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**READINGS IN  
EDUCATION**

FOR

**NATIONAL  
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## LANGUAGE POLICY AND THE STATUS OF YORUBA IN PRIVATE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN ABEOKUTA NORTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

BY

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### ABSTRACT

*The importance of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education is a subject of concern to language educators. While many studies have been carried out on public primary schools, not many have been done in private schools, hence the challenge to probe into problems facing the teaching of the mother tongue in this sector. Two hundred and fifty pupils and ten Yoruba teachers were randomly selected from five private primary schools in Ogun State. Three instruments used to obtain data were Pupil Questionnaire on Yoruba (PQY), Teacher Questionnaire on Yoruba (TQY) and an interview guide for head teachers. Data collected were analysed using simple percentages. The results showed that all the private schools used for the study did not encourage the use of Yoruba as a medium of instruction hence qualified Yoruba teachers were not recruited; teaching aids were not adequately provided; most teachers(80%) did not give assignments in Yoruba to their students and it was forbidden to speak Yoruba in schools(100%). Ironically, majority of the pupils spoke Yoruba at home and watched Yoruba programmes on television. The paper recommends that schools should encourage the use of Yoruba as a medium of instruction in early primary education while enough time should be allotted to it on the school time table.*

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### INTRODUCTION

It is necessary to begin this paper by quoting Fafunwa (1989) on the need for mother tongue education in Nigeria primary schools:

If the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from the start to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, initiative, industry, manual dexterity, mechanical comprehensive and co-ordination of hand and eye, he should acquire these skills and attitudes through the mother tongue as the medium of education which after all is the most natural way of learning,

Fafunwa would be regarded as stating the obvious because, apart from being the architect of the Ife Six Year Primary Project (SYPP) which proved right the 1953 resolution of UNESCO on the use of mother tongue in education, he contributed immensely to the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education.

Although the 1969 National Conference on Curriculum Development stated in one of its recommendations that "the Nigerian primary school child should be well grounded in his mother tongue as well as learning English and or any other language as a second or third language of instruction" (Adaralegbe, 1972), nothing was done to implement it until 1977 when the statement re-appeared in the National Policy on Education. Despite the fact that the language of a child's immediate environment has been accorded due recognition in the policy, nothing was visibly done either by the Federal Ministry of Education or its counterparts at the state level until 1982 when the unity secondary schools began teaching the three major Nigerian languages.

In some Yoruba speaking states like Oyo and Ogun, it became compulsory for trainees at teachers' colleges to offer and pass Yoruba before they could be certified to have passed the state papers. It was when a pride of place was accorded this Nigerian language that student teachers attached importance to it and awareness in it increased, hence more teachers pursued and still pursue higher education in Yoruba.

### **The National Language Policy in Education**

Awoniyi (1978) stressed that the best way to develop an African children to become very useful members of their community is to teach them in their mother tongue. Emenanjo (1988) corroborates this when he writes that scientific and technological innovations are most effortlessly and spontaneously done in the language in which people eat, dream, love and curse - in fact the language in which their personality is enmeshed and immersed. The above assertions are valid because the mother tongue is the language through which the child has been relating with members of his community and he/she reasons, dreams, talks, loves and does everything in it.

As Awoniyi has aptly observed, the mother tongue a Nigerian child learns in his/her first six years of life is 'not a garment that he/she can put off when the school uniform is removed; rather it is part of the stuff of which his/her mind is built. It embodies the ideas and attitudes he/she has gained from the environment. Psychologists have also stated that the first 12 years are the most formative ones in the life of a child because attitudes are developed at this period and if the child is helped to lay the foundation of future development in his/her mother tongue, he/she will likely be in a position to build upon it in later years, even in another language (Fafunwa et al, 1989).

The *National Policy on Education* (2004) endorses the importance of the mother tongue at the primary level of education by requiring that the medium of instruction at this stage should be the language of the immediate environment after which there will be a switch over to English. The essence of adopting the mother tongue as the language of instruction at this stage is to enable the child fit in easily in the classroom and allow for effective interaction with the environment. The mother tongue therefore constitutes an instructional area

and a medium of instruction. Thus, the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates that:

- (i) The mother tongue or language of the immediate community would serve as the medium of instruction at the junior primary level of education.
- (ii) English would serve as the medium of instruction at the senior primary, post-primary and higher levels of education. In short, English will be the official language of the country.
- (iii) The three major Nigerian languages, that is Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa would serve as languages of national culture and integration.

Easy as the above analysis seems, it is beset with poor implementation strategy because nothing worthwhile has been achieved since the policy came into limelight. Today, studies and observations have proved that the language of the immediate community (LIC) is mostly used as a medium of instruction in public primary schools because many pupils do not understand English as they do their LIC (Awoniyi, 1982; Elugbe, 1989). It has also been proved that instruction received in the mother tongue at the primary level is richer and more meaningful than that received in a second language. In addition, it has been discovered that most primary school teachers instruct their pupils in all subjects, apart from English, in Yoruba language while Yoruba itself is obviously taught in Yoruba (Adeyinka, 1998). It is common to observe teachers write notes on Elementary Science, Family Living, Social Studies and other subjects in English at the upper primary level and explain the notes to them in Yoruba.

The above situation is not as pathetic as others may view it but a pointer to the fact that the time has come to adopt the proper and full use of the mother tongue in primary education. The UNESCO meeting of specialists of 1951 had submitted that pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue and that the use of the mother tongue should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible (UNESCO, 1953).

It should be stressed that the LIC of a child would help such a child to discover his personality in his/her environment and acquire knowledge and understanding. Thus, the mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education has advantages because it is the key to the success or failure of the whole system.

The above situation portrays the fact that the mother tongue should serve as the medium of instruction, not only at the primary school level but at all levels of education. This is because, it has been proved to be most potent for scientific and technological advancement in the twenty-first century as countries like Japan, China, Taiwan, India, Russia, etc. adopt the mother tongue as media of instruction at all levels of education.

Elugbe (1997) observes that few Nigerians are getting the best education because most of them acquire education through the medium of a language they do not know very well. This is in support of Enoch (1996) who writes that:

When instruction is given in a foreign language, a distorted proportional relationship is established between grasp of the language and acquisition of knowledge, and since only a tiny majority ever grasp such a foreign language, they end up being seen as the only knowledgeable group in society and on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of educating the rest.

Added to the inhibition of speaking the mother tongue in school is the fact that the society itself shows a lukewarm attitude to teaching and teachers while trainees and trained teachers of Nigerian languages feel inferior to their counterparts in other disciplines (Adeyinka, 1998; Olatunji, 2000).

### **Functions of Language**

Language, according to LADO (1961) is primarily an instrument of communication among human beings in a community. According to Bell (1976) language performs three major functions viz:

- (i) For wider communication
- (ii) For educational purposes and
- (iii) For religious purposes.

Language for wider communication serves as a means of interacting with people in or from other nations. For example, English, French, and Arabic are languages used internationally at conferences, meetings, workshops, sporting activities etc. Language is used as a medium of instruction in schools at certain levels of primary education in different areas and English as medium of instruction in later stages. In Tanzania, for instance, three educational stages are marked by the use of three separate media of instruction. The first language is used at the primary level with Swahili taught as a subject. Swahili is the medium of instruction at the secondary level with English as subject and English becomes the medium of instruction at the tertiary level.

For religious purposes, some communities use specific language for public worship. For example, Latin is the language of worship for the Roman Catholic and Arabic is used by Muslims for prayer purposes. The above being the case, the roles of language in education could be said to be dual. It constitutes an instructional area and serves as medium of instruction. It is therefore, necessary at this juncture to examine reasons for teaching the mother tongue in education.

Given that the language of a child's immediate environment allows for effective interaction with the environment, Solarin (1991) points out that the man who is indigenous to this land but insists that his children be reared in English



language is a slave. The following are some of the reasons for teaching mother tongue in schools as highlighted by Obanya (1985):

- (i) To equip the learner with the essential elements of the basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing which are necessary for communication within the language community.
- (ii) To give the individual learner adequate practice in the standard form of the language, to enable him to communicate easily with other users of the widely accepted variety of the language.
- (iii) To equip the learner with the skills of reading at a level that should enable him to use the language as a means of acquiring information and of learning in the broadest sense of the term.
- (iv) To give the learner a deep insight into the working of his language (e.g. its grammar, vocabulary, and sound system).
- (v) To open up to the learner the cultural wealth of the language as embodied in its folklores, music, dance, theatre, oral and written literature.
- (vi) To awaken in the learner a love for the study of the mother tongue.

It is plausible that the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction at the primary level of education will be of immense advantage to Nigeria. Some of the advantages have been identified by Enoh (1996) viz:

- (i) There will be effective and meaningful communication between the teacher and the learner in and outside the school environment.
- (ii) The development of mature judgement is enhanced in the pupils. This is supported by Krolkowski's (1974) observation that through the medium of the mother tongue, the child will not only know but will also understand what he or she is taught'

Based on the foregoing submissions, this study was conducted to find answers to the following questions:

- (1) Do private nursery and primary schools in the area of study teach Yoruba?
- (2) Do they use Yoruba as a medium of instruction at the initial stage of primary education?
- (3) Do pupils love to learn Yoruba as a subject?
- (4) How many qualified Yoruba graduates do they have in these schools?
- (5) What are the problems facing the teaching of Yoruba in private nursery and primary schools?

## METHODOLOGY

A total number of 250 pupils in five registered private primary schools in Abeokuta North area of Ogun state were selected for this study. The breakdown of the subjects revealed that 25 pupils in primary five and 25 pupils in primary six were selected in each school. Also, class teachers in each class were selected. Altogether, ten class teachers participated in the study.

The purposive random sampling technique was used for the selection of five schools from the 25 government approved private nursery and primary schools in Abeokuta North LGA. The criteria for selection were.

- (i) A school must have been ten years old since the date of establishment.
- (ii) It must be at its permanent site
- (iii) It must have adequate classroom(s) and teachers for each class.

Three distinct instruments were used for this study. The first, tagged Pupils Questionnaire on Yoruba (PQY) had two sections. Section A sought to obtain personal information from the pupils while section B contained 20 items on their attitude to Yoruba as a subject and medium of instruction. The second questionnaire, Teacher Questionnaire on Yoruba (TQY), was administered on the teachers. It has two sub-divisions as in the case of the pupils. The instrument was designed to measure teachers' level of involvement in the teaching of Yoruba via the resources available to them in schools.

The third instrument employed was an interview guide, which was administered on the head teachers. The instruments were personally administered on study participants by the researcher and results were collected immediately. A 100% rate of administration and collection was therefore achieved.

The data collected were interpreted in line with the research questions asked. The items in the questionnaires were grouped into 10 sub-titles and the responses (Yes or No) were calculated using percentages. The interview guide served as further information to corroborate the data obtained.

## RESULTS

The results obtained are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3 below:

**Table 1: Pupil's Responses on the Learning of Yoruba**

S/N	Items	Yes	%	No	%
1.	Learning of Yoruba as a subject	100	40	150	60
2.	Use of Yoruba as a language of instruction in early primary	-	-	250	100
3.	Interest in the teaching of Yoruba	70	28	180	72
4.	Use of teaching aids to teach Yoruba	-	-	250	
5.	Possession of Yoruba texts	40	16	210	84
6.	Speak Yoruba in school	-	-	250	100
7.	Speak Yoruba at home	180	72	70	28
8.	Read Yoruba story books	40	16	210	84
9.	Listen to Yoruba Programmes on radio and television	200	80	50	20
10	Learn rhymes in Yoruba	25	10	225	90

While all the pupils responded that they did not speak Yoruba in school, 180 (72%) of them spoke it at home while 70 (28%) either spoke English or another language. Also, only 40 (16%) of the respondents read Yoruba story books while the rest did not read them probably because they did not possess Yoruba texts. The Table reveals that 100 pupils (40%) constituting pupils from two schools responded that they learnt Yoruba as a subject in school which means that three schools did not teach Yoruba at all. In addition, all the subjects responded that Yoruba was not used as a language of instruction at the initial stage of primary education, which contravenes section 2, paragraphs 10 and 13, and section 3, paragraph 14 of the NPE. Even in the two schools where Yoruba was taught as a subject, pupils were not introduced to it at an early stage.

The result obtained on item 3 is related to the fact that Yoruba was not given prominence as a medium of instruction and as a subject as only 70 (28%) of the respondents said they had interest in the language while 180 (72%) responded otherwise. Furthermore, Table 1 reveals that teaching aids were not used whenever Yoruba was being taught while a negligible number of the pupils (40 or 16%) possessed Yoruba texts. Ironically enough a greater percentage of the subjects (200 or 80%) responded that they love to listen to and watch Yoruba programmes (drama) on radio and television while 25 (10%) of them learnt rhymes in Yoruba.

**Table 2: Teacher's Responses on the Teaching of Yoruba**

S/N		Yes	%	No	%
1	Teaching of Yoruba in School	4	40	6	60
2.	Love of Yoruba as a subject	1	10	9	90
3.	Possession of certificate (s) in Yoruba language	1	10	9	90
4.	Knowledge of Yoruba Orthography	1	10	9	90
5	Buying of books for teaching Yoruba	2	20	8	80
6	Use of teaching aids during Yoruba lessons	1	10	9	90
7.	Speak Yoruba to pupils	1	10	9	90
8	Pupils should not speak Yoruba in school	9	90	1	10
9.	Give pupils assignments on Yoruba	2	20	8	80
10	Have cultural dance at end of the year	4	40	6	60

The responses of the teachers in Table 2 above tally with what the pupils' responses were in Table 1. For instance, only four teachers taught Yoruba in their schools which means that only two schools allowed the teaching of Yoruba. In spite of the number of Yoruba teachers in the study area, only one (10%) of them really had interest in Yoruba as a subject. The reason for this is not far-fetched: he was the only one who possessed a certificate in Yoruba (Table 3 below), the only one who had knowledge of Yoruba orthography, the only one who used teaching aids during Yoruba lessons and the only one who spoke Yoruba to the pupils in school while the rest 9 (90%) believed that Yoruba should not be spoken to the pupils.

Despite the negative attitude that majority of teachers showed towards Yoruba, a proportion of them (40%) encouraged cultural dance in Yoruba at the end of the school calendar year which supports the love the pupils had for Yoruba, for Yoruba programmes on radio and television.

**Table 3: Teachers' Academic Qualifications**

S/N	Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
1.	W.A.S.S.C.E.	5	50
2.	W.A.S.S.C.E.+N.C.E. in view	4	40
3.	N.C.E with specialisation in Yoruba	1	10
4.	First Degree	Nil	Nil
	Total	10	100

Table 3 above provides answer to research question 4 which sought to know the qualifications of teachers of Yoruba in the study area, The Table revealed that only one of the teachers obtained a relevant qualification in Yoruba, the remaining were Senior Secondary School Certificate holders or pursuing courses in other disciplines different from Yoruba, None of them was a first

degree holder even though this is not required at this level of education in Nigeria. The interview conducted with head teachers sought to determine the attitude of the respondents to the use and teaching of Yoruba. It also provided answers to research questions 4 and 5 above. The responses of the head teachers were that most parents did not show interest in the use of Yoruba and that some parents specifically added that they had brought their children to private schools so that they could speak English.

### DISCUSSION

Based on the finding in Tables 1 and 2 above, it is evident that Yoruba language has not been embraced as a medium of instruction and as a subject in most private nursery and primary schools in the study area and this could be extended to other private schools in Abeokuta. It therefore implies that the language is still facing stiff opposition in most private schools probably because of the problems highlighted below:

- (i) Most parents took their children to private schools in order to equip them for mastery of English Language, which they regard as elitist language.
- (ii) Proprietors and proprietresses of private schools did not employ qualified teachers of Yoruba because they assumed that the pupils were in the linguistic environment.
- (iii) Instructional materials that will aid the teaching of Yoruba were not provided in schools.
- (iv) Pupils were forbidden to speak Yoruba in school even when it is the language of communication of most of them at home.
- (v) Most proprietors and proprietresses employed less qualified teachers most preferably Senior School Certificate holders to teach in their schools because they do not want to pay salaries of N.C.E holders.

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that private primary schools are needed in order to allow for competition in our society but the issue is that even though public and private schools use the same curriculum, many private schools do not use the language of the immediate community as a medium of instruction for all subjects except English, as the National Policy on Education (2004) stipulates. Thus, efforts should be made by curriculum planners to ensure that the objectives of any level of education are achieved through the right methods and subjects.

It is believed that the necessary understanding and the various concepts embedded in each curriculum area of the school which the child will be exposed to will be better enhanced through the teaching of the mother tongue (Fafunwa, 1989).

In order to achieve the objectives of the use of the mother tongue in education and to move Nigeria forward scientifically and technologically, the following recommendations are hereby offered:

- (i) Private nursery and primary schools should ensure that qualified teachers of Yoruba are employed to teach the subject.
- (ii) Yoruba should, as a matter of compulsion, be allotted time on the school time table.
- (iii) An orientation programme on the importance of mother tongue in education should be carried out by the Ministry of Education on the mass media so that the general public would imbibe it and encourage their children in the use of it.
- (iv) Instructional materials that will facilitate the teaching and learning of Yoruba should be provided in schools by proprietors and proprietresses.
- (v) The Inspectorate Division of the Ministry of Education should always go round to ensure compliance to the provision of the NPE, that the MT should be the medium of the instruction at the early stage of primary education and erring schools should be disciplined accordingly.

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