

English language in the face of global multicultural emphasis and the challenges of bilingual education

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NNEWI, NIGERIA (ANS) -- English has been accepted as a second language in Nigeria, right from the time the country was colonized by Britain. Nigerians have shown much prominence in all academic pursuits. English Language has been a crucial issue in the Nigerian education system. This is particularly so because it is an official means by which a child receives instruction in other subjects of the curriculum. It is equally the means through which a child appropriates and synthesizes the knowledge transmitted to him by the teacher.

In fact, it has been demonstrated that the child's cognitive development as well as his affective characteristics is a function of language, and the cultural implication of this in the prominence of English in education calls for attention in an era of multicultural emphasis.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language could be defined as a system of sounds or vocal symbols by which human beings communicate experience. It is a veritable means of communication and it is a special attribute which differentiates man from other animals. It is a human phenomenon that has form which can be described in terms of the units of sounds (phonemes), words, morphemes, phrases, sentences and paragraph or discourse. According to Gatherer (1977), we think in language and effective thinking is not possible unless we possess linguistic competence adequate enough to realize and express our ideas.

Language and culture are closely related, while culture is simply the way of life of a people or society. Language either in its spoken or written form is the medium through which culture is expressed, transmitted from one generation to the other, or reserved for present and future generations. The dressing patterns, habits, different types of food and their modes of preparation, expressing joy or sorrow, hate or anger etc are transmitted through the language of the group.

The richer the culture, the richer the language that expresses that culture.

Again, language is man's most prized possession. It is his major vehicle for self-expression and a mark of his personal and group identity. It is an integral component and at the same time a product of culture, like culture itself, it is learned behaviour which can be facilitated or enhanced through direct or indirect context and acculturation. Language is not innate or inborn. That is, no human being is born with a language but every human being has an innate tendency to acquire a language, hence it is a bridge to access knowledge, skills and attitudes within and across cultural/political boundaries.

Language is the major vehicle of expression, for instance Nigeria has about 400 spoken languages which accounts for about 25% of all languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa. With the multiplicity of Nigerian languages, complex problems are created with regard to

making a categorical policy on language for education, official business, government and legislative functions.

GLOBAL IMPLICATION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

It is very well known that over many centuries there has been a progressive expansion of "the speech community of speech fellowship" of the English language. It was initially England; it later became Great Britain. It then grew to include North America, Australia, New Zealand, parts of Asia and parts of Africa. It is today virtually the entire world.

The advent of the English language in Africa cannot be dissociated from colonialism as a factor which was initiated under the disguise of missionary activities, trade and commerce, and borderline areas are other means of transportation of the language into the continent. It is worthwhile/plausible to say that the factor of colonialism is the channel of English in Anglophone East African countries comprising Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc and West African countries comprising Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana, Gambia etc.

English has become an international language means for multinational and multicultural communication with numerous indigenous languages and a multiplicity of the culture of the different peoples of the world that speak English. There are now many forms of the English language which are identifiably different from each other like American English, British English, Indian English, West African English, Singapore English, Australian English etc. This trend has led to the use of a new plural 'English'/world English to refer to the different forms and varieties of the language.

Because English is so widely spoken, it has often been referred to as a "global language"- the lingua franca of the modern era. While English is not an official language in many countries, it is currently the language most often taught as a second language around the world. Because of that global spread, English has developed a host of English dialects and a host of English-based Creole languages and Pidgins. Dialects means varieties of a language defined in terms of its users, since the users of a language constitute the members of a speech community.

The existence of different varieties of English could therefore be attributed to the multiplicity of the culture of the different peoples of the world that speak English. Examples are Cockney slang with British English, New Foundland English, and the English spoken by Anglo Quebecers within Canadian English and African American vernacular English and Southern America English with American English. Although no variety is clearly considered the only standard, there are a number of accents considered as more formal, such as Received pronunciation in Britain or the Bostonian dialect in the United States of America. In his word, B.B. Kachru (1977) has advised that for any variety to be regarded as standard, that variety should be assessed from the point of view of what he called 'relevant factors of appropriateness, acceptance and intelligibility'

It must be stressed that language in contact are bound to develop variations and

mutations. This is because such languages are forced to accommodate the variations of locality. Since English is the language of the world, it is no longer the possession of the British, and a non-native speaker is not subject to English assumptions of correctness. As the spread of English progresses, English is bound to reflect a diversity of disparate cultures since no language is used to its fullest extent by its native speakers; there is always much room left for the non-native speakers to exploit it in the unique form of English usage, phonetically, lexically, syntactically, semantically and pragmatically.

Varieties of English occur as a result of such factors as cultural, political, economical etc. The implication is that the existence of such varieties of English poses difficulty to the second language learner, but when learned, it enhances his effective use of the language. Again, as a result of the afore-mentioned factors, there have been cases of confused linguistic allegiance and the interference phenomena. In terms of the first, a second language learner is faced with the task of acquiring communicative competence in a language that belongs to a totally different family and culture. Here, if the learner comes from a "well educated" family, he misses out completely the emotional make-up in the mother tongue.

There are reported cases of the interference of the mother tongue on English which could be phonological, lexical and syntactical. The interference of mother tongue affects the learner's performance in the target language. This is one of the problems Nigerians are facing because of mother tongue intruding into that of the target language. Since English is a global language, it becomes pertinent that one examines the general perceptions of the use of English worldwide in order to see how each country fits into the schema. The use of English can be classified into the following categories of users:

I. English as a mother tongue (EMT)

A mother tongue is the only language of a monolingual person which is acquired naturally in his native environment which meets all his linguistic needs. English being a world language serves as the first language or MT in some countries like Britain, USA, Australia, New Zealand, British settlers in South Africa, Blacks in USA, West Indies, Liberated slaves settlers in Liberia, Sierra Leone etc. It has been estimated that about 250 million people use English as a mother tongue/first language.

II. English as a foreign language (EFL)

This is a situation where the users learn English as an additional language and use it voluntarily when necessary, especially outside their countries. Such countries include China, Japan, France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, and Spain.

III. English as a second language (ESL)

In a country where English is used as a second language, that country has its indigenous languages but use English compulsorily in official and public affairs hence English performs two different roles, primary language (1.1) and secondary language (1.2). Those for whom English is their primary language are referred to as "native speakers" (NS) while the non-native speakers are those for whom English is a secondary language (NNS)

THE CHALLENGES OF BILINGUAL EDUCATION

The term "bilingualism" means the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or a speech community. We can also explain the term bilingualism as dual language performance by an individual or individuals covering all stages starting from Bloomfieldian native-like control of two languages and the minimal knowledge of a second language. Each of these languages has its own distinct phonological, lexical, grammatical and discourse rules. Nigeria is an example of a bilingual community. In Nigeria therefore, there are individual bilinguals- people who speak only Igbo and English, Hausa and English, Yoruba and English, Efik and English etc.

It has been stressed that bilingualism was and still is the explanation for the failure of certain group of children. It has been argued that bilingualism is counterproductive to the child's welfare to develop and maintain proficiency in more than one language. Many people now recognize that these ideas are based on questionable assumptions about language proficiency: how it is measured and how bilingualism affects academic development. There are a number of hypotheses about influence on children's achievement in school.

They are as follows: Bilingualism itself, lack of exposure to the school language, linguistic mismatch between home and school, cultural mismatch between home and school, inferior quality of education provided to minority students, and factors associated with social-economic status, etc

Some linguists are of the view that bilingualism is one of the causes of poor achievement in schools. For example, the Toronto Board of Education in 1969 and 1975 showed that students of non-English-speaking background who immigrated to Canada performed worse academically and were in lower academic streams than those in Canada. Again, not too long ago, minority children in countries like Australia, the United States, Britain and Scandinavia were subjected to physical violence in school for speaking their home language. In most cases, the education of these children entailed removing them from the parents and their own cultural group. These children are taken to where they would learn not only the dominant language, but would do so in an environment where their culture was seen as barbaric.

The primary role of the mother tongue in bilingual education cannot be overemphasized. Experiments conducted have shown that pupils will learn and comprehend their subjects better in their mother tongues, especially if they are allowed to mature in them. At the secondary school, the policy lists one indigenous language and English as part of the core subjects and does not list any indigenous language as an elective.

Taking cognizance of the fact the face of education is now situated in a multi - cultural global society, we cannot avoid contact with others from different cultures and societies. In the past, educational theory and thought were influenced and ruled by dominant western values and culture but in the present day society, educational theory and classroom practice must now change to meet the educational demands of a global society.

Bilingual Education should be dominant by numerous theories concerning the development of language. Issues like how individuals develop and learn languages should be addressed. The different functions of the organs that are employed during language learning and acquisition should be examined. The different schools of thought viz: formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, and applied linguistics are theories that need to be understood in bilingual education. The importance of the knowledge of these theories cannot be over emphasized. For instance, the knowledge of the meaning of linguistics makes us to know that a linguist is not an individual who speaks many languages but one who studies the grammar, the social and psychological aspects of language use, and the relationships among languages. The goal of this field of study is to explain the uniformity of language acquisition among humans despite differences in native language.

There are other challenges of bilingual education that need to be considered. These are ESL or resource model, structural immersion model of instruction, transitional or early exit bilingual education, maintenance or late exit or developmental bilingual education and bilingual immersion or two way bilingual or dual language education. Students in developmental bilingual education classes receive instruction in the 1st and 2nd language throughout their period of schooling. Thus, instructions are taught through the two languages with much regard to multicultural perspective.

If bilingual education is to succeed, then the bilingual educator must be willing to accommodate the beliefs, attitudes and teaching strategies for the benefits of their bilingual students and bilingual community. The bilingual educators need to make bilingual education meaningful to themselves, their school, community and their students. It is also advised that education and educators in particular should recognize values other than their own when educating the global children of today. Educators must move outside their dominant local views and recognize values other than their own. More so, this type of bilingual reform also calls for administrators to develop, plan, provide and finance bilingual education reform that focuses on willingness to change.

Again, in the application of bilingual education, the educators must not forget that there is every tendency for the second language learner to code mix or code switch during the teaching and learning process. Indigenous languages as well as the various Pidgins and Creoles should be consciously promoted as an essential part of national culture. The educators therefore, should not fail to realize that the consequences of bilingualism are observed through the features of code switching, borrowing, interference and biculturalism. It is quite interesting to know that when learners are given the opportunity to use both 1.1 and 1.2 in their academic studies, they do not experience difficulty in developing 1.2 proficiency. This is because the previously acquired knowledge and skills are now automatically transferred to the new language.

While this subject is gaining interest in the linguistic community, it is my feeling that the broader peace education community can contribute to the reformation of second language acquisition as an international medium to promote peace and global responsibility.

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that English is a global language, a world language which serves as the first language, second language or foreign language of the different peoples of the world. It is therefore, the lingua franca of the modern era. The role of the English language in the face of global multicultural emphasis should not be undervalued. The teaching of English should therefore be carried out within a truly bilingual system. Since language is culture-bound, English must be able to coexist with the indigenous languages both in the curriculum and in the world outside education.

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A Response from Jim Harries:

Herbert touches on many issues of bilingualism, and seems to conclude strongly that we are looking forward (and should or must be looking forward to) a world in which while English may be widespread, it will be so as second (or foreign) language for many people on an ongoing basis. It will not displace mother-tongues, in other words, but complement them.

He points to what linguists have long argued - that a person's education is best carried out in mother tongue. English then is best considered as a 'taught language', rather than the LOI (language of instruction).

This brings a question regarding the linguistic policies of international educational initiatives in the future. In brief, I suggest that international educationalists ought to be bilingual as are their 'international students'. Any non mother-tongue English speaker's English will clearly be influenced by their MT (mother tongue), so will only be accurately understood by someone who also knows that mother tongue. Hence it could be argued that an educator who goes beyond native-English shores 'should' know the (or a) MT (and MT culture) of those shores, even if they 'teach in' English.

The church, more than any other international institution, is concerned with the heart of man. Its product (unlike that of businessmen) frankly is not quantifiable. Having the intent of winning people's hearts, the church ought more than others (business, science, etc.) to promote MT and express itself in MT. Encouraging the church to be rooted in English is turning it into a channel for intrusion and control by foreign forces, and not a means for indigenous theological and heart-felt expression and development. Meanwhile, because education does not reach it, the indigenous church can in Africa be left to the control of 'ancestors' ('spirits').

The problem in much of Africa is that instead of English being planted on top of and to complement MT languages, it is attempting to displace them. This has the effect of seriously weakening MTs, and thereby undercutting the sensibility of many already impoverished communities. In Africa more than anywhere then, I suggest that the international community that has disproportionate power needs to use that power to encourage MT (therefore deep and relevant) education in Africa, even if it could perhaps ignore that elsewhere (e.g. Germany, Japan, Korea) as these latter countries have their own resources with which to look after their MTs.

Respectfully submitted,

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