

ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A TOOL FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Language seems to be the vehicle for second change, social mobilization, social reconstruction and national development in a multilingual, multiethnic nation like Nigeria. Since no ethnic group in Nigeria can lay claim to English as its own, this political neutrality qualifies it as the national language that cuts across and can bring development in the economic, social and environmental life of the people of this nation. This paper pointedly exposes us to the various ways in which the English language acts as a veritable tool for sustainable development in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Language is a distinctively human system of communication based on oral and written symbols. It is the vehicle through which people's culture is transmitted. It is an extremely important aspect of a community. It is an index of identity which serves as a repository of a people's culture, industry and exploits. It is language that differentiates the home sapiens from other animals (*Crystal D. 2010*). As a tool of communication among the members of a society, language is influenced by the very society where it functions. Moreover, being the most significant tool of communication, a particular language which is mastered only by some people has often been the determining factor in turning these people into a separate group as a people, a nation or a state (*Fasold, 1992*).

The English language has taken the position of a national language in Nigeria. There is no gain saying the fact that English has become a Nigerian language (*Adegbite, 2004*). The language has become an invaluable legacy of the British Colonial masters. Several years after independence, the English language still survives and has assumed a more important status in Nigeria.

Now, in the 21st century, the United Nations secretary General's High level panel on a global sustainability recently wrote that sustainable development is not a destination, but a dynamic process of adaptation, learning and action. It is about recognizing, understanding and acting on interconnections –above all between the economy, society and the natural environment. So, today development has got to do with improving the well-being of the majority of the population, ensuring people's freedom and increasing their economic security. The key to the achievement of all these is language. This paper therefore examines English language as the vehicle for sustainable development in Nigeria.

Sustainable Development

Development has got to do with improving the well-being of the majority of the population, ensuring people's freedom and increasing their economic security. The key to the achievement of all these is language.

Development can also said to simply mean providing qualitative improvement in the lives of people or providing greater quality of life for humans. Development also means the act or process of bringing to a more advanced state, growth or progress; or progressed state or form.

There are different forms of development which include: social, political, economic, educational, environment, cultural, green development and so on. So development can also be described as: material progress or economic growth or reformation of social institutions and infrastructures.

The primary objectives of all types of development is to promote authentic human development. Catherine Walsh (2011) agrees with this by stating that development has recently shifted from economic progress towards a more humanistic view focused on the individual and the quality of life which is often referred to as "integral and sustainable human development". This

focuses on the inter-connectedness of economics with political, socio-cultural and environmental spheres, as well as the necessities, capacities and potentialities of human beings.

Sustainable development could therefore probably be otherwise called "equitable and balanced". This means that, in order for development to continue indefinitely, it should balance the interest of different groups of people, within the same generation and among generations and do so simultaneously in three major interrelated areas: economic, social, environmental and soon.

Sustainable development is also defined by the Brundtland commission as "a development which meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs". The United Nations 2005 World summit outcome document refers to the interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development as economic development, social development and environmental development. Another dimension was added to it by UNESCO which is cultural development. Sustainable development therefore means a pattern of resource use that aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come.

Therefore, for any meaningful development to take place and be sustained, there must be a medium which the members of the community or any nation can be made to participate in the programs which will bring positive results. Language is the only means by which members can be conscientized and positive attitudes inculcated into them. This is because language has a central and rather crucial role to play in the mobilization of the rural population for specific national development program e.g agriculture, timber exploitation, fishing etc. Language can make useful contribution in providing the skills needed for rural development projects as well as other aspects of life in a modern society in the following areas: health, education, family planning, child welfare, home craft, literacy, road safety, alcoholism, drugs etc. Everything considered, it is clear that when the appropriate language (aimed at the total mobilization of rural community) is used, the people will naturally be drawn into being totally involved in government policies and once the community members are captured, the states and the nations will benefit and societal ills will be corrected thereby achieving a high rate of development. Language has therefore become a viable weapon for sustainable development in the 21st century.

The English language could be seen as a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria in the areas of Education, Economic and National Unity.

Education

The National Policy on Education (1977, 2004) in its acknowledgement of the status of the English language in our education system has it that the government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and at later stage, English. This makes it the language of instruction from the upper primary level to the tertiary level. This makes life a veritable gateway to the understanding and mastering of science and technology so much needed in Nigeria. Poor knowledge of English is therefore a clear indication that one may perform poorly in other subjects as the examination in these subjects are usually written in English. Thus, to be educated in the eyes of many is to be versed in the English language literacy with proficiency in the English language or communicative competence. The incessant desire by Nigerian government for effective teaching of the language in our schools is rooted on the belief that Western education especially communicative competence in the English language would equip the youth with the techniques and skills essential for the improvement of personal statuses in the emergent economic and social structure (Coleman, 1958). Considering the many indigenous languages present in Nigeria today, it is quite difficult to impose any indigenous and unifying language because they are above five hundred. The language scenario in Nigeria would have been close to what happened at the Tower of Babel had not a foreign language English, been introduced and used in the country.

Economic Dimension

Economically, the English is the avenue to sustainable development in Nigeria. Economists in Nigeria believe that English is crucial for economic growth, as it helps them trade more widely on an international scale. Nigeria can do international businesses because we have English as our official language. The international community can easily and comfortably be reached because of the prestigious language. English is very important when hiring a new employee. This underlines the fact that English skills enhance business and trade, while also improving an individual's economic conditions.

An individual's economic empowerment in Nigeria is closely linked with good command of English. A wide range of business categories in Nigeria including the banking industry, technology, the pharmaceutical industry, and even vocational workers such as carpenters and electricians see increased need for English language skills. A salaried professional with good English language skills can earn an average of thirty percent (30%) more than someone with no English language skills in Nigeria. The government of Nigeria firmly recognized that English is a key element of business communication and it is essential for attracting new investments. With governments and companies pushing for far more English speaking workers, it can be expected that more individuals will view English, among other skills, as a step towards career advancement and higher pay. This is a motivating factor for individuals to learn English in order to obtain well-paid jobs within the most dynamic organization and industries in Nigeria. Clearly, we all can see that prospective employees who can speak and write English well have better opportunities economically. This way, English language is a tool for sustained national development

English as a Unifying Tool among Nigerians

English serves as the language of nationalism, concerned with political integration and efficiency (Bamgbose, 1991). The language brings all the supposed "nations" of Nigeria to function as one. Nigeria is a country with many ethnic groups and nations such as Hausa nation, Igbo nation, Yoruba nation, Tiv nation, Fulani nation, Edo nation, Jukun land, Urhobo land, Igala nation etc. However, the cohesion and integration of those nations under the coinage "Nigerian nation" is possible through English language. In other words, without English the ubiquitous violent ethnic groups such as Oodua People's Congress (OPC), Movement for the Actualization of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Arewa People's Congress (APC), Ijaw Youth Solidarity (IYS), Niger Delta Militant Group, and other groups would have found more justification for desiring to secede from the Nigerian nation.

Ironically, English is also the language of nationhood and nationalism (Yusuf 2003). This is because the love for the country as a whole has to be manifested through the language "intelligible" to all and sundry, if not the 'ethnic agenda' would always be enthroned other than national interest. This reason accounts for why nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello had to use English language as a weapon for nationalist struggle. A nationalist expresses his patriotic views in English language. If English language is not used to express the ideas for which a nationalist is known for, he becomes an ethnic jingoist or a tribal apologist. Indeed however, English is the language of authenticity and reform in Nigeria till date.

As a language of wider communication (LWC), English language is used for phobic expressions, ceremonial purposes as an instrument of keeping records, information dissemination, self-experiment, and embodiment of thought among the various linguistic groups in Nigeria. The common linguistic basis that constitutes a requisite for the existence of any nation is provided by English. So with English as the common tongue to all the youths of various ethnic diversities, the collective sentiment of belonging together despite the cultural or ethnic differences is forged.

It is an obvious fact that the language which has held Nigeria together up to date to a greater extent has been English language. It was passed on to us by our colonial masters, and so far, it has played that role very well. In our official day-to-day communication, it has greatly enhanced the relationship that existed between the various ethnic groups we have in Nigeria. Take for example,

an Igbo man who has never been to the Western part of Nigeria nor has any understanding of Yoruba language, will definitely see English language as the best means and only option to express his emotion, thought or whatever information he has when seen in the midst of Yoruba speakers.

Another important area that language has been useful in keeping us together in Nigeria is in the field of academics. This is because it has to a great extent helped to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the privileged and the less privileged. However, English remains the link between the high to low class persons in Nigeria and beyond.

In religion, the important role played by language can never be overemphasized. Herein lays another unifying factor, and being championed by language. English language continues to serve as the medium of communication therefore bringing the people of God together under the same umbrella. Many religious gatherings in Nigeria either make use of English language in carrying out their activities side by side little elements of local language(s). This has contributed significantly to the peaceful co-existence in our beloved country. We have had various religious disputes and conflicts at one time or the other due to the fact that such religions do not use English language in its proceedings. This needs to change.

So far, we have pointed out the various roles played by language, (by this we mean English language) in the attainment and sustenance of national unity. However, it is believed that it would have been better if the roles played by English had been played by an indigenous language. This is not intended to discredit English but to emphasize that an indigenous language would have been better, if we are to be a country of one nation, one language.

CONCLUSION

The best form of education is the one that opens our minds to think critically, our hearts to embrace all even when we disagree and our hands to be practical in all endeavours. Nigerian problems can only be solved through a purpose laden education in English language that is desired by all and sundry *Obuasi (2000)*, If the idea of sustainable development is to create a system that is sustainable, which means that one can keep going indefinitely into the future, then the English language becomes a key factor to unending development in Nigeria in the areas of education, economic empowerment and national unity.

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