English language as a solution to issues and challenges of leadership and good governance in Nigeria: Historical analysis

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Abstract

Language is the vehicle of social interaction needed by every government for effective and good governance. Unfortunately, Nigeria does not have a well articulated and explicit national language policy that can be found in one document. The official language of governance in Nigeria for now is English. No doubt the problem of poor performance in this is the root of all the difficulties in efficient governance in Nigeria. The state of students' performance in the language has deteriorated to an embarrassing and unacceptable level. If the government cannot communicate its policies and programmes to the least of her citizens, there is bound to be great misinterpretation and misunderstanding between the government and the people which is likely to generate into social unrests. In this paper, the writer asserts that unless the teaching and learning of the English language is given the priority it deserves in Nigeria, issues and challenges of leadership and good governance will remain unattended. The most, and apparently difficult problem of poor performance in the English language and by extension, other subjects especially at the secondary school level is examination malpractice. The phenomenon of examination malpractice has become endemic in the educational system. It is suggested that a serious and better training and re-training of teachers is paramount.

Introduction

It is common knowledge that Nigeria does not have a well-articulated and explicit national language policy that can be found in one document. But it is also common knowledge that Nigeria has a national policy for languages in education and by implication, in the polity. This policy is, sometimes, explicitly and, sometimes riot clearly stated in some sections of the National Policy on Education (2004) as may be seen in Chapter X 'Special Issues in Nigerian Polities' Paragraphs 270 - 272, pp. 62 - 63 entitled “National Language” of the Government Views and Comments on the Findings of Recommendations of the Political Bureau (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC, 1997).

The actual National Policy on Languages (in Education) recognises the multidimensional, multilingual three-tier political polity which tries to capture the multiethnic and, thereby multilingual polity which Berlin and the British have hammered into a rough-hewn existence.

The policy provides for:

i. Mother-Tongue (MT) and\or Language of the Immediate Community (LIC) as the language of initial literacy at the pre-primary and junior primary levels, and of adult and non-formal education.

ii. The three major (national) languages - Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as the languages of national culture and integration.

iii. English - the official language - as the language of formal literacy, bureaucracy, secondary and higher education, the law courts, etc.

iv. Selected foreign languages especially, French and Arabic, as the languages of international communication and discourse. These are the languages for which language villages have been set up.

In terms of unstated policy, the NPE policy on languages:

a. Advocates multilingualism as the national goal.

b. Recognises English as the actual official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of formal education.

c. Treats Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba as potential national languages which are to be developed and used as L1 and L2 all through the formal educational system.

d. Considers all Nigerian languages as meaningful media of instruction in initial literacy, and in life-long and non-formal education (FME, 2003).

We need to remind ourselves of the policy statement as articulated in the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004) that:

- Education is an instrument for national development; to this end the formulation of ideas, their integration for national development, and the interaction for national development and interaction of persons and ideas are all aspects of education.
- There is the need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive, united Nigeria; to this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive; while interest and ability should determine the individual's direction in education.

  Education has to be geared towards self-realisation, better human relationship, individual and national efficiency, effective citizenship, national consciousness, national unity, with the specific goal of inculcating the right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society... because it is the most important instrument of change via which any fundamental change (like Rebranding

> Nigeria move that is currently in vogue) in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an education revolution.

Majority of the students who are admitted into Nigerian universities have no ample opportunity to study the English Language any more, except those who are admitted to study the English language and related subjects such as Literature in English. Though, all students admitted into the universities in Nigeria are encouraged to take a course in the use of English, the contents of this course is grossly inadequate for the students to acquire requisite skills in effective use of language for communication and for the give and take of social experience. In order to study English as a second language and be successful at it, the student must be helped by the teacher to acquire skills in the four language arts skills namely: speaking, reading, listening and writing (Cadiero, 2005).

Language is the vehicle of social interaction and we need it to function properly in the work place and indeed, for good governance. It must be emphasized that a person is functionally literate when he has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those

activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group (Gray in Awosusi, (2008).

The concept of leadership and good governance

Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal, and governance is the activity or manner of controlling or ruling a country, city or people. It is the process of decision making and the process in which decisions are implemented (or not implemented). In leadership and good governance, the followers look up to the leader, hold him in high esteem and trust him because he is *the eyes* with which they see (Norlhouse 2007).

The challenges of good governance include the following:

- Corruption at various levels
- Centralisation of power and authority
- Criminalisation of politics
- Violation of human rights
- Weak legislators with criminal records, poor knowledge about development issues and low level of education

- Poor people's participation in development processes
- Less active civil society
- Poorly empowered grassroots democratic institutions
- Poor coordination among the political, administrative and community level organizations and institutions
- Delay in delivery of judicial decisions
- Poor participation of the disadvantaged in decision making process

The sorry state of English language performance

In an analysis of the senior secondary school certificate results in English language between 1988 and 1996, Olapoopo in Creig (1998) indicated that the percentage of failure was between 53.36% and 72.71%. Statistics released by JAMB revealed that from 2007 to 2009, a total of 2,993,197 candidates sat for the University Matriculation Examination, but only 427,777 of them secured admission in universities nationwide (14.3%).

Similar reports from WAEC indicate that the level of attainment of candidates in all papers over the years has been appalling. The result of 2010 November/December West African Senior School Certificate Examination did not come as a surprise

when only 20.04 percent of 310,077 candidates obtained five credits in core subjects which include English Language and Mathematics. A review of past performances indicate that in 2005, only 27.53 percent obtained five credits in core subjects, while 15.56 percent passed in 2006. Also in 2007, 25.54 percent scaled the line; with the worst performance of 13.76 percent recorded in 2008. There was a slight improvement in 2009 when 25.99 percent passed the examination, a figure that went down in 2010 (Daily Champion,13/4/2011).

The same paper quotes the Registrar and Chief Executive Officer of the National Examination Council (NECO), Prof. Promise Okpala as saying that 2010 November/December result of the Council shows 80 percent failure in English Language. This, he says "is as embarrassing as it is instructive". This implies that only 20.1 percent of the candidates who sat for the examination obtained a credit in this core subject.

Given that English is a compulsory subject, one that must be passed at credit level for a candidate to qualify for admission into any tertiary institution, this repeated poor performance is most worrisome because it shows the percentage of the country's youths

that fail to proceed to higher levels of education yearly. A World Bank study came up with a report which shows that university education in Nigeria has degenerated in the past 15 to 16 years (The Guardian, February 19th 2010). According to the report, the poor performance of Nigerian graduates is particularly evident in two areas; poor mastery of the English language and lack of requisite technical skill. It was ascertained in the report that the deficiencies in both vital areas make Nigerian graduates of the past fifteen years unfit for the labour market, and sometimes the larger society. Shortcomings were particularly observed in oral and written communication.

Effects of poor performance on governance

The official language of governance in Nigeria for now is English. No doubt the problem of poor performance in this is the root of all the difficulties in efficient governance in Nigeria. Suffice it to say that the reverse is the solution to most if not all challenges facing the Nigerian government. If the government cannot communicate its policies and programmes to the least of her citizens, there is bound to be great misinterpretation and misunderstanding between the government and the people. This

will obviously generate into social unrests and sectional agitations in a multilingual nation as Nigeria.

Since English is the official language of education in Nigeria and the vehicle used in teaching all other subjects, poor quality teaching and comprehension of this core subject inevitably, will negatively, affect the rate of assimilation of other subjects. When majority of the candidates fail to comprehend English, mass failure becomes the overall result. This development is really worrisome because mass failure in English in NECO or WAEC examinations means that majority of youths, who should have been better trained to assume leadership positions in the future, become drop outs with the prospect of joining criminal gangs or the army of social miscreants parading many urban centers in the country.

The few youths who manage to scale through the secondary school level to acquire tertiary education can hardly write or speak good English. Regrettably, it is these same half-baked graduates that would go into such sensitive areas as the civil service, the diplomatic service, politics, the industrial sector and the leadership cadre of the armed forces. Nigeria must not continue to watch this

clearly unwholesome development. If we hope for a better future, practical steps must be taken immediately to reverse this disconcerting trend.

Causes of poor performance in the English language

Students' poor performance in the English language particularly and the fallen standard of education in general must be partly blamed on the poor tutoring that they are receiving. It is a fact that most of today's teachers are ill-trained and are therefore not properly equipped to teach the students. Onyene (2001) identified that poor remuneration and gross neglect of the education sector by past governments have unarguably led to brain drain as most professionally trained and experienced teachers have left the public school system in search of greener pastures, especially in the relatively better paying private schools and foreign countries.

Because governments over the years chose to ignore this regrettable situation, public schools have deteriorated beyond imagination. Some of the buildings have collapsed and students are left to study under leaking roofs or, worse still, under trees. This grave reality is further worsened by incessant teachers' strikes as they press for better conditions of service. Of course, it is the

public school students, who spend most of their academic calendar year at home that bear the brunt (Rowe, 2003).

Unlike in the past, when students utilized their spare time to read good novels, today's students are unfortunately hooked on television, the internet and other social media networks. The novels that engaged the fancy of youths in the past, though not conventional English textbooks, helped to improve their written and spoken English. This can hardly be said of today's television and the internet's social facilities, like facebook, where bad grammar and spellings are used "by most subscribers" to exchange messages. Many students mistake these for good English expressions and so make use of them in formal settings and while answering examination questions. Where they do this, they fail and are unfortunately frustrated.

The major problem of the decline in the university education may have its roots at the secondary school level. It is at the secondary school level that the potential undergraduate is given adequate foundation in the use of English. A mastery of written and spoken language is highly desirable, yet its teaching and

teaming is beset by a myriad of problems at the secondary school level. (Kolawole 1998).

Perhaps the most, arid apparently difficult problem of poor performance in English language and by extension, other subjects especially at the secondary school level is examination malpractice. Unfortunately, the process of examination in Nigerian secondary schools has become a "contemporary shame" (Obemeata, 2005). This is because of the phenomenon of examination malpractice that has become endemic in the educational system.

The Examination Malpractice Act (1999) explains examination malpractice as any act of omission or commission by a person who in anticipation of, before, during or after any examination fraudulently secures any unfair advantage for himself or any other person in such a manner that contravenes the rules and regulations to the extent of undermining the validity, reliability, authenticity of the examination and ultimately the integrity of the certificates issued. Oluyeba and Daramola (cited in Anadi 2006) remarked that examination malpractice is any irregular behaviour exhibited by a candidate or anybody charged with the conduct of

examination before, during or after the examination that contravenes the rules and regulations governing the conduct of such examination.

Though examination malpractice is neither a recent phenomenon nor is it peculiar to Nigeria or Africa (South African Ministry, 2000), the alarming rain of increase is a global issue. The rate of examination malpractice in secondary schools in Nigeria calls for concern from all stakeholders in the education sector. It has been widely reported that parents and teachers aid and abet examination malpractice directly or indirectly.

Parents go to the extent of bribing their way through to ensure that their wards get unearned grades while teachers encourage examination malpractice because they lack the zeal to work but want to be praised for job not done (Alutu & Aluede in Anadi, 2006). According to Omoluabi and Uzoka (cited in Anadi, 2006), the value system in Nigeria has broken down completely and so adults and youths alike act without moral scruples. This is the reason why examination malpractice still thrives despite its grave consequences on the social political and economic structures of the nation.

Examination Malpractice Act No. 33 of 1999 stipulates a minimum punishment of fifty thousand naira (N50,000.00) and a maximum of five years imprisonment, without option of fine, for violator of the offences stipulated in the Act. The offences are: cheating at examinations, stealing of question papers, impersonation, disturbances at examination, obstruction of supervision, forgery of result slip, breach of duty, conspiracy and aiding, etc. Government, examination bodies, and other concerned citizens have made a lot of efforts to forestall the incidences of examination malpractice and the problems associated with the conduct of examinations in Nigeria.

Although the efforts seem to be yielding some results, yet incidences of examination malpractice still feature prominently in the school system. In 2006, the Federal Ministry of Education blacklisted and derecognized 324 secondary schools across the nation as centres for conducting public; examinations from 2007 to 2010.

Possible solutions to the problems

- There is a serious and urgent call for better training and re-training of teachers.

- Efforts must be made to encourage the writing of 'more interesting novels and novellas that students can read while e-reading of novels must be encouraged. More libraries in schools and communities, stocked with good novels and easy to read general interest books, should be built across the country by individuals, groups and governments at all levels.
- Also more debating clubs and competitions should be sponsored by individuals and corporate bodies while school Press Clubs should be funded and popularised all in a bid to get students to read and write more in English since perfection in the language can only come through constant usage
- A rich and stimulating language environment during the early years and beyond is essential to the development of verbal and intellectual skills necessary for English language learning. Volove (1991), asserted that composition writing is a difficult skill to acquire, and recommended that teachers must use a variety of methods for teaching the English language. It is also recommended that some basic

skills be taught to learners so that they can write essays proficiently. Such skills include spelling, punctuation, linguistic skills and convention of style.

- Keyner et al (2001) ascertained that many good teachers are adaptive rather than rigid in their approach to teaching children and only loosely base their instruction on a given method. There are odds against the Nigerian students learning English. We must note that a student is automatically placed at a disadvantage when he already has a language of his own and he is asked to learn another language. Majority of secondary school students in Nigeria already have various mother tongues before they are admitted into school. Nigeria is reputed to have over 250 languages and so special programmes must be developed by our curriculum planners to take care of this situation. With the poor performance of students and graduates in English Language in Nigeria, educators, parents, employers are worried and concerned.

Conclusion

There is no denying the fact that good governance revolves around effective communication between the government and the people. This paper has identified the English language as the official language of governance in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary for the government to give this subject the priority it deserves in the scheme of things especially in our education system.

The problems bedeviling effective teaching and learning of the English language must be tackled from the lowest level of education. It is a clear fact that most of the teachers of the language learnt it as a second language and this calls for training and retraining of existing English language teachers. Efforts must also be made to recruit and groom more English language teachers.

International collaboration and exchange programmes among teachers of English will go a long way in assisting our nation. Since the problem of English has direct effect on other disciplines, genuine effort to solve this guarantees the solution to other problems of education and takes care of issues and challenges of leadership and effective governance in Nigeria.

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