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ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL BASIC/PRIMARY EDUCATION IN AFRICA IN 2015. MYTH OR
REALITY?

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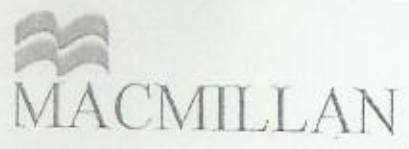
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EFFECTIVE REALISATION OF THE GOALS OF THE UNIVERSAL BASIC EDUCATION (UBE) PROGRAMME THROUGH NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Advancement in education is one of the cardinal goals of nations for the citizens and the direct effects on socio-economic development cannot be over-rated. This results in the argument for the universalisation of education. For the beneficiaries of any educational endeavour to benefit maximally from its programme, the language of instruction should be the one in which learners have the highest linguistic facility to communicate effectively. No other language does it better than the learner's mother tongue. This paper therefore explores the language factor in the effective realization of the goals of the Universal Basic Education programme in Nigeria.

Introduction

The Universal Basic Education which was launched on September 30, 1999 by President Olusegun Obasanjo at Sokoto provides for compulsory free Primary and Junior Secondary Education. It also includes provision for drop-outs from formal schools, Adult Literacy programme and non-formal Education for children of the nomads in October, 2000 with 7 million pupils nation-wide, and it is expected that in the next eight years, 40 million literate Nigerians would have been produced. The Mass Literacy Programme (MLP) will produce 150,000 literate adults yearly in each state of the federation. Some tertiary institutions have been listed to take care of the training of 30,000 teachers annually while 28,000 classrooms would be constructed yearly (Punch Editorial, 2000:8, July 10)

There is no doubt that education is the most effective weapon and the best strategy for promoting good citizenship, reducing or eradicating poverty, acquiring skills for the recognition and exploitation of scientific and technological opportunities around us as a nation.

Basic education means the provision of a minimum set of learning needs for an individual with the aim of equipping him or her with such knowledge and skills that will enable him to develop to his fullest capacity, derive maximum social, economic and cultural benefits as a member of the society and also exercise his civic responsibilities and rights. Such an education should also empower him with the spirit of inquiry, the desire for problem solving and sustained interest in living (FME & YD, 1993:7)

Basic education according to Garuba (1997:171-178) is the core-education which is designed to form the pillar on which the rest of education ladder rests. For Freire (1972) in Salawu (2000:3) basic education is designed to teach the pupils literacy skills (ability to read and write) and numeracy skills (ability to manipulate figures) and promote conscientisation.

Literacy has been defined by Obanya (1999:404) as the ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement (in ones own language) related to one's daily life and also include the

ability to count and do simple calculations (or basic arithmetic skills). However, recent conceptions of literacy have incorporated meanings such as; the ability to listen to audio-books, locating and computing various forms of information from the internet, making meaning of the world, making inference about texts read, rate of reading and accuracy of spelling as well as accessing information on computer and performing CD-ROM (Ezeokoli, 2000:4).

It could be seen from the fore-going that universalising education will empower Nigerians to effectively participate and contribute more meaningfully in a global environment that has increasingly become knowledge – conscious in recent times. Whatever the meaning we might attach to literacy, language is a crucial and an indispensable factor.

The Language Factor and the UBE

The language provisions in the National Policy on Education (1997) revised in (1981), (1998) and (2004) are that the medium of instruction at the pre-primary school and the first three years of primary education should be the mother tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate community (LIC), and that at the Junior Secondary School level, every Nigerian child is expected to learn a Nigerian language apart from his or her MT or LIC. Also, at the Senior Secondary School level, each student is expected to take a Nigerian language in the SSCE.

That language plays two different roles in education: an instructional area (a subject) and also the media of instruction have been expressed by Fafunwa et al (1989). The potency of Nigerian languages in teaching science, technology and related subjects has been empirically supported, (Fafunwa, and Macauley and Sokoya 1989, Olarewaju 1988, Olarewaju and Akinwunmi 1988, Olarewaju 1991 and Olarewaju & Jimoh 1995, Makinde and Olabode 2006) to mention just a few. Earlier, Lewis (1962) has been cited by Omolewa (1975:107) as saying that:

Native tongue is immensely more vital than it is one of the chief means of preserving whatever is good in Native customs, ideas and ideals...All people have inherent right to their own personality, however primitive they may be ...No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language.

To deny the Nigerian child the opportunity of receiving education in the language in which he has the highest linguistic facility to communicate is to deny him of creativity, inventiveness, the effective exploration of his environment, all amounting to alienating him from his ancestral cultures.

Furthermore, it is highly essential that Nigerian languages should be given the pride of place they deserve in the present UBE programme. The provision in the National Policy on Education that encourages a Nigerian child to master one of the major Nigerian languages apart from his mother tongue should be properly and systematically pursued for the promotion of unity and acceleration of nation building (Ahmed 1983:72).

Language according to Bamgboze (1994:1) not only serves as a means of communication and self-expression, it also "makes co-operative effort and joint action possible". It no doubt makes possible social

co-operation, social cohesion, and interaction among members of a community for the purpose of overall social development. Language according to Gomwalk (2000:102) also serves as a weapon of mass mobilisation at the levels of families, educational institutions, professional associations, religious organisations, youth and student organisations, political parties to mention just a few.

In addition, the use of indigenous languages as media of instruction will promote the languages both at home and abroad. It is erroneous to think that the English language is superior to Nigerian languages. According to Baugh (1951) in Ahmed (1983:69), the rise of English language began from the second half of the eighteenth century and before then, English intellectuals even generally believed that their tongue (English) unlike Latin, was not adequate enough for intellectual and formal discourse.

There is therefore the need to de-colonise the entire educational system in Nigeria. Many nations like Guinea recognize some of the native languages (Fulfulde, Malinke, Susu) as national languages and are being used as media of instruction from the primary to the secondary school levels; Tanzania has the Kiswahili (an indigenous language) as her official language and it is also used as the medium of instruction for both primary and secondary levels of education. Other countries where recognition has been given to their indigenous languages as official language and media of instruction include Russia (Shapiro, 1977); Finland and Israel (Haughen, 1972:104).

To make the curricula more accessible and more relevant to the learners and the teachers, the use of Nigerian languages as media of instruction is the answer. As the teachers will be proficient in the languages, the learners will learn better and faster because the language is either their mother tongue or a widely spoken one in their immediate community. An added advantage is the promotion of indigenous literacy texts which will also be of benefit to the nation economically, politically and culturally.

It is desirable to note that many science educators in Nigeria are now acknowledging the fact that Nigeria's scientific and technological development is dependent on acquiring and applying the techniques of science by the use of indigenous languages in our schools (Akhilomen, 1991:13 in Matemilola (1999:29). The truth is even laid bare in the observation of Aderounmu (1990: 61) in Matemilola (1999:30) that the best scientists in the world come from countries where the mother tongues are the media of instruction in their schools. Such countries according to him include Russia, Switzerland, Japan, China, India and Germany.

In consonance with the provision of the National Policy on Education (2004), indigenous languages should be made the medium of instruction for the mass literacy or adult literacy programme while other relevant languages may be taught as subjects. It is also necessary that literacy needs be geared to a learners immediate interest and occupation in order to make it functional and this can be successfully done in the language of the learner or that in which he has highest level of proficiency.

Olabimtan (1992) in Oderinde (1998:6) has expressed his dissatisfaction with the policy of teaching 6-11+ years olds in the LIC for only the first three years and he wanted the Nigerian languages experts who were challenged by him to produce adequate texts in the languages and to teach such subjects as Mathematics, Social Studies, Elementary Science/Integrated Science, Cultural Arts, Health and Physical Training, Agricultural Science, and Home Economics in consonance with the footsteps of Ife 6 years project.

One is not unaware of the fact that Nigeria is faced with problems such as multiplicity of local languages, multi-ethnic and multicultural situation in urban areas; the official status of Nigerian languages; lack of human and material resources and the high cost of educating in Nigerian indigenous languages (Obanya, 1999:477-478). The number of languages spoken in Nigeria has been put at five hundred and thirteen (513) by Bamgbose (1992:3) in Kosemani (2000:157) and Eka (1994:10)

In spite of the enumerated problems the government as well as Nigerian language experts should give the issue of indigenising education in Nigeria the urgency it deserves. Other experts in various fields

whose MTs are Nigerian languages should also be ready to support this noble idea. For the UBE to effectively achieve the desired goals, the beneficiaries must be educated in the MT or LIC even for the 6 years in primary school and the 3 years of the Junior Secondary School. However, English language should be handled by experts and effectively taught for the role it plays as the official language of wider communication as well as medium of instruction in schools. English language and other foreign languages should be taught as subjects especially for international relations and co-operation.

Expected Role of the Nigerian Languages' Teachers

Ezeokoli (2000:6-12) has identified five areas of teacher-role in any literacy programme for the language teacher and these are:

- ◆ Motivating the learners and encouraging them to have positive attitude to literacy.
- ◆ Adopting informal approaches and methods in literacy education like the whole language approach.
- ◆ Establishing literature circles where learners can interact and share meanings and understanding of texts read or listened to together.
- ◆ Collaboration with colleagues for sharing of professional knowledge and insight and
- ◆ Involving the homes of the learners by advising on family literacy activities and encouraging parents to provide adequate literacy materials at home.

Apart from the above, teachers are expected to keep abreast of innovations and developments in their languages of study by attending and participating in learned workshops and conferences. These are days of cassettes and educational computer software and of photography. The materials should be procured and exploited for teaching and learning of Nigerian languages. Teachers of Nigerian languages should be ready to serve as resource persons in translation of science and technology textual materials into their languages of specialisation. They should also be prepared to assist speakers of undeveloped languages to get them reduced into writing.

Suggestions towards Achieving the Objectives of the UBE

i. Educating the Nigerian Language Teacher

Considering the recent meanings attached to literacy, it is no doubt a necessity that the existing programme for language teaching both in the NCE and undergraduate levels are reviewed to meet the challenges of the day.

The Nigerian language students who will eventually be teachers in the UBE scheme and in the 21st century must have their knowledge broadened with the ability to produce audio books for teaching specific aspects of Nigerian languages; possession of literacy in the area of internet handling; having access to the computer and its softwares; computerising the study of Nigerian languages as well as "becoming their own resource persons, their own media men and their own improvisators" (Shuaib, 1984:17).

There is no doubt that Nigerian schools are short of competent personnel in terms of teachers and curriculum experts in the area of Nigerian languages. Teachers would be needed to teach Nigerian

languages as L₁ and as L₂. Primary school teachers in the urban areas would have to be retrained in LIC in order to be able to use the language in question as medium of instruction.

• More experts are needed to reduce other languages into writing, and more importantly, if we are to realise the dream of teaching all subjects in the Primary and Junior Secondary Schools in Nigerian languages, many translators must be produced to translate the texts from English, French etc into the affected Nigerian languages.

This could be realised in no distant period of time if the teacher education programme is reviewed to make it possible for any student to combine a Nigerian language with a teaching subject. Currently, some Colleges of Education (like Anambra State College of Education, Nsugbe) allow students to combine any of the Nigerian languages with their science-teaching subjects (Adesuyan, 1999:45). In addition, courses in translation skills should be included in the teacher education programme. More teachers are also needed to teach the beneficiaries of the adult literacy programme as well as the children of nomads and fishermen in Nigerian languages. The programme for educating the Nigerian languages' teachers must also take into account the modern approaches to teaching and learning not only at the level of L₁ but also at the L₂ as well.

ii. *Choice of Language for Medium of Instruction*

At the local government level where more than one Nigerian language exist, the people must be allowed to decide which of the indigenous languages would be used as medium of instruction in their schools from the pre-primary to post-primary levels. Any language chosen must be the language of wider communication (LWC). This should be done at the state and at the regional levels. The major aim here is to ensure that the Nigerian child receives his education in the language in which he has the highest linguistic facility to communicate. It may be contended that such arrangements might pose problems for civil servants and their children who are transferred from one part of the country to another. This writer believes that there is solution to that. As it is done in countries like Japan, Russia, America and many other advanced countries, language proficiency courses of six to nine months duration should be organised for such civil servants, while their children should be allowed to complete their education where instruction is given in their mother tongues. It is also emphasised that the first three years of primary education should not be the limit for the use of the mother tongue medium of instruction. It should be extended to cover the period of the UBE programme (primary to JSS and the adult literacy programme). Policy makers should begin to look beyond the JSS. It should be extended to the tertiary levels.

iii. *Establishment of a Monitoring Body*

In order to make the objectives of the UBE realisable, an effective monitoring unit should be established in the Inspectorate Division of the Ministries of Education at the Federal, State and Local Government levels to ensure that schools (private and public) comply with the languages provisions of the National Policy on Education (2004).

iv. *Carrying out a Comprehensive Survey on Nigerian Languages*

The various tiers of government should carry out a comprehensive survey of indigenous languages within their boundaries indicating the number of speakers of such languages, those already developed, those undeveloped; status of the developed ones, and an up-to-date bibliography of the literature of those languages. For instance, a survey carried out by Udoh (2003) reveals that there are about 119 languages spoken in 123 Local Government Areas of the South-South Zone in Nigeria. Such a survey will facilitate the production of orthographies, grammars, dictionaries literary and other reference materials as well as other language tools for every spoken language.

v. *Establishment of Nigerian Languages' Villages*

Like the French and Arabic villages, Nigerian languages deserve the establishment of their own villages where L₂ learners could go for acculturation. Junior Secondary School Students could be made to go there for a three-week acculturation programme.

Conclusion

It is evident that many people are skeptical about the success of the UBE considering the failures that had attended such laudable programmes in the past. The Federal and State Government must be ready to give the fullest support to the programme. For the primary schools, it will be better to clearly define the government that would be responsible for recruitment of teachers as well as payment of teachers' salaries. A situation whereby teachers' salaries remain unpaid for months thereby resulting in strike actions would not augur well for the programme.

Adequate infrastructure must be provided from time to time to cater for the teeming population. In this regard, classrooms, hostels (where applicable), laboratories and workshops must be put in place. The government should also look ahead and make adequate provision for those who will go beyond the scope of the UBE into the SS schools and other tertiary institutions. It will be expedient if implementation and monitoring bodies are set up as earlier indicated having men of probity as members as part of the strategies that would ensure the successful implementation of the programme.

The federal government should be ready to spend and be spent considering the truth in the words of the Vice-President, Atiku Abubakar (2000:27), thus:

No amount of money spent on the education of our youths, who are the future leaders of the country, is too much... without a solid educational foundation, no country will be adequately prepared to face the complex challenges of the future.

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