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LANGUAGE, SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, MATHEMATICS (STM) AND POVERTY ALLIVATION IN AFRICA: A CASE FOR NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight the power of language in poverty eradication. In doing so, the paper examines the concept and causes of poverty and draws attention specifically to the relationship between language power and poverty alleviation as well as the importance of language education in acquisition of scientific and technological skills. Finally, relevant recommendations are made and the roles of Government bodies and NGOs in improving literacy levels of the people were fore grounded as strong factors for effective poverty alleviation in society.

Introduction

Poverty has remained one of the greatest impediments to the development of our nation despite efforts being made by leaders to reduce it to the barest minimum.

This paper focuses attention on the following questions with a view to finding answers to them:

- What is poverty and what are the causes of poverty?
- What role does language power play in poverty alleviation?
- What is the relationship between language and Science?
- Which way forward?

Concept and Causes of Poverty

Poverty means a state of lack or want. It could be lack of money, food, shelter, clothes, communication, expression, education or exposure. The World Bank (1990) define poverty as the inability to attain a minimum standard of living encompassing inaccessibility to food, clothing, shelter,

education etc. The aforementioned implies that poverty has to do with lack. No wonder Oranu (2001) posits that there is poverty of the mind, which manifests more in ideological sterility. The mind is so wonderfully made that it liberates one from all other forms of poverty. At this juncture, some questions come to mind:

- 1 Why has poverty remained an intractable problem in Africa?
- 2 What could be responsible for the high degree of poverty in Africa?
- 3 Does Nigeria/Africa in any way contribute to the impoverishment of its people?

In an attempt to answer the following questions, the paper observes that the quality of education in Nigeria is a suspect. A good number of Nigerians are not in schools in the sense that they do not have the requisite training and experience gotten through education, which is transmitted through the process of language education in order to secure jobs.

No doubt good education is a passport to the elite stratum of any society and lack of that education sends the uneducated to the world of the peasantry. This increases the number of the poor in any society. It is deducible from the foregoing that effective and efficient manpower development anchored on qualitative education for the greatest number is an escape route from the shackles of poverty. The failure of Nigeria to produce employable manpower leads to the recycling and perpetuation of poverty among the populace. In fact, the degree of poverty in Nigeria is traceable to the following:-

Structure of Production Capacity: Nigeria is particularly a consumer nation and not a manufacturing nation. A situation of 70 percent importation and 30 percent exportation breeds unequal balance of trade, which is most unfavourable to such a populous nation as Nigeria. The numerous able-bodied men and women, who would have been gainfully employed in the manufacturing sector find themselves idle. Fortunately for Nigeria, the raw materials for the production of any thing imaginable

are there but unfortunately for her, availability of raw materials does not guarantee economic growth. The few manufacturing companies in Nigeria produce below capacity not because of lack of raw materials but most probably because of inadequate capital and lack of technical know-how. It is important to state categorically that any country that lacks qualitative manpower even in the presence of numerous raw materials will also lack the ability to transform as well as manipulate its environment to its advantage.

Language Power and Poverty Alleviation

Language is a means of communication. We communicate through speech, writing, eye contact and facial expression.

Language is man's identity hence it sets man apart from the animal world. No wonder Brooks (1964) defined language as a universal mark of man.

Language is uniquely human characteristics (Dale, 1984). By implication, human beings are very much at the mercy of the particular language, which has become the medium of expression of their society.

Language plays a very prominent role in the process of formal and informal education especially in the process of enculturation (Okonkwo, 1986) and the inability of an individual to effectively use a particular language; such as English may possible deny him participation in the economic activities that are worthwhile. This possible denial of participation can lead the person to poverty and the poverty status of the individual in question is as a result of his deficiency in communication and language power.

Language is seen as a liberating force for human reasoning for it frees human mind from total dependence on the immediate appearance. Language is so vital in poverty eradication that when one is linguistically deprived, he/she suffers from language poverty, which alienates him from his cultural milieu. It could also be called linguistic deprivation. When one lacks the language power, he is lost in communication; expression of feelings, thoughts, ideas, interpretation, understanding, socialization etc. and the individual is unable to exploit the experiences of life which can

liberate him from the linguistic poverty. Because language has an emancipation power, it emancipates one from the hardships of nature. A person who lacks the power of language power cannot do well as a politician and since oratory is a powerful ingredient of man's emancipation, language is power and command of language is command of power.

However, on the other hand, an individual that has the capacity of effective use of language finds himself gradually free from the shackles of poverty. This is because his ability to interact with people affords him the opportunity to express himself and equally make a show of his potentials. And the fact is that a society which is aware of the potentialities of an individual begins to interact with that individual in an attempt to maximize those potentials. This inevitable leads to the integration of that particular individual into a viable economic activity that will ensure his triumph over poverty.

Furthermore, in the era of globalization, coupled with the privatization programme of the present government in Nigeria, those who lack the power of language and effective use of the lingua franca may not find their feet in any of the competitive sectors of the economy. This is partly because the global economy which is driven by capital and technology requires individual and collective effectiveness in language usage. There is a correlation between language and poverty eradication. An individual with lots of potentials should be able to speak out so that society could give him/her listening ears. One needs to inform society of his arrival in any sphere of human endeavor he or she finds himself. All these are possible through language.

The human society is a competitive arena for those adequately prepared to engage in life struggles and for one to do that well one must be able to convince humanity that he deserves some attention.

Inability to express oneself shuts one out of the society and since no man is an island, one's survival without language is pretty difficult. At this point, I wish to point out some effects of one not having language power:-

- 1) **Retardation of Social Development:** Society may be denied the contributions an individual with language deficiency would have made to speed up societal development if he had language power.
- 2) **Self-Inflicted Inhibition from Social Interaction:** Those who do not have language power alienate themselves from the public. This is an unfortunate situation in the sense that even when they have model ideas on how to move the society forward, such ideas never get public attention because those who conceive the ideas lack the language articulate them for public use.
- 3) **Economic Marginalization:** The participation of some individuals in certain economic activities could be limited by deficiency in language power. This amounts to marginalization of such individual's opportunities that would have made great wealth to come their way. Proper handling of the opportunities with all the promises of recognition and socio-economic enhancement is lost. Consequently, such people find themselves in an unending battle with poverty throughout their lives.

Language and Science

Language is a means for effective expression of scientific applications in order to make them unique and generally acceptable. The eradication of poverty by the use of language can be enhanced solely through communication. Man interacts with another culture by understanding the language of such interest. For instance, Nigeria is a nation with different ethnic groups having different cultures, languages and reasoning. This situation places Nigeria below poverty level. The unique and common language, which would make Nigeria to share the same specie of reasoning, is English Language which is not generally appreciated and accepted in every part of the country. People still believe that their native language is superior to English and this makes socio-economic interaction difficult.

Many disciplines have their respective languages which one needs to know before one can convince people that one is a professional and will be able to function effectively. Today, computer system cannot be operated well if the operator does not know or understand the language of

computer. The field of medicine, has its own language and every other field has the languages that provides business tricks for these respective fields. Such languages come from integration of one, two or more different languages, which cannot be compared with any native language in the world. Consequently, language eradicates poverty through interaction, knowledge and understanding by the user to express his feelings and attitudes.

Linguistic communication is a necessary condition for the existence of a human group. It enables man to achieve a form of social organization and this is why Gbenedio (1994) identifies a dual relationship between language and science. He pointed out that while science has influenced linguistics as well as the literary genres in diverse ways, language provides tools for scientific investigations. By implication without language, science cannot function and without science, language cannot be studied as it is today. No wonder Eze (2000) sees science education as the process of expanding or realizing the potentials of an organized area of study, that aims at exploiting man's material environment systematically for the betterment of life in the society. By implication, it is only through the use of language that such is realized.

The Way Forward

The easiest, and most efficient and universal model of communication is language, whether spoken or written. In Nigeria, as a result of our colonial past, English Language is the official language of communication. It is the language in which instructional materials for schools are presented. It is also the language in which textbooks for science, technology and mathematics are written. Since these subject areas are not indigenous, it is necessary for one to understand and use the English Language if one is to receive instruction in these areas. Inability to communicate in the English Language can pose problems of a socio-economic nature for the affected citizens and thereby adversely affect efforts at poverty eradication.

The programme of poverty eradication involves among other things enlightenment of the target population through information dissemination and instruction. The aim is to enable them to acquire new skills and improve upon archaic, old and ineffective methods of carrying out their

occupations. Such steps will bring about a higher output leading to improved living standards for the people.

The big question is how can any programme of enlightenment and instruction be carried out among Nigerians who cannot understand the English Language? Take the much-talked-about transfer of Technology as an example. This can only be successfully done if the target population can understand the language of the technology to be transferred, which for us Nigeria, is the English Language. Technology cannot be successfully transferred to people who do not understand the language of the technology.

Inability to communicate in the English Language would, therefore, be an impediment to poverty eradication through technology transfer.

If we also look at the methods of some occupations engaged in by people in the rural communities, we find that they require improvements to achieve a better and higher output. For example, to introduce improvements in the methods of farming and fishing by the rural people, it is necessary for them to understand some basic scientific concepts. The farmer should know that plants need nutrients before they can grow well and the fisherman should be able to relate the size of fish to the type of net he should use. The carpenter should know how to make accurate measurements. Unless indigenous instructors are available, instruction in these areas cannot benefit those who do not understand the English Language. This impediment would work against the eradication of poverty. Even the petty trader who does not understand the English language cannot be instructed on how to keep a simple account of his transactions. Language is, therefore, an important factor in the implementation of the poverty eradication programme.

Conclusion

The Nigerian situation as it concerns poverty eradication is precarious and deserves urgent attention. Nigeria runs the risk of not having qualified personnel to administer its affairs, if the trend at the moment is not reversed in favour of effective scheme anchored on qualitative education through language power for the greatest number. The average Nigerian is advised to read newspapers, listen to radio announcements,

and even read novels to sharpen his language base for effective communication. To utilize Language skills for poverty eradication means learning the skills of being an effective listener and being able to differentiate noise from effective language communication. The Nigerian Government and relevant NGOs should focus on inculcation of language skills through language labs on immersion approaches. Universities and other polytechnics including NCE awarding institutions should use General studies (GS) approach to reach the entire students for effective language both for academic purpose and other purposes including commerce and politics.

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