

The Impact of Foreign Language Acquisition and Cultural Change in Emerging African Society

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Abstract

The concept of language and culture are intricately woven together. None of these concepts can exist independent of the other. Language is seen as the most important tool with creative property unique to human beings as individuals. It is also the only road to thinking (Sapir quoted by Adegbite in Oyeleye). Meanwhile; language does not exist in a vacuum. It is as a vehicle of culture that language functions as an instrument of human development. It provides every society the opportunity to promote her culture, tradition, religion. Culture as a natural endowment that means all the learned and shared human behavior while language is simply a means of communication which gives an individual categories he/she uses for expression of ideas, feelings, hopes and aspirations to others. Language can be viewed as a verbal expression of culture. It is used to maintain and convey culture and cultural ties. Foreign language is a major cause of culture change. With the help of foreign language, different cultures are being transferred from one geographical boundary to another. However, education is a great facilitator of the spread of foreign culture. This work therefore examines the impact of foreign language acquisition and cultural change in emerging African society.

KEY WORDS: Language acquisition, Culture, Foreign Language

Introduction

In the past, different researches have been carried out on language, including foreign language acquisition and culture. Available literature of those researches revealed that each researcher focused in his or her own aspect or perspectives still leaving off some vacuums to be explored. It is quite obvious that many sociologists, educationists, linguists as well as anthropologists have delved into the interrelationship of language and culture and have equally brought out the effects of the relationship on individuals as well as society. Education being the agent of socialization is at the center of the possible outcome. From the view of Ezike (2007) such a world view is basically a function of the type of education that formed the basis of the socialization of the individual, the nature of the culture under which he obtained his first self-identity by enculturation, and the foreign language that is sufficient reason for his added personality by acculturation. These together, form the bedrock of the individual's socio-cultural relations including his belief patterns, overt and covert attitudes, implicit and explicit, the totality of his aspirations, pragmatic desires and designs, likes and dislikes, indeed the totality of his actions and reactions in the face of prevailing circumstances in his life. In other word, the totality of a person's life style is fashioned based on the external influence of the foreign language on one's culture.

Further researches on foreign language acquisition and cultural change will eventually be of immense help to provide Africans a maximum insight into some of their outrageous practices and introduce to them a modern method to be used to curtail such excesses. It is believed that the teaching and learning of foreign language will bring a lot of positive impart to Nigeria in particular and Africa in general which will eventually equip the people with technological tools that will bring a positive overall change to all facets of the shattered economy. It is good to know that series of researches could elevate the hopes of Nigerians who have been long dehumanized and disillusioned by series of tyrants as leaders to participate in this new millennium advancement.

Definition of the key concepts

Language acquisition: Various approaches to language studies have shown that it involves skill, knowledge, attitude, and behavior peculiar to human beings. Fromkin and Rodman quoted in Opara (1999) define language as a system that relates sounds with meanings, and when you know a language, you know its system. This system could mean the rule that governs the organization of words into larger units such as sentences or phrases (syntax); it could be the shape or forms of words and their meanings (morphology); it could also be the exploitation of speech sounds to make meaningful contrast (phonology); and it could also be the ways in which sounds and meanings are related (semantics). Therefore, human language seems to be the only communication system that combines meaningless elements into meaningful structures (Chaika, 1994).

Therefore, language acquisition is a gradual process whereby language learners become speakers of the target language. Yule (2007) defines it as a “gradual development of ability in a language by using it naturally in communicative situations. Language acquisition is not an automatic happening rather; it follows a gradual process as the learners continue increasing in the knowledge of the target language until they master the language in view. This means that the manner in which the language learners learn how to speak the target language is not perfectly understood. From my own perspectives, I believe that every normal human being is capable of language acquisition yet, putting into consideration the individual differences. That notwithstanding, many Linguists have different opinion about language acquisition.

Diaz-Rico and Weed (2002) advocate the two approaches to language acquisition; they are: meaning-centered vs “Commonsense”. The meaning –centered approach is also called the top-down systems (see Weaver, 1988). This is in line with the view of language as espoused by Halliday that language is a complex system for creating meaning through socially shared conventions (Halliday, 1978). It is complex in that language is made up of interdependent and inseparable systems and in that it is predictable. For them, language is social in that it occurs within a community of users who attach agreed-upon meaning to their experiences. For the meaning- centered advocates, language learning is viewed as the process that occurs when language is used for specific purposes. Language is learned not from drills and worksheet but rather, from the active process of seeking meaning through learners exchanging information while doing a science project or researching aspects of their local history. (Diaz- Rico and Weed 2002)

Advocates of bottom-up approaches are concerned that learners connect the individual sounds of language with its written form as soon as possible, leading to the ability to decode whole words. For them, phonics, as well as approaches compatible with a traditional “linguistic” view of language, is derived from what Weaver (1988) calls “commonsense”. Immediately you identify a word, its meaning follows. The pronunciation rules will be given to the learners to enable them decode the sound symbols.

Culture: God created man and man in turn made culture. This concept of culture is as old as language itself and has been defined by many linguists and anthropologists in different ways. From Yule’s point of view, culture is seen as “socially acquired knowledge”. For him, linguistic variation is tied very much to the existence of different cultures. Culture includes the ideas, customs, skills, arts, and tools that characterize a given group of people in a given period of time (Brown, 2000). A person’s way of life, manner of speech are all dependent on culture. Language is also a carrier of people’s culture. Culture as a universal phenomenon depict that everything that exists belongs to one culture or the other. Hardly can anybody believe that another’s culture is more superior to his. It is pertinent to say that the way people interact with each other and how they carry out their daily businesses play a significant role in the acquisition of a second language. We cannot talk about people’s culture without mentioning the concept of learning because cultural patterns are learnt or acquired through observation or language. The learning of a foreign language as a matter of fact exposes one into foreign culture. It is good to know that culture is not static; it changes with time due to certain circumstances. Therefore, learning about culture is a lifelong pursuit.

Foreign language: A foreign language is basically a language which is not just foreign to a linguistic community but one which plays a restricted and specialized role in the life of the users. This also is described as a second language of a bilingual person. Foreign language is a language in which a “bi- or multilingual person conducts only specialized activities and therefore, one in which he has only a partial linguistic facility or knowledge, possibly only some of its four basic skills” (Bamgbose, et al 2005). When an individual studied a language as a foreign language, it means that he is coming into contact with the language for the first time. Under this situation, the language has a very restricted use in the community. Some of the languages you can study as a foreign languages are French, German, Arabic, etc. Even if those languages are learnt, their use is restricted because; they are not regularly used, except with the person that knows them. Therefore, according to Crystal(1995), “a foreign language (FL), in this more restricted sense, is a non-native language taught in school that has no status as a routine medium of communication in that country.

The impact of foreign language acquisition to cultural growth

The definition of terms has given us the necessary insight and foundation of the major terms used in this research. As we try to examine the implications of the foreign language on the individual cultures that imbibe them, a light into the educational policy in the country will be necessary. Since the establishment of this policy, a lot of references have been made concerning its language policy. According to Ezike in Anasiudu et al (2007), it has refused to match theory with practice especially as it concerns the aspect of the language policy. He attributed the problem to two factors.

- a. The local language
- b. The sciences and subject grouping pattern

The implication of the local language and English

It has been noted that the National Policy on Education (1981) advocates the compulsory learning of three languages in secondary schools across the country. The languages include: the mother tongue, English (official and the first foreign language), and one other native language chosen from Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba). These are the three major native languages in the country. Nigeria as a multi-ethnic society needs to harness her multilingual potentials for the purpose of unity and integration. In order to appreciate the cultures of these ethnic groups, their languages should be learnt which is an important agent of national unity. However, the general contention according to Ezike is that such local languages need not necessarily be made compulsory at the expense of visible foreign languages whose acquisition in our modern world has become a much sought- after viable business.

The science and subject group pattern

Scholarship is always given to the students that excel greatly in science subjects in order to establish better in the country the basis for the development of science and technology. Furthermore, students are adequately equipped to acquire enough competence that will enable them adjust and adapt to this modern age of science and technology with a view to achieve a better tomorrow. This policy on education was made in such a way that the curriculum planners fashioned the students’ study time to accommodate only those laid down subjects and literally make it impossible and difficult for the learners to have the choice of any other foreign language.

The issue of globalization in this modern society makes it so pertinent for a foreign language like French or German language to be introduced to schools. The policy on education should be given a restructuring in order to fit in to the rapidly changing world. Since the English language has taken the position of the second language as well as the lingua franca, a foreign language should be given the chance of being a core subject or what Ezike called a “privileged position” to contribute its quota in this changing world. Due to the trend of events in our country and the world at large, there is now need for the ministry to review the nation’s foreign language policy. The federal government in 1996 declared thus:

We recognize that our sub-region, West Africa, consists of peoples not only by artificial colonial boundaries but also by linguistic differences. The lack of easy communication posed by this linguistic barrier has serious implications for the realization of our goal of total integration within our sub-region. It is important to address this issue in the interest of sub-regional integration. Nigeria will embark on a vigorous language programme that should ensure that our people, within the shortest possible time, become bilingual.

It is necessary therefore that every Nigerian should strive to have a working knowledge of any foreign language which will serve as an open door to national development. When this happens, automatically, Nigeria will come in contact with many foreign cultures. According to Ezike (2007) a failure of cultural contact is a failure of cultural change and a greater failure of development.

Why learn foreign language

It is quite obvious that a lot of benefit can be derived from the study of a foreign language. In this regard, we say that there is a positive impact brought about by such language acquisition as well as negative. Foreign language is a non- native language which needs to be given an opportunity to be studied in our schools. Many a time, you find a manifestation of indifference or hostility expressed toward foreign languages as well as agitations from even the teachers to increase the slots of other major subjects like sciences and mathematics without any reference to any foreign language.

Foreign language in a country is a necessity and not luxury. An acquisition of a foreign language will go a long way to create a bilateral trust and unity between the two countries thereby fostering development. "If we are to grasp the intrinsic values of events and concepts in a foreign culture, and if we are to evaluate the morality of its need objectively ..., we must be prepared to share the criteria of relativity and intelligibility of such a foreign culture"(Anasiudu et al (2007). To achieve the objectives mentioned above, one is to learn and master the language of the people that have it. According to Crystal (1995) "Foreign language learning has an essential role in preparing children to cope with the new perspectives brought about by a rapidly changing society_ not only abroad, but within their community." It is worthy to note that for one to understand other people from another environment and their cultures, one must as well understand the language of those people because language is the carrier of people's culture. "Cultural influences help unify a society by providing a common base of communication and common social customs" (Diaz-Rico and Weed 2002). The common ground where communication will be made possible is through the learning of the language in question. Since it is obvious that each culture has its own peculiar tradition, values, and ideas which help to back-up any right action or frowns at a wrong doing that does not dovetail with it, acquisition of any foreign language will pose danger to the cultural values of the recipients. This is on the negative impact but the positive impact seems to outweigh the former.

Foreign language acquisition has positive impact on tourism, career, traveling and even better prospects as it broadens the mind to accommodate other people's culture. Being able to speak a foreign language like Chinese, Arabic, or Spanish- and having experience with a different culture looks good on any application(Steve 2013). To truly understand a culture, you have to know what the people are talking about because there is no doubt that language is prerequisite for full mutual understanding and cooperation between nations. Note should be taken that English language doesn't have a foreign status in some African countries especially Nigeria; rather, it has the status of a second language. From the view point of Crystal (1995) "foreign language learning promotes understanding, tolerance, and respect to the cultural identity, right, and values of others, whether abroad, or at home in minority groups". In essence, Crystal is of the opinion that ability to learn a foreign language gives the learner a chance to appreciate other people's cultural values and equally broadens the learner's knowledge on the nature of others culture.

Influence of language on cultural growth

In any society, cultural growth is paramount. Any society that loses its culture means that its language has gone into extinction or at the verge of going into extinction. Before one understands other people's culture, one must also be conversant with the language of those people. Nida quoted in Anasiudu(2007) supports the above assertion that "he must understand a people's language by which they carry on the complicated affairs of existence, and through which they largely communicate this culture to succeeding generations". It is with the use of language that culture is handed over to the next generation.

Each culture is unique in itself. Therefore, there should not be an attempt to impose one culture to another because it causes a lot of problem. On the uniqueness of culture, each is designed to solve the needs of the users. Cultures depend on others to grow. Diaz-Rico and Weed (2002) have the same view when they say that cultures in general and individuals specifically respond in certain ways to contact with another culture. This contact can result in assimilation, acculturation, accommodation, pluralism, or biculturalism.

From the point of view of Damen (1998) there are few central ideas about culture. For him, culture is universal. This means that everyone belongs to a particular culture. Culture simplifies living. Social behaviours and customs offer structures to daily life that avoid interpersonal difficulties and endless negotiation about each detail of living. Cultural patterns are so familiar that members of a culture find it difficult to accept that other ways can be right. As cultural patterns are learned or acquired through observation and language, seldom are alternatives given. Again, the dynamism of culture depicts a continual learning of it. Therefore, its learning is a lifelong pursuit. When you try to observe a group of people living in a speech community, they tend to have the same cultural influence and they live in a characteristic way. The observable manifestations of the culture are but one aspect of cultural web- the intricate pattern that weaves and binds a people together. This should therefore be seen as a cultural tie that binds the people together.

Conclusion

In conclusion therefore, the concept of acculturation has been witnessed in our country, Nigeria. The nation's cross fertilization of culture has given the country a new wave of technological ties with those foreign countries. All these were made possible through the acquisition of foreign languages. Most of our Academics and politicians as well including the government have seen the usefulness of acquiring the foreign languages to the extent that French is made compulsory in our junior secondary schools.

However, the acquisition of a foreign culture to the detriment of one's culture should be de-emphasized. There should be a balance between such acquisitions. Therefore, it is highly necessary to acknowledge the importance of foreign language and culture. Some schools like the Goethe Institute Lagos and the Alliance Française have been established for the sole purpose of learning the foreign languages like French, China, and German etc. The awareness of the effect of foreign language should be created for the students. They should be taught the value of "interethnic reciprocal learning" (Gibson, 1991) because foreign language serves as the tool for the acquisition of foreign culture. As a matter of facts, the students' mind set should be fashioned in such a way to accept new ideas.

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