

NIGERIA LANGUAGE POLICIES AND THE PROBLEM OF IMPLEMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

People have wondered whether language policies exist in Nigeria considering the way the indigenous languages have been downplayed. Nigeria has been battling with the implementation of her language policies. Different regimes put up varying policies to reap the best out of language. Unfortunately, these have not yielded the desired results. This work tries to examine the cause or causes of this anomaly and suggest some ways out of the canker. The researchers used primary and secondary sources for data collection. The primary source was through personal intuition and experience, while the secondary source was through books, journals and online materials. The researchers discovered that certain factors militate against successful implementation of Nigerian language policies. These factors included dearth of Nigerian language teachers, lack of adequate information, and government ineptitude among others. The researchers suggest that teachers of Nigerian indigenous languages be motivated for higher performance and that government pay more active role in information management. The service conditions should be made more attractive so that more individuals would venture into it. Parents are also encouraged to speak their native languages to their children especially at home.

Keywords: Policy, Language, Implementation, Curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Language has been an indispensable instrument in governance, economic transactions, social activities, education, etc. in Nigeria and beyond. The place of language in the affairs of man cannot be over-emphasized. For these reasons and more, every nation, country, or government makes deliberate attempt to formulate policy or policies on language which will aid the smooth running of the state or its agencies. This is necessary because the inadequate handling of language policy can be catastrophic and even lead to war. It has been said that language policy in Africa is a far-reaching issue which is a great distance from an acceptable solution to the problems posed by language barriers. According to

Francomacaro (1974), one of the major challenges or key points of a national language policy is to select a language that is capable of uniting every nation or state.

The issue of language policy or policies emanates from the fact that many nations have varied languages within their confines and there is the need to streamline these languages to the benefit of the nation and its citizenry. There is the need to make members of a “speech community” have a sense of belonging in the geographical entity that make up their country. One of the ways to assert this is to respect the language of a community, state, or region. Linguists have for a long time simplified the case of dignity of language by stating that no human language is inferior to the other, and that all serve same purpose of communication. Many people recognize that their language is their identity, and, therefore, would not like their language to be treated with levity. The “formulators” of language policies are expected to be aware of the above and the danger of not being mindful of what language is to the owners.

Most nations or states operate a “commonwealth” in which all the citizens of the country should be accommodated. Language policy makers understand that as part of a commonwealth, the citizens feel their languages should count. Every effort is, therefore, made to accommodate every language within a possible language space. Despite the need to accommodate every language in the national policy on language either as a lingua franca or official language, it is a difficult task to accomplish because of the multiplicity of languages. There are so many indigenous languages to accommodate, of which many of them are not quite “developed.” It is estimated that Nigeria alone has over two hundred and fifty indigenous languages. With this number it becomes difficult to decide which language to choose and which to drop. This and other reasons place hurdles to the formulation of impeccable national language policy. Many developed and developing nations successfully skewed this part, albeit, with difficulty, leaving a theoretical footprint.

NIGERIA LANGUAGE POLICIES

Many regimes in Nigeria, whether military or civilian, recognize the place of language in the nation's polity. Hardly any regime traversed the leadership without at least brushing on the language policy. According to Sahara Reporters, Nigeria possesses a multilingual and multicultural course of action or strategy on governance. This is specially put in place for the production of the needed manpower for the development of the nation. They state that the nation notes the important roles of both the native languages and English in learning and general manpower advancement. The former Nigeria Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu was quoted as saying that the nation has lost so much due to the “death” of a number of local languages. He emphasized government's readiness to safeguard the people's culture (saharareporters.com). Toeing similar lane, Sofunke and Emenanjo (1990) opined that the building of a national identity can be made possible by a selection of a national language capable of uniting the people culturally, politically, and linguistically. This policy, according to them, will bring the East, the West, and the North together in fraternal love. This opinion may sound wonderfully good, but the problem arises when the choice of

the language to use is introduced. In that case, the users of Hausa Language may be unwilling to step it down for any other national language. The Yoruba most likely will stick to the choice of Yoruba as a national language, while the Igbo on their part most probably will employ every arsenal to see Igbo Language upheld as a national language. This is just to mention Nigerian major languages. The minority groups such as the Ibibio and the Efik may also not be easy to get by. The scenario is but a microcosm of language policy challenges. Those who drafted the 1981 National Policy on Education did their best to take care of the situation by providing that for one to graduate from secondary school, a student must offer two out of the three major Nigerian Languages. In other words, a student from Hausa speaking area must study Igbo or Yoruba in addition. The same applies to the one belonging to the Yoruba or Igbo speaking communities. This was strategic, but how far it has improved the situation or reversed the challenge is another issue.

The number of languages existing in Nigeria has been estimated at different figures by different authors ranging from 150, 200, 250, 400, to over 400. Emenanjo (1990) posits that over 400 languages subsist in Nigeria which has extended over wide areas irrespective of boundaries of administration. This can be exemplified in Nigeria's sharing of some languages with countries like Benin, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon (jstor.org). Some scholars have attributed this linguistic diversity among other diversities to the colonial partitioning exercise which failed to follow the pre-colonial socio ethnic and politico-linguistic groups found in Africa. This, according to them, among other challenges, has created problems of language policy and planning in addition to the difficulty of agreeing on a national language (Attah, 1987). It should be of note that what may be of help in estimating the number of languages found in Nigeria is streamlining the concept or definition of language. It is a common knowledge that many linguists and lay people approach language definition from different perspectives. Until it is approached from a common standpoint, there will continue to be variations in the number of languages ascribed to Nigeria.

There is a claim that three of the four groupings in which African languages are segmented are found within Nigeria's linguistic space. These four groups are: Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Kordofanian, and Khoisan. Aligning with Hansford (1976), Attah (1987) stated that the Nilo-Saharan phylum has three languages belonging to it in Nigeria. The Afro-Asiatic group possesses 103 representatives; while the Niger-Kordofanian houses 286 language memberships. The Khoisan is the lone African group not found in Nigeria (Hansford 1976). These go to show how encompassing Nigerian languages are and why policy makers should be aware of the enormous task ahead. We have often heard of or noticed Yoruba and Hausa being spoken outside Nigeria. These languages can leverage on these and demand for certain preferences as languages that extend beyond Nigeria borders. On the other hand, the Igbo Language can lay hold on originality arguing that these others might have infiltrated into Nigeria from outside and cannot be sworn to be original Nigerian Languages. Whichever way the pendulum swings, it goes to show that choosing a national language for Nigeria is an uphill task.

Devising a language policy for a nation as complex as Nigeria is not an easy task because of its far reaching implications. Attah (1987) noted how some language policies made in Nigeria in the past caused riots in some parts of the country. He mentioned the Tivi riots of 1962 as examples of such riots. According to him, the riots came about because the people refused what he termed, Sarduana policy of Hausa-isation in the old Northern Region of Nigeria. Sarduana was then the Premier of Northern Region of Nigeria. In another development on a peaceful manner, the 1979 constitution made provision for the business of the National Assembly to be conducted in Igbo, Yoruba, or Hausa, aside English. What practically took place was that the entire deliberations were in English (Attah, 1987). This is understandable for all the legislators to be carried along, although, the provision did not consider that. If, however, any of the three indigenous Nigerian languages were to be used, there could have been the likelihood that many of the assembly members might not have cope with the business of the house except for the few who may be privileged to understand the three languages. The only remedy could have been the use of an interpreter or an interpreting machine which might not be easy to come by. This is part of the problem of the implementation of Nigerian language policies. In the above example, one would notice that the policy has been made, but the implementation became a challenge. One may take for granted that the minority groups that fall out of the three mainstream Nigerian Languages might keep quiet and not complain. In reality the situation could be different.

The 1991 constitution made a slight amendment on the above provision in regard to conversation medium at the national assembly. Many, however, criticized it for its ambiguity and lack of a particular standpoint. Section, 51 of the 1991 Nigeria's Constitution states that the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made. Section 91 also states that, the business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more languages spoken in the state as the House may by resolution approve (Acheoah, 2019). A closer look at the above provisions will reveal that the vagueness of the statements was in consideration of the difficulties and challenges of implementation. The question is, when will adequate arrangements be made and how will it be made? These unanswered questions by the 1991 constitution are part of the unforeseen challenges of language policy implementation.

The 1977 National Policy on Education made a clear statement on the use of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba in addition to English either as a medium of instruction or a subject at various levels of the school system. The same applies to its 1981 and 2004 revision of the same policy. The policy was practical and estimated the cost of implementation of the project. It never underestimated the task ahead so that any government wanting to pull the bull by the horn would know the part to play. It projected that the number of teachers that would be needed to adequately teach the three selected major Nigerian languages in Nigerian Secondary Schools was 55,237 (Fifty-five thousand, two hundred and thirty-seven). Out of this figure, 6,383 (Six thousand three hundred and eighty-three) were at hand. This was

only about 11.3% of the manpower needed to execute the program me. It is of note that population has increased much since then, thereby further distorting these figures and increasing the challenge.

Towards the end of the 1980s, the Imo State Government set up a committee to investigate the teaching of the Igbo Language in the Imo State school system in line with the implementation of the National Language Policy. In their submission, the committee acknowledged that there were commendable differences since the adoption of the National Policy on Education with regard to the policy on language generally, and particularly Igbo Language. In their findings, the committee stated inter-alia, that most of the highly placed Ministry of Education officials that included: school supervisors, inspectors of education, principals, headmasters/headmistresses of schools, and practicing teachers were ignorant of the provisions of the language policy as contained in the National Policy on Education. They stated that this ignorance accounts for the low image associated with Nigerian Languages in the school system. Looking at the above submission by the committee, one would imagine how one can implement what he is ignorant about. If this is the situation in the South East where it is assumed that much people are educated, what beholds other parts of the nation? Coupled with the above are the scarcity of qualified Nigerian language teachers and the under-use of the available ones (not all the Nigerian language teachers that are graduates are given automatic employment even when there is serious need for them). One can decipher that the challenge ahead is not only on formulating good policies, but in addition bringing the policies to the knowledge of those on the field to implement it. They should also be given orientation on the modality of execution. In other words, there should be a serious follow up to any positive formulated policy.

LANGUAGE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF UNITY AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Language is an indispensable tool for unity and preservation of culture. Without communication, it will be difficult to sustain and preserve cultural life and embrace unity. People that desire to live together in harmony must have a means of communication. The most important tool for communication is language. It is language that points to the dos and donts of the society. It is through language that people express phatic communion, love, and appreciation. All the above indices of affection help to bind people together. This is why every civilized society aims to advance language policies that help the younger generation communicate with ease. This can be done through the school system and other means of socialization. The 2004 National Policy on Education highlights the place of language in the advancement of social interactions, national cohesion, and cultural preservation. Egwuatuoha (n.d) summarized the provision of the policy as it pertains to language use and learning at school. They are as follow:

1. Every child should be taught the language of the immediate community. The language is to be used in teaching in the pre-primary and lower primary schools. The idea is that, by encouraging the acquisition and use of this language commonly

- referred to as the L_1 of the child; the child will be well formed in the language. This language must not essentially be any of the three official Nigerian languages.
2. Every child should study one of the three major Nigerian Languages which is Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba if the language of the immediate community or environment is not the same with the three languages. The intention is for the child to add it to the one of his immediate environment
 3. Government should develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages not yet developed as a way of enhancing their use.
 4. From year four in primary school, English should be progressively employed as a medium of instruction while the language of the immediate environment and French are taught as school subjects. This is in line with the way English was taught as school subject in the pre-primary and lower primary schools when the language of instruction was that of the host community or immediate environment of the child.
 5. French shall become Nigeria's second official language. It should be made a compulsory subject in the primary and junior secondary schools, but non-vocational elective in the senior secondary school. This is to foster good relationship with Nigerian neighbours who speak French.

One can admit that a good implementation of the above should offer the child the much needed knowledge at this level in terms of language operation. But it is not always the case. A deep analysis of the above items vis-à-vis what is happening in our schools will reveal that its implementation is far away from the guideline. For example, many primary schools in Nigeria are not offering French in spite of the policy. This may be due to lack of manpower or the nature of teaching in the primary school system. On another development, the Sahara reporters published on November 30, 2022 an article titled, “Nigeria approves new language policy to teach primary school pupils in their mother tongue”. The new policy made the mother tongue a compulsory medium of instruction from primary one to six. According to the report, the approval was made by the Federal Executive Council in a meeting that took place at the Presidential Villa presided over by the then Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari. Commenting on the policy, the then Minister of Education, Adamu Adamu acknowledged the challenges of implementation when he said that the policy, though, officially effective can only have full implementation when the government develops the teaching materials, and adequate arrangement is made for recruitment of qualified teachers. He noted that the objective of the policy is to cultivate the use of all Nigerian Languages. Adamu, however, declared, that by the approval of this memo on national policy, Nigeria now has a national language policy.

ISSUES ON IMPLEMENTATION OF NIGERIAN LANGUAGE POLICIES

People that are familiar with policies are aware of the disparity between the formulation of policies and its execution. Acheoah and Olaleye (2019) state that language policies evolved in Nigeria to the present moment have not been practicable. They point out that policies should not be made for the beauty of making them, but ought to be viable, powerful, and foreseeing the future. It has often been said that Nigeria makes nice policies but the

problem has in a number of times revolved on the implementation. The persistent non implementation of these policies calls for investigation to fish out reasons behind the non actualization of these wonderful proposals. This could in some way help in improving the situation.

FACTORS THAT HAMPER IMPLEMENTATION OF NIGERIA LANGUAGE PLICIES

Many factors have been expressed to be responsible for the paralysis in execution of language policies made in Nigeria. It should be noted that most of these language policies are geared towards the promotion of the indigenous languages. Acheoah and Olaleye (2019) in their study of language policy and planning in Nigeria, contend that language problems in Nigeria tarry because apart from not being clearly spelt out, they are not implemented with truth and perseverance. There are other factors apart from the ones stated by Acheoah and Olaleye which can be said to be responsible for non-implementation or partial implementation of Nigerian Language policies. They include:

1. Nigeria, and indeed Africa's attitude towards anything foreign. A writer once said that Africans are enamored about everything American. Anything foreign in Africa is almost regarded as better. When a choice is to be made; it is often at the cost of the local alternative. It has gone to the extent that many Nigerians and Africans rarely differentiate between foreign nationalities. Once you are not Nigerian or African, then all you do is superior. This accounts for the neglect of our indigenous languages and poor implementation of the policies meant to promote them. For most, a product is considered good that does not have its root or manufacture in Nigeria or Africa. This attitude has been transferred to language whereby the indigenous Nigerian languages are not given the pride of place due to them. A commentator once said that a Whiteman may be pardoned for a mistake in English construction, but a Blackman will not. The mistake of the Whiteman will be regarded as ordinary while that of the Blackman will be taken as ignorance or poor cognition. The reason behind the above attitude is that English which is often projected as a language of commerce and education is a foreign language and offers more opportunities. The indigenous languages are neglected both in school and in the social milieu on account of these. This attitude spills over to higher institutions. More emphasis is given to English. Students at secondary schools and pupils at primary schools are sometimes punished for using vernacular in communication. From infancy then, the child develops a negative mindset about indigenous languages, especially, those of his immediate community or environment. Parents take pride that their child can speak English very fluently. They care less about their performances in their mother tongue. For that, anything goes. This psychologically affects the implementation of the language policy because the child is not motivated and the teacher is not encouraged. This should not be for linguists have often said that no language is better than the other. The trend, however, is gradually changing with the insistence of a pass in any three of the major Nigerian Languages to obtain the First School leaving Certificate.

2. English as the official language in Nigeria has permeated the psyche of the citizens who see it as a language of local and international commerce. It is also used in most government transactions. Interviews for employment into ministries and parastatals are majorly conducted in English and anyone who cannot write and answer correctly in English will be regarded as not intelligent or at best be at the mercy of the interviewers. One, however, should, however understand that any language can be used as language of commerce. It can also be employed for educating the child.
3. Being the language of instruction in school, pupils and students desire to be like their teacher who speaks “queen's English”. This psychological condition will hardly allow the child to accept his or her indigenous language as a necessary tool of life. The child, therefore, regards indigenous language acquisition as secondary in his mental grading. The same applies to the teachers, school supervisors, and others who see to the implementation of the national language policy. The environment affects them also. Priority and interest somehow affect action. Acheoah and Olaleye (2019) state that the position of English as a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools is conditioned by the Education Ordinance of 1882. Article 114 (1) of the Littleton Constitution legalized English as an official language in Nigeria. Following that, in 1896 the certification system was introduced which made credit pass in English compulsory in schools. Up to the present time, it is a condition for admission into Nigerian universities. By this, a scale of preference was formally drawn, leaving those willing to promote the indigenous Nigerian languages enormous task to accomplish, and those to implement the policy, a difficult terrain to ply. Government at this level can intervene by insisting on a credit in any Nigerian Language in addition to English as a prerequisite to admission into tertiary educational system.
4. The next factor militating against the effective implementation of the national policy on language is ignorance of the provisions of the policy. Many of the teachers and inspectors of education are sometimes unaware of the changes in policy due to communication gap. Many may not have access to news prints and today's social media. Some complain of the inability to purchase an android phone. Those who have smart phones complain of financial lack to load data. Others that have the information about changes in policy may wait for directives from their superiors who are awaiting instruction from the Commissioner for Education. All the above protocols and bureaucracy hamper implementation. At a higher level, there may be a plan to organize a workshop or seminar in this regard. Some seminars, workshops, or symposia may be difficult to come by because of other logistics such as funds, personnel, services, etc. The totality of these factors either results to poor implementation or non-implementation of the guideline. To abate this, government can set up machinery of communication of new language policies

using today's social media platform. Government can post information to WhatsApp groups. A department in Education charged with supervision and enforcement of implementation of policy guidelines should also be established. Such a department will ensure that everything about language policies work right.

5. Lack of trained Nigerian language teachers also hampers the implementation of the language policy. The available trained teachers are not sufficient enough to man the program me as to produce the envisaged output. As earlier stated, the 1977 National Policy on Education which was revised in 1981 stated inter alia that the total number of indigenous Nigerian language teachers required in 1988 for the teaching of Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba Languages was 55,237 while the available number was 6,383. This number represents just about 11.6% of the number of teachers required to make the policy functional. What a huge difference? This becomes a major issue which somehow is linked to others above. There is no special program me designed to tackle such a challenging issue. There are no special interventions or incentives in form of free education and automatic employment for graduates of indigenous Nigerian language studies. Incentives that could have been placed in form of making available special allowances for the trainees and their teachers are not there. Government can think of giving automatic employment to these language teachers, increase their pay package and make their condition of service better.
6. There is also lack of equipment and instructional materials to execute the program me. Cultural artifacts and teaching aids enough to make impact for the teaching of these languages are not provided. Such materials could have made the study of indigenous languages easier and more attractive to the students. The government can improve on this by improving budget for education. More excursions should be organized to make students and pupils visit the museums and appreciate African arts and icons.
7. In a good number of the indigenous languages, some fundamental phonological issues exist. Some of the languages are still battling with the challenge of acceptable orthography. Several others are at the stage of identifying the phonemes of their language. The Igbo Language, for instance, battled with orthography controversy for over four decades. This devastating controversy truncated the development and progress of Igbo Language studies for almost half a century. The controversy was fueled by some language specialists who were bent on projecting the orthography and phonemes of their dialects. The situation was miraculously salvaged by government intervention and language policy. The Onwu Committee set up by the government in 1961 to investigate the issue, streamlined the controversial orthography and came out with the present Igbo alphabets. This was accepted and approved by the government and made compulsory to be used in all the schools and institutions. This is what is today commonly referred to as the

“Onwu Orthography”. This serves as good example of government policy and implementation. Though, there is respite since then, there still exists scholars of the old order and their disciples indirectly influencing certain practices at the implementation level, thereby, making the execution of the policy not to run so smoothly. Recently, a school of thought headed by Professor B.M Mbah of the University of Nigeria rose up to question the idea of writing together some Igbo compound words like 'ṽdaume'-vowel, 'mgbochiume' -consonant. They insist that such words should be separated in writing and written thus: 'ṽda ume' (vowel), and 'mgbochi ume' (consonant). Part of their argument is that you do not make every Igbo word a single word just because their meaning equivalent in English is one word. According to them, these are different languages with varied structures. Some scholars in opposition to this stand, state otherwise. It is hoped it does not generate a new wave of dangerous linguistic controversy that will put further clog on the wheel of language policy implementation.

CONCLUSION

Human language is complex just as human beings are complicated. Formulating a language policy is not an easy task. Its implementation is even a more onerous chore. Language policies have been formulated in Nigeria beginning from the '1882 Education Ordinance' which gave English the position of 'language of instruction' in Nigerian schools, to the 'Littleton Constitution' that made English Nigeria's official language. The 1977 National Policy on Education that was revised in 1981 and 2004 raised the status of the indigenous languages in Nigeria. The three major Nigerian languages –Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba alongside English were to be used at all stages of formal education up to secondary level as directed in the policy guidelines. The National Executive Council under the then Nigerian president, Mohammadu Buhari, in November, 30, 2022 approved the “latest” language policy to teach primary school pupils in their mother tongue. All the above policies were designed to enable Nigerian children acquire requisite knowledge as the leaders of tomorrow and the propellers of New Generation Nigeria. Good as these policies are, and how plausible is the intention of those that formulated them, they are still far from meeting the designed goals. There has always been retrogression at the point of implementation. This is caused by a lot of factors such as the preponderance of many languages to contend with, non-availability of enough trained language teachers, lack of incentives, laissez-faire attitude of the teachers and the taught, phonological issues, etc.

It is not, however, a total story of woes. There has been increased consciousness of the need to accelerate the use of our indigenous languages both at school, in the home, and in social gatherings. Improvement can be recorded if there is a change of attitude towards our indigenous languages. The popular Yoruba 6year study showed that children learn better with their mother tongue than with a second language. Improvement on implementation of Nigerian Language Policies could be achieved by mass mobilization through orientations, seminars, symposia etc. Government should make deliberate effort to advance implementation. This also can be attained through provision of incentives to Nigerian

indigenous language teachers such as, enhanced salary, scholarship endowment, putting infrastructures in place to ease teaching and learning, etc. Heads of schools, proprietors of educational institutions, teachers, and all those involved in the academic industry should be made aware of every new policy and urged to tenaciously take up the task of implementation. Serious efforts should also be made through radio programs and other media to advise parents to speak the mother tongue to their children both at home and in various functions. This will enable the children develop love for their mother tongue early in life. English can sometimes be added since it is a school subject, though; more English is spoken in the school. Larger budgets should be allocated to education and to the teaching of Nigeria languages in particular. Such budgets should be monitored down to execution level. Government and its agencies should borrow a leaf from other nations that successfully implemented their educational/language policies. These and other measures if religiously followed, will to a great extent enhance the implementation of language policies in Nigeria.

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