



THE PLACE OF PIDGIN IN NIGERIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM

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Abstract

The Nigerian pidgin is a hybrid language with unique characteristics. It is not complex; it is easy to learn and understand and also contains elements of our indigenous languages. Moreso, it is not prone to conflict as is the case with our other indigenous languages. The Nigerian pidgin is advantageous to be viable as a language of instruction in our educational system and should be appreciated, encouraged and nurtured as it is obvious that it is a perfect candidate for the position of a national language and the language of instruction in schools.

Introduction

Language is a veritable instrument for communication. It has been described as the most creative instrument for social communication. For Umera-Okeke and Okitipi (2017), language takes different shapes, assumes or displays different behaviours in different environment. This explains the varieties of language in use even among speakers of the same language.

Nigeria is a multilingual nation that has over 400 indigenous languages. In addition to those identified languages, English is the official language/lingua franca while many writers view pidgin as the unofficial lingua franca in Nigeria. Even with the acknowledgement of the existence of these languages, it has been observed that whereas English is promoted other indigenous language and even the pidgin are not given adequate attention. Even when they appear to be accorded recognition in official documents, implementation is a far cry from what it ought to be.

Nigeria pidgin has been described as a language of exigency between people of diverse tongues who lack mutual intelligibility of their language. In Nigeria situation is began as a confect between Nigerian and Portuguese and also between, Nigerians and British. Through pidgin is widely spoken in Nigeria but

its presence is mostly felt on the coastal areas of Edo, Delta, Rivers, Akwa-ibom, Cross River, Lagos etc. in these places, varieties of pidgin are spoken. The reason is that the formation of pidgin involves the amalgamation of both substrate and substrate languages.

Being a multilingual nation, Nigeria is constantly faced with the issue of a national language, that is, language that is officially approved for use in schools and other official matters. To overcome this nagging problem, especially as it concerns educational matters, language policy on education has been put in place. This has been reviewed overtime to accommodate the multilingual nature of our nations. But the pertinent question is: has the issue of language question been resolved? The answer is no! It is evident that the issues surrounding the language of instruction in schools has always been a matter fo concern to both the educators and educational planners. The presence of English as the official language has not really helped matters since even the educated ones in the society hardly master the language. The problem of using one of the major indigenous languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) as a language of instruction will generate more problems as the perceived claim of marginalization by other regions will be the order of the day. The language which appears to be neutral and easy to learn is the Nigerian pidgin but how prepared are we to adopt it as the language of instruction in our schools? What is the attitude of educated ones on the use fo pidgin in schools? How standardized is Nigerian Pidgin orthography? What is the possibility of having enough learning materials including the dictionaries in Pidgin? These questions and more rear their heads and beg for answers as we discuss in this paper, the place fo pidgin in Nigerian Educational System.

Overview of Pidgin English in Nigeria

Nigerian pidgin are English-based pidgin, has been described as a hybrid language comprising elements of both English and indigenous languages.

Onyejelem and Onyejelem (2020) assert that the entrance of pidgin into Nigeria was mode possible through the trade situation between Nigerians and the Portuguese during the period between 1469and1539 and with the British during the 17th century. From that period onwards, pidgin English has become a recognized language code in Nigeria. In fact, pidgin has become the native

language of million Nigerians and a second language for at least another 75 million (Ihimere in Umera-Okeke & Okitipi, 2017). There are also varieties of pidgin. They range from region of use (for instance, Calabar, Lagos, Warri, Sapele etc); to place of use (for instance; formal school setting or markets). Whether situation based or region based variety, many Nigerians accepted Pidgin because it contains some elements of their indigenous language and it is easier to learn and use.

Status of Nigerian Pidgin and National Policy on Education

Nigerian education process starts from pre-primary ad extends to tertiary education. The levels of education in Nigeria are as follows;

- Early childhood (pre-primary)
- Basic education (9 years). This comprises both primary and junior secondary education.
- Senior secondary education (3 years) and.
- Tertiary education.

The Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) has an official document titled National Policy on education which contains policy states on educational matters in Nigeria. Among its many policies is language policy on education. Language policy on education discusses the various functions assigned different languages in various levels of education. According to the document, every Nigerian child shall learn, in the language of the immediate environment in the first three years while English shall be taught as a school subject Every child is required to learn one of the three National languages (Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba) Omotoyiribo, (2016). The document also specifies that English language should be studied alongside any two Nigerian languages in high schools. Here, also English language has been assigned the role of the language of instruction. To indicate its superiority, Onyejelem and Onyejelem (2020) opened that a even it pass is now mandatory for a candidate to gain admission into higher institutions. Also, it is mandatory for first year students in higher institutions to undertake a course in the 'Use of English' and pass the course before they can graduate.

Despite the fact that pidgin is used to facilitate communication link among individuals, serves as a language of both the literate and the illiterate, nowhere was the language accorded any function in the language policy on education. Some writers have tried to cover this obvious lacuna by trying to assign pidgin the status of unofficial lingua franca and insisting that it has obtained a sociolinguistic status in Nigeria. But this is not enough.

In schools and colleges, pidgin has become a medium of casual exchange among students. This indicates that it has metamorphosed from being a mere contact language to a language spoken by the teeming population of Nigeria youths both in and out of school environment. In addition, it is no longer news that it is the preferred language of Nigerian business world and the media. It is therefore worrisome to observe that Nigerian government has neglected it and has more or less forbidden its use in the school system.

If we consider the fact that many school children already speak Pidgin before they start school and those who did not, pick it up within a few weeks of starting school (Njoku and Njoku, 2014).

We cannot fail to ask why our government has failed to officially recognize this language that is more or less home grown and easy to learn and use by many people as against English whose mastery is more difficult to gain.

Again, the policy also recommends that where the mother tongue cannot be used, language of the immediate community which the child speaks is recommended. Despite this pronouncement, it is sad to note that even where pidgin is the language of the immediate environment, of instruction. Rather, it has been relegated to the background in schools even in such places like Sapele, Warri etc where it has even assumed the status of Creole.

Experts have declared that the importance attached to language largely determines its suitability as a medium of instruction (Ibrahim & Gwandu, 2016). With reference to pidgin, it can be deduced that not much importance is attached to it by government and educational planners. This explains why they did not deem it fit to use it as a language of instruction in schools or even teaching it as a school subject.

Problems of Inculcating Pidgin as a Medium of Instruction in Nigeria Educational System

Nigerian pidgin is easy to learn and has limited vocabularies. These obvious strengths when viewed from a different perspective also count as its

disadvantages. These and many more are factors which militate against the use of Pidgin in our school system. Umera-Okeke and Okitipi (2017), assert that pidgin has limited vocabularies, grammatical structures and seems to lack rules that govern its usage. Sentences and expressions in pidgin can be fragmented and full of errors. In addition, some writers have maintained that pidgin hampers proficient use of English and also retards progress in the acquisition of good English. This belief has explained why some people largely attribute the poor performance in English language to the use of Pidgin. Apart from the above Onyejelem and Onyejelem (2020) assert that it takes a long while for students who come from homes where pidgin is the first language to internalize English lexical items and vocabulary.

The absence of zeal by our administrators to adopt pidgin as a language of instruction in schools or even as a second subject may be connected to our quest for technological advancement. We are in the age of globalization and English happens to be a global language. Many people are of the opinion that adopting pidgin as a language of instruction will draw us back technologically. We may not be able to communicate with the outside world and this will deal heavy blow to technologically. No wonder Mitsugi in Onyejelem and Onyejelem (2020) posits thus: if you speak pidgin, you think pidgin and you write pidgin.

Viability of Adopting Pidgin in Schools

Pidgin, no doubt, is a unique language that has cut across the entire nation, on the versatility of pidgin, Umera-Okeke and Okitipi (2017) maintain that the language is evolving and still has room for expansion to the extent that it has various forms used by different people. Similarly, one cannot fail to notice that pidgin has an edge over, English in the sense that it takes a longer period of time to learn English.

Most often, mastering English requires that one must attend a formal school with pidgin one may not need to have access to formal education to master it and it takes a relatively a shorter period of time to master than English.

Because pidgin has deep roots in Nigeria and has even acquired some levels of Nigerianness in its choice of lexical items, its use in schools will boost inter-ethnic relations in Nigeria. Nigerian pidgin brings people together and breaks barriers of ethnic and language differences. It also blends ideas from different

cultures in Nigeria. Where else can this language be more effectively nurtured if not in our educational system?

Related to the above is the fact that Pidgin has a unifying property. Use of any of our indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in schools can lead to conflict and calls for perceived or obvious cases of marginalization. Nigerian Pidgin, on the other hand, is neutral and rather fuel the embers of lies unity will serve as an instrument of unity and solidarity. No single tribe will lay claim to it as it is more or less a blend of English and our indigenous languages. Since languages serve as unifying tools, Nigerian pidgin will equally perform the same role in our educational system if adopted.

Between the standard English and pidgin, it is obvious that a typical Nigerian child understands pidgin easily and better than English. Why then can't we adopt Nigerian Pidgin in our educational system since it is easier to learn, creates a local culture for itself which most Nigerians can identify with and even free us from the complexities surrounding the mastery of the syntax of English language. Njoku and Njoku (2014) question the rationale for excluding pidgin in our educational. System whereas government make use of it in many of their programmes especially in the area of creating awareness and sensitizing the populace. They ask

If the government should allow the people to enjoy all these wonderful programs to widen their knowledge of happenings around them, why then should pidgin be prohibited from entering the curriculum as a medium of instruction in our schools?

Conclusion

Nigerian pidgin is a hybrid language with unique characteristics. It is not complex; it is easy to learn and understand and also contains elements of our indigenous languages. Moreso, it is not prone to conflict as is the case with our other indigenous languages. That Nigerian pidgin is an important part of our local identity is just stating the obvious. With these numerous advantages, one can conclude that pidgin is viable as a language of instruction in our educational system and should be appreciated, encouraged and nurtured as it is obvious that it is a perfect candidate for the position of a national language and the language of instruction in schools.

Recommendations

Having discussed the place of pidgin in our education system, the following recommendations are made:

1. Pidgin should be included in our education system and should also be adopted as the language of instruction in schools.
2. Further studies should be conducted on the Nigerian pidgin to ensure that it has a standardized orthography.
3. Teachers and other individuals in the education sector should be trained on the lexis and structures of pidgin and other aspects of its syntax to ensure adequate mastery.
4. Books and non-book materials should be made available in pidgin. Most importantly, writing of pidgin dictionary is paramount if any meaningful result will be achieved.
5. Federal Government should as a matter of urgency revise the language policy section on the national policy on Education. They should promote the teaching of pidgin and its use as the medium of instruction in schools.
6. In fact, Federal government should fully develop more educational resources and orthographies of pidgin language so as to meet the demands of our multilingual education system.
7. Supervisors and other relevant individuals should pay constant visits to schools to ensure full compliance on the directive to entrench pidgin in our educational sector.
8. Funds should be made available for the implementation of the policy on adopting Pidgin as our national language and a medium of instruction in schools.

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