

## Basic Education or Literacy? Yes. In What Language?

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### Abstract

*Not all children of school age in Nigeria have access to school education. Not all those that have access complete their primary education. Those who complete their primary education can hardly read and understand adequately. Many of the adult Nigerians are illiterate in which the majority are women. This is the situation, despite previous efforts by successive government towards mass education and literacy. One major problem in the past effort is the deliberate elevation of English Language at the expense of Nigerian languages. For the future, one would expect to see a systematic encouragement of teaching in Nigerian languages. These languages should be introduced as a medium of administration, so as to bring the administrator closer to his subject, thereby giving the masses the right to express themselves.*

### Introduction

Basic Education refers to education that enables people to meet their basic learning needs. Basic needs then infers the composite knowledge, skills, values and attitudes necessary for human beings to:

- Survive;
- develop their fullest potentials;
- live a decent life and earn a living under decent conditions;
- participate fully in the process of development;
- improve the quality of their lives;
- make informed decisions; and
- learn how to keep on learning.

When one considers the fact that learning needs vary, then it will be understood that there will be different ways of meeting these needs which may demand different languages.

Bearing in mind the multi-lingual nature of Nigeria and when one considers the fact that learning needs vary, then the question arises, will these needs be met in just one language or in varying languages?



## The State of School Education in Nigeria

Records available gives one the picture of the state of school education in Nigeria.

### Access to school

Not all children have access to school education. About 52 million Nigerian children do not have access to schooling. The poor, rural dwellers and children in urban slums are mostly affected.

Although 75% girls and 86% boys enroll in primary schools, only about 55% boys and 46% girls actually complete primary education. Reasons for withdrawal are diverse (UNICEF, 1996).

### Low level of learning

Observations show that children who complete five - six years of schooling are not able to read and understand adequately.

### Few children attend pre-school programmes [0-6 years]

In spite of the rapid expansion of early-childhood education provision (day-care centres, kindergartens, nurseries) few children have access to it. Enrolment is witnessed mainly in urban centres.

### Adult Education

About 59 million Nigerian adults are illiterate. Most of them are women. The world in 1990 and 2000 (Jomtien and Dakar) respectively, called attention to the importance of basic education and obliged ratifying countries to ensure:

- the expansion of early childhood care developmental activities, including family and community intervention, especially for poor, disadvantaged and disabled children;
- universal access to, and completion of, primary education or whatever higher level of education is considered as 'basic';
- improvement in learning achievement;
- reduction of the adult illiteracy rate;
- expansion of provisions of basic education and training for youths and adults;
- increased acquisition by individuals and families of the knowledges, skills, and values required for better living, and sound sustainable development are made available through all educational channels; and
- the adaptation of an 'expanded vision' of basic education.

If one considers the expanded vision of basic education to the limited vision, would one advocate one linguistic formula or many?

Limited vision	Expanded vision
Basic education is for children	Basic education is for children, youth and adults
Takes place in the school: refers to primary education or its equivalent	Takes place in and out of school
The learning of a specific amount of material or subjects is the guarantee	Cannot be measured by numbers of certificates but rather by learning achievement
The only kind of knowledge that is valid is the knowledge transmitted in the school system through a systematic education programme	The ability to meet basic learning needs is the guarantee recognizes the validity of traditional knowledge
is confined to a specific phase of life	is lifelong process that begins at birth
is homogenous and identical for everyone	is differentiated (because every group and culture has its own distinct basic learning needs)
is static and does not tend to change	is dynamic and subject to change
is the responsibility of ministry of education	involves every ministry and every government authority responsible for educational activities.
is a government responsibility	is the responsibility of government as well as of society as a whole, and educational activities therefore require consensus and co-ordination.

### Efforts at mass education and literacy

In the resolve to achieve universal literacy in Nigeria, regional and national government have made various attempts that have succeeded relatively and failed in some areas to reach the derived goal. Nigeria over the past four decades have adopted a wide variety of literacy strategies ranging from mass education campaigns, universal free primary education, work-oriented functional literacy and now universal basic education. Despite these efforts, the adult literacy rate in Nigeria as at the year 1999 according to UNESCO stands at 64.1%. Out of this, 72.3% are male and 56.2% female.

The literacy campaign in Nigeria started in 1927 and became more organised in 1947. There was the free education experiment in Western Nigeria in 1955; the National Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1976 and the current Universal Basic Education



(UBE). One may say that factors that have contributed to the failure of the previous efforts include the multilingual nature of the country, resultant inappropriate choice of language of instruction, near collapse or failure of the formal school system, the declining fortune of the nation, poverty level of the populace, low completion rates, poorly motivated literacy teachers and most importantly, poorly orientated literacy strategies.

Varavarn (1989) notes that, literacy strategies include the mass campaign approach and the intensive selective literacy programme approach. The mass campaign is often typified by mass mobilization of a vast segment of the population towards certain set targets of literacy education within a short time span. Intensive selective literacy programme is viewed as a carefully planned educational endeavour with goals which may extend beyond simple reading and writing. It may not be adequate to choose the better of the two but whatever choice is made should consider the following:

- Political support and commitment.
- Institutional capacity.
- The number of diversity of the target groups.
- Technical competence in organizing literacy education.
- Expected resources support and participation.
- Availability of further learning opportunities.
- Appropriate and relevant linguistic policy.

### Post-colonial linguistic policy

With the attainment of independence in 1960 in Nigeria, one would have expected to see a new nation in various attempts to restore its cultural, political and national identity. This was not the case. Instead English was declared the official language thereby marginalizing Nigerian local languages. Literacy programmes have been carried out without any attempt to integrate the role of the Nigerian mother tongues with that of English. The primacy of the mother tongue has been largely neglected and that of English largely exaggerated (Afolayan, 2001). This bestows on English the position of a means of communication in academic and administrative circles and the media at the expense of Nigerian local languages - "vernacular".

Ahohunkpanzoun (1989) notes that, between 1957 and 1965, new African leaders, chose to continue to pursue the linguistic policy of colonialists in full awareness of its potential effect and placed their people in a difficult situation. Independence for them was a question of building modern nations acceptable in the context of historical concept.

Hofmann (1974) sees the new African leaders as well meaning men who thought that:

- European language across borders would help in achieving national unity; the spread of education would be made easier and perhaps even accelerated;
- French and English being languages of international status their usage would

make communication with the rest of the world easy; and  
- access to scientific and technical knowledge transfer from the west would be facilitated.

Those declarations led to stifling of African languages and lent credence to linguistic policy which favours English language in Nigeria and its resultant effects on Nigerian local languages.

Despite dominance lasting decades and effort in the school and out of school, English language has not reached majority of the population.

Ahohunkpazoun (1989) is of the opinion that even 10% of African populations have not been reached and that the number of Africans whose command of the official language is equivalent to that of their native tongue does not exceed 2%. This shows that post-colonial linguistic policy of silencing local languages has not succeeded.

In an attempt to salvage the local languages from total collapse, in 1979, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba were accepted along with English language as the official languages of the National Assembly and they are now compulsory taught in most secondary schools in Nigeria. Obashoro (1996) notes that in the past and in fact currently, literacy efforts advocate the use of the mother tongue as medium of instruction. This is to ensure effectiveness and immediate relevance to the adult populace.

### The Future: Basic Education for Critical Literacy

If we go by the fact that the aim of literacy or education is to enable a person benefit from it, to express his thoughts in writing, transcribe his ideas, his feeling in the most accurate way, to read and understand what he is reading, then it is necessary to have a command of the language which one wants to read and write. Of course, one does have a better command of language in his native language. To subject rural Nigerians to literacy in English would mean teaching them to speak a language which is not theirs, a language which is the product of a culture and colonization far from theirs and a language they will never master.

The era of Nigerians speaking English at local assemblies is disappearing. Local languages are themselves acknowledged and known. Observations and experiences of happenings in markets, on the streets and at town meetings, show that in Nigeria, mainly Nigerian local languages are spoken and people feel more at home with their own languages.

The education and or literacy for the future demands the integration of the individual in this cultural, economic and social milieu, conditioned by his capability to



gain access to knowledge of which the native language should be the vehicle. This shows that development and linguistic factor consciousness are closely related.

The new information age demands and expresses the fact that information will be so much more effective in that, it will pass more directly from source to target with minimum distortion. All translations represent a break in flow and a loss of efficiency. The flow of information is necessary for a realization of development attempts.

It should be noted that information for the rest of the world and communication with them does not necessarily require imposing the English language on the entire population. Nigeria can borrow a leaf from the Scandinavian countries where indigenous languages are used for commerce, education and politics.

For the desired development to be achieved through education via the local languages, supporters of literacy in local languages have a lot to do. Promotion of local languages teaching and learning required a great deal of work in the field of research to give the language a future. There is the need to develop the language vocabulary to accommodate technological terms, train teachers and develop relevant books.

Efforts should be made to remove the elements of inferiority complex which the masses attach to their local languages. They should see the local language as their identity.

Critical literacy through basic education should be focused on education is that devoid of endless recitation and repetition. Emphasis should be on comprehensive usability and functionality of learning, with a view to developing intelligence not memory.

It should encourage participation in the process of national development, maintain social equality and enhance integration into the economic, social, political and cultural structures of the nation.

For the future one would expect to see a systematic encouragement of teaching in Nigerian languages. These languages should be introduced as medium of administration, so as to bring the administrator closer to his subjects thereby giving the masses the right to express themselves.

In planning for future efforts in literacy promotion, the following should be considered.

Literacy promotion is a continuous learning process. Targets can be set and achieved when illiteracy is not painted as a social illness.

- UBE stresses meaningful reduction of illiteracy and the creation of a supportive learning environment. This calls for planned environment.
- Teaching and learning strategies should be diverse and responsive to the needs and conditions of differing populations, motivated differently.
- National commitments, support and personal motivation for literacy are essentials.
- Responsive and adaptive strategies require continuous monitoring of progress. There should be periodic review to ensure their functionality.
- The managing agency/body should be responsible for situation analysis, planning, resources mobilization, technical support, coordination, monitoring, evaluation and reporting.
- The body should be adequately equipped to perform these functions and not become too powerful and neglect other agencies in literacy efforts.
- International organizations should not be overlooked. They can help to promote literacy by sharing experiences raising national awareness giving recognition to exemplary work, providing technical and financial backing. However, over dependence should be avoided.
- Literacy should be literacy in the context of the learner. It should place people at the centre of their environment and give them the means to take an active part in community life.

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