

The English Language and Literacy: a Panacea for National Development in Nigeria

Okafor, A. M.

English Department

Federal College of Education (Technical), Umunze, Anambra State, Nigeria

Abstract

For any nation to achieve any meaningful development, its citizens must show an appreciable high level of literacy. Attainment of literacy is made feasible through the language skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing. This is because language is a non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by mean of voluntarily produced symbols. The language skills like speaking, reading and writing therefore are the various channels through which the language of any community, society, or country could be used to communicate or express their feelings, thoughts, ideals, and experiences to each others. The importance of language in the context of a developing nation like Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. This is because there are two dominant areas in which it is crucial to national development. Similarly, there are three aspects of literacy which inevitably link it directly with socio-economic development, such as the correlation between illiteracy and poverty, social transformation as well as economic growth. To achieve socio-economic development, the nation needs a common language to ensure mass participation in national development. The English language therefore serves such purpose. The relationship between the English language and literacy as tools for national development forms the core for this paper.

Keywords: English language, Literacy, Panacea, National development

Corresponding Author: Okafor, A. M.

Background to the Study

It is not an overstatement to say that the English language is central to literacy and national development. This is because the language holds the key to further academic progress since it is a prerequisite to studying any course in any Nigerian tertiary institution. Literacy and the English language cannot be separated because it is taught as a subject and is a medium of instruction as well. This paper therefore x-rays the role of the English language and literacy to national development.

The Role of Language in National Development

Man uses language as a necessary tool to facilitate his daily interaction with other, whether in face to face exchange or in other social contexts, within the society. According to Bamgbose (1991), national development can be viewed in terms of socio-economic goals, National development is a total human development, which emphasizes a full realization of the human potential and maximum utilization of the nation's resources for the benefit of all citizens. It is therefore a situation where people harness the resources at their disposal to improve their general well-being. Although such people may be from diverse cultural backgrounds with different languages and values, sentiments are put aside in a bid to work towards the nation's development.

For effective national development according to Butari (2010), language plays a central role, particularly in terms of such agents of development as literacy and communication. According to him, it is through language that man has to plan, provide the primary sources, and the key factor of all economic development comes out of his mind. Besides planning, man uses language to instruct and evaluate his programs. According to Bamidele (1999), language plays an important role in national development as it fosters understanding, unity and sense of belonging among the various members of the different ethnic and social groups that constitute a nation.

The position of Bamidele which is relevant for our purpose is that national development ranges from growth, in areas of politics, economy, science and technology, education, health to even crime control. It is therefore the position of this paper that language is a veritable means of national development and this makes it imperative for issues concerning language education to be seriously addressed.

Language is an indispensable tool at the political arena, because, the leaders have to inform the populace on steps taken and the next line of action. Through this, the people are not only carried along but also have a sense of belonging which will lead to the attainment of meaningful growth. No wonder therefore on special occasion like the Independence day, New Year days or public holidays, the president and governors make national and state broadcasts. Such speeches inform and educate the people on government politics.

Language in relation to economic development seems the nursing link in the economy of the nation. Since economic development is rated by the productive activities within a nation, language therefore guarantees proper coordination of these activities within a nation. A self conscious and unified population working towards being economically self reliant cannot be coordinated without effective communication, similarly in commerce, language is employed to transact trading activities between people from different linguistic, social and political backgrounds.

In the growth of science and technology, language also play a major role in any given society. This is because, several textbooks in science are written in a given language. Language is usually employed in the training of technicians, who work in factories to build or manufacture high technology gadgets. As rightly pointed out by Bamidele, science and technology are not developed in the most third world countries because their concepts are not expressed in the languages the people can understand. This is true when one considers the stagnation in indigenous technologies like blacksmithing, and dyeing. But in the case of China, Japan and India just to mention but a few, their science and technology are well developed; this is because the concepts of science and technology are well spelt out in their own indigenous languages which of course make the concepts easy for everyone to understand.

In the area of Education, language is employed for both formal and informal education where the individual learns things; acquired knowledge skills that will eventually make him useful to himself, the community, and the entire nation. Through language, other educational activities such as writing of textbooks, newspapers, magazines, journals and conference papers are done. Such education materials are important because people read and learn about the environment, get acquainted with things happening around them and in the outside world.

Communication in the sense of the mass media is also directly relevant to national development. This is done through the use of language (written or spoken). For instance, in agriculture, communication could be employed to disseminate information on fertilizers, pesticides and high yield varieties of crops, appropriate planting seasons, irrigation and preservation as well as marketing outlets.

Language also plays a major role whereby the youths are brought together to interact with one another thereby fostering unity for national development. A notable example is the NYSC put in place in the early 1970s in Nigeria. Through the programme, people of diverse ethnic group apart from interacting with one another, learn one another's culture, language and even intermarry.

Wardhaugh (2006) rightly observed that language and thought are inseparable because language expresses an individual's thought. The bedrock of any meaningful development is positive thinking and language mediates in thought. The whole idea of scientific innovation comes from thought which is implemented via language. Based on these aforementioned therefore, language issues should be seen as central in our efforts to develop educationally, technologically, politically and socially in Nigeria.

Literacy as a Panacea for National Development

Luke (1998) views literacy as multi-literacies. In this sense, we can extend the meaning of literacy to mean both a function of what we teach and the context in which it is taught as well as extending beyond ourselves to the notion of creating a just and humane world. In this sense, the term is extended to include: print literacy, critical literacy, multi-cultural literacy, mathematical and statistical literacy, internet literacy as well as media literacy. To make all of them effective in the society, they must be taught in contexts that encourage dialogue, choice, ownership and participation by the student. Hornstein (2008) states that for these literacies to be effective, they must be taught in a continuous way and must intertwine. This therefore means that for us to act as literate people, all of these literacies must be present in us.

Print literacy is assumed to be ability to read and write. This literacy goes beyond reading and writing. Freebody (1999) proposed four models of print literacy that focus on the following practices.

1. English language breaking the code of texts through alphabets, phonics, spelling, syntactic conventions.
2. Participating in the meaning of text by understanding and creating written visual and spoken texts within a variety of meaning systems and settings.
3. Using texts functioning within a variety of social setting and knowing how texts perform different functions across different settings and cultures.
4. Critically analyzing and transforming texts by understanding and acting on texts.

Print literacy will therefore encourage students to become thinkers and actors critical literacy, on the other hand, is one's ability to bring to bear one understanding of the world to his understanding of texts. Through such literacy, the individual can possess the courage as well as ability to interrogate the political, economic, cultural, social and religious assumptions he encounters.

Multicultural literacy according to Luke (1998) is one's ability to view knowledge from the diverse ethnic and cultural perspectives and the use of such knowledge to create a just and humane society. As a multi-ethnic society, there are so many ethnic nationalities in Nigeria as such there is need for multi-ethnic literacy for proper understanding as well as the appreciation of other people's culture, beliefs and religion. To be truly literate in this instance, we need to be inclusive by transcending those histories, cultures and religions as well as build new understanding in line with the history and culture origin of the nation.

Technological literacy is another of literacy which requires both the understanding of new technologies being introduced to the society as well as their importance to the citizens and the circumstances surrounding their operators, context in which they are used and their impact on the lives of people.

On the part of internet literacy, this enables the literate citizens to be part of the global village. While at home, school and even with our cell phones, we can have access to the entire world. As literate citizens, having such privilege is not enough sign that we are truly literate, we need to be aware of the ubiquity of such access, and be able to question the veracity, authorship, reliability, and purposes of any information received.

Finally, media literacy is crucial to making an literate citizen productive. To possess such literacy is not just to have the ability to be current about happenings around the society but requires citizens who can impact and critique the media as well. This cannot come through merely reading and watching the news but through a skill and literacy obtained through discourse and experience. The literate person should be conscious of the issues beyond the news such as the portrayal of individuals, ethnic groups, nationalities, culture as well as the discern reality from fiction. The Alliance for a media literate America notes that media literacy "allow citizens to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate information".

Functional literacy, on the other hand has shown that it is a powerful means of developing new skills. For example, according to Rassol (1999), in the area of agriculture, which majority of

Nigerians are engaged in, literacy can enable knowledge of the use of fertilizers, use of credit, marketing and price trends and other techniques. Besides, it can also help the industrial worker to convert from old to new plants and being unskilled to being skilled thus improving production.

Functional literacy also makes possible the training of women for employment not only in small scale and cottage industries as is presently obtained in the country through the numerous and duplicated government programmes such as NAPEP (National Poverty Eradication Programme) etc.

Other areas that literacy can be seen as panacea for national development are health and family planning. Countries with the highest illiteracy rates are shown to have higher population growth rates. This is a case in Nigeria where the population growth is at an arithmetical rate. That explains the reason why the fight against poverty and hunger has been a nightmare for the government. If people are well informed about the danger inherent in population explosions, there will be an improvement in maternal and child health.

Through literacy training, attitudes of the citizenry can be radically transformed because if most of the people are literate, they can effectively plan, communicate and obtain information, as well as participate in social activities. Besides, they can also be better in terms of skills and working habits and adopting new practices which will invariably lead to improved standard of living as well as attitudes conducive to development.

English and Literacy in National Development

For any nation to achieve any meaningful development and effectively harness the material and human resources there is need for a common language which the people need to use. However in Nigeria, the case is contrary, there is bound to be a retardation in the people's strive towards National development.

An Adegbite (1992) state that is made up more than 250 ethnic groups with a conservation estimate of 400 languages. A midst these multiples of languages, the English language becomes the obvious choice for literacy as well as national development. It also helps to enhance and promote social and economic interaction among the various tribe groups. Ubahakwe (1979) affirms that 'since the colonial era, the English language set the stage for any citizen of the nation to attain a position of prestige, the English Language must play a crucial role in his life.

This made Ezeulu in Achebe (1964) to state that:

I want one of my sons to join these people (white man) and be my eyes there if there is nothing in it (school) he will come back, but if there is something he will bring home my share. . . . my spirit tells me that those who not befriend the Whiteman today will be saying 'had we known' tomorrow.

The English Language is both the content and subject matter of education.

Thus it is the medium of learning whatever is to be learnt. The requirement of English for higher education, job opportunity wider national and international communication and in adult life, bring to bear on the Nigerians to learn it so that they do not just improve their performance in the language but contribute their quota towards national development.

For Nigeria to forge ahead science and technology is very crucial and the use of English in this regard cannot be underestimated. Several textbooks are written with the use of the language. Similarly are instruction manuals for most electrical appliances are written in English. Besides these, English employed in training the technical who work in the factories that manufacture and fabricate items like metals, cement and clothing which are crucial to national development. The role of English in this regard can be more appreciated when we consider the backwardness in the indigenous technology like black smithing and dyeing.

Conclusion

From the ongoing discussion, it is glaring that for effective national development of both human and material resources literacy is the key. Literacy cannot be separated from the English Language since it is the medium of instruction in schools, and official interaction. Based on this, we can submit that the English Language is the life wire of the nation's economic, social, political, educational and administrative development as well as the window that link the nation to the outside world.

References

- Achebe, C. (1964). *Arrow of God*. Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Adegbite, W. (1992). *Towards and efficient Bilingual Programme for teaching Language skills in Nigerian primary school*. Literacy and Reading in Nigeria, vol.6
- Bamgbose, A. (1991). *Language and the Nation*. Edindurgh: University press.
- Bataille, L. (ed) (1976). *A Turning Point for Literacy*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Butari, N.U. (2010). The English Language and Literacy as basic Tools for National Development. *Journal of English studies and National Development in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: English Language Association.
- Freebody, C (1999). *New Trends in Literacies*. London: Heinemann.
- Hornstein, S. (2008). Beyond print Literacy: the Important of Multi-literacies in a Democratic Globalized Society in Adegbite & Olajide (eds). *English & the Challenges of Literacy in the 21st century*. Lagos: Olivetree Publishing Venture.
- Luke A. (1998). *Getting Over it: Literacy Teaching in New Times*. Language Arts. 75:308-313.
- Luke A. & Freebody, P. (1990). A map of possible practices: Further notes on the four Resources Model Practically Primary 4(2) Retrieved from <http://www.atea.2.ufrebody.htm>.
- Rassol, N. (1999). *Literacy for sustainable Development in the Age of Information*. Clevedon: Multiling Matters Ltd.