

## Language Literacy, Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Nigeria

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This paper analyzed roles of language literacy in the reconciliation and cohesion of Nigeria. Nigeria is multilingual entity with more than 400 languages. The languages are divided into majorities and minorities. This resulted in fear of domination, mistrust, suspicion, disloyalty, segregation, disharmony, and disintegration. The paper argued that improvement in language literacy is the most important factor in enabling reconciliation and national integration of Nigeria. Language literacy is the acquisition of cultural and communicative competence. When one communicates, one has objectives to be accomplished or aspirations to be realized. Language through the use of dialogue has been agreed as a best and a powerful weapon in reconciliation of any warring parties. However, in situations where people use a common language, they understand one another, have confidence and trust in one another and live in a harmonious life which brings about social integration.

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### **Background to the Study**

Language is a social phenomenon which plays important roles in human lives. Language is seen as a vehicle of communication, means of cultural transmission, and a powerful weapon for human interactions. When one communicates, one has objectives to be accomplished or aspirations to be realized. These can be national unity, socioeconomic interaction or education (Mkwinda-Nyasulu, 2014). Language literacy which is learning of communication skills for the exchange of information between individuals within and outside their speech communities helps in the understanding of various linguistic, social and cultural milieu, and in turn, form the most important platform for the development of common strategies of the countries that have decided to follow a common route (Cok and Novak-Lukanovic, nd). The learning of various linguistic, social, and cultural values of speech communities leads to the inculcation of peaceful coexistence skills and fruitful interaction by different speech communities, close cooperation, and acknowledgement of equal rights to everyone in the society.

However, in situation where there are plural linguistic communities, tribalism, marginalization, oppression and war were recorded. In these cases, dialogue has been agreed as a powerful weapon in reconciliation of any warring parties. Dialogue has been understood as a healing mechanism for social interactions, forgiveness, mutual recognition, acceptance of every member, restoration of positive attitudes, social sensitivity, and the consideration of the needs and interests of every individual in the society. Through dialogue, social conflicts can be resolved via telling the truth, forgiveness, institution of justice and fair play. This can be translated into exercising of civic responsibilities, justice and fair treatment to everyone, improvement in health care services, as well as information dissemination to both the majorities and the minorities ethnic and language backgrounds. The paper argued that improvement in language literacy is the most important factor in enabling reconciliation and cohesion of Nigeria.

### **Multidimensional Features of Nigeria**

Nigeria is a geographical entity composed of people from different socio cultural backgrounds. The inhabitant speak different languages and practice different religions (Islamic, Christianity, and Traditional). Nigeria is known for its “extreme linguistic diversity” (Elugbe 1994), where about 400 languages can be identified (Aito, 2005). The languages can be understood as the majorities and minorities depending on the numbers of speakers, literary, political or educational status (Aito, 2005). Language differences between the speech communities cause fear of domination of one speech community over the others, mistrust between the members of different speech communities, suspicion, disloyalty, segregation, disharmony, and feelings of disintegration. These vices resulted in the social crises like tribal wrangling, religious' intolerance, political instability, and political apathy. These affect civic participation, justice, health and information dissemination, gender equality, and educational inclusion which are crucial to national integration. To reconcile these socio cultural crises between these plural speech communities, language literacy can be encouraged and improved.

### **Language Literacy**

In the Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics, Crystal (2008) defines language as a concrete act of speaking, writing, or signing in a given situation. Literacy is the ability to read and write. Language literacy is the process of developing the linguistic skills that enable one to communicate with others as well as acquiring the ability to read and write and understand. In the process of reading and writing in any language, a language learner is learning both cultural and linguistic skills of that language. Language and literacy are two important components that develop through interactions with others both within and outside one's environment. Language literacy is very important in social development. It is used in social interaction, in the provision and maintenance of human security as well as education.

### **Social Reconciliation**

Reconciliation has been conceived differently by different academics. The concept is mostly associated with post-conflict regeneration, forgiveness, peace building, and resolution. Fischer (2011) summarized the conceptions and describes reconciliation as a process rather than an end state or outcome, aiming at building relationships between individuals, groups and societies. It was based on this premise that Bloomfield, Barnes, and Huynes (2003, 12-21) see reconciliation as a process "through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future". This conception defines social reconciliation as a process of analyzing past sufferings of mistrust, intolerance, disharmony or war by the opposing parties in order to provide and promote mutual trust for a long lasting peace.

Reconciliation denotes peaceful "coexistence" (Bar-Tal, 2004), "social reconstruction" (Stover and Weinstein, 2004,) and "forgiveness". Therefore for the society to reconcile over their grievances, they have to engage in dialogue, where a common language is used to discuss the causes of the opposition, forgive or punish the defaulters, reconstruct the broken ties for future peaceful coexistence. It was on this note that Bar-On (2007) suggested bringing the "religious, somewhat idealized, discourse down to earth" that include "dialogue" and "working through", which have been tested in social reconciliation. The term suggests that the enemies of yesterday will give up and let go of their hatred, animosity or wish for revenge, as well as their identity that had been constructed around the conflict (Bar-On, 2007). The need for reconciliation is emphasized in particular for societies that have gone through a process of ethno-political conflict, as these are marked by a loss of trust, intergenerational transmission of trauma and grievances, negative interdependence and polarization (Fischer, 2011).

### **Social Cohesion**

Social cohesion has been conceived differently by different academics. De-Varenes, (2015) conceived social cohesion as the sense of reducing inequalities and exclusion while at the same time strengthening social relations. Hernandez and Malderez, (2015), see social cohesion as the glue that holds all members of a society together which is derived at least in part from a society which is working towards reducing disparities and inequalities. In view of Idris, Legere and Rosendal (nd) social cohesion ... is understood,

firstly, as positive interaction (exchanges and networks between individuals and communities) and, secondly, as social inclusion (integration of people into civil society). Taking an analysis of these conceptions, one can understand that social cohesion entails unity, integration, and sense of belonging. The sense of belonging translates into semblance of common identity; the ability to tolerate and respect individuals' feelings and opinions, tribes, race, culture, religions and avoidance of culture impunity in the system (Busari and Meko, 2018).

Social cohesion integrates people through the maintenance of the presence of mutual trust. The confidence in other speech communities could booster inter-personal and institutional trust; provides equal opportunities in civic matters for everyone; having a somewhat civic co-operation, provision of good governance and gender sensitivity; an active participation in matters of national interest; and respect for the constitution by abiding and respecting the law of the land. Any society that finds itself in this position is expected to achieve sustainable development.

### **Language Literacy, Reconciliation and Social Cohesion of Nigeria**

The connection between language literacy, reconciliation, and social cohesion is very important in Nigerian quest for sustainable development. The multilingual nature of Nigeria causes her struggles to achieve national reconciliation and integration. The need has been clearly identified in the National Policy on Education (NPE) which stated that English language, the language of the colonial masters and the neutral language in the country, should serve as an official language, the language of instructions in schools right from Middle Basic Education and one of the criteria for admission into the universities at credit level pass. Its overall social function is the national integration. However, the policy encouraged the learning of Mother Tongue/First Language (MT/L1) or the Language of the Immediate Communities (LIC). The policy stated that Early Child Care Education (ECCE) and Pre-Basic Education should have MT/L1 or the LIC as the language of instruction in schools while one out of the three major indigenous languages (Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo) as well as English language serves as school subjects. For inclusions, the National Institute for Cultural Orientation (NICO) teaches 13 languages so far in its Nigerian Indigenous Language Program (NILP), namely Izon, Tiv, Efik, Kanuri, Gbagyi, Nupe, Batonu, Bwatiye, Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Chamba, and Fulfulde (Foubiri, 2014). This clears the ground for multilingual literacy in Nigeria.

### **Roles of Language Literacy in Reconciliation and Social cohesion in Nigeria**

Language literacy in the context of Nigeria is the acquisition of the skills of reading and writing in literary language used in the country. The National Policy on Education contained that students must learn at least two languages- English and any of the local languages. Therefore, Nigeria adopts bilingual or even multilingual educational system. This is with a view to bringing about mutual trust, social tolerance, and social integration of both the minorities and majorities languages speech communities. The multilingual education policy is transformative and has the potential to contribute to social development: it bridges the gap between community and school and recognizes the

identity, epistemology and voices of local communities (Phyak, 2013). Studying multilingualism, Meier (2018) stated that multilingualism has three important benefits. These benefits are *instrumental*, *social*, and *individual*. The *instrumental* benefits include serving as economic asset, supporting diplomacy, and human security. The *social* benefits of multilingualism involve development of greater sense of belonging, acquisition of conflict resolution skills, reductions in violence; community relations; peace; and the social justice. The *individual* benefits are intercultural learning; democratic citizenship; as well as identity construction and power relations between groups. This paper concurs with these benefits and discussed them under major subheadings hereunder.

### **Intercultural Communication**

Communication is a process of sharing information from one person to another. Language literacy has the potentials of making the students to acquire linguistic and cultural communication skills. If one learns another language, one learns a different language other than one's MT/L1 and learns their cultural norms and values. By acquiring relevant linguistic and intercultural communication skills and competence, individuals as well as social groups will be able to establish communication links needed for an efficient cooperation (Cok and Novak-Lukanovic, nd). This intercultural communication is paramount in the reconciliation and integration of opposing parties. Meier (2018) says instinctively, the more languages we speak the more people we can talk to. This talking can be in group and weak ties. In group ties is a situation whereby family, friends, and close relationship often with similar people for exclusive and emotional bond. The weak ties (bridging) is a situation where acquaintances, colleagues and neighbors, often from different groups form societal glue, solidarity and practical support.

### **Social Tolerance**

Language literacy promotes social tolerance. Social tolerance implies social norms, values or skills of living together. Donia (2016), sees social tolerance, as a process of acquiring a fair, objective, and permissive attitudes towards the opinions, beliefs, and practices that differ from one's own. It is a process of acceptance of the "others". Acceptance of others is the process of involving of minorities in to the majorities speech communities in any sociopolitical matters. Tolerance can be cultural or linguistic. Cultural tolerance involves the toleration of different cultures, member of nationalities, and ethnic groups without negative attitude or prejudice evaluating their tradition, customs, religion etc. Linguistic tolerance is the toleration of different languages and their usage not following the hegemonial attitudes. The intercultural dialogue is only possible after having mastered several languages.

The multicultural nature of Nigeria can make it flourished if language literacy was encouraged. Language literacy makes people understand and tolerate other minority tribes' opinion, belief, norms and values, religion and linguistic orientation. In this case Rehman and Sagar, (nd) state that respect and promotion of minority languages will promote tolerance in a society where extremism and intolerance are spreading. This can

be binding force that forms a mix of subcultures. It is on this ground that (Donia, 2016) stated that the truth of the matter is that people feel united when they find others to be a part of the same lingual group as them. Therefore, language literacy can be social force that brings people closer to each other. Therefore, improvement in common language literacy can bring both majority and minority tribes together where their ideologies, behavior, attributes, and beliefs are tabled together for the contribution to the national development. In this case, Nigeria will produce better citizens that form successful, cohesive, pragmatic and tolerant society (Donia, 2016).

### **Social Inclusion**

Language literacy promotes social inclusion. Social inclusion is the relations that exist in kinship, gender, ability, marriage, membership rights, linguistics, politics, education and economic activities of both majority and minority socio-cultural groups. Language literacy in Nigeria is on the right tract of socio-cultural inclusion for national cohesion. The National Policy on Education (NPE), for example, started multilingual literacy with three major languages- Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Today, Gbagyi, Nupe, Batonu, Bwatiye, Chamba, and Fulfulde are being studied specifically at the state levels. This is an increase in the national integration process which provides opportunities for the minorities speech communities to feel sense of acknowledgement. Again, these people can be reached through mass media. Where these practices are exercised, typical Fulani herdsmen can be educated to know his right through rural mobile schools in his native 'Fulatanci' language (World Book Encyclopedia in Momodu, 2001).

### **Information Dissemination**

Language literacy plays an important role in dissemination of information in Nigeria. It helps in sharing one's thoughts, feelings and knowledge with others who might not be from the same linguistic group. It is interesting that a multilingual marketer advertises his products in different in different languages, an employee could work everywhere he finds a language he can communicate with. The government finds easier to disseminate information in language that she believes every citizen could understand. This is because, information is "a data value in decision making which acts as the live wire of any organization" (World Book Encyclopedia in Momodu, 2001).

### **Promoting Democratic Citizenship**

Language literacy plays important roles in promoting democratic citizenship. This is because it enables the learners to acquire knowledge and skills of his and other speech communities way of life. This knowledge will prepare every community member to air his concern and propose thoughtful solution to any national issues in accordance with what he believes. The development of literate society in any nation makes the populace to acquire the skills of reading in which are very important in understanding, analyzing and interpreting any constitutional provisions. It enables citizens to analyze any national issues and separate separates facts from opinions. In promoting democratic society, language literacy informed citizens to discuss any social topics, listening to the views of others by expressing their own opinions evaluate sound responses appropriately.

Through dialogue this social topics could be resolved. Language literacy equip any speech communities member to write letter or petitioned any government program that affect the life of any citizen in the country this appeal can be shared to different audiences writing. Through language literacy, citizens will be able to develop citizenship skills such as conceptualizing key concepts associated with democracy and identifying cause and effect (Schell and Fisher, 2007).

### **Promotion of Social Justice**

Language literacy promotes social justice. (Corson, et al, 2006) states that social justice has to do with ideas about legitimacy, fairness, and impartiality; about welfare and mutual advantage; and about political and social consensus. Therefore, language literacy promote in the fair treatment of every speaker irrespective of his speech communities if social justice is included in the reading and writing. This involves developing literary text that ensures justice to every citizen and incorporated them in national curriculum. Justice itself relates to the way that benefits and burdens are distributed, and is usually said to exist when people received that to which they are entitled (Barry, 1989). Language literacy promotes justice as it is considered an important component of the freedom of expression a factor emphasized by the constitution where every citizen can exercise all of his fundamental rights connected with freedom of expression.

### **Conclusion**

In any multilingual country, language literacy is very important in promoting reconciliation and social cohesion. The existence of the plural speech communities resulted in the fear of domination, marginalization, segregation, disharmony, inequality and mistrust. These social vices affect national reconciliation and social integration. In this vain, language literacy plays important roles in serving as a medium of intercultural communications, promotes social tolerance, democratic citizenship, social justice and information dissemination. These are very critical factors in promoting sustainable development of Nigeria.

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