

Teaching and Learning (Language) at a Distance in a Multilingual context: Issues and Challenges.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of language in literacy for the development of a nation cannot be overemphasized, because language is central to access learning. According to Obanya (2004 p.234), "Human development through Education seeks to reinforce the individual's capacity to perform the essentially human functions...This is what makes language the major object and subject of Education". Language literacy is crucial for increased participation in a world that has transformed from industry- based economy to a knowledge- based economy. The laudable goal of Education for all (EFA) by 2015 being facilitated by UNESCO is a clear indication that education has come to be viewed as not the preserve of a few, but the right of every individual regardless of the country of origin. The E-9 initiative by UNESCO comprising countries that account for 60% of the world's population, and two-thirds of the world's illiterate adults attests to the relationship between literacy and development. That Nigeria (others are Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and Pakistan) happens to be a member of this group of nations underscores the importance of the language in literacy issues which form the focus of this paper. As noted by Obanya (2004 p.231), Nigeria is unique in that she differs from other African countries in terms of population and physical size, the level of multilingualism. How Nigeria has handled the language issue in the light of these characteristics should prove worthwhile for other multilingual nations in terms of lessons learned for the ultimate goal of creating access to learning for development.

The paper begins by examining the role of language in literacy; Nigeria's demographic and literacy profile as a background to examining the implications of the language policy on multilingualism, language curriculum, teacher development as factors for access to learning. The potential contributions of ODL to literacy efforts are examined and two examples that model the issues discussed earlier are presented.

LANGUAGE IN LITERACY

For the purpose of this paper, UNESCO's definition of literacy will be adopted. "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society". It is clear from this definition that language plays a key role in the achievement of literacy because it involves the ability to "use printed and written materials". In this paper, literacy covers the following areas as suggested by Obanya (2004 p.236):

Basic (the inculcation of basic learning to read and write skills)

Post-literacy (the consolidation of basic skills, through life activities designed to make literacy permanent and socially useful)

Further literacy (in the language with the greatest pull in the community).

One modification that should be added to the post-literacy and further literacy phases is to make provision for continuous access to lifelong learning that makes for functional literacy. Indeed and as evidenced in some studies (Olaofe 1992, Ofulue 2005), there is an aspect of literacy that is dynamic in the sense that although a literate individual does not lose the basic skills, he or she can become an "educated illiterate" or functionally illiterate thus reversing the trend. There is some evidence that points to a large and growing number of the functional illiterates who are not

able to perform certain daily tasks that characterize the Information technology age, for example using basic functions of a mobile phone.

Following the questions asked by Bamgbose (1991 p.62) with regard to the role of language in education, in what language should each these three phases of literacy be carried out that will best achieve the stated objectives? The multilingual nature of Nigeria's language terrain has made this question a difficult and complex one to answer over the years and even more so in the current dispensation in which more variables have made the situation more complex.

Nigeria's Demographic, Language and Literacy Profile

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the ninth most populous country in the world with a population of over 140 million people (UNICEF: 144,720 million, Wikipedia: Nigeria: 2006 census: 140.003.542), with a densely multilingual nation with 510 spoken languages (Ethnologue 2007), and an adult literacy rate of 69% (UNICEF: 2006). Of this number, three are national languages, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba and are spoken by about 59% of the population. About thirteen regional languages have fairly large number of speakers namely, Fulfude, Kanuri, Ibibio, Tiv, Izon, Edo, Nupe, Urhobo, Igala, and Annang, which when added to the national languages, they account for 87% of the population. An indication of the widespread nature of Nigerian languages, is that none of these languages is spoken by up to 50% of the population as a first language (Adegbija 2000). The English language by virtue of its status as the official language during the colonial period remained as the official language after the colonial period. It is the dominant language in the country's sociolinguistic space, the complex linguistic diversity and multilingualism; the quest for upward social mobility by individuals; attitudes towards individual languages based on perceived functions and benefits that accrue thereof. The ability to communicate in English confers on its speakers, power and acceptance into the educated/elite group; not able to speak English means to be disenfranchised and have no voice.

The language topology of Nigeria involves the participation of five of the six types of languages for literacy and communication:

- 1) The mother tongue (medium of informal education in the home and for socialization among peers)
- 2) Language of the immediate community (particularly for minority language speakers which serves as a local or regional lingua franca)
- 3) Language of wider communication (can serve also as a language of immediate community but with a wider reach as for a lingua franca or national language)
- 4) Language of wider communication which is also the official language (usually was the official language during the colonial period and is a second language for most but first language for a growing number of speakers)
- 5) Language of religion (as is the case with Arabic in countries with Muslim populations)
- 6) Language of wider communication which is learnt as a foreign language (Bamgbose 1991:62-63)

The choice of language(s) with which to conduct basic literacy should ideally be a language the child or adult is familiar with. The language for conducting the second and third phases, post-literacy and further literacy will depend on several factors including the learner's profile (age, language needs, attitudes and language skills already acquired), and the level/type of interaction with the immediate and wider society. These as well as other factors such as the historical experience, sociolinguistic features, and nationalistic views are noted to be considered in the choice of languages for education in Africa (Obanya 2004 p.225).

Nigeria's language policy and Implications for Literacy efforts

Nigeria's language policy makes provision for the potential participation of all 510 languages in Nigeria which are of the first type, mother tongue languages, the three national and thirteen regional languages as languages for initial, informal education, immediate communication, and in some cases for wider communication, and finally, English as the official language for

wider communication. The sixth type, French, is a recent feature in the policy as a second official language. The assigning of educational functions to certain languages is reflected in the revised version of the NPE (2004 p.5):

Government appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and natural cohesion; and preserving cultures. This every child shall learn the **language of the immediate environment**. Furthermore, in the interest of national unity it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn **one of the three Nigerian languages: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba**.

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, **French shall be the second official language** in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and Junior Secondary Schools but Non-Vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School.

Furthermore, the policy stipulates the language of instruction for each level as well as the role in the teaching and learning of other languages and is summarized below:

Early childhood/Pre-primary: Mother tongue or language of the immediate community

Primary Education: Six years: Language of the environment for the first three years; English to be taught as a subject
Progressive use of English from the fourth year
Language of immediate environment and French (to be taught as subjects).

Secondary Education: Junior Secondary School: Three years
English as language of instruction
Language of environment (to be taught as first language where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy as a second language).
One major Nigerian language other than that of the environment

Senior Secondary School: Three years
English as language of instruction
Any Nigerian language that has orthography and literature to be taught as subject

It is interesting to note that for Mass Literacy, adult and non-formal education, there is no statement is made about the language of instruction. The focus here is on the implications that the policy has for literacy in terms of attendant factors of implementation of the language policy, multilingualism, language curriculum, and teacher development.

Policy Implementation: There is reason to question the practicability and sustainability of the language policy. One implication is the possible inaccessibility that the choice of language as dictated by the policy poses to the rural learner. The assumption that the language of the immediate community is a viable alternative to a child's (or even adult's) mother tongue is one such example. Urban/rural population statistics for Nigeria show that a greater percentage (51) of the population live in rural areas where mother tongue is usually the first and sometimes only language understood by pre-primary school children. A fair percentage of these children will most likely not have access because the language of instruction is not in their mother tongue. It is also doubtful that the policy will be adhered to in urban settings where English is the preferred medium of instruction in many schools. The urban pre-primary school child is confronted with the task of learning another language different from his/her own in order to access learning. At the primary and secondary school level, a second language as a medium of instruction in which perhaps, the school is the only access to exposure and practice.

Multilingualism

The multilingual context in Nigeria has implications for literacy efforts because the language of literacy must be accessible for such efforts to be effective. Language diversity is a problem when it comes to the choice of language to carry out learning. Nigeria has attempted to

resolve the problem for education through the selection of different languages for different purposes. For example, the mother tongue is for initial introduction to basic literacy; English for medium of instruction is from certain levels; and at least two languages, French and a Nigerian language as subjects. The number of languages recommended by the policy implies that a child will be exposed to three to four languages including the mother tongue over a period of twelve years of schooling. Indeed, multilingualism appears to be a crucial factor in access to learning when coupled with high population, poverty rates and literacy rates. With a greater percentage of the Nigerian population (68%) between the ages of 0 – 18 there are implications for both human and economic resources (UNICEF: 2006). Among the E-9 countries for example, with the exception of Egypt, all of them have relatively high numbers of languages. The table below illustrates this point:

	COUNTRY	POPULATION	NUMBER OF LANGUAGES	LITERACY RATES %	LIVING ON LESS THAN \$1/DAY
	Bangladesh	158,665,000	35	47.5	41.3
	India	1,130,340,000	418	61	34.3
	China	1,323,080,000	205	90.9	9.9
	Pakistan	162,652,500	66	49.9	17
	Indonesia	231,627,000	256	90.1	7.5
	Nigeria	140,003,542	510	69.1	69
	Egypt	75,498,000	12	71.4	3.1
	Mexico	106,535,000	289	91.6	3.0
	Brazil	186,315,468	236	88.6	7.5

Source: Wikipedia.org (2008).

Language curriculum: According to Obanya (2004 p.238), part of the problem in implementing the language policy in literacy has to do with the language curriculum. In response to large classes and low teacher to student ratio, the focus of many teachers seems to be more on teaching of theory rather than on the use of it in situations that would be relevant for the learner. The sole dependence on print materials in the absence of other forms of resources to practice the other skills of listening and speaking is a problem. Currently, the language curriculum seems to have stagnated and there is neither adequate exposure nor practice for language learning. One aspect that is usually missed out is the increase in the number of subjects in the curriculum, the result of which is insufficient time for language learning.

Teacher Development: The formalization of the language curriculum is not without reason. When the language policy was introduced, there was no adequate preparation to train and upgrade teachers to cope with the number of students; there were not enough Nigerian language teachers. Today, despite the number of teacher training institutions and programmes that are available, a dearth of language teachers still exist. To buttress this point the admission statistics of three selected universities for those who selected a language course as discipline was compiled. It was observed that there is an abysmal lower subscription of individuals for language courses compared with the total admission figures, and lower subscription of Nigerian languages compared with English. If the trend continues, the implication is that universities may have to discontinue the programmes:

Admission figures for three selected universities

	English	Nigerian Languages	Total Enrolment
University of Lagos	246	24	10,000 +

University of Nsukka	103	22	6,900
University of Maiduguri	371	65	10,000 +

Sources: www.unilag.org, www.unimaid.org, www.unn-edu.net

Although one of the resolutions at the 7th Ministers' Review Conference of E-9 countries is more focus on teacher development, the training of language teachers should perhaps be given more emphasis than it currently receives, because of the role they play in building the basic foundation that other skills are based on. However, in the multilingual context like Nigeria's it will require much more than all the institutions that train teachers to meet the current demand if no alternative approach is found.

ODL's contributions to teaching and learning language for development

Perhaps the most significant contribution of ODL to language literacy and learning will be access to unlimited language exposure and practice which in f2f situations, is limited in time and learning context. Language literacy is skilled based because it involves developing language skills and competencies. It requires adequate exposure to the right material. Classroom time is hardly sufficient in many cases for language teaching and learning in terms of practice and adequate exposure. Language is best learned when the learner is exposed to other speakers in a natural (rather than be confined to the artificial context of the classroom). It was mentioned earlier on in the paper that the characteristics of a language learner and teacher should be taken into consideration when selecting a language and when selecting appropriate technologies. The needs of the learner and teacher are summarized in the chart below:

Learner and Teacher Profile

Classroom language teaching	Distance learning language teaching
Traditional Approach	Modern methods
Limited retraining opportunities	Unlimited ICT mediated training opportunities
Insufficient teaching time and accessibility to learners	Unlimited
Limited numbers	Limited numbers can reach more learners
Classroom language learning	
Distance learning	
Has limited control over pace of learning	Is in control of pace of learning
Can be affected by others in the group	Is not affected by other members of the group
Has limited control over choice of materials	Has potential access to variety of resources
Does not own the learning process	Owns the learning process

ODL offers a means of maximizing the benefits multilingualism in terms of costs of developing materials: one text is accessible to many through appropriate media; one teacher is accessible to many; and cost of producing in several languages is minimised. In line with Obanya (2004) on teaching resources, innovation and creativity and relevance to the learners' interests by creating natural opportunities to hear (pronunciation is taken care of), use (speaking is taken care of), and read (grammar and vocabulary) a language is more effective than providing artificial simulation of the same. In my opinion, these practical processes constitute 70% of language learning.

Two examples of language teaching and learning literacy at a distance:

The possibilities for creating access to literacy are enormous. Two of such possibilities are presented here:

The Virtual Institute for Higher Education Programme (VIHEAP) was launched in 2003/2004 under the auspices of the National Universities Commission. The programme was designed for higher education teachers. The objectives included upgrading the knowledge of teachers while introducing teachers who have no formal training to teacher education. It was also a pilot study for conducting training at a distance via the Internet. Over 400 teachers registered to participate in the programme. The programme can be classified in the further literacy skills phase because it is a high end literacy programme which assumes computer literacy skills to participate in it. The fact that the programme ended abruptly and the VIHEAF by UNESCO took over raises a question of how to sustain and maintain the gains of such programmes.

Literacy-by-Radio Programme.

The literacy-by-radio project is one of the outcomes of the resolution taken by the comity of nations of which Nigeria is a part was the attainment of Education for all (EFA) by 2015. The project was inaugurated in 2004 in collaboration with UNESCO. The present report comes from Niger state, one of the states selected as a pilot state for the project. The state has a vision of it was conducted in two local government areas Agaie and Lapai each with 5 communities. As part of their contribution, the local governments were asked to provide ten facilitators, translation and production of primers, and monitoring facilities. A total of 213 female and 6 male learners were selected for a two-week training. The learners were to meet at specified times of the day to listen to the broadcast. An examination was conducted at the end of the period. The report states that the learners developed more learning skills in a shorter period than the conventional method of learning. Two issues worthy of note in the report are that the local governments took ownership of the project, and second there were more women than men in the exercise. The project is an example of basic literacy and a low end literacy programme. It should be possible to sustain the programme and increase its reach across the state.

RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION.

The goal of the paper was to examine how language can ensure access to learning for development in the midst of the Nigeria's language complexities. Based on the findings in this study, the benefits of ODL in ensuring such access are yet to be fully maximized. ODL makes it possible turn the problems of multilingualism into gains, the limited time frame for practice, and the provision a context for exposure to language using technologies that are appropriate for the needs of the learners. Access should be created based on the learning profiles of the learners and the availability of appropriate technologies, and the attendant benefits to the learner. For example, since children tend to learn more than one language easily than adults, their curriculum and supporting technology should take that into consideration. The 21st century child tends to take to the use of technologies faster and more easily than the adult. For adult teaching and learning on the other hand, there will be the need to gradually move from the known to the unknown that is, It is perhaps instructive to note from the reports that the radio is a more accessible medium for adults, while the young, the computer and mobile phones by virtue of their easy and fast adaptation to these technologies.

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