavour of a culture is given through its language.

Globalization has brought with it dynamic language contact and conflict worldwide. This has resulted in language shifts in a number of countries and language maintenance has become a central issue with many ethnic groups and national governments; "Ethnic groups regularly use language as one of their most signifying features Most ethnic groups believe that their language is the best medium for preserving and expressing their traditions" (Slopsy, 1998 p:57). Attempts to reverse language shift can be an emotional issue, resulting in non-productive negative backlashes that hinder economic and political growth. Nigerian educators and policy makers must be cognisant of the power of language. Therefore, to maintain a rich and pure language is to maintain a rich and pure culture. Thus, fostering the use of the indigenous languages in education will enable the

learners to come to understand their culture in more depth. Yule (1985) observes that different languages and cultures reflect various and differing world views. Therefore, individuals will judge and react to others differently, depending on how they perceive the person. These perceptions are very much linked to language use and body language, Skutnabb-Kangas (1990) finds one form of prejudice they call 'linguicism' as the common idea that prestige world languages such as standard English are intrinsically better than other less economically powerful languages. If English is seen as intrinsically better, then it is a small step indeed to view English culture as intrinsically better as well. This knowledge can be a powerful tool in promoting English and therefore western political viewpoints throughout the world. National policies to promote English as a second language (ESL) in Nigeria has created generations of young people cognisant of other people and their cultures. Most educators view this as a good trend but policy makers must ensure that this promotion does not lead to the attrition of indigenous Nigerian languages.

IV. Second Language Acquisition in Context

Second language acquisition and second language learning are used interchangeably in the field of applied linguistics and language education. Some researchers differentiate between acquisition and learning (Krashen, 1976). A first language is acquired through total immersion, usually with no formal training and with family and friends as tutors. Krashen (1984) states that 'learning' connotes some form of formal or classroom situation where a second language is 'sequentially' and systematically 'taught'. Observing the ways in which a child acquires a first language, it is clear that the methods are more varied and less structured than the second language learning situation. Acquisition can be successful through any number of styles and settings. In the context of this paper, second language acquisition refers to the learning or acquiring of a second or foreign language both in formal and informal settings.

Until the middle of the 20th century, second language acquisition emphasised reading and writing proficiency, because most international communication was made by way of letters and documents. Official visits from one country to another were an expensive and to another were an expensive and time-consuming undertaking. The traditional grammar-translation method worked well in school systems worldwide. Individuals in positions of power were proficient in their first language as well as in written English. The advent of improved modes of transportation made international travels become more frequent and obvious in the 1960s. It then became more obvious that the grammar-translation method was not producing individuals who could speak a second language. Methods in language teaching began to change with (Lambert, 1973) pioneering the language immersion approach in Canada.

Today, researchers point out the new approaches necessary to produce second language students who are capable of proficient verbal communication. Corder (1997) states that first language learning follows a lawful sequence, or built in syllabus and should be, by and large, identical to second language learning. Krashen (1984) developed a theory of second language acquisition, which is influencing language teaching technique worldwide. The researcher studied children and their patterns in acquiring their first language. The study revealed that when children acquire their first language, it is through meaningful interaction in the target language and natural communication. Children do not plan to learn a first language, they see a need to communicate with the people around them and attempt to send messages in whatever form they can master.

Krashen (1984) further asserts that acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language, natural communications in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding. To Krashen, language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require tedious drill. The theory sees learning as the product of formal instruction and it comprises a conscious process, which results in conscious knowledge about the language. According to the researcher 'learning' is less important than 'acquisition' and acquisition is best achieved through conversations with sympathetic native speakers who are willing to help the acquirer understand the message.

V. Language Attrition and Cultural Implications

The field of applied linguistics and English as a second (foreign) language (ESL/EFL) has expanded at a tremendous rate in the past two decades but few researchers and policy makers have stopped to ask 'why English' (Bainbridge, 2002). In this era of economic evolution, it may be an efficient and necessary fact that we must be able to communicate internationally with one language, but countries should have a clear understanding of why they are promoting English, the benefits resulting and the methods, to combat cultural homogenisation.

Grimes (2000) observes that the one language policy combined with American economic success has resulted in serious erosion of other world cultures and languages. Experts estimate that about 420 languages of the world are on the verge of extinction. Two obvious examples of the power of language, especially English, are the resulting loss of indigenous culture in the Philippines and Guam as given by Enriquez & Marcelino (1984 p.3);

‘With the imposition of the English language, the country became dependent on a borrowed language that carries with it the dominant ideology and political-economic interests of United States. With the dependence of the country on a borrowed language, it became dependent too on foreign theories and methods underlying the borrowed language, thus resulting, in borrowed consciousness. The peoples values were then more easily modified so that they equate foreign interest with national interest. Thus it became easier for the United States to subjugate the Filipino people and impose its will on them.

English as a second language ‘ESL’ has been viewed by Day, quoted in (Phillipson, 1992) as a factor in linguistic genocide. The study described the experience of Gwam Island which was ceded to the United States in 1906; Eight years after, an English-only policy was introduced and the indigenous language, Chamorro, was prohibited. Today, Chamorro is an official language of Guam, but it is seen as unimportant economically and although school programmes are attempting to reintroduce young Guamanian students to their former mother tongue, but the cultural damage is complete.

The Nigerian language situation is no better than the situation in the Philippines and Gwam. A nation with over two hundred and fifty languages is still battling with a language policy of promoting and implementing three major indigenous languages.

As Akere (1998) contended that inspite of the comprehensiveness of language policy provisions; the language situation in Nigeria educational system remains confusing, the major problem according to the study has been the lack of seriousness on the part of Nigerians to fully support and implement its language policies.

Government and policy makers can prevent this cultural erosion if they know and understand the reasons why English has become the international lingua franca. The combination of computer technology, globalisation and English as an international language should be viewed as a package. Industrialized countries are benefiting from the advances, but the situation warrants a paradigm shift regarding its influence on the national cultures of countries with non-English traditions. A nation can become bilingual and a player on the world stage while conscientiously working hard to maintain an appreciation of its own traditions which can only be done through the indigenous language/languages of such a country.

VI. Conclusion

From the foregoing research, evidences have shown that teaching and learning a second language can actually contribute to higher proficiency in first language. As a result of this, it is clear that if curriculum balances language education in bilingual multilingual environments, the child can maintain high linguistic standards in all the languages. The concern of language educators in the twenty-first century does not have to be first language erosion, but the phenomenon of cultural erosion. If implemented properly, second language learning can enhance first language proficiency, which in turn strengthens first culture stature. National policy makers in Nigeria may have to face the reality of a one-language international policy but at the same time take measures to protect their peoples traditions. Second language education should not erode the existing culture.

The only solution to the language problem faced in Nigeria is for all the language groups to learn their own languages, ‘the language of wider diffusion’ which is English should be learned to access higher education, international networks, information in the international arena, social and geographical mobility while the group languages provides socialization, rootedness, continuity and identity. Adaptability and speed are the key words of the new millennium. The specific challenges for Nigeria is to loosen the prominence given to the English language, which elevates it as the only official language of the country. This would allow policy makers put in place reasonable measures to promote literacy, in the indigenous languages and maintain cultural traditions and national identity.

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