



Towards the Reconfiguration of Language Education for the Nigerian Child

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Abstract

In this article, we examine the extant language policies, with particular regard to the Nigerian Child. We take a profound look at the National Policy on Education 1977, the UNICEF Annual Report 1995, the National Policy on Education 1998, the National Policy on Education 2004, the National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria 2007, the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, the Nigeria Millennium Development Goals Report 2010, etc. We seek to appraise the strengths and weaknesses of these policies in order to determine the extent to which they are beneficial to the Nigerian child in the context of plurilingualism and globalization. This appraisal is done employing a tridimensional framework: hindsight, insight and foresight perspectives. We argue for the reconfiguration of language education aimed at functional plurilingualism for the Nigerian child. Recommendations are made in view of enhancing the prospects of functional plurilingualism for every Nigerian child, who will consequently be competent to contribute meaningfully towards the development of Nigeria in particular and mankind in general.

Keywords: Nigerian child, National Policy on Education, language education, Millennium Development Goals, functional plurilingualism

1. Introduction

That the child is the future of every nation is incontrovertible. This explains why it behoves the nation to assume fully its responsibility of ensuring that the educational development of children empowers them to be able to contribute meaningfully and optimally to national and global development.

There is also no doubt that the immense development evident today in the western world is a product of the importance accorded child education several centuries ago, rooted in a revered tradition whereby teachers were appointed by aristocratic families to educate and mould children in such disciplines as Philosophy, Classical Languages, History, Music and Literature. Education was thus aimed at an all-round development of the child in line with the famous Cartesian statement: "*Men sana in corpore sano*" meaning "*a sound mind in a sound body.*" With the benefit of hindsight, this objective is not very distant from that of the Universities, which were to evolve later as centres of moral and intellectual training of "Philosopher-Kings", equipped adequately to rule their societies effectively.

It is pertinent to observe that in a pluralistic linguistic community, like Nigeria with no less than 500 languages (indigenous and foreign) in contact and within the wider context of a global village with several thousands of languages, a no less lofty objective is desirable for the Nigerian child. This implies that language education will only be purposeful for the Nigerian child if it is reflective of language diversity and if it aims at national development and peace.

2. The Nigerian Child's Right to Purposeful Education

Both the U.N. Convention and the O.A.U. Charter recommend that children's right should cover the areas of child survival, child development and child participation. Categorically, the U.N. Convention and the O.A.U. Charter state that "every child (male or female) is entitled to receive compulsory basic education and equal opportunity for higher education depending on individual ability" (UNICEF Annual Report 1995:5-12).

Accordingly, the goals of child education, as espoused by the UN and the O.A.U (UNICEF Annual Report, 1995:12), are as follows:

- (a) Prepare the child for a responsible life in the society
- (b) Promote and develop the child's personality, talents, mental and physical potentials to the maximum level
- (c) Enhance positive societal norms and tradition values
- (d) Foster respect for individual freedom.
- (e) Contribute to the preservation of national unity, territorial integrity, African solidarity and international peace.

It is widely acknowledged that, at independence, Nigeria inherited a legacy of qualitative education. The only University at that moment, the University College, Ibadan was established in 1948 as a colonial campus of the University College, London. The quality of education offered by the University College, Ibadan was comparable to

what was obtainable at every other reputable University in the world. Furthermore, at Ibadan, the Premier of the Western Region, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, introduced in 1958 the *Free Primary Education* in the entire region. The result of these developments is the leading educational pedestal in Nigeria occupied till date by the erstwhile Western Region, which has since metamorphosed into the present day South West Nigeria, Edo State and Delta State.

The first Federal Government scheme designed to enhance child education in Nigeria was the *Universal Primary Education* scheme introduced in 1976 by the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo. The scheme provided free primary education for all children in Nigerian schools. It however recorded little success and suffered immense setbacks afterwards because successive governments did not demonstrate the political will to ensure its continuity. Secondly, though free, participation was not compulsory for all children of school-going age.

On his second coming to power, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo introduced, in 1999, the *Universal Basic Education* (UBE) scheme. This was done in consonance with the spirit of the *Education for All* (EFA) of 1990 to which Nigeria is a signatory and that of the education component of the *U.N. Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs). In 2000, 189 nations made a pledge to free people from extreme poverty and multiple deprivations. This pledge turned into the *Millennium Development Goals* (henceforth MDGs) with the target date of 2015 and eight components. The eight components of the MDGs are as follows:

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) Achieve universal primary education
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) Reduce child mortality
- 5) Improve mental health
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS malaria and other diseases
- 7) Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) Develop a global partnership for development

To achieve Goal 2, universal primary education, it is hoped that by 2015, children everywhere will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling. (cf. www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.html)

Unfortunately, however, the UNDP MDGs Report 2013 reveals that too many children are still being denied their right to primary education and that the world, by 2015, might not meet the goal of universal primary education. Further, the report states that in 2011, 57 million children of primary school age were out of school and more than half of these out-of-school children live in sub-saharan Africa.

With specific regard to the Nigerian child, the *Nigeria Millennium Development Goals Report* (2010:4) released by the Federal Government of Nigeria reports in its executive summary that “in a major step forward, nearly nine out of ten children, 88.8% are now enrolled in school”. We observe that this net enrolment ratio in primary education of 88.8% is certainly a remarkable improvement when compared with the ratio of 68% recorded in 2000, the take-off year of the MDGs. It is however instructive to point out that this figure is not equitable to all parts of the country as further indicated by the Nigeria MDGs Report (2010:4):

Nevertheless, regional differences are stark...In particular, progress needs to be accelerated in the north of the country if the target is to be met.

This implies that the rate of primary education enrolment in the Southern part of the country is higher than that of the Northern part of Nigeria. It is also important to note that the survival rate, which refers to the percentage of pupils who complete primary education, has been on a steady decline: 97% in 2000 but 72.3% in 2008.

As we have earlier submitted above, the introduction of the *Universal Basic Education* (henceforth UBE) scheme in 1999 by the civilian government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo was aimed at fulfilling its commitment to the *Education for All* (henceforth EFA) of 1990 and at satisfying the education component (Goal 2) of the UN MDGS.

The UBE scheme (National Policy on Education 2004:7) stipulates that:

Basic education shall be of 9-year duration comprising 6 years of primary education and 3 years of junior secondary education. It shall be free and compulsory.

It is imperative to remark that that unlike the *Universal Primary Education* (henceforth UPE) scheme of the 1970s, the UBE scheme, right from its inception, is designed to be not only free but also compulsory for all children of school-going age. This therefore serves to correct the major deficit that we alluded to in the UPE scheme.

Further, the vision statement of the UBE scheme, as contained in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) Standard Action Plan (2004:6), is as follows:

At the end of the nine years of continuous education, every child that passes through the system should acquire appropriate levels of literacy, numeracy, communication, manipulative and life skills and be employable, useful to himself or herself and the society at large by possession of relevant ethical, moral and civil values.

The statement above suggests that the UBE scheme is envisioned to equip the Nigerian child with skills and values that will make him or her to be self-reliant, innovative, creative, humane and of good moral conduct for the benefit of mankind in general. It is also significant to observe that the introduction of the UBE scheme has led to the replacement of the 6-3-3-4 system by the 9-3-4 system of education in Nigeria.

However, the UBE scheme has not been insulated from a number of problems. First, the scheme has been denied sufficient funds, by the Nigerian government, required to carry out effective monitoring, supervision and evaluation of the progress of its activities. It is sad to note that most of the funds available for its projects and activities are derived directly from grants by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Project (UNDP). Closely related to the above is the lack of political will by the Nigerian government to adequately fund the educational sector in general. This is attested to by the frequent industrial strike actions often embarked upon by the trade unions such as the *Nigerian Union of Teachers* (NUT) in the Primary and Secondary schools, the *Academic Staff Union of Polytechnics* (ASUP) in the Polytechnics, and the *Academic Staff Union of Universities* (ASUU) in the Universities, to mention but a few. Whereas the UNESCO recommends a national annual budgetary allocation of 26% for the educational sector by all countries of the world, Nigeria, in the 2013 budget, allocated a paltry 8.5% for education as against higher allocations for the same purpose by some other African countries: 31% by Ghana, 23% by Kenya and 27 % by Uganda!

Meanwhile, in 2007, a supplementary policy, the *National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria* (henceforth NPIECDN) was formulated. The then Minister of Education, Dr. Sayyad Abba Ruma, presented the policy as an integrated approach designed for children of age 0 to 5 years. In his foreword to the NPIECDN, Dr Ruma affirms that:

The ultimate aim in the provision of early childhood care and development is to provide care for the child while the parents are at work and to prepare the child for further education. This integrated approach will definitely ensure improved care and support for the growing child thereby giving it a good head start in life.

The justification for the formulation of this policy is significant and compelling. According to the NPIECDN (2007:2), the state of child education in Nigeria is not cheering: 30% of 6 to 11 year old children are not in school. Besides, less than 20% of children of ages 0 to 5 years are not attending any form of organized child care or pre-school programme. The policy (NPIECDN 2007:13) thus aims at working in concert with the UBE Act, which provides for the establishment of integrated early childhood development day care and crèche centres in public primary and junior secondary schools in Nigeria.

In addition, the NPIECDN (2007:17) recommends the introduction of the “child into the social world, using your mother tongue with pride.” This endorses the use of the mother tongue in educating children of ages 0 to 3. However, no language is recommended for educating children of ages 3 to 5. This, to our mind, is a shortcoming of the policy. We shall return to this later.

To conclude this section, we wish to suggest some solutions in order to mitigate some of the major policy shortcomings identified above. First, the Federal Government should increase considerably its annual budgetary allocation to education in the light of the 26% recommendation by UNESCO. This will help to shore up the prospects of producing qualitative educated youths for the future. The current trend of relying on grants by the World Bank and the UNDP for the funding of the UBE scheme projects should be discontinued.

Incentives should be provided by the Nigerian government to address the problems of declining enrolment ratio by the children of school-going age and that of poverty-driven declining survival rate of pupils in the basic education. In the true spirit of free education, free tuition, free books, free school uniforms, free lunch, free medical treatment, free raincoats during rainy season, and free transport should be provided. More schools should be built and made accessible to children.

Allied issues like child labour in farms, marketplaces, etc, child prostitution and the engagement of children in street hawking, alms begging during and after school hours should be legislated against and appropriate sanctions imposed on culpable parents and guardians.

The need to not only train adequate manpower and teachers for all levels of education (from basic to tertiary) but also to highly remunerate them can never be overstressed.

3. Language Education and the Nigerian Child

Nigeria's policy on language education is contained in the various versions of its *National Policy on Education* and the *National Policy for Integrated Early Childhood Development in Nigeria*.

On language education for the Nigerian child, the *National Policy on Education* (1977: 9) states that:

In addition to appreciating the importance of language in the educational process, and as a means of preserving the people's culture, the Government considers it to be in the interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his own Mother-Tongue. In this connection, the Government considers the three major languages in Nigeria to be Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba.

We consider the selection of the three major Nigerian languages for learning in schools to be quite disturbing in a multi-ethnic and a multilingual country. More widely-spoken languages, which we can refer to as "semi-major Nigerian languages", ought to be included in this list. Bamgbose (1978:65) identifies about 513 languages and clusters in Nigeria. Although some linguists put the figure at about 400, what is clear is that the selection of only three languages does appear to be inadequate and non-representative of all the Nigerian languages.

For pre-primary education, the *National Policy on Education* (henceforth NPE) (1977:10) states, among other things, that "Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community." This implies that the early childhood/pre-primary school pupils ought to take all their subjects in a Nigerian language: either their mother-tongue or the language spoken in their environment. The policy thus favours the acquisition of Nigerian languages by children. A demerit of this policy is that there is no room for the teaching and learning of foreign languages by the pupils, particularly, within the context of globalization.

Meanwhile, it should be noted that, for primary education, the scope of language acquisition is broader. The NPE (1977:13) specifies that:

Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and, at a later stage, English.

Notice the addition of English at the primary school level. The recommendation for primary education is similar to that of the secondary education (NPE 1977:17), which reads:

In selecting two Nigerian Languages, students should study the language of their own area in addition to any of the three main Nigerian Languages, Hausa, Ibo and Yoruba, subject to availability of teachers.

English is classified as a core subject, compulsory for all students, while French and Arabic languages are simply non-vocational electives. But the recommendation is quite objective in the use of the phrase "subject to availability of teachers" because what perhaps was the main problem of implementing this policy since inception was the shortage of teachers of Nigerian Languages. The erstwhile *National Institute for Nigerian Languages* located at Aba, in Abia State seemed not to have lived up to expectation in terms of training and producing sufficient teachers for Nigerian languages.

The study of Nigerian languages at childhood is a necessary tool for preserving our cultural heritage and identity, but the selection of only three of these languages out of a plethora of indigenous languages is faulty. Moreover, the ancillary status accorded foreign languages such as French and Arabic cannot be convincingly justified. We therefore argue for a broad-based language policy as opposed to the restrictive policy contained in the NPE 1977. We shall return to this soon.

To demonstrate the resolve by the late Nigerian military Head of State, General Sanni Abacha to implement his 1996 declaration that French shall be the second official language of Nigeria, the NPE 1977 was radically revised and a new version published as the *National Policy on Education* (henceforth NPE) 1998. The NPE (1998:9) declares that:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria, and it shall be compulsory in schools

To this end, the NPE (1998:13) states that in the primary schools, three languages shall be compulsory for the pupils to learn, namely, (i) the language of the immediate community (ii) English and (iii) French. A similar recommendation is made for children in both the junior secondary and senior secondary schools. In the junior secondary school, the NPE (1998:18) specifies that the compulsory subjects to study shall include four languages, viz, (i) English (ii) French (iii) the language of the immediate community to be studied as L1 and (iv) another major Nigerian language to be studied as L2. In the senior secondary school, the compulsory subjects, according to the NPE (1998:20), shall include three languages which are English, French and another major Nigerian language.

In our opinion, the NPE 1998, despite its imperfection, presents the best prospects so far in the history of Nigeria for the teaching and learning of the French language by the Nigerian child. It stands out as a well thought-out policy, geared towards equipping the Nigerian child with the knowledge of French right from the primary school to the end of the secondary school education. Its imperfection, however, is the preclusion of the Nigerian child in the early childhood/pre-primary school from the same enterprise at an impressionable age which linguists have agreed to be most appropriate for multiple language acquisition. We shall return to this later.

In 2004, the NPE (1998) was also revised. The revision, which led to the publication of the *National Policy on Education* (2004), was primarily a response to some major systemic changes in the educational sector. The UBE scheme, a nine-year programme, was introduced to run from primary to junior secondary school. With regard to language education, the NPE (2004:4) states that:

For smooth interaction with our neighbours, it is desirable for every Nigerian to speak French. Accordingly, French shall be the second official language in Nigeria and it shall be compulsory in primary and junior secondary schools but non-vocational elective at the senior secondary school.

French thus suffers a policy reversal, at the secondary school level, to the NPE 1977 status: a mere non-vocational elective from the compulsory subject status it enjoys in the NPE 1998. It is important to observe that such frequent policy reversals and policy somersaults have been the bane of the Nigerian educational sector since independence and account largely for the slow pace of national development.

Besides, as we observed in the NPE 1977, in the NPE 1998, as well as in the NPIECDN 2007, no mention is made of French as one of the languages to expose the Nigerian child to at the early childhood/pre-primary educational level. Article 14(c) of the NPE (2004:5) states that at the early childhood/pre-primary education, "Government shall ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment." Also as demonstrated in the NPE 1977 and in the NPE 1998, the NPE 2004 favours the acquisition by the Nigerian child of other Nigerian languages apart from the three major Nigerian languages. To this end, the NPE (2004:5) envisages, in article 14 (c) to:

- i) develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages*
- ii) produce textbooks in Nigerian languages*

It should however be noted that, as at moment of writing this article, very few Nigerian languages have been adequately documented in terms of orthography and grammar. The *National Institute of Nigerian Languages*, Aba, Abia State, whose primary assignment was to realize these objectives was curiously scrapped in 2006 and subsequently subsumed in 2007 to become a centre in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, because of a petty political acrimony between the then president, Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, and Chief Orji Uzor Kalu, the then governor of Abia State. This development epitomizes the frequent policy reversals and policy somersaults that have often characterized the educational landscape in Nigeria.

As contained in the NPE 1998, the NPE (2004:8) affirms that the compulsory subjects in the primary school shall include four languages namely, (i) language of the environment (ii) English (iii) French and (iv) Arabic. The NPE (2004:9), in sections 19 (e) and 19 (f), adds as follows:

- (e) The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject.*
- (f) From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects.*

Above, we observe that French, the proposed second official language in Nigeria is rightly accorded the status of a taught compulsory subject in the primary school, which is the first six years of basic education.

During the final three years of basic education, which is the junior secondary school, the NPE (2004:12) recommends that the core subjects shall include four languages namely, (i) English (ii) French (iii) language of the environment to be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oralcy as L2 and (iv) one major Nigerian language other than that of the environment.

Notice that while the recommendation on English and French remains the same as that of the NPE 1998, some modifications are introduced in the NPE (2004) regarding the approach to the teaching of Nigerian languages: a certain degree of flexibility is advocated to truly reflect the actual state of documentation of the Nigerian languages to be taught.

In the senior secondary school, the NPE (2004:13-14) presents the core subjects to include only two languages: English and one major Nigerian language. French is listed as a non-vocational elective. We need to note that this development signifies a return of French to its status in the NPE 1977. While it is difficult to rationalize this policy reversal and

policy somersault, it remains an incontestable fact that the goal of making the Nigerian child a global functional multilingual is clearly inhibited.

It has been observed that language development in children is one of the most remarkable accomplishments, which occur during the first years of life. There are two sides to it: productive speech, which means the speech a child produces, and receptive speech, which means how a child receives and understands speech.

According to Schickedanz & Forsyth (1993: 210-227), productive speech during the first year of life is called prelinguistic. It involves no use of words. It includes crying and cooing at four months of age. From five months to eight or ten months, most children begin to combine consonants with vowel in alternate forms like "mama mama" or "dada dada." This is known as babbling. The first real word said by a baby is often to call a very familiar object or person. The first word may be a simplification of an adult word for example "foo" instead of "food," "wayer" instead of "water." The child has thus advanced from being incomprehensible to being comprehensible; in other words, from prelinguistic to linguistic. At about fourteen to eighteen months of age, most children learn to use the suprasegmental features of adult language, for example, intonational patterns. The final stage of speech production is between eighteen and twenty four months of age, like, "No want," "Mummy rice" "Daddy car" "Where bottle?" Brown (1973) refers to this as Toddler's Telegraphic speech because it is similar to the way telegrams are constructed. After this stage, most children learn to be able to construct full sentences.

The second side of language development, as earlier mentioned, is receptive speech. Infants can differentiate between human speech and other sounds as early as from one month of age (cf. Eimas et al, 1971; Harris & Coltheart, 1986). But they respond more positively to infant-directed speech otherwise known as "Motherese" than to adult-directed speech (cf. Cooper & Aslin, 1990). From 12 months of age, infants understand much more of what is said than what they themselves can actually say.

Theories of language acquisition can be categorized into two: external versus internal factor or nurture versus nature factor. The external or nurture factor is anchored on the Learning Theory expounded principally by B. F. Skinner (1957). According to this theory, language is primarily learned from and influenced by contact with the environment, a kind of operant conditioning consisting of a *stimulus* emitting a *response*. Language is not innate in human beings. If we learn and speak our mother tongue, it is because it is spoken around us. According to learning theorists, the three main techniques involved in language acquisition are imitation, reinforcement and punishment or negative feedback (Schickedanz & Forsyth 1993: 221). It should, however, be pointed out that the demerit of the Learning Theory is that it cannot account for the ability of children to generate sentences they have never heard nor uttered before.

The internal or nature factor is related to the Nativist Theory, which in turn is anchored on Chomsky's Generative Grammar. Inspired perhaps by his famous critical review of B. F. Skinner (1957) Learning Theory espoused in *Verbal Behaviour* (1957), Chomsky's Generative Grammar holds that the child is endowed with an innate Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Chomsky 1957, 1965). This enables a child to derive a grammar from the language he or she hears. A child is born knowing how to construct grammar, Chomsky claims, just as birds are born knowing how to fly (Schickedanz & Forsyth 1993: 221).

In spite of all criticisms, it seems that the Nativist Theory is able to account sufficiently for the innateness of the LAD. It accounts therefore for the linguistic competence of children to "on the basis of a finite and accidental experience with language, produce or understand an indefinite number of new sentences" (Chomsky 1957:15). It also accounts for the attested universal nature and orderly progression of language development in human beings. In every language, the learning process follows certain paths and language structures are attested in the same sequential order. This underpins the concept of Language Universals. It is our belief that every child has the ability to learn as many as five languages because of his or her cognitive malleability because, as Chomsky (2007: 3) posits, the human "genetic endowment sets no limits on the number of attainable languages." For example, in the schools of Louisiana in the 18th and 19th centuries, French was used for classes in all subjects and other activities in the mornings. In the afternoon, until dinner, only English was spoken. Thanks to this, every scholar in Louisiana is perfectly bilingual (Bressand, 1996:2). Another example is Lebanon which, for about 150 years now, has been operating a bilingual educational system. Arabic and French were the idioms of instruction at the outset. Since independence in 1943, there has been a change to Arabic and English. The system has ensured that educated Lebanese are all perfect bilinguals (Bressand, 1996:3). Also in Saarland, Sarrebruck became, perhaps, the first bilingual University (German and French) in Europe because, just after the Second World War, Emil Straus, the then Minister of Education, in a bid to introduce bilingualism, "imported" about 100 young teachers from France with a strict order to speak only French as the language of instruction and communication to the pupils in nursery schools and primary schools (Bressand, 1996:11).

The need for a plurilingual Europe has gained prominence since the mid 80s. In 1984, the Ministers of Education of the European Community countries recommended a "practical command of two languages in addition to the mother tongue" (Bressand, 1996:7). In 1993, 60 delegates (ministers, language educators and diplomats), drawn from all the countries in Europe, signed the *European Charter for Plurilingual Education*. The charter expressed that, in addition to the mother tongue, another European language should be spoken to the children in Kindergarten. A certain number of subjects should be taught in the two languages. Towards the end of primary school, a second modern language should be introduced so that at the end of compulsory schooling, a student will be able to speak three languages "which should be the normal range of linguistic ability of every European citizen" (Bressand, 1996:34). The signatories concluded by sounding a note of warning (Bressand, 1996:35):

The signatories wish to remind all the European Ministers of Education and culture of how history will judge them if the European Institutions and Governments do not turn their backs on monolingualism and linguistic imperialism, and rapidly take concrete steps to instigate the plurilingualism which could prove to be a cohesive factor in uniting Europe and opening it up to the outside world.

The statement above justifies the call for a plurilingual Europe. André Martinet explains the reasons in clearer terms in his preface to José Ferreras's book, *Language Learning in the European Community Countries*, as follows:

First of all, why opt for European plurilingualism? The English speakers are in no way concerned about this, for they can just trust to present trends, working to their advantage. However, the fact that English dominates the world scene in no way implies that either within the European Community as it is today, or in the no doubt wider form it will have one day, it will become the only language of community between the member states. The use of a language has profound cultural implications. There has long been a strong European Culture, to which Great Britain has brought a great deal, just as have all the other countries in the community. All the languages spoken in Europe have been and remain the vectors of European culture, and we would all be the poorer if we were to sacrifice any one of them.

And recently, precisely on May 22 2008, the *Council of the European Union* resolved, inter alia, to preserve the linguistic diversity of Europe and to respect the parity among European languages. But the desire to have a plurilingual Europe is being done within the context of globalization. European countries are now interested in the teaching and learning of non-European languages by children in European schools. Article 3 of the *Council of the European Union* official journal puts it succinctly by inviting member states to:

promote the learning of their national languages in other member states including through greater use of distance learning technologies, and encourage the learning of less widely used European languages, and non-European languages.

If Europeans believe that Europe will be better placed as a plurilingual community rather than as a monolingual entity, it is our conviction that Nigerian children will be more useful to their country, in particular, and to the world, in general, if the language policy is modified to make them functional plurilinguals. In the 18th and 19th UNESCO General Conference (1974-1976), resolutions were adopted in favour of bilingual education. This was followed by the creation, in October 1998, by the UNESCO Executive Board, of a Consultative Committee on Linguistic Pluralism and Plurilingual Education (*Le monde bilingue*, 1999:26). It should also be noted that in many Francophone West African Countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Bénin Republic, Cameroon (already officially bilingual) and Togo, a bilingual language education policy has been adopted in all schools: French and English are compulsory subjects in the school system from primary school through secondary school to Baccalaureat level (i.e. HSC or GCE A/L equivalent).

In effect, for early childhood/pre-primary education in Nigeria, we propose the introduction of four languages for instruction and communication, as follows: (i) the mother tongue; (ii) English as the first official language; (iii) French as the second official language; and (iv) the Nigerian language spoken in the immediate community. The mother tongue should enjoy the pride of place in the classroom but where the pupils come from different ethnic groups, as is often the case in urban areas in Nigeria, the language of the immediate community should be used.

The use of the Mother Tongue is preferred for several reasons. First, it has been observed that most children of "elite" parents in Nigeria attend private nursery schools where English is the only language of instruction and communication. Similarly, at home, "elite" parents communicate with their children in English, perhaps, as a status symbol. This tendency is quite detrimental to the future of our indigenous languages. The adoption of mother tongue in Nursery School will, therefore, help to preserve our ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Second, the use of the mother tongue will facilitate the acquisition of language universals by the child. This will in turn make the acquisition of other languages by the child an easy task. This is based on the minimalist assumption by Chomsky (1995:388) that:

Languages have no rules at all in anything like the Traditional sense ... there are universal principles and an array of options (parameters) as to how they apply. There is a single computational system (CHL) for language and only limited lexical variety in its application to different languages.

We argue that English should be retained as the first official language on grounds of convenience or expediency and as a result of our historical relationship with the language. The reasons for supporting French, the second official language, are:

1. It is the second most widely spoken language in the world.
2. It is the lingua franca of our neighbouring countries.
3. It will facilitate trade and commerce with our neighbouring countries. Nigeria therefore stands to be the greatest beneficiary of such economic activities because of our immense human and industrial resources.

The fourth language we propose for instruction and communication at the early childhood/pre-primary education is the Nigerian language of the immediate community. This is needed by the Nigerian child for survival purpose and for boosting interpersonal relations and national unity.

For basic (primary to junior secondary) education and senior secondary education, we argue that the four languages introduced at the early childhood/pre-primary education should be vigorously maintained. This will help to make the Nigerian child a functional multilingual in the future. Besides, it will certainly enhance the cognitive, imaginative and creative competences of the Nigerian child for other academic fields like science, technology, medicine, law and philosophy, psychology, to mention but a few. For according to Claude Hagège (1996:16):

As far as unilingual children introduced sufficiently early to a second language are concerned, numerous studies show they are ahead of their contemporaries in their ability to deal with the abstract.

4. Conclusion

The child remains the pivot of the future and growth of every nation. As a developing nation, empowering the Nigerian child through purposeful education has become rather imperative. The Language Policy as contained in the current *National Policy on Education* (2004) is seen to be working at cross purposes with this objective because, as we have seen above, of its restrictive nature. It does not take advantage of the child's cognitive malleability and innate aptitude for plurilingualism with regard to the acquisition of Nigerian and foreign languages. Some francophone West African countries have made French and English compulsory subjects in their school system. The story is the same in Louisiana: French and English have been compulsory in the school system since the 18th century. In Lebanon, it was at the outset, Arabic and French but recently Arabic and English due to a policy shift. In some communities in Germany, for example, Saarland, German and French have been adopted since the post world war era. And more recently, European countries have adopted plurilingualism that seeks to accommodate both European and non-European languages. We submit that the Nigerian child will be more useful to her or his country in particular and to the world in general, in the areas of economic, social, diplomatic and technological developments, if we tread a similar path.

Therefore, we argue for the reconfiguration of language education in Nigeria. Theoretically, our argument is anchored on Brown (1973) post toddler's telegraphic speech hypothesis according to which a child from the age of twenty four months is able to construct sentences, having been innately endowed with, following Chomsky (1957, 1965), a Language Acquisition Device that prepares him or her to grapple easily with, according to Chomsky (1995), language universals which are similar in human languages and which, as postulated by Chomsky (2007: 3), sets no limit on the number of languages that can be acquired by the child. From the early childhood/pre-primary education to senior secondary education, we propose that the Nigerian child should learn at least four languages, particularly, her or his mother tongue, English, French and the language of the immediate community. It is our belief that this model will enable the country to produce functional plurilinguals who will be nationally and globally relevant.

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