LANGUAGE TEACHERS IN NIGERIA: ISSUES OF COMPETENCY AND PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

There are issues that Language teachers face while carrying out their day to day activities in the classroom. Some of them include mother tongue interference, use of instructional materials, challenges of the modern technological facilities, confusion of the target Language and even the learners' and teachers' personal challenges too, etc. These challenges can affect the learning processes in the Language classrooms. This paper discusses some issues faced in the Language classroom and proffer suggestions among others that the creation of in-service training opportunities for English language teachers in Nigeria is one way of improving their professional skill; provisions for self-improvement must be allowed by the management as to give the English teachers ample opportunities to develop themselves and english teachers must be motivated and encouraged in terms of favourable conditions of service.

Keywords: Language Teachers, Competency, Performance

Introduction

The role of language in human, national and international development cannot be overemphasized, especially in this era of globalization and information and communication technology of the 21st century. Defined in the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary as the system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country, language is viewed as the people's property which enables speakers to communicate with one another and with others at both the local and international levels. In other words, language plays a vital communicative role in the development of every country, especially in the educational, scientific, cultural, social and economic sectors. In fact, language is one of the most significant tools for sustainable development in the world, especially in the developing African countries such as Nigeria. With over 500 indigenous languages, English, French and Arabic spoken within her borders, Nigeria is a highly multiethnic and multilingual country in Africa involving the following indigenous languages : Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Fulani, Ijaw, Uhrobo, Igala, Tiv, Efik, Ibibio, Edo, Nupe, Gwari, Igala, Idoma and hundreds of others (Iwuchukwu 2006). It is expected that the study and use of these languages by Nigerian speakers will promote the much desired Nigeria's cultural diversity and unity.

A teacher is a professional who guides others to acquire knowledge, skills and attitude that are necessary for their full integration in the society, and for future development. The teacher is responsible for the operation of the instructional activities; thereby need strong and efficient professional competence. To be able to deliver quality instruction in any education system depends largely on the quality and competence of the teacher. The teacher is expected to perform important functions of guiding, directing, evaluating and imparting knowledge, skills and values to the students. In this regard, to participate fully in the new knowledge society, the teacher needs to be equipped with necessary competences. Competence is a set of knowledge, skills and attitude of a person to perform specific task properly. According to Ferrari (2012), digital competence is the collection of knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be functional in a digital environment and the appropriation of digital technology in specific environment. Teacher's personality is also known as personal competence of teachers in the educational sphere. It is concern with the ability of teachers to maintain good conduct and behaviour.

Khan, (2016) opine that the personality of teachers greatly contribute to the academic performance of students. Furthermore, they noted that effectiveness of teachers depends on six components, which includes; appreciating and encouraging students, respect for students personality and equality, social interaction, professional enthusiasm and motivation, occupational or professional attitudes, and reflective interaction. In support of this assertion, Kheruniah (2013) affirms that the good personality of teachers aid in improving and promoting students' academic performance. Language teachers today are working with students whose entire lives have been immersed in the 21st Century media culture. Today's students are digital learners; they literally take in the world via the filter of computing devices like cellular phones, handheld gaming devices, and laptops, televisions, and game consoles at home. These technological devices can be utilized by language teachers to help in the teaching and learning of language skills. Rather than teaching listening and writing, teachers should

teach active listening and writing. In teaching speech skills, teachers must engage students actively with such activities as role-play, dramatization/simulation, debates, class discussion, oral presentation, etc.

Since language education in Nigeria operates behind the 21st century, it means that Nigeria would keep producing graduates, who will not be employable in the global market; who cannot navigate the 21st Century world and contribute their quota to the development of our nation and the world at large. Rather, Nigeria would have a bunch of educated illiterates lacking in the skills required to be functional as world citizens. It means that Nigeria's education system, the foundation for development, is nothing but an illusion or a mirage. It also means that rather than sustainable national development, Nigeria is geared towards sustainable national underdevelopment. It is only when language teachers overhaul and incorporate the 21st Century model of education in their classrooms can they be said to be relevant and effective; being responsive to the needs of the time and those of their students; and contributing effectively in the actualization of a sustainable national development. The scope of this study is the issues of competency and performance of language teachers in Nigeria. Language here can either be language learnt and taught in the educational system or the language used for educating at various levels and sectors of a national system (Obanya, 2004). This review deals with the use of languages in education both as languages learnt/taught and used for instructional reasons.

Concept of Language

Language is an important factor of human life as well as the most important tool in education. It has been variously defined by scholars. For instance, Adegbite (1992) opines that language can be described as a system of sounds or vocal symbols which human beings use to communicate experiences. It is a special characteristic of human beings. Language is the most important factor in identifying who is who, where one comes from, what ones is made of, one's culture, and tradition. It is a vehicle which is used to impart knowledge and so a vehicle of the thought, culture and communication. It has a dual function; as a subject on the curriculum as well as a medium of instruction. Language is the pivot around which every activity rotates hence it is an instrument of public relations, medium of imparting knowledge, means of national and political interaction and a gateway to national unity. According to Mgbodile (1998), language is the chief means of generating, maintaining and transferring culture and civilization. The author stresses that man learns to speak a language in the way he learns to walk, to climb or swim. Consequently, language is the bedrock to nation building. For Aziza (1998) language is the most important tool with which society is organized and it is hardly possible to talk of national development without including the language with which the people formulate their thought, ideas and needs.

Language also occupies an important place in any educational system. It is, therefore, the nucleus of any course of study (Ige, 2000). Prominent scholars have defined language in different ways, but according to Osisanwe (1995); language is human vocal noise or the arbitrary graphic representation of the noise, used systematically by members of a speech community for purposes of communication. Streeter (1972) puts it more succinctly when he notes that language is the basic factor in communication. To be communicative is to be understood. The degree to which the audience understands a thought is dependent, initially, upon the words used and their arrangement into thought units. The thoughts of the speaker become clear as they are translated into words, in meaningful combinations. Hence adequacy in the use of language is based upon the arrangement of words in sentences. Arguing along the same line, Ojomo (2001) further states that language may be viewed as human culturally established and voluntarily acquired means of communicating information, ideas, emotions and desires by means of conventionalized symbol systems. These verbal symbols systems may depend upon any of man's perceptual senses, namely: auditory, visual or tactile-single or in combinations.

Language Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the art of teaching (the responsive, creative, intuitive part); the craft of teaching (skills and practice); and the science of teaching (research-informed decision making and the theoretical underpinning (Robin, 2008). It is the process of accompanying learners; caring for and about them; and bringing learning into life. Language pedagogy presupposes teaching and learning a second language. This entails formal learning (instructed learning) as against informal learning (naturalistic learning). Language learning is synonymous with imbibing the system of a second language as against the unconscious acquisition of a first language. According to Anyadiegwu and Nzekwu (2015), it is a conscious effort of an individual to imbibe the system of another language after acquiring the first language; the emphasis is on the students to understand the structure and the

rules of the language through the application of intellectual and deductive reasoning. Language teaching and learning have been viewed under three approaches/views: the structural view that sees language as a system of related structures; the functional view that sees language as a tool with which we accomplish something; and the interactive view which sees language in terms of the social relations (Richards & Rogers, 2001). These views have resulted in the different language teaching methods such as the grammar translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method, the cognitive–code learning method, suggestopedia, the communicative method, etc.

Language pedagogy in Nigeria is tilted still, towards the traditional model in which teaching and learning is seen in the form of 'banking', making deposits of knowledge. In this situation, learners are treated like objects, things to be acted upon rather than people to be related to; acting on learners rather than with them. The traditional teaching model has positioned students as passive receptors (tabula rasa) into which teachers deposit concepts and information. The model has emphasized the delivery of course material and rewarded students adept at reflecting the course content on assessments. The spoils tended to go to students with good short-term memories and reading skills. The traditional model of teaching is time-based; teacher-centered-- the teacher is the center of attention and provider of information; lessons focus on the lower level of Bloom's Taxonomy – knowledge, comprehension and application; learners work in isolation within the four walls of a classroom; and diversity in students is ignored. The traditional model of pedagogy has changed overtime such that pedagogy is viewed as such as in which the teacher is a facilitator of learning.

Language Acquisition Theory
Opara (2008) noted that there are many theories to explain how children acquire language. So far no theory has achieved satisfactory explanation of this wonderful achievement in the child. No theory, therefore, has been able to fully help teachers to understand and determine how to help children better with language acquisition. However, knowledge of theories of language acquisition can go a long way to helping teachers of language know how children acquire language. Language acquisition theory is classified under three sub-heading namely: imitation theory, reinforcement and cognitive theory.

Imitation Theory
Skinner (1957) one of the founders of behaviorist's psychology proposed the imitation theory. He observed that children learn languages by imitation of what adult say, imitating the sound, the derivation and use of grammar, the meaning and the type of language spoken around them. The babbling sounds children make early in life are shaped after the sounds made by adults. Hence, a child in Igbo land will learn the Igbo language, the child in Yoruba land where Yoruba is spoken will learn the Yoruba language and so on. However, the learning of languages by the imitation method only would demand a lot of time to learn the language. This is because the expressive language is narrower in breath than the impressive language. Associated with the imitation theory is the modeling or association theory whereby learning occurs faster when what is said is associated with the concrete representation of the object. The theory reveal that children learn languages by imitation of what adult say, imitating the sound, derivation and use of grammar, the meaning and type of language spoken around them. Therefore, this theory is relevant to this study as it shades light on the process in the learning of the Nigerian languages; hence it is from this learning of languages that helps the teachers of language to pattern their teaching with imitational skills that would help the child in the acquisition language.

Reinforcement Theory
Skinner (1957) also propounded this theory that children learn language by reinforcement because they are rewarded. Each time a child approximates a sound made by an adult, he receives a positive response (e.g., a clap, a smile, a pat, a hug). The child tries to repeat that sound several times over so as to be rewarded. He also associated that sound with the meaning it has evoked in the adult's reaction. The more often he makes the sound the more he comes closer to the correct pattern. Gradually the sounds become words and the words become sentences that are correct and intelligible. As he wishes to get positive response, he makes efforts to speak better. However, there is more to language learning than this theory can explain. If a child waits until he is rewarded, then he will spend eternity to learn a language. It is very useful though in improving language development in slow learners. However, the child can build internal mechanism for self-reinforcement. The above theory is relevant to this study in the sense that reinforcement is very useful though in improving

language development in slow learners. When the learners make good attempt to speak or write any of these major Nigerian languages well, they should be given a positive reinforcement from the teacher as stipulated by the theory. Such reinforcement could be relegated to a simple clap of hands among others. This is the aspect of this theory that informs the basis of this study because it is an integral part of every good learning process.

Multilingual Policy on Language Education in Nigeria
The language of instruction in multilingual Nigeria has always been a matter of concern to educators and educational planners. The African situation is aptly captured by Ouadraogo (2000) when he asserts that, "education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual situations". Due to this linguistic plurality, the government appreciated the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion as well as preserving culture. Thus, there was the need for language policy, planning and development as well as implementation. In 1977, an official document titled National Policy on Education was promulgated which was revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004. This document assigned different functions to the languages in the nation's education at various levels. The policy stated 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. However, in the interest of national unity among the various ethnic groups in Nigeria, every child shall require to learn one of the three national languages (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba).The provision of the NPE (2004), Section 4, Paragraph 19 (e) and (f) cited below confirms that the multilingual education is in existence:

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 j subject, from the fourth year, 21.English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. The policy made it explicit that from the fourth year of basic education, the medium of instruction shall be English language while the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. At secondary level, English shall be the languages 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 he taught as school subjects.
Levels of Education in Nigeria are:
1. Early childhood (pre-primary);
2. Basic education (9 years) - comprising Primary and Junior secondary
3. Education;
4. Senior Secondary Education (3 years);
5. Tertiary Education.

Role of English Language in Nigeria
Decades after decolonization English language being the language of the colonial masters still enjoys primacy through its significant role in the integration of the Nigerian nation that is made up of made up of three different regions of North, East and West. Hausa is the predominant language of the northerners, Igbo of the Easterners and Yoruba of the westerners. Each region has many other minority groups within it. Nigeria's multiplicity of languages is so obvious that languages of people living within a 20 kilometres radius are particularly different and not understandable to one another (Danladi, 2013). The implication of this linguistic situation has been the lack of a common effective means of communication among the groups and this became the basis for resorting to use the English language as a medium of instruction in educational settings, since the choice of any of the three main native languages as a national language may deteriorate to disintegration. According to Odebunmi (2005), English is institutionally the only means open to individuals from different ethnic and linguistic groups for interaction. This shows the dominance of English in the Nigerian setting. From earliest stage to date, English has been playing dual roles as a contact language between different ethnic groups and a medium of communication at international levels particularly in the area of commerce and diplomacy, though in different usages. Despite all constitutional provisions, English still controls almost all methods of instructions in all levels of education in Nigeria, while Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are considered as local languages. English is that Language of unity that speakers of other indigenous languages do code-mix with in their speech. Other speakers see Pidgin English as lingua franca in Nigeria.

Scholars have identified five dominant roles of English and other mother tongues in Nigeria as: official, educational, mass media, religious observance, and interpersonal relations. However, these roles played by English language can be rooted in its colonial history. There have been advocacies for students' centered class to promote effective teaching and learning in classroom. Eken (2000), states that in a student centered class, teachers are more of facilitators, while students are more involved in discussion. With this method, students become active, and this promotes more participation of students in classroom activities. The 21st century teacher is expected to prepare his students for higher thinking and performance skills that can best enhance learning activities in the classroom. There are certain competences a teacher in the modern classroom needs to possess; some of these competences are professional International practice, leadership and management, and personal effectiveness. A knowledgeable teacher encourages learning at all times, because he believes all students have the ability to learn. He tries to win the minds of the students by paying good attention to their needs and motivate them to learn. The teacher recognizes the importance of developing and working with others, such as parents and colleagues, for an effective classroom

Challenges of Multilingual Education Provisions in Nigeria
The Multilingual Challenge: In multilingual Nigeria, it is obvious that the estimated 500 different languages are of unequal statuses. This inequality confirms that linguistic hierarchy is a serious concern in the Nigerian linguistic situation. Consequent upon Nigeria's linguistic diversity is the issue of national unity and cultural integration of the people. This nonexistence of linguistic unity among citizens led to the emphasis placed on English language in the educational sector. Gbenedio (1990) discovered that only about 65 standardized orthographies and only three major languages of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba have documented efforts of teacher education. In the case of this situation, the challenge is the identification, development and adoption of about five hundred (500) languages for the basic education in the country. Any attempt to compress similar languages in a particular region to promote one that would represent the cultural area would meet with opposition and complain about marginalization from the communities, even when majority of languages do not have standard orthographies. Ogunbiyi (2008) emphasized that in spite of the provisions of the National Policy on Education and the position of the government on the roles assigned to the English language and indigenous languages in education, some schools still downgrade Nigerian languages to the background and promote the teaching of English language, most especially the private schools.

Poor Policy Planning and Implementation: Although 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, numerous factors have contributed to the low attainment of the educating goals of basic education in Nigeria. Leading among the factors is poor implementation of educational policies. Aghenta (1984) observed that, "for education to achieve all ends, it has to be carefully planned. The plan must take into consideration… the needs of the society; the political, socio-cultural, economic, military, scientific, and technological realities of the environment are very important to its survival."

Teacher Quality and Curriculum Materials: Another key challenge that contributed to the unsuccessful implementation of the multilingual policies on education in Nigeria is capability problem. There is low turnout of competent teachers in the various indigenous languages to handle school subjects, in other words, there are no graduate teachers of indigenous languages in the right quantity and quality. There is non-availability of teaching materials particularly relevant textbooks in the indigenous languages. It is very common in the Nigerian setting to see that there are many school teachers who do not know how to read or write their native languages. Speaking a language (with semantic errors alone is not enough to qualify a teacher to teach that language. Only quality teachers can succeed in proper implementation of any curriculum. This is an unfortunate situation but that appears to be the handwriting on the wall.

Conclusion
There is every need to reposition and re- structure language education in Nigeria to meet the needs of students in this 21st Century if Nigeria must harness the potentials of the tool of language in the nation's education system. This restructuring should reflect the totality of our school system vis-àvis the school facilities, school curriculum, the teacher and the learner. Language classrooms in the 21stCentury should be laced with a project-based curriculum for life aimed at engaging students in addressing real-world problems, issues important to

humanity, and questions that matter. This is a dramatic departure from the factory-model language education of the past. It is abandonment, finally, of textbook-driven, teacher-centered, paper and pencil, talking and chalking teaching and learning.

Suggestions

Based on the literature reviewed, the following suggestions were made:
1. The creation of in-service training opportunities for English language teachers in Nigeria is one way of improving their professional skill.
2. Provisions for self-improvement must be allowed by the management as to give the English teachers ample opportunities to develop themselves.
3. English teachers must be motivated and encouraged in terms of favourable conditions of service.

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