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Multilingualism and Early Childhood Education In Nigeria

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There has been much talk about Nigeria being surrounded by French speaking countries and the need for Nigeria to use French in addition to English as an official language (Obinaju 1996; Ofor, 1992). This consciousness has led to the pronouncement of the new Nigeria Language policy which makes French the second official language in Nigeria.

The envisaged merits of this policy include the facilitation of business and international relation between Nigeria and the neighbouring countries of the world. A few obstacles have also been highlighted. Paramount among them is the idea of having adults to start a new learning programme in order to effect the new policy. Many hold the opinion that childhood is the best time for acquisition of all desired attributes of adulthood. This means that the language policy to be functional and effective French must gain an equal status with English, the first official language in Nigeria. Both must be introduced simultaneously as soon as the child starts school. In other words, during the Early Childhood Education year. In an interwoven nature, this paper examines the effect of learning French, and in fact the effect of multilingualism at the Early Childhood level after clarifying such intervening concepts as Early Childhood Education and multilingualism.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early Childhood Education has been defined by many and depending on what the contributor wants to highlight, he lays emphasis on certain attributes of Early Childhood Education. Generally speaking, Early Childhood Education constitutes all forms of education given from birth up to the age of seven (Obinaju, 1994 and Okon, 1996). This definition is in recognition that education of the child starts even before the child is born, but physical intervention by persons outside the mother figure starts only after birth. Starting from birth therefore and considering the Nigeria situation, the period can be divided into three segments.

1. 0-2 years when the child gains experience at home
2. 2-5 years when 'fortunate' Nigerian children receive preliminary instruction in kindergartens and Nursery classes while others not so fortunate continue to play around the home.
3. 6-7 year olds-the first two years the primary school.

These make up what is referred to in this paper as Early Childhood Education (Obinaju, 2001). To buttress some points; reference will be made to the entire childhood Education which will extend this period during which the child is in primary and secondary schools.

MULTILINGUALISM IN NIGERIA

The concepts of multilingualism refers to the ability to speak and make effective and correct use of more than two languages at the same time. In Nigeria, the National Policy on Education (1998) expects children to be monolingual, at least during the Early Childhood years, bi-lingual up to the end of primary education, tri-lingual and possibly quadrilingual from secondary school years and above. These are assessed from the policy which stipulates that instruction should be in the mother tongue at the Early Childhood stage and during the junior primary school years while English, the first official language takes over from the upper primary years. French as well as one other Nigeria language chosen from Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa are expected to be taught starting from the secondary level. Infact, the child at the end of secondary education (aged between 16 - 18) is expected to be proficient in all these language. This assertion is based on the fact that the examination set for him in each of these language is geared towards assessing his proficiency in the language.

So far we have discussed what the policy provisions are. The next vital question are How far have our schools adhered to these provisions? What is the practice on ground? In most cases, it would be observed that pre-primary institutions are tagged "International Nursery Schools". These use English starting from reception class as a means of instruction such that the child from modern homes, English is introduced as L1 right from home. These cannot altogether suppress the mother tongue but expect the child to be communicated to in English. In such a situation, it is not clear which of the two languages becomes L1 and L2. The child ends up starting his language acquisition with confusion which culminates into delayed speech, then to a mixture of the expected language (English) and the mother tongue (spoken by the adults in the home). It would be observed that the child at this level would understand both languages but cannot make very correct use of either. This is a situation referred to by Essien (1998) as imperfect bilingualism or linguistic mal-nourishment.

When this child goes to schools depending on the language intensified by the school, the child perfects one out of the two for it to become L1 while the other becomes L2. It is worthy of note that the perfection of L1 has some grievous educational consequences.

In most "International Nursery Schools" it is noted that even with the above linguistic confusion, French is still introduced. Obinaju (1993) notes that this anomaly is introduced by proprietors and head teachers to increase patronage since they view the provision of Early Childhood Education as "business". In consideration of a child who speaks the local language and / or mother tongue receives instruction in English at school and has French introduced at the Nursery level, he has French as L3. There is little assurance that he has mastered the mother tongue to a sufficient depth, nor has he perfected his L2 in this case English language. Now that a third language is introduced, there is need to examine the learning strategies which he would use to acquire L3 (French).

Udofot (2000) paints a picture of a group of Nigerians born and brought up in the urban areas where their parents language happens to be different from the language of the immediate community. She went further to examine the case of an

Ibibio child born and brought up in an urban center like Lagos or Kaduna. It is likely that this Nigerian Child will acquire Ibibio (L1) and also pick up the language of the immediate community (L2); in this case Yoruba or Hausa as the case may be. All these would occur before English (L3) is introduced to the child in school. At the introduction of French, it is pertinent note that this language automatically becomes L4.

To draw an end to this section it is worthy to emphasize here that at the age of 5, an average Nigerian child is already superficially multilingual. If he attends formal education, his acquisition is guided to some extent but if he is still playing around the house he has the opportunity of perfecting the language used in the home but still acquires some smattering knowledge of an L2 - either English or a more acceptable language of the outer community.

THE EFFECT OF MULTILINGUALISM ON CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

From the fore-going, it has been observed that a child born into a multilingual society/home is faced with delayed speech. Here the language with which the child is communicated to is confused as to which symbols to used. This confusion accounts for delayed speech. At the age of 10 - 12 months, the child's first words are expected to be uttered. Thereafter language acquisition is expected to move on at a steady rate following the pattern of communication to which the child is exposed. But a situation whereby the child delays up to 15 months of age before uttering his first word and where the pattern of communication to which he is exposed is not consistent, the child has a late start and a handicap at language acquisition.

Lyons (1981) as well as Faw (1980) demonstrate that language serves more functions than speech. In addition to communication language aids reasoning, storage of information as well as recall. By implication, a child who makes a late start at language acquisition makes correspondingly late start at each of the above functions - reasoning, storage and recall information. Where he has some handicap because of a confused linguistic environment this confusion significantly affects the child during his attempts at the above functioning. In other words his thoughts and memory processes would be hindered as a result of his not being thoroughly grounded in a language.

Udofot (2000) in consideration of the process of learning a second language agrees with Lyons (1981) that one thinks in a dominant language (L1) and only translates this thought into a subordinate (L2) especially where the situation involves unfamiliar subjects. But hardly would a word in one language translate exactly into other in a different language. This explains why many Nigerians use the sentence.

“It is had to understand” instead of “It is difficult to understand”

Or

“Je Suis 18ans” instead of “J'ai 18ans”.

Basically language learning, irrespective of the method used in teaching, involves an individual cognitive re-arrangement at its acquisition. In most cases, the acquisition involves translation from a more “dominant” language to the not so familiar language, but where there has been a weak foundation at the supposed

dominant language, it would not be surprising when the acquisition of the new language fails. In the Nigerian situation, we have observed that the Nigerian child is exposed at an early stage to acquire two or more languages. Depending on reinforcement, one out of these gains weak dominance. Subsequent acquisition is therefore built on a weak foundation and the acquisition of the required languages (NPE 1998) are bound to meet with difficulty. In another consideration, because the child's thoughts processes depend on the mastery of the language, he is likely to perform poorly in other disciplines which required in-depth thought processes because his language competence is weak.

Stones (1966:199) notes this thus:

A child with a level of linguistic ability will have poor conceptual ability and will be unable to understand the system of logical relationships which constitutes a cognitive schema.

Would you want to continue asking questions why Nigerian children are performing below expectation in areas such as the sciences?

We have already mentioned that each of the languages taught require a certain level of competence before one could say that the child has acquired the language in question. With some other languages at the background and given the translation cognitive orientation, the introduction of a new language is bound to create some confusion. In consideration of the interaction among a mother tongue. English and French at the pre-primary school level, Obinaju (1993) observes:

come to think of more seriously of it, how would a three year old child who is battling to stabilize in his use of the mother tongue combat with English and French, two foreign languages at the same time? These languages would 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.

(Obinaju, 1993:235).

Ikoh (1996:86) confirms this when he states that with multilingualism at the pre-primary level, "children will be confused and will experience uncertainty, this tends to reduce their proficiency" in the languages involved. Interference at three levels; phonological, semantic and syntactic are all evidence of the confusion which the Nigerian child experiences while trying to be multilingual.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that French has been introduced in many Early Childhood institutions, especially as a response to the new language policy. This paper has examined the effect of multilingualism on Early Childhood education and this, it has done after unraveling the concepts of early Childhood education and multilingualism. On the whole, the need for the child to gain expertise in one language; and in the Nigerian case, the language of the immediate environment has been stressed. This language serves him more serious functions than communication.

Multilingualism at the Early Childhood stage leads to a weak foundation in language acquisition and a correspondingly weak functioning in thoughts processes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With the above observations we are no longer in doubt about the unhealthy effect of multilingualism on Early childhood Education vis-a-vis the entire education of the Nigerian citizen. There is need to encourage the use of fewer languages at the pre-primary stage so as to ensure that there is sufficient mastery of one language which will serve the child as the language of thought, reasoning and memory. Infact as recommended in the National Policy on Education (1998) both the child's L1 and the language of instruction during the Early childhood years should be same. It is therefore recommended that French and indeed other foreign languages should not be introduced at the Early childhood Stage. The strategy for enticing parents by the introduction of French in their curriculum employed by "International Nursery Schools" should be checked. This of course can effectively be done by the supervising arm of the ministry of Education.

With a strong foundation in language, the child at the upper primary would be better armed to start an introduction of English and or French. In fact any additional foreign language study should start with entry into secondary schools. It is expected that at this age (beginning from the age of 12) the child's cognitive ability would be able to segregate the offerings of one language from that of another. In this way interference would be minimized.

The language policy on its own makes sense for the reason espoused in its support. But to expect every Nigerian to gain equal competence in all the languages expected of him i.e. English or French, one Nigerian language in addition to his mother tongue, is ridiculous. Anyway, in Udofot's (2000) opinion there can never be a question of equal competence in multi-language acquisition. If French must become an official language, there is need for it to be accorded the same status as English such that individuals could make a choice which foreign language to study an use beginning from the secondary Education years. In fact this paper holds the opinion that there should be reduction in the number of languages expected to be learnt by any one individual so that its learning can be effective.

Further more, depending on the choice of the foreign language, a programme for immersion should be planned such that before the end of Secondary Education, the learner would have had up to three occasions of learning the foreign language of choice with the native speakers for a duration of at least 3 months each. In this way correct syntax, phonemes and intonation would be included instead of learning it the haphazard way with all the tedious effort required for correction.

On the whole, whatever method employed to inculcate the required language to Nigerian this paper warns against the dangers starting the introduction at the pre-primary and early primary school years.

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