



Nigerian Languages, Ethnicity and Formal Education

Olufemi Kehinde Ogunyemi^{[a],*}; Abiodun Emmanuel Bada^[a]

^[a]Department of Arts Education, Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

* Corresponding author.

Received 22 April 2020; accepted 7 June 2020
 Published online 26 June 2020

Abstract

One of the major concerns of African scholars is the wide linguistic and educational gaps that exist among different ethnic groups within the same country. To bridge the gaps between inter-ethnic class and struggle, there is a need to put into consideration, the linguistic and educational set up of the country. Overall, this paper examines Nigerian languages, ethnicity and formal educational practices. It contributes to the very large literature on the conformity, formation and the question of identity, culture and language in Nigerian formal education. This work concurrently links linguistic identity to educational choice in Nigeria. The work concludes that ethnicization has become the highest level of threat to national integration thereby causing a lot of wobble in our democracy. One can then deduce that ethnic sentiments spring from man's innate (linguistic) and educational tendency to display allegiance to a particular group. The work suggests a review of the National Policy on education. The study also suggests ways of managing ethnicity and developing educationally and culturally through interaction with government agencies that disseminate policies through various indigenous languages. It also recommends the sustainability of functional education.

Key words: Ethnicity; Ethnicization; Education; Languages; Ethnic sentiments

Ogunyemi, O. K., Bada, A. E. (2020). Nigerian Languages, Ethnicity and Formal Education. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 20(3), 22-27. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/11654>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/11654>

INTRODUCTION

It has become increasingly clear in recent times that the ethnic investigation of language in any multilingual society, will provide a more holistic and inclusive experimental peculiarity(ies) for educational counterbalances. Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse countries of the world with over 400 languages spoken in distinct but relatively large communities sprawled across the Western, Eastern, Northern and Southern parts of the country. Before the year 1960, the nation 'Nigeria' exists in name only. It was later geographically and racially defined. It was never a nation with the same linguistic attitude. There has never been a common linguistic and educational trait. It was and still remains a state encompassing many ethnic nations, each claiming its own separate heritage, language, culture and education. Ogunyemi (2014) asserts that there are controversies on the actual number of indigenous languages in Nigeria. The reason for these controversies is traceable to the fragmented nature of the country which is ethnically and linguistically defined.

Ajulo (2008) posits that Nigeria is a West African nation with a population of about 140 million people. It covers an area of 923,766 square kilometres with over 200 different ethnic groups. Geo-linguistically, there are three major languages in Nigeria; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba languages in Nigeria emanate from the Afro-Asiatic, Khosian and Niger-Khodofanian respectively. The three ethnic groups in Nigeria are somewhat territorial affiliated. Mapping from the north, Nigeria shares boarder with Niger Republic which also belongs to Afro-Asiatic region. Senegal and Mali also have Hausa speakers. Researches have shown that those countries where Hausa Language is being spoken display the same linguistic character traits with Hausas in Nigeria. Yoruba-speaking nations across the globe also share the same linguistic features. Yoruba language is even said to

be spoken in Brazil. Recently, Brazil Minister of Culture announced that Yoruba will become one of the country's official languages and the African history will be added to their school curriculum. The Igbo nation is also reported to be made up of western Aboh, Ezas, Eastern Izi, Egbema, among others. Those linguistic contacts and influences remain with the ethnic groups in Nigeria and thus inform the social and linguistic traits which are evidence in not only the language but also the social and formal education of the people.

Scholars like Harvie, Hill, McLaren, Coleand Rikowski (n.d) as well as Ogunyemi and Bada (2019) contend that formal education under normal circumstance should produce the required societal change, engender positive thinking, creativity, the development of individual community and the country at large. Reverse is the case in Nigeria as the assumed problem of Nigerian formal education is the recognition of and quest for ethnic and linguistic hegemony. To attain the aspired level of education in any country, there is a need to put into consideration, the linguistic and ethnic set up of the country. James and Saville-Smith cited in Olssen, Codd and O'neil (2004), argue that the grounds for educational liberalism is built on "constructing a society in which all are equally eligible to compete for society's position" regardless of social, linguistic or ethnic identity of the citizen.

A large number of scholars have suggested that ethnic differences are in part attributed to cultural and social factors (e.g. Ogbu, 1978, Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, Ogunyemi & Popoola, 2019), with some groups adopting an appositional attitudes towards formal education with the tendency of renouncing both cultural and linguistic imperialism. We can then assume that formal education through which societal view is balanced can only be promoted by "intra-unanimity" of culture, education, and language.

In an ethnic democracy such as Nigeria, the strength of a group is measured by the level of attainment of formal education of its citizens. Given that the formal educational infrastructure may not be evenly supplied across different regions, the remaining differences could be due to the attitudinal traits to education. Some ethnic groups place prominence on cultural and religion education at the expense of formal education. Such groups believe that formal education leads to cultural imperialism or slavery in disguise. The cost of formal education might even prevent members of certain groups from enrolling in school.

Overall, this paper examines Nigerian languages, ethnicity and formal educational practices. It contributes to the very large literature on the conformity, formation and the question of identity, culture and language in Nigerian formal education. This work shall concurrently link linguistic identity to educational choice in Nigeria.

ETHNO-LINGUISTIC PARADIGM IN NIGERIA

Ethnicity has been widely viewed in the realm of social sciences as instrumental for the understanding of socio-cultural processes. Language is an indispensable part, and the first determinant of any culture or ethnic group. Therefore, to be acquainted with any ethnic group, there comes the need to place priority on linguistic make up of such ethnic setting. This envisages that the link between language and ethnicity is particularly strong across territories whose variables and documented indigenous population constitutes diversity in sociocultural dealings. In other words, linguistics features are likely to have the strongest effects on ethnic indicators far beyond other ways of life in any society. Ethnic diversity measured by the number of language(s) spoken in any country is systematically related to the underlying heterogeneity quality which may later bring differences in educational setup of such country. Specifically, the findings that linguistic heterogeneity partially shapes ethnic and educational diversity, provides a justification for review of ethno-linguistics in a country like Nigeria.

It is abstract and unrealistic to think of Nigeria as a classless society. If we have to be realistic, we have to admit that we are divided into many categories ethnically, linguistically, and sometimes educationally. Ajeigbe (1987) asserts that there are more than two thousand and five hundred languages in the world. A thousand these are to be found on the continent of Africa and within the boundaries of Nigeria alone, two hundred and fifty (250) are found. Greenberg (1971) figured 248 Nigerian languages, Bamgbose (1976) estimated it at 400 while Hoffman (1975) puts it between 400 and 513 living. Oyetayo (2006) presents a more comprehensive analysis of the Nigerian linguistic situation by identifying 510 living languages and nine extinct languages. This brings the total number of indigenous languages (both living and extinct) in Nigeria to 519. Oyetade (1995) thus describes Nigeria as a linguistically fragmented country. Ajeigbe (1987) later posits that a quarter of all sub-saharan languages are spoken in Nigeria. It is therefore obvious that Nigeria today is a multilingual and multi-ethnic society. Perhaps, this prompted Ajulo (2008) to describe Nigeria as "what the Lord has put asunder" as it is naturally separated by the Rivers Niger and Benue.

Consequently, multilingual nature of Nigeria seemingly encourages ethno-centrism, a scenario whereby the speakers of one language see themselves as superior to people who do not. This may at the long run, lead to mutual hostility among the diverse ethnic groups. According to Olaifa, Dare, Balogun, Adegunle, Ige and Kayode (2015, p.45), "In multilingual speech communities, there is bound to be a dominant language (high variety) which the majority in such communities speak. Such a language often assumes the status of a language of

domination, oppression and suppression exploited by autocratic governments and dominant ethnic groups. Ajulo (2008) supports this view by observing that each ethnic group believes in its superiority over other ethnic groups. In fact, people of a particular ethnic group have certain derogatory words they use to tacitly insult people from other ethnic groups. It is sad to note that ethnic bias is found in almost all spheres of life such as education, politics, economy, etc. We can then opine that one of the problems of Nigeria is that of tribalism that is directly proportional to the consequence of multilingualism and ethnicity.

Historically, in the last 500 years, several regions including Nigeria have experienced dramatic changes in their linguistic endowments via conquests, slavery, migration, and colonization. Before the advent of the British colonialist in Nigeria, there were several existing cultures and ethnic groups in the country. All these cultures had an already established means of communicating and expressing themselves. This estimate is quantifiable through historical backup of the ethnic diversity of Nigeria. Nevertheless, the extent at which linguistic variability increases ethnic diversity by reducing interactional mobility among groups, eventually causing a cultural drift; one would expect education to play a significant role in places where minorities have been linguistically imperialised. This is an important finding because we have realised that Nigeria, like most countries where a fraction of ethnic diversity may be treated as predetermined by colonization, combat cultural imperialism through formal education.

ETHNICIZATION OF NIGERIAN EDUCATION

Education has always been explained with little or no attention to the emerging dimension it is taking in ethnic form. It is a serious polemic to assume a unified concept and belief of education in a multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria. In Nigeria, curriculum development in schools is greatly influenced by the ethnic group in which the school is situated. The reason for this is not farfetched. The fact is education is seen as the transmission of culture from one generation to another. Okeke (1991) sees education as the process by which society deliberately transmit its cultural heritage through schools, colleges, universities and other institutions. This is somewhat related to enculturation—the process of initiating a person into the way of life of his or her society. Not only does enculturation lacks the value-judgemental unification of education, but also implies a greater sense of negotiation in the process of identity formation and realization. Negotiation plays an intrinsic role in developing national identity, or to use a more awkward word, the process of “ethnicization”. Ethnicity and ethnic diversity is not the major problem of

the nation but the politicizing of ethnicity along linguistic and educational parameters which in turn brings about ethnicization.

What is ethnicization? What roles does it play in enabling individuals to achieve the goal and aspirations of formal education? These are the questions that educationists and ethnologists have grappled with from time immemorial. Ethnicization may be seen as the assignment of an ethnic identity by societal force in or outside the group. This assertion renders making choices enabled or constrained by a variety of factors including their own belief-system and the socioeconomic conditions of the host society. Ethnicization has to do with the relations of people, not merely as individuals in their interpersonal interactions, but people as mere members of groups, which are differentiated because of both physical characteristics and cultural differences.” These “cultural differences” according to Frazier (1957), includes technology, customs, habits, values and resulting personality organization of the members of the various racial and cultural groups. The central of the above differences is traceable to education in that ethno-cultural traditions of the people in this epoch directs the process of formal education such as the passing of societal ways of life from one age grade to another. This implies that Nigerian ethnic groups demonstrate through formal education, the tradition of general knowledge and communal participation through enculturation that is ethnic based. Ethnic groupings are groups that share a perception of themselves as being bonded together by historical, cultural and kinship links which set them apart from others.

Nigerian educational systems have gradually become ethnic colonies, what may be seen as a drift or change of paradigm from the real sense of education and the very kind of education that reflects general differences of Nigerian ethnic groups. In the pre-colonial era, educational development was closely linked with the social development and was in conformity with the successive stages of physical and mental upbringing of the child. It was then difficult to distinguish between education and productive activities, or create a division between manual and mental education because they concurrently went together. It is worthy of note that education was, however, organised to meet the common needs of the society. Nigerian formal education later fostered ethnicity by encouraging the rise of “ethnic consciousness” among Nigerians as we can boastfully assert that no two societies can have identical educational system. Consequently, education, which is produced in four walls of schools, is firmly grounded in the culture of a given society. Since educational system is supposed to be a reflection of the society’s culture, needs and aspirations, the nature of the knowledge available in any given society is herein sought in the nature of a society’s

educational institutions and sometimes, linguistic makeup. This is because education is disseminated and acquired so that members of the society can improve themselves and operate the social institutions of the society. This implies that both culture and livelihood of a given society reflects the types of education produced in the society. On this note, "The Nation" newspaper of Nigeria dated Tuesday, February 18, 2020 reports that Emir of Kano, Muhammadu Sanusi II "has challenged leaders in the North to change the education narrative so as to save the region and the country." Backing up this "call", Kastina State governor, Aminu Masari, whose state was battling with bandits, opines that "education is the panacea to criminality and killing." This reveals educational inequality of the country. Based on the principle, which aims at balancing the influence and position of the various ethnic groups in the country certain areas in the Northern region are regarded as educationally disadvantaged. People from the "so called disadvantaged areas" enjoy special privileges in "competitive" education. The objective of this principle is to make it possible for the Northerners to meet up with other ethnic groups who are presumed to be educationally advantaged. Sanusi confirms this by asserting that the rest of the country cannot be investing and educating its citizens, producing graduates and they watch the North lagging behind. This seems to be a pointer to ethnicization of education.

It is not a mere recapitulation to assert that for "ethno-political reason, Nigerian educational institute is found of giving vacant positions only to 'indigenes' or persons who share same ethnic affiliation to the institution in question which is dangerous and antithetical to the spirit of intellectual exchange of ideas. The place of education in Nigeria ought to be a place that houses the best minds. The ethnic background or the race of the persons involved ought to be a nonissue.

LANGUAGE POLICY IN NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

The inaccuracy that characterizes language and education inventory in Nigeria has been a source of discomfiture for education policy makers. Despite the fact that the importance of language is recognized in National Policy on Education (NPE), the language of instruction in multi-ethnic Nigeria has always been a matter of concern to educators and educational planners. Language plays a critical role in reproducing imbalances in ethnicity and education, especially when policy makers possess the ability to regulate and control the language of others. Nigerian linguistic situation is aptly captured by Oudraogo (2000) when he posits that, "education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual situations". Due to this multi-ethnicity nature, Nigerian government recognised

the importance of language not just as a social tool but as a means of national cohesion as well as preserving culture. Then the need for language policy and its implementation arose. In 1977, there came an official document titled National Policy on Education (NPE) which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004 respectively. Policy on education involves consideration, collective and consultations coordinated by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development (NERDC). Policing this policy and its implementation, we need to strategically investigate how effective and significant it is to our educational system.

Earlier debates on the language policy in Nigeria had centred on the conflicting importance of indigenous and exogenous languages in Nigeria (Adekunle 1972, Bamgbose 1992, 2005). According to Musa (2010), in Nigeria, language policy on education dates back to the colonial era when in 1927 the British Advisory Committee on native education in tropical Africa recommended that indigenous languages should serve as medium of instruction in the lower years of primary education. Research revealed that English language was the medium of instruction before the National Policy on Education advocated the use of indigenous languages in teaching at basic level of education. This work has mirrored Nigeria's Ethnolinguistic and educational nature in order to fully police (investigate, appreciate and appraise) language policy strategy and its implementation across the nation.

In the interest of "national unity" among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, the National Policy on Education assigned different functions to the many Nigerian languages in the nation's education at various levels. Considering the provision of the NPE (2004), Section 4, Paragraph 19 (e) and (f) cited below one would confirm that the interest of the government is geared towards strengthening national unity through education and language from the beginning of schooling:

The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.

From the above citation, the policy reveals that every child shall learn in the language of the "immediate environment" in the first three years while English language shall be taught as a school subject concurrently. It also states that from the fourth year of primary education, the medium of instruction shall be English language while the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. The policy states forward that at secondary level, English shall be the language of instruction while the language of the immediate environment, one of the three major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) other than that of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as school subjects.

Linguistic consideration in Nigeria Policy on education compounded the problem of Educational development on the basis of this vagueness, inexplicit and complexity which leaves it determination and measurement at the mercy of whomever or whichever group that stands the place of majority. Education (linguistic education) then became survival of the fittest, relegating the place of the policy. Educational officials and policy implementers have often times abused the policies and destroy the major essence of those policies they were meant to implement because of its vagueness. This linguistic consideration has added little or nothing to our grass root education that is aimed at transforming the strong ethnic chauvinistic tendencies to patriotism. Children develop feeling of ethnicization rather than patriotism that would in turn bring about educational development across the country. Furthermore, access to basic education is inhibited by socio-cultural beliefs and practices, among other factors.

Nigeria policy on education fuelled the embers of ethnicization especially with the imposition of Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo language on ethnic minority groups in that the minority soon began to see Education as thing of the major ethnic groups. As a result, the policy did not only fail to address the very problems for which they were designed to solve but also tend to generate ill feelings among and between ethnic groups. In line with this, it is essential that account is taken of political, economic and socio-cultural factors in examining nations' educational policies (Green, 1997)

Although we cannot dispute that the use of the child's mother tongue as a medium of instruction for the first three years of basic education as stated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) is ideal, but numerous factors have contributed to the low attainment of the educating goals of basic education in Nigeria. The unsatisfactory state of education in Nigeria is the resultant consequence of a lack of proper implementation of the national education policy. Generally, the National Policy of Education in Nigeria is based on the dynamic model of formulating educational policies, which is meant to be adaptive to changes and most appropriate for a developing country and multi-ethnic nation like Nigeria. Up till today, this policy is yet to be actualized because of its poor implementation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Whatever the speculations about the assumed "ethno-linguistic" status of Nigeria are, the point still remains that evidence of ethnicization in our educational system stares us in the face. It has become the highest level of threat to national integration thereby causing a lot of wobble in our democracy. Ilechukwu cited in Oteh (2009), observes that ethnicity is likened to a hydra-headed monster which breeds social chaos, and has had a pervasive influence on every aspect of Nigerian life and this calls for a

multifaceted attack from all and sundry to combat it. It is therefore pertinent to realize that the differences in our educational systems, languages or cultural heritage cannot be overemphasised. From the foregoing, one can deduce that ethnic sentiments spring from man's innate and educational tendency to display allegiance to a particular group.

A lot has been said about Nigerian languages, ethnicity and formal education but this work will not be complete without taking into consideration some of the recommendations. Therefore, on the basis of our research, certain recommendations are considered appropriate.

There is no doubt that the country is in the light of new socio-economic and political development. However, competition for the control of both education and linguistic dealings has led to different levels of ethnicization. Understanding this competition in the light of our societal demands should call for a review of the National Policy on education. This review should actively and adequately involve educational and linguistic elites from the country's six geo-political zones. This review would lessen the threat of imperialism amongst ethnic groups. Ethnicization has not been a sweet experience as it is being witnessed on daily basis in the country as a whole and the economic and social development of the regions.

Furthermore, we cannot dispute the fact that Nigeria has neglected the place of educational elites for ethnic militias. Without mincing words, the multi-ethnic situation of Nigeria disempowers the minority linguistically and educationally. Failure of the country to curb imperialism has resulted to the formation of ethnic militias which has been seen as a threat to real sense of education which is actually seen as a vehicle to development. Presently in Nigeria, we have shifted our gaze from sustainable development that could arise from the unification in educational system to creation and investing in ethnic militias. It is therefore pertinent that Nigeria invest on the training of human soul far more than human arms. National development is not in arming of individual but the development education that would positively affect individuals. Nigerian should develop educationally and culturally through interaction with government agencies that disseminate policies through various indigenous languages.

On the tune of finality, a key issue in Nigerian education today is enabling students to participate in learning in ways that make new ways of meaning from different field of studies functional to all students regardless of the linguistic diversity as a resource that enriches learning for all. Therefore, pedagogies dealing with this reality need to have a dual focus: promoting academic language development and creating a functional linguistic and educational space in every field of studies. The developmental revivals that will follow will also positively lead to socio-economic revolution which will lead to more national integration.

REFERENCES

- Adekunle, M.A. (1976). National language policy and planning: the Nigerian situation. *West African Journal of Modern Languages*, 1(1), 23-29.
- Ajeigbe, O. (1987). The language situation in Nigeria and the choice of a lingua franca. *Ife Studies in English Language*, 1(1), 17-27.
- Ajulo, A. (2008). *Language in society*. Akure: Stebak Books and Publishers.
- Bamgbose, A. (1976). The changing role of mother tongue in education: In A. Bamgbose (Ed). *Mother tongue education: The West African experience*. London: Holder and Stoughton Publishers.
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the nation: The language question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Bamgbose, A. (2005). *Language and good governance*. A paper presented at the convocation ceremony of the Nigerian Academy of Letters, Lagos cited in Guardians Newspaper of August 25, 2005.
- Eze, G.C (2003). Achieving functional education: The Essential Requirements. *Nigerian Journal of Functional Education*, 1(1).
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1977). *National policy on education*. Lagos: Government Printer.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1981). *National policy on education* (2nd ed., 3rd ed., & 4th ed.). Lagos: Government Printer.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2006). *Education sector report*. Abuja: Federal Ministry of Education.
- Fordham, S., Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: coping with the "burden of acting. *The Urban Review*, 28(3), 176-206.
- Frazier, E. F. (1957). *Black bourgeoisie*. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press.
- Green, A. (1997). *Education, Globalization and the nation state. Pre-Copyright Draft*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Andy_Green4/publication/234629585_Education_Globalization_and_the_Nation_State/links/5620fb2b08aea35f26807f7b.pdf
- Greenberg, J. H. (1971). *The languages of Africa*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Hoffman, C. (1975). *The languages of Nigeria by language families*. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press.
- Mark, O., John, C., & Anne-marie O. (2004). *Educational policy: Globalization and democracy*. Retrieved from www.researchgate.com, pdf.
- Musa, R. J. (2010). The role of mother tongue education in National Development. In E. Osakwe (Ed.), *Social Studies and Integrated National Development in Nigeria*.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross-cultural perspective*. New York: Academic press.
- Ogunyemi, K.O. (2014). Extent of implementation of the national language policy at the basic education level. *Akungba Journal of Research in Education*, 2(1), 139-153.
- Ogunyemi, K. O., & Bada, A. E. (2019). Ecolinguistics in a multilingual society: A case study of Adekunle Ajasin University, Nigeria. *American International Journal of Social Science Research*, 4(2), 145-152.
- Ogunyemi, K. O., & Popoola, O. O. (2019). English as an agent of 'Lingua-cide and 'Native Tonglocaust' in Adekunle Ajasin University. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 19(1), 100-107.
- Okeke, E. A. C. (1991). *Teaching in Nigeria: A case for professionalism*. Onitsha: University Publishing Company.
- Okeke, V. I. (1991). *Population education and the rural family*. Proceedings of the Conference on Population Education and Nigerian Society (pp.78-86). Ibadan: Population Association of Nigeria.
- Olaifa, T., Dare I., Balogun, P., Ige, O., Adekunle D., & Esther, K. (2006). *Conflict and communication*. Abeokuta: Jacob & Lydia Publishers.
- Oteh, C. O. (2009). The ethnic question and the challenge of development in Nigeria: A study of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Ebonyi State University. *International Journal of Development and Management Review*, 4(1), 63-76.
- Ouedraogo, R. (2000). *Language planning and language policies in some selected West African countries*. Retrieved from [http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/\[in=epidoc1.in\]/?t2000=015957/\(100\)](http://lst-iiiep.iiiep-unesco.org/cgi-bin/wwwi32.exe/[in=epidoc1.in]/?t2000=015957/(100)).
- Oyetade, S O. (1995). A sociolinguistic analysis of address forms in Yoruba. *Language in Society*, 24(1), 515-535.
- Oyetayo, A. (2006). *Nigeria: Hope for the Future languages of Nigeria*. Ibadan: Freedom Press.
- Sanusi, L. (2020). Illiteracy in north to peace. *The Nation Newspaper*, 18th of February, p.7.