

CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION & EVALUATION

A Book of Readings

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Edited by

Dr. B.G. Nworgu

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Chapter 29

LOCAL LANGUAGE AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

Queen I. Obinaju (Mrs)

Introduction

Curriculum implementation refers to the carrying out of what has been planned for the education of learners in a particular area of knowledge. This is the process of translating curriculum plans to reality. In this process, the key agents involved include the government as may be represented by the ministry, the teachers the learners and in some respect the society. During the process, some principal activities are expected to be carried out. Ekpo (1991) identifies these activities to include the selection of goals, objectives, contents, learning opportunities, teaching techniques and evaluation.

Certain curriculum may be well conceived, planned and interpreted but may lose its viability depending upon the system of implementation. Some others may be planned but modified during the implementation process while others may be wrongly implemented. The case of the local language provision for pre-primary and primary schools in Nigeria is here presented.

In pre-primary and primary schools in Nigeria, specific subjects have been laid down to be taught to children. At the pre-primary level, the aim of teaching these subjects include among others to effect a smooth transition from the home to the school; to inculcate in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity and to prepare the child for the primary level of education. At this level also, aspects to be taught include co-operation and team spirit, the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours shapes, forms and good habits. At the primary level, the objectives for teaching the prescribed subjects include the inculcation of permanent literacy and numeracy, the ability to communicate effectively and citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society.

Above all these, a medium of instruction has been prescribed. For the pre primary institutions as well as for the first half of primary education, the medium of instruction is expected to be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community. This consideration is expected to be of particular benefit towards achieving the specified aims for each level of education.

Rationale for the use of Mother Tongue in Pre-Primary and Primary Education.

The use of the local language has been seen to gear towards the achievement of the set aims of education at the pre-primary and primary school level in a number of specific ways. In the first place, the language of the immediate environment which can also be the mother tongue of the child is expected to be the language to which the child is already familiar with before coming to school. Its use would make the pre-primary child to understand at the first instance and react immediately to the instruction provided by the school. Moreover, the use of the language which the pre-primary child is already familiar with would reduce strangeness of the environment and procedure which Obinaju (1992) found to constitute a major cause of school phobia in them. In the process whereby the language of the immediate environment is used, the child would hardly experience school as different from home. He would rather experience school as an enlarged home where there are many brothers and sisters to play with. On the level of language, he would be able to communicate freely with his peers, his teachers and other functionaries in the school without being frowned at. In this process, the child perceives the school as a second home. He would not develop a negative attitude towards it (the school). The aim of "effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school" would thus be achieved.

By the child interacting freely without the barrier of a strange language, tension would be reduced in him. As Bee (1981) puts it, tension is seen at the basis of every aggressive behaviour. Tension reduction in the pre-primary child places him more pre-disposed to exhibiting desirable social habits, co-operation and team spirit as required of him by the National Policy on Education.

At the primary school level, the same effects as described above are observed about the mother tongue. But above all, as the primary school content is more intensive and the child needs to understand what is presented to him, teaching him in a language which he is already familiar with gives him the opportunity of learning the materials presented faster than if these materials were presented in a foreign language. In the latter case, the child would have to grapple first with understanding the language before he attempts to understand the facts presented to him. This latter case would definitely affect the child's performance in not only language but in all other subjects taught to the child.

It is also expected that if the child is taught in the mother tongue, this would help the language in question to develop in terms of vocabulary and orthography.

However, there are a few points raised as demerits of using the local language as language of instruction in pre-primary and primary institutions in the country. Teachers to these children often argue that in the present system of education where all the examinations that matter are set in English, using the local language as a medium of instruction and encouraging the child to use the local language at the pre-primary and the primary levels shortens the time of contact between the child and the language that matters (the lingua franca). There would

therefore be no time for the child to perfect the use of the lingua franca before the final examination where the child is expected to read and answer questions in it. But is Nigeria obliged to set questions and demand answers in English especially at the pre-primary and primary levels of education?

Another argument which is often presented concerns children who may have to attend school in a linguistic area other than theirs. The lingua franca is seen as placing both the indigene and the foreigner on an equal footing as both would experience the strangeness and grapple with the foreign language equally. As it is often the case, up till the end of the primary school, children can neither perfect in the local language nor in the lingua franca. The feeling here is that, if pupils are allowed to speak freely and receive instruction in one language and the language used in their homes, this approach would lead to a faster mastery of the language in question than having both languages one interfering with the other.

However another language could be introduced as recommended by the National Policy on Education from the end of the lower primary level. Children from other ethnic groups especially at the age referred to in this paper get to learn and understand language very quickly. He as a minority could learn the language of the locality in which he is schooling. Giving instruction in the language of the locality would also help him to understand the language fast. This is even more advantageous to him as he would most probably live and interact within the community.

With all the benefits of the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment to interact with the pre-primary and the primary school child, one would have expected that the school would need no persuasion towards the implementation of the provision. Unfortunately, a lot of militant factors still stand between the teacher and the implementation of the laid down procedure.

Constraints to the Use of The Mother Tongue at the Pre-primary and Primary School Levels

Considering the prescription of the National Policy on Education and the objectives of pre-primary and primary education and evaluating these alongside what obtains in the field, some discrepancies are observed. These discrepancies include among others, the non-use of the local language as a medium of instruction as provided in the policy document. Factors which could be responsible are discussed below.

In Nigeria, the provision of pre-primary education has been left to private efforts. A situation which enables anybody who can afford it, to build a school and employ people; all in the name of providing pre-primary education. In this same singular process, the provision of pre-primary education has become a trading business which requires the trader and the customer. Parents pay huge sums of money to these private pre-primary institutions and they hope to 'get something out of it.' Proprietors also believe that the only way of displaying their worth to parents

is to force children in their schools to speak in English (the lingua franca) as early as possible. Therefore, from reception class and indeed through out pre-primary classes, the English language is used in most of the schools as a medium of instruction.

Pre-primary education left to private efforts has also provided the opportunity for non-professionals to dabble into the 'business' of providing education at this level. Most of these people hardly read for themselves nor interpret accurately the provision in the policy document so as to be guided in the dispensation of pre-primary education. Where the proprietor is not a professional, he is, at the least, expected to employ a professional who would use his knowledge to bridge the gap discussed above. Perhaps, because they (the proprietors) cannot afford to pay the professionals and because they are out to make gain even to the detriment of the educational system of the country, people far below the level recommended to teach at these levels are employed. These teachers employed are completely ignorant of what obtains in the practice. They learn on the job. They also transfer their expectation of what pre-primary education should be to practice. Even in the area of content, these "teachers" are seen to have their own ideas of what they consider appropriate. Ekpo (1991) contends that these "teachers sometimes substitute certain facts and ideas in place of the official content of the curriculum." Thus the danger does not only involve methodological processes but also the content.

All these anomalies are expected to be screened by regular visits and inspection of the Ministry of Education. But how often are such visits carried out? After the initial visit of approving the school for which the proprietor had made special provision, the school can operate for several sessions without a single visit from the Ministry. With this situation prevailing, the provisions of the National Policy on Education cannot be said to be properly implemented. The schools carry on with what they think would pay them best. The ignorant proprietors continue to employ unqualified persons to teach and instruct them to make the pre-primary pupil speak in English (the lingua franca) by using this language as a medium of instruction.

It is even worse in some cases where yet a third language (sometimes French) is introduced at the pre-primary level. This is merely a marketing stratagem to lure parents to sending their wards to this school. Come to think more seriously of it, how would a three year old child who is battling to stabilise in his use of the mother tongue combat with learning English and French, two foreign languages at the same time? These languages would only come in to inhibit the attempts of the child to gain proficiency in any of the three languages exposed to the child. None of the three would be thoroughly learnt and used.

Where the primary school is a continuation of the pre-primary school, the situation is obvious. Right from the start of the primary school curriculum, the use of the local language gets completely neglected. English becomes the language of instruction such that within the first three years of schooling the child uses only English and ignores the local language while in school.

In the government primary schools, the situation is comparable to what is described above. In primary one which represents the reception class, attempts are made to use the local language as the medium of instruction but starting from the next class, attempts to change in favour of English start being observed.

It appears that the government is contributing to this disturbing situation. The setting of all subjects in the official language (English) already renders any pupil who does not have adequate understanding of the language handicapped. As Nwoke (1992) puts it, performance in English language correlates positively with performance in all other subjects. He further explains that without a good mastery of the language, no Nigerian child may be expected to progress educationally. This is probably so because all these subjects are examined in and are expected to be answered in English. A child who does not have adequate understanding and who is not capable of expressing himself adequately in English language may not do well in examinations. This perhaps explains why teachers flout the provision that the local language should be used as a medium of instruction at these levels. The knowledge of the relationship between overall performance and performance in English language probably explains why teachers from the beginning of schooling are desperate to let their pupils understand and communicate in English. Where any other language is introduced, that would only be a mark of prestige.

Further, entrance examinations to secondary schools are also set in English. It is a well known fact that the school the child attends determines to a great extent the performance and success of the child in life. In order, therefore, for the child to be successful in entrance examinations to desirable schools, the child has to be well versed in English language. Teachers, who on their own would want to see their pupils succeed in most of these examinations, have no choice than to prepare them adequately for these examination. One of the ways to prepare them is to let them start early to speak and use English language. One then wonders, should the local language provision be dropped in the **National Policy on Education** so that what now obtains can continue? Or should a new approach be adopted to encourage the use of the local language in our schools?

Recommendations

There is but one proposal towards solving all the problems observed and discussed above. The great proposal is the de-emphasizing of the use of English language in most of the terminal examinations and entrance examinations in the country. If these examinations are set in the local languages, especially now that states are wholly in charge, children would be encouraged to speak in a language they are already familiar with (the language of the immediate environment). They would be encouraged to perfect these local languages, learn to read and write in them as opposed to what obtains at present. Teachers too would see nothing wrong with teaching in these languages. In addition, more regular inspections by the Ministry of Education to private and public schools can ensure compliance with the provision so as to ensure the expected results and benefits.

Conclusion

In this paper, curriculum implementation has been seen as a way in which laid down content and procedure can be enhanced or marred. A closer look has been taken at the local language provision as a medium of instruction for the pre-primary and the first half of the primary institutions. Benefits of this provision have been highlighted. Constraints to the implementation of the provision have also been examined. A proposal which would proffer remedy to the constraints observed has also been offered. If this proposal is well taken and implemented then the local language would not be looked upon as inferior in any way. Its use would be enhanced in the education of our children.

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