

**THE IMPLICATION OF THE HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ON MOTHER TONGUE LITERACY IN NIGERIA.**

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Abstract

The English language is a second language in Nigeria. It is a second language because Nigerians already have their first language or mother tongue before its advent. Its incursion into Nigeria was caused by a lot of factors such as, trading, slavery, religion and missionary activities. Today the language has become the language of education, administration, law, commerce, religion, politics etc. It is the dominant language in Nigeria. As a result of this, our mother tongue is neglected and relegated to the background. As culture and values of people are embedded in the language they speak, Nigerians lose their culture for western cultures. The researchers examine the effect of the super imposition of English language in Nigerian linguistic environment. The study sample included twenty five parents, twenty five teachers and one hundred pupils, selected from ten different families and ten Nursery Schools in South- South geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The parents and teachers were interviewed to ascertain the extent of the use of English and/ or mother tongue in the society .The children were also observed while playing with their peer groups. The study reveals that English is the dominant language at home and at school. In fact the nursery school pupils were first taught to communicate in English and afterwards learn their mother-tongue (MT) .The researchers suggest that MT should be mastered at pre-primary school level before the introduction of the second language.

Keywords: The English language, Mother Tongue, Nigeria.

Introduction

Nigeria is a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society which comprises over 450 dialects (Akindele and Adebite (2004). Before the coming of the Europeans into Nigeria, a kaleidoscopic linguistic diversity was already in existence. The extreme linguistic complexity in Nigeria made English language a highly desired language in Nigeria. Today Nigerians use the English language for all kinds of communication purposes. It is observed that in some homes the English language has begun to assume L1 status. The English language has been used in Nigeria since the 19th century, when the southern region of Nigeria started trading with the Portuguese merchant and explorers. There was communication barrier between the Europeans and the aborigines, as they could not speak the numerous indigenous languages in Nigeria .The Portuguese merchant did not speak the English language.

The mixture of the indigenous languages and Portuguese languages gave rise to what is today called 'Pidgin'(see Osuafor ,2005). With the advent of the British who supplanted the Portuguese, English was introduced as a medium of communication between the non-natives and the natives. Towards the end of 19th century the language baton was passed to the

missionaries. The primary purpose of the missionaries was to make the new converts literate enough to speak English and read the bible. After about a century of socio- political domination by the British the English language became the national language. It has become the language of commerce, industry, education, administration, law and politics. It is also used to conduct legislative, executive and judicial functions at the three tiers of local, state and Federal Government.(see Awonusi,2004) Given that English language allows communications to occur across national boundaries it has become the most dominant language and most desired language in Nigeria. The English language is hegemonic. The implication is that Nigerians as well as their indigenous languages are under the control of the native speakers. While discussing the implication of the hegemony of English language on non native English speakers, Tsuda (1996;4) citing Suarez observes that there are serious consequences. These include:

1. Linguistic and communicative inequality.
- 2 .Discrimination against the non English-speaking people and those who are not proficient in English.
3. Colonization of the consciousness of the non-English - speakers causing them to develop linguistic, cultural and psychological dependency upon, and identification with the English, its culture and people.
- 4 Dialects extinction.

It is often claimed that English is bringing the world together, by increasing opportunities for communication over geographical barriers but it is also hegemonic. As language and culture are inseparable the English language which has become the dominant language in Nigeria also dominates the minds of the citizens because it is not only the languages that are in contact but also peoples' cultures, values and belief. Hence, the citizens have also been acculturated. There is an indirect control of the people's mind through the use of the English language. As Ogu (1992) rightly observed the English language has been made to fill all the roles normally reserved for the MT

The researchers expound that in a situation where English dominates all communication, the non-native speakers are inevitably disadvantaged in that they lose their culture as well as their identity. More so, the indigenous languages or MT can go extinct. All what is known is known in language those who control language control what knowledge, meaning and reality are taken to be (see Norman, 1989). The paper examines the implications of using English as a dominant language. It suggests that effective communication in a society should promote and accommodate diversity of languages in a linguistic community. Bilingualism should be encourage in Nigeria..

Language/ Literacy

The simplest meaning of literacy is the ability to read and write with understanding.(Nada 2001:4) Literacy is a lifelong skill, the child needs to be equipped to function effectively in life. Literacy skills are transmitted through the language. On the other hand language ensures unity. It is a component of culture. Language helps to sustain peace and unity in a given society. .Ayakoroma (2012) defines language as the central feature of culture , it is a reflection of the thoughts , feelings, values , belief and experience of a community of speakers. Since language is central to human existence it should be nurtured and preserved.

Linguists believe that MT acquisition acts as a filter through which subsequent experience are interpreted and understood. Indeed there is no greater bond that can hold a people together. When a language dies the people who speak the language also die. Thus losing one's language means losing one's culture and values. Generally speaking language is the sum total of man's activities. Humans cannot perform any activity in life without using their languages. Language is the mirror through which the language users see the environment and the world around them (Sapir, 1944). This means that a child cannot use an L2 which he is not competent in to view his immediate environment. Lamenting on the decline in the use of indigenous languages Braide (2012;1) noted that; language is one of the values that holds people together. When a language becomes weak and unused, the ideas and philosophy of the culture become weak and unused, thereby making the idea and philosophy of the culture to disappear.

Emphasizing on the significance of MT/L1, the National Policy on Education (NPE) 2004 stipulates that the medium of instruction in schools should be mainly mother tongue or language of immediate environment at inception and later stage English. The assumptions may be that the general principles are easy to learn and master in the child's native language. It is the first language the child uses to build in his mind, images that will guide him throughout his life. Therefore the time spent in learning English will deprive the child of general knowledge most easily understood through the Mother Tongue. Yet despite the national language stipulations, English is still the first language taught in schools as well as the medium of instruction at preprimary stage. The fact is that we cannot use a second language to transmit Nigeria culture and values to our children.

Mother Tongue

Mother Tongue is defined here as the language which a people considered to be the inhabitant of an area, acquire in their early years and which normally becomes their natural instrument of thought Otagburuagu and Anyanwu (2002:27). It is the primary tool for acquisition of notions, ideas and concepts. Olaoye (2010:50) agreed to this when he said that;

Mother tongue is an indispensable cultural legacy through which all forms of human interactions are carried out...it is the key to the heart of the people. If we lose the key we lose the people. If we treasure the key and keep it safe, it will unlock the door to wealth and affluence.

From infant the mother plays and talks with the child through this natural process the child subconsciously acquire the MT. MT is the language the child listens to and understands most. The child uses it to conceptualize and interpret his environment as he grows. In recent times, most mothers speak the L2 first before the L1 to their children. The issue is that the MT is endangered. A situation where parents who are the first informed teachers and caregivers of their children prefer speaking English to their wards to MT is detrimental. Today Children feel free to declare that they cannot speak their MT. The MT is now in the state of death by installment. The fact is that although Nigerians quickly point the direction of Colonialism as being responsible for the gradual decline in the usage of the MT in Nigeria but the citizens are the perpetuators Ayakoroma (2012;10). Ayakoroma noted that the core values of the culture, including language, dresses, songs and dances had been terribly neglected by the people and government.

The Hegemonic nature of the English Language

Hegemony literarily has to do with leadership or control of government, sect, organization etc over the other group. The controlling group has power and control to the detriment of the controlled. The controller Lords itself over the controlled in various ramification. Hegemony is like colonization whereby the colonizers carter for education, politics, administration, language, religion, power, etc, and imposes such on the colonized. Similarly, after the colonization of Nigeria the British left their cultures amongst which is the English language, as such indigenou languages have been in the state of perpetual negligence. The English language is believed to be the most respected, most unifying and most successful language in the world, yet it is at the background doing more harm than good to those countries and groups that enjoy its benefits. In the words of Mazrui (2000); "the same English which is building bridges between ethnic groups, may be destroying bridges between generations whose languages and cultures are imperiled by the dominance of the English language".

In Nigeria, English is considered to be a symbol of modernization, knowledge and power. Based on this, parents in particular speak English language to their children who equally grow up to see for themselves the manifestation of the same idea and facts. They therefore throw the mother tongue to the dust. It is pertinent to note that it is not only mother tongue that is thrown to the dust, our culture, norms, likes, attitudes to mention a few are equally thrown to the dust. It has caused us our identity yet we are neither competent in English language nor our MT. We cannot compete with the English speakers, and we cannot speak our own mother tongue. Hence this paper set out to examine the implication of the hegemony of English language on MT literacy in Nigeria.

Research Question

The following research questions were considered in the study;

- 1 How often do you speak English /Igbo to your wards?
- 2 How often do you speak English /Igbo to your parents?
- 3 How often do you use English or Igbo as the medium of instruction in your class?

Method

The subjects for this study were twenty five parents, twenty five teachers and one hundred pupils selected randomly from ten different families and ten different nursery and primary schools in South -South geopolitical zone in Nigeria. The parents and teachers were interviewed to ascertain the most frequently used language at home and school .The children were also observed as they play with their peer groups to ascertain the dominant language of interaction.

Table 1: How often do you interact with your child /parent in English at home?

Parents/child use of language at home			
	Parents	Children	
Rarely	3	15	
Always	20	80	
Not at all	2	5	

Table 2: How Often do you interact with your child/parent in mother tongue at home?

	Parents	Children
Rarely	5	40
Always	5	10
Not at all	15	45

Teacher /pupils use of language at school

Table :3 How often do you interact with your pupils/teachers in school with the mother tongue?

Response	Teachers	Children
Rarely	3	7
Always	2	8
Not at all	20	85

Findings

From the research findings; the first and second research questions reveal that 80% of parents speak English to their children, while 90% of the children also interact with their parents predominantly in English. The parents confirmed that their children prefer English to their MT. The English language is therefore the dominant language at home . The third research question was meant to discover whether the medium of instruction at the nursery level of education was the mother tongue or language of the immediate environment. 80% of the teachers affirmed that they use English language as the medium of instruction at school from nursery .

The researchers' interaction with the children proved that 90% of Nigerian children prefer using English to their MT, while chatting with their teachers, parents and peer groups. From our observation, English language is hegemonic and detrimental to our MT.

Discussion

It is obvious that the English language, because of the vital roles it plays and its status function as the dominant language in Nigeria and it therefore legitimates and controls not only the activities in Nigeria, but also produces the perceptions of linguistic prejudice and discrimination . Its' widespread use threatens the MT which are now on the path of extinction.

The ultimate consequence of the dominance of English is "colonization of the consciousness" (See Tsuda 1996). This refers to the mental control of the colonized by the colonizer. This implies that the dominance of English has given rise to the control of the mind of the entire Nigerians. This is seen in the subjects' preference for English. They believe that the children have a better chance to succeed in life if they are competent in English than the MT.

The British indirectly controls the citizens, their government, economy and their entire life. Thus, acting as a crucial gatekeeper to social and economic progress. Consequently Nigerians have been trans-nationalized and acculturated. The native speakers are in a

position to control, influence and dominate the nation in terms of values, beliefs, thoughts and power through their language.

Furthermore, in National Policy in Education it was stated that Government appreciates the importance of language as means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion and preserving cultures, the child was expected to learn the language of immediate environment. It was expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian major languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. It is unfortunate that in recent times, the government has change the policy by making Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba optional instead of compulsory at School Certificate Examination. As Nwadike (2012: 21) noted Nigerians have exchanged their mother for another . It is surprise that after 59 years of independence Nigerian still recognize English as the lingua franca.

Conclusion

Language is the life wire of any nation. It is through language that business and every other activity in the nation is conducted, as human beings think in language. It is true that the greatest asset a people have is not their wealth, not in their human resources nor in their technology and industries; their greatest asset is their languages (Nwadike, 2012). The language distinguishes them as a people and as an entity.

We should be careful and take into cognizance the importance and effect of language on the people. Mother tongue should be spoken first to the child as his first language or side by side with the L2, so that the child grows speaking his mother tongue and the second language fluently. Parents on their own should stop looking down on their mother tongue because they indirectly force their child to lose their value and beliefs. Some scholars believe that bilinguals perform better than monolinguals in academics. More so, the more language you know the more keys to treasure house you have., But if you know all the other languages but you don't know your language you are enslaved (cf Ngugi wa Thiong'o) To save the MT from dying, parents should encourage their children to speak their MT, because languages that are not spoken are on the path of extinction.

Mother tongue or the language of immediate environment should be used along side with English language as medium of instruction in schools from primary level and not at preprimary level. MT should also be the exclusively language of communication at home. Government should reassess the present curriculum emphasizing on the need to use MT as the medium of instruction at preprimary level. Emphases should be laid on training teachers who are fluent in the native languages.

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