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### The English Language and Sustainable Development in Nigeria

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#### Abstract

Language is one of the sustainable weapons that can bind a multilingual nation like Nigeria together. English language occupies a very significant role in the formation of national values and integration of the Nigerian nation. More than decades after decolonization of Nigeria, English continues to enjoy its primacy in our educational system as a medium of instruction. Economically, English language is crucial for economic growth, science and technology etc. The fragile unity that we still enjoy in Nigeria would have been herculean without the English language. This paper pointedly exposes us to the various ways in which English language acts as a veritable tool for sustainable development in Nigeria and the inevitable role it plays in the country

**Keywords:** Education, Language, Sustainable Development, Multilingualism, Unity, Economy

### Introduction

Language and society are so much related. Their relationship cannot be underestimated. Language is the oil that lubricates activities within any human society (Chomsky, 1957). In the Nigeria context, more reasons have been put forward for the choice of English as both the official language and lingua franca. Adegbeja (2004) explains that “language issues in Nigeria are often quite explosive and conflict ridden. First, there is the fear of political domination, if any indigenous language is selected as the official language” (p.181). The truth is that no ethnic group wants to be subservient to another ethnic language because the promotion of that ethnic language connotes the promotion of that

corresponding ethnic group itself (Adegbeja, 2004, p.181). However, in order to ensure the promotion of indigenous languages in the country, some of them have been given official recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Sections 55 and 97 of the country’s 1999 Constitution provide policy guidelines for various linguistic needs. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (NPE 1977, revised 1981, 1998, 2004) which has been criticized for lack of clarity recognizes three major (national) languages –Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba- as languages of national culture and integration.

These three languages which are spoken by the three demographically more populous ethnic groups are meant to be used along with English in the

conduct of official business in the country's National Assembly consisting of the Senate and the House of Representatives (Afolayan, 1984, p.5). In addition, they are to be used in national functions such as in national mobilization, rallying people for national goals; for example, registration of voters in an election or the registration for identity cards, and also for unity in diversity (Adegbiya, 2004, p.174). The three languages are also used as mediums of instruction in education in the regions where they are widely spoken, and are studied as school subjects up to the tertiary level. Apart from the first three years of a child's life in the primary school that was mentioned in the National Policy on Education, the rest of the child's life in the primary, secondary and tertiary institutions, in all academic activities is subjected to the use English language. Therefore, recent pronouncements by the federal government that education in from primary one through to JSS3 is done through the language of the immediate environment is yet to be articulated in concrete terms.

In practice, however, these languages are more regional than national in distribution. Hausa is spoken predominantly in the North, Igbo is mainly spoken in the South East while Yoruba is widely used in the South West. There is no gain saying the fact that English has become a Nigerian language (Adegbite, 2004, p.56). However, International intelligibility is crucial to English studies in Nigeria, so long as the country has not evolved an indigenous lingua franca. Unfortunately, attitudinal

factors and lack of proper monitoring continues to hinder educational institutions from achieving the goals of English studies, part of which is to ensure that: the spoken English of Nigerian graduates are internationally intelligibly accepted.

This paper therefore, examines English as a language of education, the language of economics and the language of unity in Nigeria etc. These are very important avenues for meeting the much needed "Sustainable Development" that Nigerians yearn for. Therefore, the importance of English language as a veritable tool for sustainable development in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized.

### **The Language Situation in Nigeria**

Everywhere in the world, there appears to be one language problem or another. All the former British colonies were left with the English language at the departure of the colonial government (Sapir, 1921). Nigeria has English as her official language understood to stabilize ethnic conflicts and yet questions the authenticity and identities of the users. This has always resulted in arguments about the choice of indigenous languages for official and national purposes because the use of English as our official language strikes at the root of national pride since English is a foreign language. Nigeria is a complex polity. Demographically, it is home to about 174 million people (Population Nigeria, 2013).

This makes Nigeria the most populous country on the African continent. Linguistically, it is the most multilingual country in Africa with as many as 553 indigenous languages used by its inhabitants (Blench, 2007, p.142). Nigeria, therefore, is not only the most populous country in Africa, it is also the most linguistically diverse and heterogeneous country on the continent. Like many other multilingual countries in Africa, Nigeria has adopted an exoglossic language policy. Batibo (2007) explains that “an exoglossic language policy involves the adoption of an ex-colonial language, external to the country, as an official or national language.”(p.12). English, which is the language of Nigeria’s ex-colonial master, Britain, is both the official language and the *de facto* lingua franca. So, independent African countries like Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, to mention a few, found it more convenient to retain English as their official language instead of developing one or some of the numerous indigenous languages in their countries for that purpose since, the ex-colonial languages were seen as ethnically neutral and, therefore would not arouse resentment of any ethnic group (Batibo, 2007, p.15).

Nigerians, as a matter of fact, would have wanted to have one of the over 555 languages to be recognized as the official language. But the multiplicity of the languages poses a problem to the ethnic conscious Nigerians. The reason is that each language has a geographical boundary which sees her language as a

mark of social identity (Blench, 2007, p.147). First, there is the fear of political domination, if any indigenous language is selected as the official language. Second, Nigeria seeks to avoid India’s experience where the choice of Hindi led to riots in many non-Hindi-speaking regions. The third reason is lack of political will to enforce the use of any of the indigenous languages (Yule, 2007). Thus, English plays a significant role in education, politics, government administration, the judiciary, economy and legislation. Literature-in-English through language, also warns people of dangerous and anti-social practices, ridicules people of mean and despicable character, criticizes such evils like corruption, injustice, nepotism, bribery, economic and political sabotage, oppression, colonialism and neocolonialism, dictatorship, racism or colour segregation etc. Good poetry, songs and music, especially those philosophical ones which extol good virtues and deride ignoble course or action are capable of correcting societal ills (Asade, 2000).

On the African content, the implantation and localization of English was one of the major sociolinguistic outcomes of contact with Europe occasioned by trading expeditions, missionary activities and East Africa as major sites where the language has thrived as a direct consequence of British colonization. The English language, therefore, has come to stay in Nigeria as well and has established itself as the language of upward mobility in the country (Ofulue, 2017, p. 10).

## Concept of Sustainable Development

“Development” could be seen in the context of a positive change for the better, from conditions (social, economic, political, cultural and human) that is no longer considered well enough for the goals and aspirations of a society. (Business Dictionary, web. 2015), defines development as “the process of economic and social transformation that is based on complex cultural and environmental factors and their interactions”. National development therefore, cuts across economic growth, attainment of economic targets such as: increase in Gross National Product (GNP) and Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These are indicators of National Progress in many countries. Bunza and Ariferavwa, (2019) submits that, “Development means improvement in a country’s economic and social conditions. More especially it refers to improvement in way of managing an area’s natural and human resource in order to create wealth and improve lives”.

The Brundtland Commission in its 1987 report defines sustainable development as the “ability to make development sustainable—to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. The use of this definition has led many to see sustainable development as having a major focus on intergenerational equity. Sustainable development is broad in that it includes economical, ecological, social and educational aspects of

sustainability. Thus, there are many different ways to approach the issue of creating more sustainable communities. The famous Rio Declaration, adopted by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 (also called the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), placed it this way: “Human beings are at the centre of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”. Corruption however, impedes the successful attainment of sustainable development goals such as: (i) End poverty in all its forms everywhere (ii) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture (iii) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages (iv) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (v) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (vi) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all (vii) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable modern energy (viii) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all (ix) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation (x) Reduce inequality within and among countries as a means of implementation to revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development etc.

Thus, the government takes account of sustainable development as a part of how it develops its policies, how

it runs its buildings and how it buys its goods and services. All departments are responsible for making sure that their own policies and activities contribute to sustainable development. Therefore, the synergy and networking in English language forms a key factor to sustainable development in Nigeria.

### **English as a Tool for Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

As a tool for sustainable development in Nigeria the English language is indispensable in, areas of education, economic growth science and technology and most importantly, a driving force for national unity in Nigeria.

### **The Role of Education**

What should be the purpose of education? This is a question that has agitated the minds of teachers and policy makers all through the ages. The purpose of education in Nigeria is for national unity and development. Igiri and Ogayi (2021) opine that, “Education serves as a source of development and transformation for societal existence. It is indeed indispensable in the life of individual and nations, and all these cannot be achieved without effective and efficient teaching-learning”(p.183). Inko (20210) also defines education as “a process of developing a person in all aspects of life, to be able to function properly as an individual and be useful to society” (p.29). This is because, in Nigeria, the English language is used as an instructional language in her educational curriculum. It is also used in

political, economical, social and religious fields of Nigeria. Commenting on the position of English in Nigeria, Dada (2010) submits that “English is compulsory for every Nigerian, being the de Facto official language in the bureaucracy and all tiers of formal education in Nigeria and as an international language for that matter”(p.419).

The utilitarian value (socially, economically and academically) of the English language vis-à-vis any of our indigenous languages is high to the extent that the over bearing status of The English language over the indigenous languages in Nigeria today makes even mother tongue learning a perfunctory exercise ( Dada 2010, p.421). Nigeria as multilingual country decided to adopt the English language to solve the problem of communication. So, in all these explanations above, the solution should be to reposition the English language education hence, it is the key for sustainable, unity and national development in Nigeria. However, irrespective of the necessities of repositioning the English language education for sustainable youth empowerment, unity and national development in Nigeria, very little attention was still paid to the children and youths education in the country today. The question now is how can such people become active change agents in today’s world and the coming generation? So, for sustainability to be possible, children and youths education is the answer (Ugwu, 2019).

From the above interrogation, we can see that education is a life-long process which enables the continuous development of a person's capabilities as an individual and as a member of society. Education can take three different forms: informal, non-formal and formal. The focus of this paper is on formal education which is associated with schooling. It comprises all forms of organized learning experiences acquired by an individual in a school structure, under the guidance of a teacher.

### **English Language Education for Sustainable Development**

When the British government took over the running of the schools in Nigeria, they harmonized the subjects taught in the different missionary schools that made English language a core subject as well as the language of instruction. From that point, many Nigerians strove to learn English as competence in it was a meal ticket. In fact it was a yardstick for employment during the colonial era. After independence, the Nigerian system of education did not change much from what it was during the colonial era. English language remained the pivot of education in Nigeria. Not only is English language a compulsory subject in secondary education, a credit pass in it is a compulsory condition for securing admission into Nigerian tertiary institutions. Competence in English is seen as an index of academic excellence. More so, before any student can graduate from the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, they must pass the course Use

of English. From the foregoing, we have seen that English language is the bedrock upon which education in Nigeria is hinged. Suffice it then to say that English is indispensable to education in schools in Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is hinged on Sociology of Language Theory which emphasizes on the concept of "Domain Analysis" that explicates how language operates in physical (situational) context. According to Fishman (1972) domain is "a socio-cultural construct abstracted from topics of communicators and locales of communication, in accord with the institutions of the society and the spheres of activity of a speech community". In the context of this study, work-places are the domains where proficiency in English is used to foster the development of the Nigerian state.

### **Economic Growth**

Economically, English language 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 language 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.

### **National Unity**

English language serves as a tool for sustainable development in the area of national unity in Nigeria. Amidst the compounding complexities and conflicts in some parts of Nigeria, the only language that still emits the spirit of oneness in Nigeria is the English language. More often than not, activities conducted in indigenous languages are seen as being ethnic or tribal, except in cultural celebrations or ethnic displays. This explains why, even during the first republic and during the colonial era, when English had not attained its present level of ascending in national and international affairs, political parties were formed in English language. However, the parties might have regional bases but the fact that they were named in English entailed their national identity. The Northern People's Congress (NPC), The Action Group (AG), The National Council of Nigeria Citizen (NCNC) after the excision of Southern Cameroun, National Elements Progressive Union (NEPU) etc, were formed to integrate all Nigerians and give them a sense of belonging. This trend has necessarily survived until today

with all the national political parties formed and sloganeered in English.

English is equally the language of nationalism. The love of a country has to be manifested through the language that people can understand lest the ethnic agenda be implied. This was why, even in the old political days, nationalists like Herbert Macaulay, Obafemi Awolowo, Ahmadu Bello, Nnamdi Azikiwe etc. had to use the highly graded form of (queen's English) language as a weapon of nationalist struggle. A nationalist bases his patriotic views in English. If English language is not used to express the same ideas for which he is known as a nationalist, he is seen instantly as a tribalist and not a nationalist. English is the language of authenticity in Nigeria (Hanna 2008, p.26).

However, on-going challenges of security on national unity orchestrated by the vicious Boko Haram, Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Banditry, kidnapping, religious intolerance etc in parts of the country is causing a lot of threat to this good scheme. This is because most of the youths are now afraid of serving in that trouble prone areas of the country. We believe that with providence on our side, the English language will continue to bind us together.

The constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is written in English to create a level playing ground for all Nigerians. The National flag, the National Anthem, the National Independence Day, the National Associations as well as several national monuments are designed in

English and all of these “assert” that English is the foundation of the giant structure called Nigeria. These, have the effects of reducing what Adebayo (1985) refers to as “deep rooted mutual suspicion that result in prejudice, stereotypes and subtle linguistic hostility among various linguistics groups”. English language therefore, remains a very big tool in favour of sustainable development in Nigeria.

### Sustaining the Language

The best form of education is the one that opens our minds to think critically, our hearts to embrace all even when we disagree. This is evident because negative attitudes towards learning the language are made worse by, nonchalant undergraduates from non-language disciplines who do not think it is necessary to study English. These negative attitudes also hinder learning regardless of teacher’s competence or availability of teaching aids. Again, when working-class Nigerians from any discipline do not have adequate skills in the use of English, and do not see the need to improve on their written and spoken English, they cannot contribute meaningfully to its sustainability for development. For us to achieve good success in English language education, these problems should be tackled headlong. Nigerian problems can best be solved through a purpose laden education in English language.

### Conclusion

Nigerians use the English language to impinge on nation-building

in different ways. Although the English language in some case might not be not properly taught and learnt in our schools, there is the possibility of reversing the unacceptable situation through sincere, goal-driven efforts of all stake-holders. Therefore, pending when Nigerians will agree to use one of its local languages the idea of sustainable development in English is to create a system that is sustainable. English language remains a key factor to unending development in Nigeria in the areas of education, economic-empowerment and national unity.

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