

TOPICAL ISSUES IN LITERACY, LANGUAGE AND DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA.

Obiajulu A. Emejulu

Directorate of General Studies
Federal University of Technology
Owerri, Nigeria

Louisa E. Uwatt

Department of Teaching and Curriculum
University of Calabar
Calabar, Nigeria

Arua E. Arua

Department of English
University of Botswana
Gaborone, Botswana



Reading Association of Nigeria



International Development in
Africa Committee

INTERNATIONAL

Reading Association

800 Parkside Road, P.O. Box 8139,
Newark, DE 1971-8139, USA (302) 731-1600
www.ro-ang.org

Copyright: International Development in Africa Committee &
Reading Association of Nigeria, © 2008

ISBN: 978-2915-53-X

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means - electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise - without prior written permission of the copyright owners.

Cataloguing-in-Publishing Data

Emejulu, Obiajulu; Uwatt, Louisa; Arua, Arua; editors

Includes bibliographic references.

ISBN: 978 – 2915 – 53 – X (Nigerian pbk)

1. Literacy -Nigeria
2. Reading -Nigeria
3. Language and education – Nigeria
4. Literacy and Development – Nigeria

Published by:

International Development in Africa
Committee

A standing committee of

**INTERNATIONAL Reading
Association**

800 Barksdale Road, P.O.BOX 8139

Newark, DE 1971-8139 USA

www.reading.org



INTERNATIONAL
Reading Association
800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139,
Newark, DE 1971 - 8139, USA (302) 731-1400
www.reading.org

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

ACHIEVING UNITY IN A MULTICULTURAL NATION THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERACY AND META LANGUAGE APPROACH.

ODIAKA STELLA IFEYINWA

INTRODUCTION

The popular sayings “unity is strength” and “united we stand but divided we fall” are very relevant if one thinks of a basic factor that can move a pluralistic, multilingual nation forward. Nigeria, a typical multicultural nation, which originated from the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914, has been battling over creating the much-needed unity in diversity.

Part of the attempts at creating intercultural understanding in Nigeria includes providing school curricula that emphasize national symbols believed to create unity (Harber 1988). The struggle to bring about unity in countries with diversified cultures is still on, both internationally and nationally.

In Nigeria, this desire is explicitly presented in the New National Policy on Education, (2004). In Section 1 of the document, under subsection one, one of the national objectives to be achieved through education is the building of a united, strong and self-reliant nation. In subsection five, the first overall educational aim includes “the inculcation of national consciousness and national unity”. In Section four (Secondary Education) under subsection 18, education, at this level, is expected to “foster national unity with an emphasis on the common ties that unite us in diversity”. To achieve this objective, the Nigeria child is “to study the language of his own area in addition to any of the three main languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba”. This exposes the adolescent child to multilingual education, particularly with the addition of the target language – English language – which of course is a compulsory subject. What is implied here is that permanent literacy in English language and the indigenous languages will aid international understanding, learning of skills and national unity respectively. Any educationist who is conversant with the happenings in Nigerian Secondary Schools will attest to the fact that

these policies are superficially implemented in schools. Pupils are not really literate in the indigenous languages. Moreover, the longed for national unity is yet to be achieved.

The objective of this paper, therefore, is to examine the concepts of literacy and multiculturalism and explain how literacy can be used to achieve unity in a pluralistic community. It is therefore important that we examine the concept of literacy.

THE MEANING OF LITERACY

Over the years research work and people's general interest have repeatedly focused on the use of literacy for individual and national emancipation. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in its sixty-two years of existence has organized different literacy programmes with a view to enhancing the quality of life of the third world countries. It is commonly believed that a reasonable acquisition of literacy is needed for an individual or a group of people to perform various skills adequately; it is needed to make a person communicate effectively, within and outside an immediate community. Several definitions of literacy abound, some of which will be examined here.

In explaining his view of what literacy is, Laubach (1961) stated thus:

Literacy is a set of reading and writing skills which facilitate material and spiritual development for individuals and their community.

This definition proves the point that literacy in any language involves one's ability to exhibit, at least, two important language with much dexterity. Perhaps the definition provided by UNESCO as quoted by Jarvis (1990) gives a wider explanation of what literacy means. This definition has it

That a person is functionally literate when he/she has acquired knowledge and skills in reading and writing to enable him or her to engage effectively in all these activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his or her culture or group.

This definition stresses the utilitarian benefit of literacy. It recognizes reading and writing as literacy. Generally, reading, writing and computing are skills that one must acquire to be termed literate. To be seen as literacy skills, they must not be acquired as ends in

themselves. Literacy enables individuals and groups to participate fully and meaningfully in politics, education, religious practices and community development. It leads to tolerance, cooperation and international understanding. When a high level of literacy is acquired by a person or a group, it helps break the walls of division and demystify the beliefs surrounding people's cultural norms, practices and worldviews. Through literacy, the economy of a nation is enhanced and this brings about national development.

The primitive societies were illiterate hence they lacked invention in terms of physical and communal development. Their lives were characterized by continuous dependence on oracy as against the use of literacy skills. Such societies were held spell-bound by superstition, lack of communication and extreme solitude. For there to be any meaningful development, therefore, either in a nation or in a smaller community, literacy has a great role to play.

LITERACY AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A nation is said to be developed if the indigenes of such a nation, through their independence efforts, are able to harness the obtainable resources to their maximum fulfillment (Olajide 2001). It is through education in general, and literacy in particular, that human resources that can bring about social changes can be developed. National development is therefore hinged on individuals, their environment and their economy.

According to Akinpelu (1992), development embraces all the aspirations, dreams and goals of peoples, nations and government. This implies that national development requires facilities which can enable posterity to achieve the dreams and visions of its predecessors and fore-parents. Literacy is the only key to the provision of such facility.

Oni (1992) is of the view that in a society where the adult are ill-informed, poor and disease ridden, dependent and crippled by illiteracy, the futures of their children, who are the future adults becomes precarious and are likely to inherit the ills accompanying illiteracy.

Unity is the springboard that can elevate any nation to great heights. Sustainable development occurs where everyone enjoys maximum peace and plays his or her roles in moving the nation forward. Such peace and unity come where there is tolerance, understanding and good government who gives the required

directives. In a multicultural or pluralistic nation, especially like the type that obtains in Nigeria, creating such unity may look like a Herculean task but it is a possibility.

NIGERIAN AS A PLURALISTIC NATION

Nigeria can be described as a multinational state as it is a geographical area made up of people of diverse cultures. As a multilingual nation, she has experienced dichotomies that have affected her political life and threatened her safe existences on several occasions. The civil war of 1966 to 1970, prolonged military rule and tribal sentiments have had their tolls on the political lives of Nigerians. Irrespective of these, the hope to bring “unity in diversity” as stated in the New National Policy of Education rests on the provision of multicultural education at all levels of the country’s educational system.

A critical investigation into the nature of the indigenes of the nation reveals that they have tenaciously clung to beliefs, attitudes and norms associated with their places of origin. Even some highly educated Nigerians are guilty of this. Such negative attitudes and beliefs widen the gaps among various tribes and localities making it impossible for inter-tribal understanding to be established. The government’s plan for students to study at least one of the national languages had not bridged the gap. With student’s negative attitude to reading, especially in the mother tongue, one wonders if the expected literacy for national unity will ever be achieved through this means.

CREATING UNITY THROUGH MULTICULTURAL LITERACY

Multicultural literacy is a literacy programme planned to help members of a multilingual society cope with the challenges facing them. Related to this is multicultural education that allows for all ethnic groups within a society to celebrate and learn about their own culture. It means competence in multiple cultures and it is for all students. In such a dispensation, every minority language is recognized and not just a few prominent ones. To ensure that there is unity through multicultural education and literacy, the government, parents, the schools and the pupils have various roles to play.

In the first place, the government has to recognize the importance of multicultural literacy or education and include same in the school curriculum.

Teachers should adopt methods in class than can enable students to learn from one another's culture. Through the method of structured conversation, teachers can help students appreciate the richness of the culture of their classmates. This will promote intertribal and international understandings.

At the national level, parents in various secondary schools can liaise with the executive of the Parent Teacher Association (P.T.A) to provide literacy materials emphasizing the cultural beliefs of minority groups and those of the national languages. Ceremonies and literacy activities should happen simultaneously across the nation to create impact.

On the part of the pupils, the awareness that they need special literacy to cope with their pluralistic environment must be created. Attitudes which reflect intolerance, vindictiveness, suspicion and segregation among the different tribes should be debunked. These takes should not be left in the hands of the English language or language teachers alone but should involve all the teachers in the school.

At the community level, basic education in form of adult and non-formals education should be introduced into every community. This should be followed by the gradual introduction of the intricacies of the culture of adult learners as well as those of their neighboring communities and towns. They must be taught to appreciate their culture as well as the cultures of other people. No culture or language should be relegated or regarded as being inferior to another.

The basal readers, literature texts and special write-ups should be replete with indigenous equivalents for words that reflect unity and national consciousness. Some traces of these are seen in some books but more emphasis is needed in this regard.

CREATING UNITY IN A MULTICULTURAL NATION THROUGH METALANGUAGE AND PEDAGOGICAL TREATMENT OF LANGUAGE.

The issue of language must come into play each time a discourse regarding unity in a multicultural nation is carried out. Language and culture are closely knit since language that the expression of a people's culture is made vivid. Other avenues could

be through arts and craft, symbols and dressing. According to Gumperz and Gumperz (1982) "when backgrounds differ, meetings can be plagued with misunderstandings, mutual misrepresentations of events and misvaluation". It is therefore important that both the national and "minority" languages are subjected to language treatment by the use of meta-language. In the field of medicine, in Nigeria, this technique has been used at the grassroots' level to teach housewives (both literate and illiterate) the effectiveness of breastfeeding during the first six months of their children's lives.

Meta-language is the coinage or lifting of words and phrases from a language to another language, providing equivalents for the meanings of words in a language to make its study easy. Meta-language programmes have been done in Igbo and Yoruba to provide the Igbo and Yoruba equivalents of certain scientific expressions and names in English. Apart from this, meta-language involves using language to discuss language. In discussing cultural words that can explain national unity, broad terms that described statement about love, true neighborliness and loyalty can be framed from the different indigenous languages. In incorporating this into the teaching learning process, catalogues of such words can be presented before students for in-depth discussions in different groups. Across the nation, indigenes of other places can be asked to present such catalogues of words and what they mean. In this age of internet the metalanguage of such words can be mailed to different parts of the country thereby furnishing pupils with information about the culture of others. This approach (metalanguage approach) will enable all the students to understand the workings of their language and appreciate it the more.

To work towards unity, the meta-language of minority languages and national languages can be carried out in regard to expressions that relate to values, habits and culture. Common sayings that reflect team spirit, friendliness and nationalism can be documented and popularized through literacy materials.

In addition to using the meta-language approach, pedagogical treatment in form of creation of suitable syllabuses, schemes of work and provision of teaching aids can make multicultural literacy in classrooms effective. Literacy teachers have to be given training about the objectives of this form of education and how to achieve them. Syllabuses and booklets counting the metalanguage of the indigenous language can be prepared. This can be combined with exchange programmes in the schools across the nation irrespective of tribe and religion.

CONCLUSION

National unity in a pluralistic or multicultural setting is instrumental to the social, economic and political development of such a community. This can only be achievable if such a society avoids paying lip service to her language policies. Both national and minority languages have to be given special attention through special language programmes and pedagogical treatment. No language is inferior to another. Since lack of communication is other inhibiting factor to unity in multilingual and multicultural nations, tolerance, cooperation and appreciation of others people's culture are the ingrefioents of nationalism in Nigeria.

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY

REFERENCES

- Akinpelu J.A** (1992). Education and Mass Literacy
Danger and Opportunities for Nigeria in the 21st Century.
Education Today Sept. P41-44
- Arvizu, S. and Saravia Shore, M.** (1990) Cross Cultural Literacy.
An Anthropological Approach to Dealing with Diversity.
Education and Urban Society Volume 22 (4) 364-376.
- Fagbemi, O.**(1997) Literacy, the Reading Culture and National
Development, Lessons for Nigeria in Abe Bayo et al (eds.)
(1997) Literacy and Reading Vol. 7. Pp.59-68.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria** (2004) National Policy on Education
Lagos NERDC Press.
- Gumperz, J.J and Gumperz, J.C.** (1988) Language and the
Communication of social identity in Mercer N.(ed)
1988(Language and Literacy from an educational Perspective
Vol 1. 130-142
- Husen, T. and Postlethwaite, N.** (1994) (eds) The International
Encyclopedia of Education Second Edition Vol. 7 Pp.
3971-3978
- Jarvis, P.** (1990). An International Dictionary of Adult and
Continuing Education. Routledge. London and New Yorks.
- Laubach F.** (1961) Are we losing Both Races? Paper presented at
the International Reading Association Conference, Detroit
Michigan.
- Olajide S.** (2001) Revitalizing the Nigerian Literacy Environment. A
Paper presented at the International Conference to mark the
retirement of Profession Ebo Ubahakwe.