



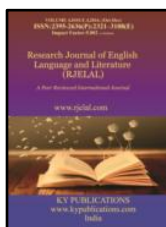
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## THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TO NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENT

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### ABSTRACT

It is incumbent on every responsible government to provide the basic necessities of life to its citizenry. The provision of basic social amenities such as quality education, health care, portable water and good road network culminates in the growth and development of the individual and the nation in general. Development is closely tied to language since it is through it that the developmental policies of government are articulated and executed. In a multilingual and divergent ethnic society like obtainable in Nigeria, none of the numerous indigenous languages can serve this purpose. Given this multilingual and multicultural scenario, the only neutral language that can foster her even development is the English language, which is the lingua franca and official language of the country.

**Keywords:** The English language, Development, Nigeria, Official Language, Multilingual, Indigenous.

### Introduction

In Nigeria, many indigenous languages, including English and other foreign languages are spoken. This makes the country indisputably a multilingual nation. In the midst of the multitude of languages, the English language is the most widely used. The language became implanted in Nigeria as a consequence of factors like trading, missionary activities and colonization. The English language functions as a language of wider communication in the country with its diverse cultural and linguistic group. Indeed, the existence of Nigeria as an entity is deeply rooted in the language because it is the cultural, political and linguistic bridge for all the geopolitical zones of the country (Emenajo, 1990). Bamgbose (1971) on the importance of the English language in Nigeria states that:

Of all the heritages left behind by the British at the end of the colonial

administration, probably, none is more important than the English language. It is now the language of government, business, commerce, education, the mass media, literature and much internal and external communications.

The target of every good government is to improve the living conditions of the citizenry by providing basic social amenities like quality education, access to health facilities, portable water, employment opportunities, industrialization and good road network. These are the real indices of a country's development. The development of any nation is closely tied to language, because it is through language that the developmental policies of government are articulated and executed. In fact, language influences all aspects of human endeavours. Given the multicultural and multilingual nature of Nigeria, it is only the English language that

can foster her even development. Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012) citing Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009) asserts that "the English language will continue to be at the centre of Nigeria's development because there is no immediate alternative among the various indigenous languages". Thus, the English language is an essential ingredient for the development of Nigeria as a nation.

Svartvik and Leech (2006), in their submission on the world wide developmental role of the English language observe that English as a window on the world is looked upon as the best means of achieving economic, social and political development. The English language is therefore, an indispensable element that enhances meaningful development in all its ramifications.

Development is a comprehensive phenomenon that comprises improvement in the totality of peoples' life. According to Bashorun (2011), cited by Owolabi and Nnaji (2013), development is "the optimization of the natural and human resources of the nation for the fostering of political unity, for the official management of the production and distribution of good and services, for the efficient management of production system and for the enhancement of the social and economic well being of the people". Consequently, the English language is the irresistible language as far as development is concerned because as Babajide (2002) posits:

For any nation particularly, in the third world to be relevant and derive maximum benefits from the opportunities that abound in every area of human need, for personal advancement and national development, the English is a *sine qua non*".

This is why the language continues to hold sway as the language of development in most of the developing countries of the world, including the developed nations of Asia, most of who use it as a foreign language.

In the case of Nigeria where there is no any indigenous language to be adopted as a vehicle for national integration and development, English, the one available neutral language should be adopted. There is no doubt that an indigenous national

language is the most ideal for sustainable national development, but since there is none in the country, the English language serves the purpose. For this reason it will sound rather hypocritical and irrational to reject the language on the basis of the colonial vestiges left on it as being advocated some national chauvinists. To development generally

Having looked at the importance of the English language and its contributions to development generally, it is pertinent to highlight and discuss some of the specific areas in which the language is inevitable and indispensable in achieving national development in Nigeria.

#### **The English as Language of Education**

The purpose of education is for national unity and development. This has informed many of the reform programmes in education by successive government in the country. Education is a crucial factor for development in any society and the principle means by acquiring it in Nigeria is the English language. The development of any nation is highly dependent on the quality of its educational system. Nigeria's educational system is operational through the English language as it is the language of instruction, evaluation and examination in our schools from the pre-primary to the tertiary level. Nigerians from different language groups meet at various levels in different educational institutions for the purpose of teaching and learning under the guidance of teachers whose second language is often the English. No country can develop beyond its educational system and its teachers. Thus, Nigerians from divergent ethnic group are integrated through the English language and contribute positively towards the development of the country in various sectors of the economy. Adebisi (1984) subscribes that national unity and subsequent development can be achieved through recourse to the utilization of the language. He advocates that the English language should be assigned development-oriented role within the educational programme of the country.

The enviable status enjoyed by countries like the United States of America, Britain, France, Germany and Russia around the globe today is largely accounted for by their high standards of education. Because the relevance of education in

the development of any society is universally acknowledged, huge investment on it is made the world over.

It is in recognition of the relevance of education as an instrument for national development that the National Policy on Education (1981), states that:

Education will continue to be highly rated in the national development plans, because education is the most important instrument of change as a fundamental change in the intellectual and social outlook of any society has to be preceded by an educational revolution.

The fact that the English language is the language of education shows that it is indispensable for building united and verily nation, hence, it is an important tool for the development of Nigeria.

#### **English as a Unifying Language**

The English language remains the only language through which the numerous ethnic and linguistic groups in Nigeria are united. Unity of purpose in any given country is tantamount to development. Nigeria being a diverse and heterogeneous nation with numerous languages needs a language that can unite the people to achieve national growth and development. The English language is the only neutral language that can do this. In recognition of this fact, Nnandi-Eruchalu cited in Onuigbo and Eyisi (2009), puts it more succinctly that:

It is unrealistic for anybody in Nigeria today to think that national unity can be forged in the country without recourse to the utilization of the English language... it has been the language for the creation of the political entity itself, and also the language of its politics, economic unification and administration. Furthermore, the fact that it is now functioning as the language of Nigerian nationalism cannot be denied.

The present volatile Nigerian socio-political situation where some sections of the country are clamouring for secession and some threatening the eviction of others require the English language more than ever before to avoid disintegration and the threats to its corporate existence. So far, the English language is

the common medium of communication and a unifying force among Nigeria's over 500 ethnic groups (Crozier and Blench, 1992) each with its different language. It is obvious that without the English in a linguistically diverse culture like Nigeria, the environment would have been another episode of the Biblical "Tower of Babel" where everybody speaks but no one understands anybody (Ekpe, 2010). This scenario would have created communication barrier thereby, making political, economic and social development difficult. There is no any iota of doubt that unity through language can bring about development in the country.

#### **English as the Language of Politics and Administration**

The English language is the official language at all the levels of government in Nigeria-Federal, State and Local, because all transactions in government offices are carried out in the language. The use of the English language in government ministries, parastatals, and corporations can be traced to the colonial imprints in Nigeria. During the colonial era, the English language was the only language of communication between the Colonial Administrators and their Nigerian counterparts. The 1922 constitution was the first document that gave an official status to the language in the country. On attainment of political independence in 1960, English still remained the official language of Nigeria. The 1979 constitution further authenticates the official roles of the English language on its position on the language provision for use at the National and State Assemblies by stipulating that: "The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English and in Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba when adequate arrangement have made thereof". With regard to the States, the same constitution stipulates that: "The business of the House of Assembly shall be conducted in English, but the House may in addition to English conduct the business of the House in one or more other languages spoken in the State as the House may by resolution approve". Looking at these constitutional provisions, it could be noticed that the use of the English is unconditional, while that of the indigenous languages is conditional in that they would be used "only" and "when" necessary provisions have been

made. This establishes the fact that English is the sole language for conducting government business in Nigeria.

The English language has dominated the political arena in the country as the language of politics and politicking. It is the language of political campaigns and propaganda. For a politician to communicate with a diverse population with different shades of language, he has to resort to the English language. In essence, most of the developmental and other policies of government are articulated in the English language since the citizenry are from different tribes, and need to understand themselves.

#### **The Language of Commerce and Industry**

The growth and development of any nation depend so much on its economic and commercial activities. Transactions in commerce and industry are mostly carried out in the English language. The demand for and supply of goods and services determine to a very large extent the growth and development of any nation. These socio-economic activities both at the national and international levels are done through a common language which all the operators of the system can speak and understand (Efejirika, 2013). With regard to Nigeria, this common language is certainly the English language. This can be attested for by the fact that transaction in banking halls and in the stock exchange markets as well as inter and intra national business transactions are done in the English language which is mutually intelligible for all the people involved.

#### **The Language of Science and Technology**

Language is an indispensable tool of development and social cohesion especially, in the current era of global information technology. It plays a major role because no technological innovation can be conceived in abstraction that is, without an input from one language or another.

As in other areas of human endeavour, the language of science and technology in Nigeria is obviously the English language. Most of the names of chemicals and scientific formulae are written in the language. Science and technology have their bases in foreign countries and their terminologies have been transferred to us in the language of their

host countries, which is in most cases, the English language. For instance in science and technology, there is hardly any language in Nigeria that will suitably have a word to substitute for *oxygen*, *recharge card*, *computer*, *memory card*, *mouse* etc which are terms used in science and information and communication technology (ICT).

Nigeria is benefiting a lot from science and technology. People are able to read, interpret and put into use instructions found in the world of science and technology. Areas such as medicine, agriculture, communication, arts and crafts have received a boost from modern technology. There are some breakthroughs where certain tools and machines have been fashioned out to suit the needs of local industries. Most of these tools and machines are named in the English language.

#### **The Language of Games and Sports Development**

The role of games and sports in national development cannot be underplayed. Sports and games play a crucial role as foreign exchange earners for the country, hence development. The integration and unification of Nigerians through sports is achievable through the English language. There is no doubt that a country united is head-bent on development. Nigerian sports men and women from different parts of the country and beyond often communicate through the English language. None of the over 500 different ethnic languages has the capacity to unite sports men and women and their coaches more than the English language. This is because instructions are given and received in the language.

#### **Conclusion**

Nigeria's indigenous languages are multiple and diverse and often confined to ethnic borders. The English language is her lingua franca as well as her official language and serves outstanding roles towards her development. It is the language of education, unification, politics and administration, commerce and industry, science and technology and the language of games and sports among other sectors. All these form the backbone of modern development which our country dearly yearns for. Since the target of every responsible government is the promotion of national unity and development, the medium through which these are achieved is of

great importance. One of such media is the English language in Nigeria.

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