

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND THE NIGERIAN NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION

Imo Martin Obot (Ph.d)

Department of Educational Foundations
Guidance and Counseling

University of Calabar, Calabar, Cross River State, NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

Nigeria still needs an education that can respond effectively to her challenges. Proper linguistic culture applied in education process can help in this regard. Though the importance of language is already recognized in our education policy, this study aims at complimenting such efforts for more effectiveness of the system. Using the philosophical method of analysis, the study sought to provide answers to the following relevant questions: What is the importance of language in education? How do linguistic symbols contribute to effectiveness in learning experiences? What are the factors that can contribute to low efficiency of language in education process in the Nigerian context of educational policy? It was concluded that: 1. language assists the learners to be connected to the holistic experiences of their cultural challenges and options. 2. Symbols adapted from language can assist learners in concepts and ideas constructions that are effectively responsive to their interests and concerns. 4. Disparity in language theories, multiculturalism, inconsistencies in educational policies can contribute to low learning outcome in Nigerian education towards national development. Based on these some recommendations were made.

Keywords: Education, Language, Learners' environment and Policies.

INTRODUCTION

One important aspect of culture which distinguishes human beings from other animals is their ability to develop and use language as a major means of communication. Through it they learn and communicate with their environment too. Language has been defined as a body of words and the system by which it is used by a people within a cultural tradition (Dictionary Thesaurus, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/language>). It is one's ability to acquire and use particular complex systems for intelligible interpretation and communication of one's experiences. It is sometimes used to refer to codes or ciphers or some other artificially constructed systems of human communication (Wikipedia, The Free Dictionary Encyclopedia). This idea of language is portrayed by its etymological Latin derivative "lingua" which means tongue. Thus language is a complex social construct of meaningful signs or sounds used for interpreting and communicating experiences. According to Bloome (2002), it can be categorized into seven groups according to their functions: (1) Instrumental language (2) regulatory language (3) interactional language (4) personal language (5) imagination language (6) Heuristic language (7) information language.

Many philosophers of education emphasize the importance of the learners' experiences in the education process (Dewey, 1902). Education should assist learners to interpret, understand and interact responsibly with his environment. Most importantly it should assist him to communicate meaningfully with his environment (Obot, 2015). It is very important to education as a means of proper interpretation, integration, understanding and communication with our cultural experiences. With language the learners interpret their experiences, develop symbol, concept and ideas, form and perform activities based on cultural interests and

concerns (Vygotsky, 1978). The National Policy on Education places much importance on the relationship between language, meaning, culture and human development (FGN, 2004). However, as important as language is in the education process, there are some philosophical challenges which education must appreciate and address if it is to be as effective as it is expected from the use of language especially in the Nigerian context.

Relationship between Language and Education

Language relates to education in three different ways: (1) As learning language (2) learning through language (3) learning about language (Bloome, 2002). As learning language, education compliments the efforts of the home, the family and other social groups in assisting a child to be proficient and effective in the use of language as a means of self, environmental consciousness and understanding, social participation and integration, cultural and personal identity. Most of the teacher-learner activities involve the use of language. These include questioning, discussion, reading, listening, writing and answering questions. Thus learners learn through language. They form skills and develop their powers of mental and practical constructions. At other times they learn about the language by studying the grammatical constructions and word combinations (Bloome, 2002). Education as a social process of transmission of things that are considered worthwhile to a learner and the society basically depends on language for effective transmission of social values including language itself (Obot, 2015). When the learners are engaged in any learning activities, some of the questions one needs to ask are: whose language is assisting in the education? Whose values are being accessed, developed and transmitted? What role do the languages of the learners play in their effective education?

Language, Culture and Learners' Thought Process

Experiment conducted at Stamford University with data collected from China, Greece, Chile, Indonesia, Russia and Aboriginal Australia has shown that people with different language think differently while those with the same language think in a similar structure (Boroditsky, 2015). Language is not merely expressive or informative; it is importantly constructive in a process involving thought. It influences learners' thinking process. It helps to shape the learner's perception of reality, interpretation, formation of ideas and concepts for creative relationship within the cultural context of the education. Realities are conceived and become meaningful to learners within the categories of their language fields. Visible lights which influence the learners' cognitive abilities are only continuum of light waves and frequencies which determine the rate of visibility of reality to the human mind. In other words, the spans of their language fields are the span of and the limit of the learners' cognitive capacity of relating with reality (http://anthro.palomar.edu/language/language_5.htm). It is in this regard that linguistic cultural categories and terminologies determine the learners' interests, concerns and thinking activities (O'niel, 2006). An education and curriculum separated from the learners' linguistic cultural structure can alienate the learners from the environmental holistic interests, concerns, cultural experience, challenges and means of development.

According to Marsh and Willis (2003) and Dewey (1916) education should sufficiently reflect politics, economic, religion and history as aspects of culture of the learning context. This is partly necessary to build up terminologies use in such social activities so that they may reflect the communal interests and concerns shared by learners. In this way, thoughts formulated from the implementation of such curriculum will be effectively responsive to the

cultural context of the learners through assisting ability to develop appropriate skills and creativity towards the usefulness of things studied in these subjects within their environment. Although Piaget (1952) believes as he has been widely criticized that the development of language is purely a mental process, he however accepts that thoughts and language are closely related. On the contrary Vygotsky (1978) confirms that language and thoughts are interdependent. Language modifies the learners' higher mental functions by defining the shape of the thought, building ability for imaginative thinking as the basis for creative thinking, the use of memory and actions that reflect the learners' experiences (Ivanoff, 2013). For Vygotsky (1978) language and thought develop together and in a mutual relationship modifies the learners' construction of meaning to suit his experiences. Thus in language, the learners interpret and construct their meaning about realities in a way that reflect their cultural environment.

Language and Nigerian Educational Policy

According to the Nigerian Policy on Education (FGN, 2004), language is regarded as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and cultural preservation. It is also seen as a means of furthering national unity. Following these, the policy instructs that every Nigerian child shall also be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. French shall be spoken for the purpose of international relationship. For this reason, these shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school. Further, the policy states that for the purpose of pre-primary education the medium of instruction shall be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community. To assist in this the orthography of many more Nigerian languages shall be developed and textbook shall be produced in Nigerian language (FGN, 2004).

The above positions show that the Nigerian National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) accepts the inextricable relationship between language as an aspect of culture and education. Although the policy does not enter into the precise expression of the philosophical usefulness of language to education, this can however be deduced from the overall aims of the education which is to educate her citizens for the purpose of development of the learners in immediate context and environmental needs (FGN, 2004). According to Jummai (2012) language serves as the society's vehicle for transmitting meaning and indefinitely preserving their culture. This confirms that language is itself an embodiment and a container for culture. It carries the culture of the people. For Udoh (2010) and Olagbaju (2014), Language makes up the content and the subject matter of education through which the nation hopes to achieve her objectives. Thus language cannot be separated from her interests, concerns and means of achieving her aspirations. These are some of the functions the policy believes that language will serve in Nigeria education.

African Symbols Theories and Concept Formation in Learners

Language basically uses symbols. Related African studies see symbol as an indispensable elements in the interpretation or understanding of the linguistic meaning in our experiences. Symbol is a conventional representation of a thing which is conceptually meaningful within a particular context. It can also be said that the meanings of symbols go beyond the physical property of an object symbolized. In this case, its proper meanings can only be grasped in relation to the meaning invested on it in the entire cultural understanding and interpretation of reality. Meaning, thought and action then cannot be separated from object, mind, context and

cultural conventions in education process as it uses linguistic symbols to conceptualize realities of interests and concerns in the environment (Obot,2015). Meaning, thought and action cut across ontological and epistemological fields of the learners' mental processes. Language is a cultural reality with symbols and are meaningful within the speaker's and the hearer's cognition of the symbolic cultural situations even within education process. It is only within the proper language culture that language can effectively serve in formation of concepts and ideas that are contextually meaningful and productive in learners through education.

Some Philosophical Issues in Language – Education Relationship in Nigeria

As also noted by Jummai (2012), language is a very important variable in the strategies towards the realization of educational objectives in Nigeria. However, there are some factors that negatively influence the effectiveness the benefits of language in Nigerian education policy and implementations. Among others they include: 1.Theoretical issues in language, functions and meaning in philosophy of education 2.Inconsistencies in the national policy on education 3.Issues surrounding the multi-linguistic cultures in Nigeria.

Theoretical issues in language, function and meaning: There are multiple understandings of the functions of language. In his lecture "How to do things with words", Gasparator (2015) presented his understanding of language and meaning in the process of communication. According to him the meaning of a word in a communication situation is based on (a) the linguistic conventions or linguistic culture that is related to the words and the sentences, (b) the context in which the speaker makes the speech and his intentions and (c) the learners' context of interpretation including his cultural environment. He sees words and sentences as acts that carry force within them based on the above three components. His theory of language, communication and education thus gives a prominent place to cultural bases and context as does the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004).

On the other hand, the positivists' reductive picture theory of meaning of Wittgenstein (1961), the theory of meaning as a state of affairs and the verification theory of meaning of Ayer (1936) share different views. These logical positivists' approach to language and its functions according to Osiki (2006) arise from their attempt to reduce the complexities of language and words components and characteristics to only that which are verifiable, pictures the state of affairs. They see language and meaning only from the perspective of scientific reductive criteria. They see language as meaning the function of a known specific truth condition. Yet both language and its functions in the teaching and learning processes extend beyond the language fields of the positivists which are reductive and exclusive of holistic nature of human experiences. With such possible theoretical background which abound, most of the linguistic concepts, ideas and experiences of the learners in the Nigerian cultural context are most likely to be seen as nonfactual, meaningless, fictitious and illusive.

Austin (1962.) describes the functions of language from an inclusive approach of the total speech act situation. According to Osiki (2006) Austin believed that performativity is the quintessential feature of communication. He rejected absolutely the attempt to explain meaning of language only as a process of cognition. Language is understood when its situation including cultural context is properly conceptualized. Thus it assists learners to conceptualize the entire situation of their learning. Yoshitake (2004) introduces other fields on which linguistic meaning can be based in communication beyond that of Austin's speech act theory. He believes that sentences carry actions and actually do perform actions. In his

judgment, Austin's speech act theory is itself also reductive on the grounds of neglecting the communicative nature of meaning. It interprets language only from the fields of the speaker neglecting the fields of the hearers (Yoshitake, 2004). Again Yoshitake (2004) included ontological and epistemological issues in the understanding of words and meaning. For him meaning of words are created from social conventions which includes cultural correlates within which the speaker himself is always in direct access to as his bases of the meaning of his word, sentences and experiences. Linguistic meaning then cannot be separated from cultural situations which envelop and direct the learners' relationship with his experiences and expectations in life. It is through linguistic culture as the bases of creating meaning that the learners participate in the natural environment and is able to develop his life as an integral part of nature and the society. He acts and is acted upon through language situation. The differences in these theories of language can influence the importance attached to it by different educators and their method of applications of language in teaching and learning situations.

Inconsistencies in the National Policy on Education: Although the National Policy on Education (FGN, 2004) appears to be very passionate on issues of language, it does not appear to be consistent enough for effective implementation. There appear to be some logical inconsistencies in the policy on language and its usefulness in education. The policy is not clear on the meaning of "the language of his immediate environment" (FGN, 2004). This becomes more confusing where learners from different language communities are in the same classroom situation. In an implementation situation, what happens where the teacher and the learners do not share the same linguistic cultures as it may be the case in some multilingual communities such as some cases in Nigeria?

Again the policy goes on to state that every child shall be required to learn one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. This is not clear if this is to be in addition to the said language of the immediate environment. If this were to be, perhaps the policy would have added the prefix "also". Being that it is not added, the policy appears to mean that these are the said three languages of the immediate environment. On the issue of the development of the orthography of "many more" Nigerian language, the use of the Expression "many more" is similar to the use of "some". The question that arises is: How effective will be the education of the children in communities where the orthography of their languages will not be developed? It can then be said that the National Policy of Nigerian education is selective and exclusive of the benefits of language to the education of all Nigeria children (Olagbaju, 2014). Being that issues on language are not clearly articulated in the Nigerian National Policy on Education and the policy is not sure that every child will have the privilege of learning in his language; the policy then appears not to be sufficient for effective education in relation to the usefulness of language in education process. Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba are not the lingual cultural bases of every Nigerian and cannot have the same expected effect for every Nigeria child in education as languages differ in experiences, symbols, meanings concepts and ideas. National integration and identity through education are also at stake.

Issues surrounding the multi-linguistic cultures in Nigeria: Issues surrounding language and education in Nigeria cannot be separated from the multicultural nature of Nigeria. These issues revolve around the problem of managing a situation of many Nigerian languages arising from the many cultures in order to assist education achieve its objectives through the expected functions of language. Whose linguistic culture deserves attention in education and whose linguistic culture does not deserve attention? In the light of these, the desire to achieve positive inter and intra relationship among her citizenry through education looks marred.

Instead the policy is a veritable tool by which must Nigerians may lost their cultural identity; though this does not undermined the need for a national identity. Also for some, education remains abstract and insensitive to their experiences. Language would have been the means by which realities and experiences are in education process. This is a point Jummai (2012) will support since for him lack of proper language usage in education is a factor for lack of cultural identity which entails the harmonization of realities and experiences. Every educational policies including that of Nigeria should be more careful and realistic in handling issues of multi-linguistic cultural background and education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Learners derive meaning to their experiences in language not as a physical appreciation or interpretation of a verifiable state of affairs but also through mental association or analogy. The coherence in use of words to interpret experience in a classroom situation should consider web of holistic understanding of the various experiences within the entire fields of the learners' experiences. Words become creative when their meaning mentally interprets the entire fields of the learners' experiences in a holistic manner. Such creative forces are based on the capacity of language to define problems in real situations and conceptualize possible solutions by creating new meaning and understanding to the learners' experiences and existence within the proper fields of experiences too.
2. The positivists' concept of language may not be effective enough in the Nigerian education situation. Philosophy of education should endeavor to identify the different theories of language and meaning and point out to teachers and learners their implications on concepts of language, culture and education for proper policy implementation including that of Nigeria.
3. Teacher education in Nigeria should equip their learners with the necessary skills in methods, techniques and strategies for effective teaching in a multilingual situations and culture such as Nigeria (Obot, 2014). Teacher education should consider too the environment within which the prospective teacher would perform his or her duties as a teacher.
4. Learners should be assisted to develop the motivation and interest to learn and use the language of their culture in formal and informal learning situations.
5. The Nation Policy on Education should be revisited to effectively reflect the reality of many languages in Nigeria. Writing, publishing and utilization of such texts written on Nigerian languages should be effectively encouraged.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of language to education cannot be over emphasized. It is very appropriate that the National Policy on Education attempts to articulate this. The social conventions and symbols through language in the formation of concepts and ideas in the thinking processes are veritable tools for learners-centered education and for learners' education that is effectively responsive to the challenges of the learners. Nigerian stake holders in education including philosophers of education should see the need to bring in innovations in problem areas such as those studied above. If this is done, Education process will be more effective in responding to educational aims including those articulated in the Nigerian National Policy on Education.

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