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MODERNIZING LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND PEDAGOGY PRACTICES IN NIGERIA: Applications to Minority- status Languages

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Abstract

This paper raises a number of key theoretical issues pertaining to language and literacy pedagogy and practices in Nigeria. It goes further to explore how language learners and users from minority, ethno-linguistically disadvantaged backgrounds in Nigeria and other parts of the world can be helped to better understand, negotiate and resist the hegemonic pressures embedded in mainstream educational policies and practices being implemented in Nigerian schools today, especially as these relate to nonindigenous language media of instruction. It concludes by advocating the reformation of old-fashioned language and literacy pedagogical policies and practices and the eventual adaption of newer and more 'learner friendly' literacy ones that will better address the obvious ethnolinguistic diversity existing at all levels of Nigeria 's educational system at the moment.

Key Terms: Language and Literacy Education, Socio-Cultural Identity, Pedagogy, Ethnolinguistic Disadvantage

Introduction

The closing years of the 20th century as well as the first decade of the 21st century have ushered in a growing interest in issues of learner identities in language and literacy pedagogy settings in different parts of the world, including Nigeria. This

interest has been triggered off by better understanding by scholars of the basic notion of socio-cultural identity, with identity being understood as dynamic, and multifaceted, rather than static and undimensional, in nature.

The increasing focus on the critical role played by socio-cultural identity in either the success or failure of language and literacy education in multilingual and multiethnic communities in many parts of the world has also led to a much more deeper understanding of how language learners, especially those who come from ethnic minority backgrounds, manage to locate themselves within the social, historical, political, and cultural contexts in which language learning and basic literacy take place.

Many scholars who have done research and written on issues relating to language and literacy education readily agree that the typical multilingual classroom is a difficult setting within which to accurately assess the success or failure of any program of language pedagogy. As has been pointed out in May (1999) and Kubota (2004), arguably the greatest challenges in responding to, and evaluating cultural and linguistic diversity in language classrooms is that of being able to move beyond the often unconscious habit of stereotyping linguistic differences observed between learners or pretending that the issue of linguistic diversity does not necessarily have any links to social inequality. Linguistic differences and power relations must always be considered together in evaluating the impact or effects of pedagogy, especially in relation to diversity, arising from ethnic, class, gender, or other forms of differentiation.

Contextualizing Literacy Education Within a Minority-status Language Setting

Educators interested in evaluating the impact of literacy education using a minority—status language must also be interested in the use of language as a form of social practice, through which relationships are defined, negotiated and resisted. A number of theorists, most notably Bakhtin (1981) and Bourdieu (1997), have championed theoretical models of language and literacy education which emphasize the significance of learning modes and practices deeply rooted in the indigenous

environments and cultures of learners. Such culture-determined practices are obviously linked to struggles over legitimacy and meaning in knowledge transfer which are, in turn, best attained within the framework of indigenous minority — status languages.

The types of language and literacy education practices which were first championed by Mikhail Bakhtin and later given credence by the advocacy of Paolo Friere, make it imperative that all languages, no matter their perceived level of social importance or prestige in society, needs to be investigated and treated as knowledge transfer media through which speakers can dialogue with others to create meanings. Within such a dialogue frame for literacy education (which is particularly suitable for adoption in minority-status languages), individual learners are at liberty to acquire knowledge through active interactions with others within a familiar language learning environment, not necessarily that imposed by hegemonic pressure from elsewhere.

Simply put, the educational value of a minority-status language is measured partly by the social worth that its own speakers accord to it in the course of their daily use of it for social interactions. However, it can also be adversely affected by external institutional forces, especially those connected to the dominant educational system that is prevalent within a given society. Thus, the dynamics of power relations in language use within the educational sector of such a multilingual, multiethnic society as Nigeria today have important implications for the varieties of language that they get to learn and to use actively for purposes of literacy education, or even for the types of educational opportunities that become open to them in adult life. Thus, the language and literacy education practices now prevalent in Nigeria cannot be effective nor can they fully benefit every citizen of the country (irrespective of language affiliation), if it is not subjected to radical review.

Contextualizing Socio-cultural Identity Within a Minority-status Language Setting

The theoretical implication of the seminal works of Bakhtin and Freire in the area of

literacy education is best understood within the framework of the socio-cultural conditions under which people speak and actively use language in both institutional and community contexts. Like Bakhtin and Freire, other literacy theorists like Weedon (1987) have also emphasized the central role of language in the relationship between the individual user of language and his immediate socio-cultural environment. Weedon further argues that language not only defines institutional practices, but also serves to influence our sense of ourselves and our "subjectivity". Identity is therefore always in process, a site of struggle between competing discourses in which the subject plays an active role. In the exercise of such agency, learners may have differential investments in a variety of subject positions, best understood in the context of shifting relations of power.

In the domain of language learning and literacy education, Norton (2000) has combined an understanding of the notions of socio-cultural identity to that of human motivation, in order to explain how language users, especially users of minority-status languages, socially and historically construct an ambivalent 'lovehate' attitude towards their indigenous language, especially in relation to another language of wider communication often found within their immediate environment of habitation.

Such an ambivalent attitude by a language user is best understood in relation to the economic notion of 'cultural capital' as first used in Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), who used the term to make reference to the knowledge and modes of thought that characterize different classes and groups in relation to specific sets of social forms. They argue that cultural capital is situated, in that it has differential exchange value in different social fields. If a learner chooses to "invest" in a second language, he does so with the understanding that he would acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources which, in turn, would increase the overall value of his own cultural capital. As the value of the cultural capital increases, the learner's sense of self worth also increases and his desires for the future are reassessed. This notion of investment has been taken up by other scholars in the field, and is proving productive for understanding the complex conditions under which language learning takes place

(Potowski, 2004).

Critical Pedagogy Practices Vis-å-vis the Nigerian Educational Setting

Critical approaches to language and literacy education can be traced back to Freire (1970), which emphasized that any adequate literacy education programme worth implementing should encourage learners not only to be able to read but also to strive to understand the world first through the medium of their own indigenous languages before proceeding to learning and utilizing other languages of wider communication around them. Following Freire, many education theorists have aligned with the ideals of critical pedagogy in order to help learners develop self knowledge and the socio-cultural dynamics of the immediate world around them- a world which may have historically evolved in the context of inequitable relations of power. Its application to the conventional classroom settings in Nigeria can contribute to the emergence of more critical and proactive literacy practices, particularly in situations involving learners from linguistically-disadvantaged backgrounds. Emphasis on implementing the core principles of critical literacy and pedagogy in the classroom has helped to bring to the fore various challenges connected with learner- identity, and how individuals (particularly from linguistically-disadvantaged backgrounds) react to perceived social and linguistic inequalities which occur both within and outside conventional classroom settings.

The Imperative of Modernizing Literacy Education Practices in Nigerian Schools

Although most literacy education practitioners understand and readily embrace the concept of multiple socio-cultural identities in theory, in practice, they often fail to evolve and implement relevant programmes and activities which meet the varying literacy and educational needs of their pupils and students. In many instances, many teachers and literacy practitioners (for lack of pedagogical innovation) , easily fall back to the use of routine, old-fashioned pedagogic principles in order to deal with instructional tasks that demand newer teaching principles and techniques. In choosing to rely on old principles and techniques for purposes of instruction, many

teachers only end up imposing their own social identity categorizations on their pupils and students, irrespective of their ethnolinguistic backgrounds and sensitivities.

Indeed, it is imperative that conscious and targeted efforts must be made, at the level of pedagogic practice in Nigeria, to evolve and implement newer models of critical literacy education that attempt to balance different and competing elements. For example, following from one of the several pedagogical suggestions offered in Janks (2000), an attempt must be made to devise and promote the adoption of a 'synthesis model' of critical literacy education for Nigeria which brings together elements of domination (recognition and analysis of power), access (to privileged forms of language and literacy), diversity (recognizing diverse social identities), and design (the ability to use multiple modes to pedagogy) (see, McKinney & Norton, 2007). Such a model would be similar to that canvassed in the research report of the New London Group (2000), which has argued for the ev solution and adoption of different models of "pedagogies of multiliteracy", each of which is ultimately aimed at combining elements of situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice in different creative ways, in different socio-cultural environments.

Educators who regularly work with very young learners in Nigerian schools often face difficulties on how best to communicate with them effectively, transmitting the information, knowledge and school values they require for attaining future educational success in life. The regular and most widely adopted approach is to rigidly follow a pedagogical pattern: an institutionalized curriculum, an established scheme of work and formalized subject syllabuses. The process and activities associated with learning were also expected to be carried out through the medium of a pre-determined language of instruction, often decided upon by policy makers far removed from the classroom setting.

In taking such important decisions on curriculum content, schemes of work and subject area syllabuses, it is also often the case that little or no consideration is given to the diverse levels of pre-school competencies which learners have before

enrolment in the chosen language or medium of school instruction. Thus, for a large proportion of young learners in the Nigerian socio-cultural setting, the first few years of formal schooling is carried out through the use of an unfamiliar language medium, which is different from their respective indigenous mother tongues or languages of the immediate environment. Essentially for this and other reasons, many young learners find it quite difficult to properly develop critical perspectives of their own social worlds and are thus forced to assume roles of being passive, rather than active makers of meaning (O'Brien, 2001; Vasquez, 2004; Sahni, 2001).

This type of learning situation is certainly opposed to and antithetical to the typical Freirean pedagogical approach in which educational issues can be identified, assessed and addressed within the context of the living experiences of young learners, particularly those that may have come into the formal school setting from ethno-linguistically disadvantaged back grounds. There is no doubt that the creative adaptation and implementation of a viable language and literacy education approach to the learning needs of school pupils belonging to minority-status language groups in Nigeria will serve to raise more awareness for the implementation of more far reaching pedagogical reforms in the educational sector of the country. Such reforms would, no doubt, bring about better understanding and appreciation of some of the key social and cultural issues to be tackled if language and literacy education practices are to improve, especially as they are implemented at the Universal Basic Education (UBE) level of education.

Conclusion

The various theoretical issues related to language and literacy education practices discussed in the previous sections of this paper draw on complex notions of what it means to respond critically to linguistic and cultural diversity in language and literacy instruction settings, as they relate particularly to the Nigerian environment today. The socio-cultural identities of learners in Nigerian schools constantly intersect with environmental factors of race, gender, class and sexual orientation and raise a variety of challenges which are, nonetheless, recognized and fairly addressed

within the framework of a number of critical literacy pedagogies and practices which have emerged and are being actively implemented in some parts of the world today. Each of such pedagogies is basically aimed at creating a conducive instructional environment that promotes creative learning and open dialogue between interactants. The adoption of any of such pedagogies does not only reveal inherent social tensions or linguistic differences within the instructional environment but also creates possible avenues for responding sensitively to emergent issues of social inequality.

In advocating for the modernization of current language and literacy education pedagogies and practices in Nigeria, this paper is interested in offering learners in Nigerian schools the opportunities to gain access to orthodox (i.e. school generated) ways of learning while at the same time being allowed to use other creative, unorthodox means of gaining and validating their own self-knowledge without formal guidance. The adoption of open-ended instructional techniques and practices, as encompassed in critical literacy pedagogies, can lead to the creation of a discursive space that is supportive and non-threatening to learners while also encouraging shifts in learners' perspectives.

It is clear therefore, that any worthwhile institutional effort aimed at responding to the ethnolinguistic diversity in many classroom settings in Nigeria would require an imaginative assessment of what is possible, as well as a critical assessment of what is desirable. In addition, in order to redress shortcomings of literacy education practices in Nigerian schools today (especially in relation to learners from linguistically disadvantaged homes), there must be a willingness to recognize the pivotal role played by socio-cultural identities of both teachers and learners in bringing about effective and sustainable transmission of knowledge and skills within the school setting.

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