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ESSENTIALS OF MOTHER-TONGUE NEWSPAPERS TO THE UBE SCHEME

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Introduction

In the current information age, no education programme destined to succeed can afford to discountenance the mass media. It is in this light that Inyan-Abia (2002: 143) notes that mass media (together with instructional media) have enormous capacity for literacy development through properly structured curriculum.

One of the widely-acknowledged functions of communication is education. This, in essence, means that communication is a vehicle for education. Mass media have the potentials of diffusing information fast and wide; and, it is in this sense that they are indispensable in mass education programme.

While the broadcast system has been of great value for distance learning, the print media as well are of immense value for their peculiar advantages of visuals, permanence and chronology. Print media, themselves, are, by nature, vehicles for literacy as they are required to be read for information and knowledge (Salawu, 2002).

If we agree that education is not possible without communication, we would also agree that education is also not possible without language. This is because language as a system of symbols is a basic tool of communication. Ajayi and Oyetayo (2002:61) further notes that language is a veritable vehicle of interaction and a means of education through which human beings pass their culture from one generation to another. This, therefore, means that literacy promotes a people’s culture, custom and tradition and enables people to sell their culture to the outside world.
As a corollary, the significant role that language plays in the totality of culture is acknowledged. Greenberg (1971:156) notes:

"Language is the prerequisite for the accumulation and transmission of other cultural traits... Language is not a necessary condition for culture, it is itself part of culture."

Communication, and by extension, education, is better enhanced in a medium that expresses the totality of the culture of a given people. Meanwhile, evidence abounds about the efficacy of the use of indigenous language or mother-tongue for instructional purposes (McNamara, 1965; Klein, 1994; Luckett, 1994; Okombo and Rubgumya, 1996). In particular, the ‘Ife Six-Year Primary Project’ clearly demonstrated the efficacy of Yoruba for instructional purposes (Babalola, 1985; Afolayan, 1976). All these form part of the reasons why the Nigeria’s National Policy on Education set aside the mother-language or the language of immediate community as the medium of instruction at the initial stages of the primary school.

Thus, this paper would consider the essentiality of newspapers published in mother-tongue to the success of the Universal Basic Education Scheme.

The Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme

The idea to establish the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme was triggered in 1990 during the Jomtien World Conference on Education for all. At this conference, participating nations were requested to provide basic education to their peoples. By the declaration of this Conference, basic education refers to education intended to meet learning needs, which in turn have been defined as the knowledge, skills, attitude and values necessary for people to survive, to improve the quality of their lives, and to continue learning.
Nigeria is a signatory to the 1990 Jomtien declaration. As a result, the nation’s government, on September 30, 1999, launched the national UBE Scheme. Almost similar to the Universal Primary Education (UPE) launched in 1976, the goals of the UBE are to universalise access to basic education, engender a conducive learning environment and eradicate illiteracy in Nigeria within the shortest possible time (Popoola, 2001:218).

There are three components to the UBE Scheme. They are:

(i) formal basic education encompassing the first nine years of schooling (primary and junior secondary education) for all children;

(ii) nomadic education for school-age children of pastoral nomads and migrant fishermen; and

(iii) literacy and non-formal education for out-of-school children, youth and adult illiterates.

The UBE objectives include:

(i) To develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and strong commitment to its vigorous promotion;

(ii) To provide free, compulsory universal basic education for every Nigerian child of school-going age

(iii) To reduce, drastically, drop-out rate from the formal school system through improved relevance and efficiency; and

(iv) To cater for drop-outs and out-of-school children/adolescents through various forms of complementary approaches to the provision and promotion of basic education.

Significantly, UBE comprises a wide variety of formal and non-formal educational activities and programmes designed to enable learners acquire functional
literacy. Popoola (2001) notes that the Scheme is meant to be the foundation for sustainable life – long learning.

Nigeria’s Language Policy in Education

Different Nigerian Governments had considered what languages are suitable for passing instructions at different levels of education. The National Policy on Education (1977) stipulates that the medium of instruction initially in the primary school would be the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.

The 1981 revised edition of the policy aimed not at just promoting the mother tongue, but also enhancing national unity. Adeniran (1995:192) states:

In addition to appreciating the importance, and as a means of preserving the people’s culture, the government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own mother-tongue. In this connection, the government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

Many factors are probably responsible for the language policy adopted by Nigeria. Ogenyi (2002:132) postulates that one of such factors is the recommendation made by the UNESCO meeting of experts in Paris in 1951. This meeting recommended that, on education grounds, the use of the mother-tongue be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. It stated that pupils should begin their education through the medium of the mother-tongue, since they understand it best and because to begin their school life in the mother-tongue will make the break between home and the school as small as possible.

Another UNESCO Conference held in 1953 in Jos, Nigeria could have also inspired the content of the nation’s education language policy. The theme of the
conference was the use in education of African languages in relation to English. It affirmed that the ideal medium of instruction for a child should be the child's mother-tongue. A similar UNESCO Conference held in 1970 in Yaounde Cameroun examined the functions of African languages as means of educational vis-à-vis literacy and of course socio-cultural and economic development (Ogeniyi 2002:133).

The Conference made the following assertions:

1. The languages spoken by African peoples have irreplaceable and decisive part to play in the establishment of a system of education and the widespread dissemination of science and technology, and of authentic national cultures.

2. The African language spoken in the home is the best medium of African thought.

3. Education will not be effective until primary school education becomes a natural extension of the pre-school education received at home and in kindergarten. To achieve this, it is necessary that primary school programmes be based on the child's immediate environment and the basic rules of his mother-tongue.

Effectiveness of Mother-Tongue as Medium of Instruction

There is ample evidence in research findings about the efficacy of the use of indigenous language or mother-tongue for instructional purpose. There are reports from across the world to buttress this claim. This paper would, however, mention just two experiences in Nigeria. They are the DRCM/NKST Literacy Program in Tiv language (Tsumba, 2002) and the Ife Six-Year Primary Project (Babalola, 1985; Afolayan, 1976).
Tsunba (2002) chronicled how mother-tongue education was planned, organised and implemented effectively in Tiv language, between 1911 and 1980. It was a project credited to the Dutch Reformed Church Mission (DRCM) and later the Church of Christ among the Tiv, locally known as the Nongo U Kristu Hen Sudan Hen Tiv (N.K.S.T).

Tsunba concluded that the DRCM/NKST experience had proved beyond reasonable doubt that literacy in the mother-tongue is more effective and more functional than in a foreign language, no matter the status. He remarked:

"The DRCM/NKST could not have achieved their objective of evangelisation in Tivland within that short time without the use of the mother tongue of the target population. (Tsunba, 2002:216)."

He further noted that the experience made Tiv society a very literate society. As an indication, as from 1940, certain newspapers and magazines were published in Tiv language and were edited by Tiv mother-tongue journalists.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of Paper</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Editor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i Mwangcr u Tiv (monthly)</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Akigasai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii leha regh (weekly)</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Isaac Kpum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii Mkaanem (monthly)</td>
<td>1950s</td>
<td>Pastor S. Saai</td>
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Tsunba again recalled that in spite of the exclusive use of Tiv language in DRCM/NKST schools, the first graduate to be ever produced in Tiv land – a 1964 Chemistry graduate of University of Ibadan – was a product of the school. Equally, the first Tiv lawyer was also from the system.

The Ife project was an experiment carried out by the Institute of Education of the then University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo Univeristy, Ile-Ife). The experiment was done using pupils of a primary school in Ile-Ife. A set of these pupils was taught all their subjects, except English language, in Yoruba, while another set
received its own instructions in English. When examinations were conducted, pupils whose medium of instruction was Yoruba performed far better than those instructed in English.

The Print Media

The modern newspaper is society's primary instrument for mass communication. It has, with greater regularity, over more years and in more places, kept the logbook of human affairs than any other medium of communication.

Prior to the advent of printing technology, human societies had evolved a number of methods to record information through writing. Defleur and Dennis (1981:32) note that before the advent of writing and media, social, political and economic development had been agonizingly slow and human existence remained relatively simple for centuries.

The invention of printing has been credited to John Gutenberg, a German who lived between 1400 and 1468. His 42-line 'Bible', was, to some extent the first printed book. This was printed by Gutenberg at Mainz and was finished not later than 1455 - possibly a year or two earlier. The technical excellence of the book makes it unlikely that this was the first that Gutenberg attempted, and it was later established that it was preceded by a number of earlier and less perfect efforts, including several editions of Aelius Donatus's Ars Grammatica.

Defleur and Dennis (1981) posit that the history of newspapers is as long as the history of books. According to them, the newspaper had some fore-runners. The Romans, about the times of Christ, posted daily news sheets in public places. In the mid 1500s, leaders of Venice made news of the war in Dalmatia regularly available to
the public at the payment of a gazette, a small coin. In London, 1621, Coranto was also sold to the public.

However, the characterisation of modern newspapers is remarkably different from those of the above-mentioned publications. A true newspaper is defined as a paper that:

(a) is published at least weekly;
(b) is produced by a mechanical printing process;
(c) is available to people of all walks of life (for a price);
(d) prints news of general interest rather than items on specialised topics such as religion or business;
(e) is readable by people of ordinary literacy;
(f) is timely; and
(g) is stable over time.

Mother-Tongue Newspapers in Nigeria

*Iwe Irohin Fun Awon Ara Egba ati Yoruba* was historically significant for being the first indigenous language newspaper in Africa (Akinfeleye, 1985:35; Duyile, 1987:17) and indeed the first newspaper in Nigeria.

*Iwe Irohin* was established by Reverend Henry Townsend, a missionary of the Christain Missionary Society (CMS) in 1859. Excited over this unique feat, Townsend, in a despatch to the CMS in England, wrote:

I have set on foot a Yoruba newspaper. My first number is out, I am writing the second. My object is to get the people to read i.e. to beget the habit of seeking information by reading (Duyile, 1987).
Folarin and Mohammed (1996:101) categorised the establishment and appearance of the mother-tongue newspapers into five ‘waves’. According to them, *Iwe Irohin* stood on its own in the first wave (1859-67) while the second wave covers the period 1885-92 and featured two Efik papers, *Unwana Efik* and *Obukpon Efik* as well as a Yoruba paper, *Iwe Irohin Eko*. The third wave started with the founding of *Eko Akete* in 1922 and ended with the second and final death of the paper in 1937. The fourth wave began with the entry of *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* (1937/38) and went on till Nigeria attained independence and republican status in the 60s. The rest of the development till the present time, they note, may be conveniently subsumed in the fifth and the last ‘Wave’.

Of all the newspapers in the first to the fourth ‘Wave’, only *Irohin Yoruba* and *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* still exist till today. *Gaskiya Tafi Kwabo* (Truth is worth more than a penny) was established by the quasi-official Gaskiya Corporation, which had an objective of promoting the development of literature in the North.

Gaskiya Corporation which, at different times, had been named Northern Literature Bureau and Northern Literature Agency (NORLA) for the purpose of expansion, published other periodicals in the different languages of the region. Coker (1968:211); Duyile (1987:115) and Hayat (1983) make a list of the periodicals for each of the twelve provinces of the then Northern Region: *Ardo* in Fulfulde for Adamawa; *Ganzaks* in Hausa for Bauchi; *Mwanger U Tiv* (1948) for Tiv and *Okaki Idoma* in Idoma for Benue; *Albashir* (1951) in Kanuri for Borno etc.

*Irohin Yoruba* was established on June 4, 1945 by the legendary politician, late Chief Obafemi Awolowo. It is presently, on the stable of African Newspapers of Nigeria Plc. publishers of *Tribune* titles. *Ghounghoun* had its first appearance on October, 29., 1970. It is a publication of the distressed Sketch Press Limited.
The equally distressed Concord Press of Nigeria (CPN) Ltd., published *Isokan*, which started on July 15, 1980. Other mother-tongue newspapers on the stable of CPN included *Amura* (Hausa) and *Udoka* (Ibo), which started in 1980 and 1981 respectively.

The emergence of *Alaroye* newspaper in 1996 marked a milestone in the affairs of Yoruba and, indeed, mother-tongue newspapers in Nigeria. Within a short time, this newspaper became popular because of its arresting cover design and styles of headline-casting and story presentation. It actually popularized reading of Yoruba newspapers among the folks. It is the largest local language newspaper with a circulation figure of not less than 150,000 per week. It sells in Europe and several West African countries where the Yoruba reside (*The Fourth Estate*, 2000:7). Its publishers, World Information Agents, have also added other Yoruba publications to their stable. They include: *Alaroye* magazine, *Atoka Alaroye*, *Iriri Aye* and *Akede Agbaye*.

The success of *Alaroye* and the frenzy political situation in the country before the return of democracy and at the birth of democracy have also triggered the emergence of other Yoruba publications. These include: *Ajouro, Alaye*, and *Ofe*.

There are other local language newspapers in Nigeria. A lot of there are, however, obscure and unknown.

**Mother-tongue Newspapers and the UBE Scheme**

UBE Scheme is a mass education scheme and, therefore, collocates with mass media, a part of which mother-tongue newspapers are. Mother-tongue newspapers are channels of mass communication and, therefore, would facilitate the diffusion of the basic education wide and fast.
Mother-tongue newspapers, being mass media, would also, to a great extent, alleviate the problem of inadequacy of teachers for the Scheme. The newspapers themselves are educators and, since they are mass media, reach wide and heterogeneous audience, thus taking care of the unavailability or scarcity of teachers.

Mother-tongue newspapers, being mass media, also facilitate non-formal education. People who, because of age or occupation, cannot afford to go to formal school can avail themselves of the opportunity of newspapers because of their advantages of portability and reading at convenience. With this, they can acquire knowledge of a wide variety of non-formal educational activities and programmes designed to enable learners acquire functional literacy.

Because of the advantage of *permanence* of print media, mother-tongue newspapers will be available to the learners for continual reference.

Even though, the coverage and treatment of literacy/education in Yoruba (mother-tongue) newspapers can be better, Salawu (2002) yet contends that Yoruba newspapers have been doing fairly well as media of instruction. Mother-tongue newspapers have potentials for this especially because they publish in languages indigenous to the people. And, with the evidence at our disposal, mother-tongue is more suitable than any foreign language to basic education which the UBE Scheme is meant to popularise.

A good foundation in mother-tongue is a pre-requisite to functional literacy and even to proficiency in any foreign language (Awoniyi, 1995).

**Conclusion**

Since a plausible argument has been made for the use of mother-tongue newspapers for the UBE Scheme, it is, therefore, apposite to advocate for the
promotion of Nigeria’s indigenous languages. And, if the indigenous languages must survive and grow, the media, especially the print, must be encouraged to use them. Print media aid literacy, therefore the media operating in these languages must be encouraged for it is with these languages that our people can be effectively informed for development purposes. Banjo (1995:186) underscores the indispensability of the media and creative writing in this regard.

References


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