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A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPRAISAL OF ARABIC USAGE IN TEACHER PREPARATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The proposal of Arabic as medium of education has constituted a critical issue of concern amongst some Nigerian linguistics and language educators since the last decade of twentieth century. This is due to the popularity of Arabic not only as an international language but also as a unique indigenous African language which is central to educational development in Nigeria. There can be no meaningful education without the development of an efficient means of transmission, which is language. Language and education, therefore, are two critical issues that have played dominant role in the ways of life and governance in Africa. Basically, Arabic, the language of Islamic education, seems to occupy a prominent position in the roots of the Nigerian culture where there exists no much distinction between the profane and the sacred dimensions of life. Thus, all activities and instrument of governance and survival are clothed in religious ritual, language and symbolism. This explains the reason why the move to prepare teachers for the various basic education levels (i.e. lower, middle and upper) in Nigeria, using Arabic as a medium of instruction was initiated. The idea was advanced by a set of Muslim educationists particularly from Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Zamfara, Kwara and Adamawa States. Therefore, this article, based on Farrant's concept of educational pedagogy, gives a sociolinguistic appraisal on the use of Arabic as a medium of instruction in teacher preparation at the Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE) awarding institutions in Nigeria. The article argues that students who had their basic education from pre-primary to secondary levels in an Arabic-oriented environment will have better understanding of the concepts being taught at the tertiary level if the instruction is conducted in the same medium. Finally, the article posits that the educational system in Nigeria should be seen to be promoting bilingualism in notable international languages in Africa such as Arabic and English in order to realize the Millennium Development Goals' target on Education for All.

Key words: *Sociolinguistic, Arabic Usage, Teacher Preparation and Nigeria*

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INTRODUCTION

The language of instruction has, for a very long time, been one of the crucial subjects of discussion by researchers because to a large extent it serves as a key to education. This is especially this way at the lower and middle level of basic schools where many children come in contact with formal education for the first time. Elucidating on the subject, Ogbonna (2001) submits that the Language a child is confronted with when he starts school could determine whether he finds schooling interesting and rewarding or boring and unfulfilling. It is generally believed that the child's creativity is enhanced if he comes to meet an already familiar language at school. By contrast, a child's spirit of innovation may be inhibited if he is confronted with an unfamiliar language at school. On the whole, the objective of this study is to plead the cause of an equitable and transformative education in Nigeria using Arabic as an alternative instructional paradigm in the global learning society of the 21st Century.

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS

Philosophical analysts also contend that operations and discussions involving logical reasoning can hardly be meaningful or useful unless the relevant concepts are properly understood by all concerned (Nwosu 1998). In view of this, it will not be out of place for us to embark on clarification of some key concepts that are considered germane to the title of this article. Consequently, an examination of what the phrases "Teacher Preparation", "Language of Instruction" and "Arabic Medium Education" connote, becomes necessary. This will, no doubt, eventually lead us to the thrust of the article where prospects of Arabic usage and its implication for teacher preparation at the basic school levels in Nigeria, are discussed.

The concept "Teacher Preparation" according to Farrant (In Isyaku 2005:9), is essentially a period of orientation of thought and outlook of education. This period should enable the teacher trainee not only to teach well but also to develop ability to live exemplary lives, demonstrate high sense of responsibility, initiative and honesty. This assertion has prompted Salawu (1991) to state that teaching as a profession demands that the teacher does not possess adequate mastery of subject-matter only. He must serve as a good model to his students. Teacher educators would have been half-way in their tasks of preparing if they appreciate that their product should develop a capacity of originality of thought. The need to reconstruct a new paradigm for teacher preparation and teacher professionalism especially in this era of moral decadence all over the African continent becomes almost an obsessive imperative, most especially in Nigeria.

Incidentally, education has long been identified as a sure key that opens the door to national development, and teachers as the rightful persons that turn that key (Isyaku, 2000). Looking at the Nigerian National Policy on Education and the Minimum Standards of the National Commission for College of Education (NCCE) with regards to what both documents say about teacher education and the teacher, one will infer that "the teacher is conceptualized as a professional and a very important agent of National Development" (Isyaku et al, 1998:144). This is borne out by the following assertion:

Education in its broadest sense provides the backdrop against which development acquire its meaning. The Nigeria of our collective dream is one that is free and democratic, just and egalitarian, united, strong and self-reliant with a great dynamic economy, and above all, a land with bright opportunities for all the citizens. The NCE Education Program generally aims at producing teacher with high personal, and teachers who are educated with appropriate skills and intellectual depth that would facilitate the easy achievement of the national goals… *(NCCE, 2009, Minimum Standards of NCE Teacher Education).*

Considering the efficacy of the above, it is quite obvious that our education policies seem brilliant, but need to be given what they lack, i.e. life, action and sincerity. We should now be bored of crafted agenda whose spirit is permanently glued to the paper on which they are written!

For teachers to succeed in doing what they are expected to do, there is every need to adapt the curriculum and teaching methodology at various levels of education to the changes occurring in the teaching/learning process in the context of emerging information order. Since teaching and learning basically take the form of communication mainly through language, the choice of appropriate medium of instruction at the basic school levels becomes an important educational issue. According to Bashir Ikara (1987:2), there can be no meaningful education without the development of an efficient means of transmission.

The concept "Language" or "Medium of Instruction" has attracted serious attention by several scholars. According to Abdulraheem (2008), a medium of instruction means the language through which education is acquired. Obanya (2004:235) made the same point when he pointed out that the concept has to do with the choice of language for use in the promotion of literary and basic education. The main concern on the issue in the view of Ogbonna (2001:35) is to ensure that children are instructed in the most appropriate language, at least from the pedagogy standpoint. However, Limage (1991), has equally demonstrated the fact that the choice of language for education is a very complex issue involving not only pedagogical

considerations, but also political, social and economic ones, which sometimes outweigh the purely pedagogical ones.

In view of the above, it is pertinent to observe here that the primary considerations in making viable decisions on language of instruction are:

i. The learner, and

ii. The society. Our basic justification for this observation lies on the fact it is the learner who is to be educated for his/her own benefits and ultimately for the benefit of the society.

ARABIC FOR TEACHER PREPARATION: THE RATIONALE

For proper understanding of the concept of Teacher Preparation in Arabic Medium, a brief insight into the global history of Arabic is necessary. Modern life is characterized by existence of a number of world languages (English, French, Portuguese, **Arabic,** Spanish, *etc*.), all of which are used for communication by millions of persons for whom these languages are not indigenous (Obanya, 2004: 242). It is thus clear from the above assertion that language is the tool of education per excellence. In promoting the development of every child, therefore, the primary focus should be on language development. This is why modern educationists insist that in all national educational systems, language is the primary goal. Moreover, language as a subject, occupies a prominent position on the school timetable. Hence, being a tool subject, language is considered "the key that opens the door to the study of other disciplines (in school) and for mastering various realms of human activity in the wider society" (Obanya, 2004:242).

For the purpose of this study, Arabic which occupies the apex ladder in Africa's linguistic pyramid (see: fig.1 below) is advanced as an alternative instructional paradigm for the preparation of professional teachers in African countries generally, and in Nigeria in particular.

RATIONALE FOR 'ARABIC MEDIUM EDUCATION' IN NIGERIA

In recognition of the inevitability of Arabic to African systems of education, the move to prepare teachers for various basic school levels in Nigeria, using Arabic as an alternative medium to English, has been initiated some decades ago. Of recent, the idea was advanced further by a set of Muslim educationists particularly from certain colleges of education in the North and South-West of Nigeria. Prior to this development, some states (according to Abdulrahaheem, 2008:4) had already embarked on some educational programmes aimed at integrating Arabic-Based Education (ABE) into the mainstream of Nigeria System of Education (NSEO). Through these efforts, the ABE system has eventually metamorphosed into different

educational conceptualizations such as; Islamiyyah Education (IE), Tsargaya Education (TE), Qur'anic Education (QE), Almajiri Education (AE) and Arabic Medium Education (AME).

What are the bases for running the Arabic Medium Education (AME) in the context of Nigerian educational system?

In addressing the question posed above, several researches have already been conducted: (Dike 1963; Hitti 1970; Abubakar 1972; Akinnaso and Ogunbiyi 1990; Al-Ilory 1991; Popoola 1998; Bidmus 2003; Ajayi in UNESCO 2005; Otunuyi 2006; Abdulraheem 2008; and Hunwick 2008). From the historical perspective however, Nigeria, like other African nations, is greatly indebted to Arabic for serving as the vehicle of vast literature and for keeping African historical record including those of what is presently known as Nigeria. At this point, we cannot but agree with Bamiro (in Hunwick 2008) while quoting Dike in his attestation of the invaluable role of Arabic in African history thus:

> As a historian myself, I have taken the keenest interest in this development for it is through the aid of these Arabic documents and those written in African Languages in the Arabic script, that the scholar will be aided in his task of unlocking the secrets of the African past. It had been a revelation to the whole world of scholarship to realize for the first time that Africa before the European penetration, so far from being a "dark continent," was in fact a continent where the light of scholarship shone brightly, as the Arabic works now being discovered bear testimony … It is through their work on the enormous amount of Arabic material, both public and private, that we shall be enabled to put together a coherent picture of Nigerian history based on our own indigenous source materials and not, as in the past, chiefly on report of colonial administrator and foreign travelers … The Arabic scholars of the present, drawing upon the writings of the Arabic scholars of the past, will be able to bring before us the events and happenings of the past ages of Nigeria and so help us to write a history we may rightly call our own.

In view of the above, the bases for advancing AME as an alternative instructional paradigm in Nigeria, are briefly highlighted as follows:

i. Proliferation of Madaris (Modern Arabic Schools) in various towns and cities indicating the interest of many Nigerians in Arabic Studies. This interest could be fully exploited through the instrumentality of the AME in the teaching of basic science and technology as enshrined in the new UBE curriculum produced by the NERDC. Such exposure, if well managed by well-prepared Arabic educators, will hopefully assist in making Nigeria realize some of the Millennium Development Goals' target on education by the year 2015.

ii. There abound in the country Ulama (learned men that are vast in the knowledge of Islamic scriptures, literature and culture) who have authored numerous textual materials for instructional purposes.
iii. Arabic is the first international language that has contributed tremendously to human civilization in Africa long before the advent of colonialism with its inherent cultural heritage.
iv. The language has been adjudged possessing the potentials of carrying and expressing human thought in arts, science, technology and linguistic
v. Many academies have been established for the purpose of research advancements on new cultural, scientific and technological concepts with a view to making Arabic continue to be relevant in the modern age.
vi. The language, having served in the past and still serving till present day, as medium of communication by different people of varying tongues worldwide, can successfully play alternative role as medium of education amongst the Muslim and non-Muslim alike.
vii. The only international language in the African continent which is indigenous to several African countries and which according to Albulraheem (2008:13), is the popular language among a very large percentage of the Nigeria populace.

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing discussion, a modest attempt has been made to advance the case of solving an educational issue that has been facing a large number of Nigeria citizens. The writer has not intended, through the submissions made in this study, to create political dichotomy as a result of suggesting a bilingual education system by alternating Arabic to English in the instructional process. Rather, it is our intention to further open higher educational opportunities for a certain group of people who have been well-grounded in an educational system that is Arabic-oriented in all their foundation schooling periods. Those virile group of Nigerian youths should not be neglected.

On a final note, our analysis in this study has been quite limited but suggestive of a direction Nigeria should go if the majority of people are to be catered for in their legitimate right to basic education in this age of Education for All.

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