

Teaching English in a Multilingual and Multicultural Context: The Nigeria Experience

Grace E. Adamo, Kogi State University, Nigeria
Stella O. Igene, University of Benin, Nigeria

IAFOR International Conference on Language Learning - Dubai 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Nigeria is a country of more than 450 languages. A teacher therefore always finds herself teaching a class consisting of pupils from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This means that communication in the classroom among learners and with the teacher is a daunting task. By discussing qualitatively and quantitatively the data collected by observing practical English classes, by engaging in focus group discussions with teachers and from interviews, this paper discusses the downside of having so many diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in Nigeria's English as Second Language (ESL) classrooms. It also underscores the opportunities that are inherent in diversity in the classrooms and ways to utilize these opportunities to the advantage of the teachers and learners of English. The paper concludes that rather than continue with the monolingual-oriented education as is prevalent in Nigeria today, the National Policy on Education that advocates for multilingual education should be fully implemented. But before then, teachers need to harness the opportunities in teaching English to children of diverse linguistic and cultural background to a greater advantage.

Keywords: multilingualism, multicultural, linguistic and cultural background, English classroom, Nigeria, opportunities.

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

1. Introduction

The world is a storehouse of languages with linguistic diversity. While a few countries, like Iceland, are linguistically homogeneous, many countries display a wealth of linguistic diversity. Nigeria is one of the many linguistically polarized nations of the world, an African country with a population of about 450 languages (Crozier and Blench (1992), Elugbe (1994). Oyetayo (2006) presents a more comprehensive analysis of the linguistic situation in Nigeria by identifying 510 living languages and nine extinct ones. This brings the total number of indigenous languages (both living and extinct) to 519 languages. This heterogeneity qualifies Nigeria as a multilingual nation with its accompanying problems of language choice, language planning and implementation.

In a bid to cater for all languages and assign responsibility to each, there is a need for language planning, policy development and implementation. To this end, a National Policy on Education (NPE) was formulated in 1977 (Revised in 1981, 1998 and 2004). The policy prescribes the following:

- a) The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.
- b) From the forth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment and French shall be taught as a subject.
- c) At the secondary school level, English shall also be the language of instruction, while the language of the environment, one major Nigerian language other than that of the environment (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba) and French shall be taught as school subjects.

The NPE seeks to promote multilingualism in schools as the optimal way of utilizing the country's linguistic resources. The paradigm recognizes linguistic diversity as a National asset and sees the need to promote multilingualism but very little has been achieved in its implementation. Scholars such as Obayan (1998), Ogunbiyi (2008), Olagbaju (2009) have tried to identify the different factors responsible for the poor implementation or non-implementation of the multilingual provisions of the NPE. These include the negative attitude of students to multilingual education, parental attitude, ambiguities and complexities in the policy, lack of qualified multilingual teachers and materials. These are only some of the challenges facing the adoption of indigenous languages in early education in Nigeria.

However, in spite of this policy, three different scenarios are present in Nigeria, in reality.

First, is the rural area where children are basically monolingual in the language of the environment and come to school to learn English. Here, the indigenous language of the environment and English are the media of instruction in the early years of school.

Second, is the township private schools attended by the children of the elite. Here, English is almost always the L1 of the children and the language of instruction in such schools is English.

Third, is the township public schools where children are bi/multilingual (in indigenous language(s) and the Nigerian Pidgin), having diverse linguistic backgrounds coming together in one classroom to learn English. In all these three scenarios, young children aged 5-7 years beginning schooling are embarking on their developmental pathway of learning to use language in schooling contexts, such as in reading and writing. This makes them more reliant on spoken language and a range of other meaning - making resources such as visuals (both static and animated) and sounds (music and sound effects).

Generally, therefore, we can divide the Nigeria language classrooms into two types: monolingual and multilingual. In the monolingual classroom, all learners speak the same Mother Tongue or L₁ (English) and are learning English. In the multilingual classroom, the learners speak a variety of languages and the only thing they have in common is that they all are learning English. For this reason, every classroom is a cultural community reflective of the learners' and the teachers' cultural experiences.

Our concern in this paper, however, is the third scenario where a teacher finds themselves teaching a class consisting of learners from more than twenty (20) different linguistic/cultural backgrounds. Almost any combination is possible and you may sometimes find that every single child in the class come from a different cultural background and speak a different Mother Tongue.

This paper examines the challenges and the prospects of multilingualism/multiculturalism in Nigeria's classrooms, particularly as it concerns young children, who are encountering English for the first time in formal contexts. Multilingualism, as Encarta (2009) suggests, is a mastery of multiple languages and a person is multilingual if they know several languages. But a multilingual context in this case, is a classroom with learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds coming together for the purpose of learning a Target language (TL).

We must note that one major language and literacy challenges that most children face is that they have to learn English, given that English is the main language of literacy and the main written medium of instruction throughout the Nigeria educational system from the pre-school level to the University level especially in township public and private schools. English is the country's official language and language of education in general; thus it dominates the sociolinguistic space in terms of attitudes, power and socio-economic mobility.

2. Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study is to present the scenario of English language teaching in selected Nigeria multilingual classrooms. The specific objectives are to:

- Identify the challenges in the multilingual classrooms
- Identify the prospects of multilingual classrooms
- examine the attitudes of teachers to the multilingual situation in the classrooms
- To suggest ways in which the prospects can be harnessed to a better advantage.

3. Methodology

Data were collected from observed classes of four public township schools in Nigeria, once a week for a period of twelve (12) weeks that make up a school term. Field notes were also made during the observation period. At the end of the observation, a focus group discussion was organized with the teachers in each of the schools regarding the challenges and possibilities of multilingual classrooms. In a bid to further understand the challenges and complexities facing teachers in linguistically diverse classrooms, and to generally capture their views and voices on teaching English in such contexts, interview with teachers (n = 40) were conducted in the four public primary schools in the Central senatorial district. Learners were not involved in the interviews because they are too young to contribute intelligently.

The discussion below was made on the basis of the data obtained from the observation, the focus group discussions and the interviews. The data was analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively using percentages.

4. Discussion and Findings

Currently, in Nigeria, the majority of pupils in public primary schools come into schools as bi/multilinguals, who speak their native languages as well as The Nigerian Pidgin (TNP) - TNP being the country's lingua franca. Many of the young children do not understand the importance of learning English as they are too young to be extrinsically motivated by thoughts of better jobs or universities, and, they therefore, see learning the Target Language as a chore.

I. Pupils Use of Language in the Classroom

The medium of instruction that teachers use in the classroom is English. However, we found that pupils use the Nigerian Pidgin (NP) to communicate with themselves, and with the teacher. Most of the pupils were found to be using the NP to ask questions. Others simply kept silent. The teachers responded and explained using English. We observed that the use of NP eased the communication gap that would have existed between the pupils and the teachers as well between the pupils themselves.

Although communication problems are reduced because the majority of pupils can interact using the NP, the English language is quite different from the NP. For this reason, most of the teachers (72%) expressed concern on the poor English backgrounds of the pupils. Considering their varied linguistic backgrounds they are skeptical whether the pupils actually understand the content of what they teach. 28% were optimistic that their linguistic diversity notwithstanding, their young minds can easily grasp the content of the TL. Being trained teachers, all of the 40 teachers interviewed claimed that though they use different teaching methods, the population of the classes (an average of 50 students) and the varied ability and difficulties of students make teaching English difficult.

II. Teachers' views and voices

Some teachers (74%) believe that by banishing all languages, except the language of instruction from the classroom, they are helping the pupils acquire the English language. They believe that they will best acquire English by only speaking and hearing English. By allowing another language to be used in the classroom, the language of instruction will no longer occupy prime position in the minds of learner. Below are the general views of the teachers:

- a. Teachers (74%) believe that instruction should be carried out exclusively in the English without recourse to pupils L₁ or MT.
- b. Translation between L₁ and L₂ is not ideal in the teaching of Language (72%).
- c. The more English is used in the classroom the better the result (71%). Teachers believe that their pupils will learn English best if they are immersed in the language.
- d. Language diversity in the classroom is a problem. It is better in multilingual classes if pupils speak English all the time (84%).

III. Some Challenges of Teaching in Multilingual Classes

Mishra (2009) states that:

When children are educated exclusively in a non-mother-tongue language, they are prevented access to education because of the linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers created. Thus, these exclusively non-mother-tongue programmes violate the human right to education as expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the child....

This succinctly expresses the Nigerian situation in that classes consist of children, who speak different languages and have come with the aim to learn English. This means that they usually have no common language between them. As stated above, this causes linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers to the students as well as to their teachers. Pupils speaking different language have their individual linguistic/cultural idiosyncrasies, which they bring to bear on the L₂ learning. Almost always, the teacher is not skilled enough to deal with these problems, thereby limiting some of the learners making them feel clumsy and disadvantaged. This is compounded by the usually large population of learners in a class (an average of 50 pupils). These pupils from different linguistic backgrounds also come across different problems in the English language.

Sometimes it could be in pronunciation, spellings, grammar or the morphology of the language. For example, a pupil from the Hausa background had a problem pronouncing the /p/ sound by substituting it with the /f/ sound. Another from the Okun tribe had no problem with the /p/ sound but with the /v/ sound by substituting it with the /f/ sound. These problems are specific to individual students and it requires the personal attention of the teacher. Explaining a problem of one student to the whole class may be inefficient as they don't necessarily experience the same difficulties. The result is that the rest of the class feels unchallenged and bored. But then, how does a teacher pay attention to the individual student's difficulties in such large classes? Because of the multilingual background of the pupils it is very difficult for the teachers to device the right type of teaching methodology.

In the Nigerian context, the monolingually dominated reality of the school, where English is the only acceptable medium of communication fuels ambiguities and inconsistencies, which prevail between the multilingually-oriented Nigerian society and the monolingually dominated reality of the school. The Mother Tongues are termed as 'vernaculars' in schools and their use is seen as intrusive to the effective learning of English. But after school, the so-called 'vernacular' is the language of the home and of the society. Hence, learners are put in a kind of 'linguistic polythene bag', whereby they are neither competent in the English language nor encouraged to speak the native languages.

IV. Prospects of Multilingualism in classrooms

In a multilingual setting, all learners in classroom have repertoires of languages and/or linguistic varieties, which could be activated as vehicles for learning and, which could help foster language awareness and curiosity about their own languages and those of others. Hence, cultural and linguistic diversity affords the children the opportunity to grow up to be respectful of the multitudes of languages and cultures and peoples they will interact with when they are older. In general, most children are comfortable interacting with people and behaviours. This teaches them that differences in language and cultures are to be cherished and appreciated rather than judged and feared.

Nigeria children have a limited command of the language of instruction, and of literacy and not much efforts are made to welcome them on their own terms, therefore, social stigma is constructed based on the "implicit association between how well an individual expresses themselves and their intelligence" (Torres-Guzman 2002: 6). This obviously is a disadvantage for some. But multilingualism also serves as a signal to learners that they are all in the same boat and all are welcome as legitimate participants in the learning dilemma. They recognize and build on their diverse linguistic knowledge through various types of the learning experiences.

It is not easy to establish an accurate figure of the range of languages represented in classrooms in Nigeria, but about 400 is normally quoted and not uncommon to find primary schools where the pupils between them speak more than 20 languages at home. In cases as this, then, English is the ultimate common language to communicate with each other and with the teacher. This is an advantage because pupils are encouraged to speak English right from the onset, and because they seem to have no choice, this tends to inspire them to want to 'learn to mean' in English. Teachers often practice different methods of teaching in a lesson session in order to try to cater, as much as possible, for the individual needs of the pupils but much still needs to be done.

Dealing with diversity requires creativity, extra effort, diligence and courage on the teachers' part. The Nigeria public school teachers have rarely offered an enthusiastic welcome for learners' differences. However, a multilingual/cultural classroom must thrive on these differences and use them as a foundation for growth and development.

Different cultures have different mores and folkways. For example, a Niger Delta child is likely to be extroverted and bold, whereas a Hausa child maybe reserved and introverted as a consequence of culture and religion. If the teacher is open and

accommodating, s/he will open lines of communication that will create a beneficial learning environment for everyone. By so doing pupils will not be estranged from one another and from the teacher. To be open involves being interested in each student and willing to try new and different things/methods. The teacher should not make assumptions and be prepared for the unexpected.

There are a wide range of classroom activities that can help students recognize the essential humanity and value in different types of people e.g. showing pupils photographs of people of different ethnicity, tailoring classroom activities/lessons toward multilingual and multicultural appreciation by using culturally-centred instructional approaches, which can help facilitate linguistic/cultural pride among diverse pupils. Teaching pupils about multicultural and religious role models also serves as an effective method for demonstrating that peoples of all ethnicities, genders and religions can have positive influence on the world and they deserve to be respected and emulated.

Conclusion

The recent development in language education is the recognition and the proposal that the languages children bring to school should be recognized and promoted, while all children should also study one or more 'foreign' language or 'modern' language at school (Maalouf, 2008). But Nigeria does not appear to flow with this trend. Although the NPE can be said to favour the adoption of more than one language in education, the implementation of the policy has been a mirage. In Nigeria classrooms, English is the language of instruction. This means that the teacher must grapple with meeting the needs of individual pupils. This has not been an easy task.

You may have noted that in Nigeria the long-established monolingual 'target language' approaches to English language learning are still wide spread and are often seen intuitively as the right way to proceed. But there is the need to construct models of learning that recognize and value diversity in all its forms, in order to offer the possibility of enhancement in the quality of learning and achievement for all. While we hope and anticipate a turn towards multilingual education, teachers in Nigeria need to harness the possibilities and prospects in teaching English in multilingual/multicultural contexts to a greater advantage.

References

- Ajulo, A. (2008) *Language in Society*. Akure: Stebak Books and Publishers.
- Cenoz, J. and Jessner, U. (2004) *Globalization and Multilingualism*. In www.springer
- Crozier, D.H. and Blench R.M. (1972) *An Index of Nigeria Languages*. 2nd Edition. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, Inc.
- Elugbe, B. (1994) "Minority Languages Development in Nigeria: A Situation Report on Rivers and Bendel States" in Fordon R. and Furniss G. (Eds.) London: Routledge.
- http://www.poliglotti4.eu/docs/a_rewardingchallenge.pdf (accessed 25 February, 2015). link.com/index/e5810302053k4816.pdf (retrieved on 25/02/15).
- Maaloof, A. (2008) A Rewarding Challenge: How the Multiplicity of Languages Could Strengthen Europe. Brussels: European Commission.
- Microsoft Emcarta (2009) *Multilingualism*. Redmond, W. A. Microsoft Cooperation.
- Mishira M.K. (2009) "Multilingual Education: Indian Folklore". *Journal of National Folklore Support Centre*. Series 22, April 1.
- Nkamigbo, Linda. academicexcellencesociety.com/globalperspectiveson_multilingualism.html. (Retrieved on 28-02-15).
- Obayan, P. (2004) *The Dilemma of Education in Africa*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Olagbaju, O.O. (2009) "Multilingual Education in Nigeria: Policy, practice, Challenges and Solution." *Journal of Education and Practice*. Vol. 5, No. 6.
- Oyetade, S. (2003) "Language Planning in a Multi-Ethnic State. The majority/Minority Dichotomy in Nigeria." *Nordic Journal of African Studies*. 12(1): 105-117.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1994) Mother Tongue Maintenance: The Debate: Linguistic Human rights and Minority Education. *TESOL Quarterly* (Special Topic Issue k-12) 28 (3) 625-628.
- Torres-Guzman, M.E. (2002) Dual Language Programs: Key Features and Results. *National Clearing house for Bilingual Education: Directions in Language and Education* 14.
- Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language.
- graceadamo@yahoo.com