

THE ROLE AND STATUS OF THE YORUBA LANGUAGE IN THE FORMAL SCHOOL SYSTEM OF WESTERN NIGERIA: 1846-1971

Timothy A. Awoniyi, B.Ed. Hons., Ph.D.,
Lecturer in Education, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

The study was designed to investigate the role and status of the Yoruba Language in the formal school system of Western Nigeria during the period 1846 to 1971. The underlying rationale is that mother tongue education teaching in the bilingual situation of African countries has all too often been neglected or not subjected to the vigorous investigation it deserves. This is because the mother tongues (unobjectively referred to as vernaculars) is sometimes neglected in the educational programme especially when another language (in this case, English the language of the colonial masters) competes with it.

This neglect has been decried in a recent meeting of Experts on Problems related to Teaching the Mother Tongue held at Hamburg. They declared:

"among the many tasks of modern education, the training of pupils in the understanding and the use of their mother tongue has all too often been neglected or not considered in the spirit of urgency and experimentation which other curricular activities have enjoyed in recent years..."(1)

Yet, in a truly monolingual society where the language of the home is also the language of the school, few problems arise in determining the role and status of that language in the educational programme. But in a bilingual situation, there is the need, because of colonial experiences, to determine what circumstances of age and environment appear to have significant effects on the role and status of indigenous African languages. We now know that language as a medium and language as a content have significant implications for methodology and curriculum development.

But it seems that linguistic and educational findings, as well as our understanding of the mother tongue (henceforth M.T.) in the life of the individual and his society, cast some doubts on the wisdom of neglecting the M.T. in the education of the child. Very early in life, each normal human being becomes aware of his existence, and conscious of self and environment. The M.T. categorizes a large part of that environment.

The M.T. from the very beginning of life is closely associated with child's growth and development. That is to say that the M.T. is genuinely a part of his life and not just simply a subject to be taught at school. McCarthy (1954)(2) in her studies has shown that as the child matures, his language develops, and that through language, his personality and his experience are expressed. Carrol (1964)(3) has shown that language is closely related to concept formation, and the fact that in thinking, one may

use the organization of the environment given by the concept labels of one's M.T., and manipulate these within the framework of the grammatical categories of that language has led many to ponder, and some to proclaim the influence of language over thought. Indeed, language and culture are intricately interwoven and Silva-Fuenzalida (1949)(4) concluded that without language, i.e. the M.T. an understanding of functional distinction in culture may be impossible to grasp. In fact, the M.T. one uses is the basis upon which one's general culture and personality are judged. The M.T., therefore, is a part of culture; it conveys, or transmits culture; and itself is subject to culturally conditioned attitudes. Furthermore, numerous studies, The Iloilo Experiment (1953)(5), Nida (1949)(6), The Mexican Project (1953)(7), Texas Education Agency Report (1957)(8), Traveno (1968)(9), Platten (1953)(10), and several others, have shown that suppression of M.T. has devastating educational consequences for the learner, and were of the opinion that those who have little skills in writing and thinking in their M.T.s often have great difficulty in expressing themselves in a non-M.T.

To the child, the M.T. that he learns in his first years of life is not like a garment that he can put off when he dons his school uniform. It is part of the stuff of which his mind is built; it embodies the ideas and attitudes he has gained from his environment; it is the language through which he has acquired the earliest experiences of life; it is the language through which he thinks, dreams, cherishes, loves, scolds and learns.(11)

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The research was designed to test the hypothesis that:

"The contemporary theoretical and practical problems, in regard to the teaching of the M.T. (Yoruba Language, in this case) in bilingual situations can best be understood in the light of the historical evidence in that particular society."

The study was therefore historio-descriptive. It was realized early enough that forces of many kinds - religious, political, economic, social, intellectual and educational - would have effect on the role and status of Yoruba (as M.T.) in the School System. Hence, the writer had to assemble historical data from somewhat scattered sources including (a) Mission Records; (b) Colonial Records; (c) Education Codes and Ordinances; (d) Records of Institutions; (e) Reports of Commissions, Conferences etc.; (f) Newspapers; (g) Syllabuses; (h) Organizations etc.

Also, in order to assess the contemporary role and status of Yoruba in the formal schools, a sample of 144 Schools was taken from a total School population of 3,691 in Western Nigeria as at 1971. The schools sampled were representative of the dialectal and geographical areas of Yorubaland excluding Lagos and Kwara States. Out of the schools sampled, 261 teachers responded in the urban areas and 474 teachers responded in the rural areas to the questionnaire. Out of the total number of 1,000 pupils sampled, 848 responded.

In addition classroom observations of Yoruba teaching and personal interviews were employed to counter check the response to the questionnaire. Non-parametric devices, such as percentages, frequency counts, rank

ordering, and paired comparison, were utilized for the analysis of the data collected.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Historically, the development of Yoruba teaching in schools can be grouped into three phases based on our findings viz:

- (i) The Missionary Era, 1800-1882
- (ii) The Colonial Era, 1882-1960
- (iii) The Modern Era, 1960-1971.

THE MISSIONARY ERA, 1800-1882

The Missionaries, were missionaries first, linguists and/or educationists second. The underlying rationale for their mother tongue policy was the role these M.T.s could play in extending evangelisation. The school was seen as the agent of religious propaganda, and the M.T.s the media. The linguistic achievements of the missionaries in the realm of orthography, grammar and translation should be assessed within the concept above. They preserve the Yoruba language, but they alienate the Yoruba people for they teach them the language out of cultural context. Little wonder, the early converts were superb examples of europeanized Africans who were prepared to match the Europeans in everything - dress, behaviour, name, custom and language!

THE COLONIAL ERA, 1882-1960

It was an era of sceptical tolerance for the Yoruba language. The Yoruba language was not banned, but was not developed either. The colonial policy was a compromise between educational efficiency and political expediency.

THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ERA, 1960-1971

There has been rapid development in curriculum development, research, teaching and utilization of Yoruba in radio, television, newspapers, plays etc. This "renaissance" has as its underlying motive the sudden cultural awareness in the country. Africans are rediscovering themselves and their past.

Unfortunately, however, these changes, as far as our findings are, have little effect on the formal primary schools. Some of our significant findings include:

- (i) Most teachers who responded to our questionnaire admitted that teachers did not know Yoruba enough, and that there were no adequately trained teachers to teach Yoruba in schools.
- (ii) It is shown that most appropriate methods of teaching Yoruba were usually not employed and that there were no adequate teaching aids.
- (iii) While Yoruba was of a high status among the pupils, and

acceptable to parents, yet teachers considered Yoruba to be of a low status because it was made optional in most examinations for the award of certificates.

(iv) It would appear that the Yoruba language was being neglected in the primary schools, in spite of the enthusiasm for it in the post-primary, post-secondary levels. Unless efforts were made to improve the quality of teaching the Yoruba language effectively at the primary school level, interest in it might dwindle, even at the post-primary level since no solid foundation in the Yoruba language would have been laid.

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