
Meeting the Challenges of the Girl-Child through Language Education

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Abstract: *Today's girls are tomorrow's women. The differential treatment between girls and boys can hardly be separated from the preferential treatment between men and women in our society. The cumulative effects of the discriminatory, exploitative, and unjust treatments have had profound negative impacts on education opportunities available to the girl-child. The need to empower the girl-child in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized and the role of language in this regard cannot be overlooked. The paper then examined, language Education, the Girl-child and hence explored the challenges facing the Girl-child. The paper also examines meeting the challenges of the Girl-child through language Education and proffers recommendations.*

Keywords: girl-child, language, education, differential, language education.

1.1 Introduction

A language is a dynamic set of sensory symbols of communication and the elements used to manipulate them. Strictly speaking, language is considered to be an exclusively human mode of communication. BBC English Dictionary (1992:651) defines language as a system of sounds and written symbols used by the people of a particular country, area or tribe to communicate with each other. John Stuart, (1999:1-3) said that "Language is the light of the mind. According to Chike Okoli (2000:1) language is a "vehicle of thought". It is almost the only means of communicating thoughts and feelings available to man. The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of The English Language Encyclopedic Edition (2004:716) defines language as "the expression and communications of emotions or ideas between human beings by means of speech and hearing, the sounds spoken or heard being systematized and confirmed by usage among a given people over a period of time". Although other animals make use of quite sophisticated communicative systems, sometimes casually referred to as animal language, none of these are known to make use of all of the properties that linguistics use to define language. Right from prehistoric times, even through, say, the Stone Age man has demonstrated his need for words, speech, and language. It can be seen even from biblical times; this tool has played a critical role in the affairs of man. It is far from fortuitous that the story of the tower of Babel is recorded early in the Bible. This can be interpreted or seen as an unambiguous indication of the awesome power of human language and communication. From the profound story, it is clear that homosapiens finds this tool indispensable for the crucial purpose of communicating to others, his ideas, desires, emotions, wants, fears, and accomplishments.

The primacy of the oral medium in human history is simply incontestable, while the very power of speech has not diminished, even in modern times. The 21st century represents a highly technologized age, indeed, the fastest in all of man's scientific race or technological quest. Nor can Man has recorded his best advances- whether in medicine,

technology, or the Arts –by relegating language and its power to the background. Indisputably, man’s various achievements have all been made possible by his communicative capabilities in general, and the catalyst called language, in particular. In the following, Okoh, (2010:2) attempts to underline the very importance of language and communication in modern society:

‘Even the blind can see and the greatest Thomaxes acknowledge that man has undergone great technological transformation from those ancient days of inscribing on caves. Everywhere today provides overwhelming evidence that man has taken even greater leaps in the business of managing or coping with ideas. The unprecedented advancement, even explosion in information technology has transformed the entire world into a real global village, one in which vast, geographical, cultural-cum-political distances have been curtailed by the micro/silicon revolution, desk-top publishing, satellite and cable television. The fascinating and enamouring story continues, of course, with the World Wide Web, and other computer-based communications resources.

2.1 Conceptual Review

Education

Education is the process of providing information to an inexperienced person to help him or her develop physically, mentally, socially, spiritually, politically, and economically. It means the process of helping an individual to acquire adequate and appropriate knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values known as cognitive behaviours to be able to function optimally as a citizen. According to Adegbola, and Madu, (1997:4) education is a process of drawing out and developing the potentials of a person with the view to making the person well integrated and useful to himself and her society.

Webster’s Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language Encyclopedic Edition (2004:401) defines education as a systematic development and cultivation of the national powers by inculcation, examples e.t.c. It is the information and training in an institution of learning.

Language Education

According to Mgbodile, (1999:1) Language Education as a concept could be said to refer to the study of the art of language, which in effect involves the understanding of the nature and importance of language as a vehicle of communication, an insight into the theories and process of language development. It is also the techniques of developing the language skill, and a deeper understanding of the pedagogical approaches, competencies, and problems in language acquisition process. Language education, according to en.wikipedia.org/wiki/language-education, is the teaching and learning of a language. It can include improving a learner’s mastery of his or her native language, but the term is more commonly used in second language acquisition, which means learning of a foreign or second language. Language education is a branch of applied linguistics.

Language education derives from the general importance of language as a vital instrument for empowering the girl-child. Therefore, language education is the chief means of inculcating knowledge, skills and competencies, there is the need for teachers, and all those who employ the use of language in helping others grow in whatever field of learning, to have some specialized knowledge and understanding of the mechanics of language. The study of language education therefore is expected to provide the girl-child with a deeper understanding of the

science of language and equip her with the skills for achieving greater proficiency in manipulating the language art and make her successful in resisting attempt to truncate her education.

The issue of discrimination against the girl-child has remained an unresolved issue in the society and a major concern in the academic discourse. In every civilized society especially in African context, children are regarded as the pride of the parents and the greatest value the society possess. This is why children are mostly cherished; they are consciously protected from all forms of hazards and abuse. However, the girl-child has not been so lucky, to be cherished, protected and loved in our society due to certain cultural practices, stereotyping cultural and religious beliefs which put them at the risk of abuse and neglect.

A lot has been done in the area of documentation and assessment of the situation of the girl-child, vis-à-vis, the male-child. Hon Hilary Benin (2005:2-3), Njoku (2012:14-18, 20-21). Available data have shown the state of her existence from formative-infancy stage through youth to the adult stage Offoma (2009:2), and Ugoji, (2013:54).

The girl-child problem around the world has many dimensions but the root of all kinds of discrimination and bias against the girl-child lies in the customs, traditions and typical mindset of the society which considers the girl-child and women as inferior beings. Women and girls have been treated in the most inhuman ways from the inception of human civilization Alabi, Buhah, & Alabi, (2014:394). The legacy of injustice against the girl child has continued in some parts of the world especially in African and Asian countries. Female feticide, female infanticide, sexual abuse, marginalization in terms of nutrition, health care and education, violence against women and bias against women in all spheres of life including social, political, economic and religious spheres common norms in today's world. Generally, girls as well as women do not have decisions for themselves. An adolescent girl is married without her consent and becomes pregnant long before her body and emotional/psychological feelings are mature or ready for it. Half of the total sexual assaults in the world are committed against the girl-child. One of the leading causes of death against the girl-child is the complications from pregnancy and childbearing.

This paper therefore deemed it necessary to explore language education as an instrument for empowering the girl-child. The paper also, examined the challenges facing the girl-child and the implications of the language education opportunities available to the girl-child. Buhah, & Alabi (2014:394).

Who is a child in Nigeria? Who is a girl-child?

A child is a human being who is yet not an adult. The African charter defines a child as every human being below the age of 18 years. The definition has been adopted by Nigerian and enacted into law as part of the child Rights Act 2003 Njoku (2012: 2). The implication of this is that children below the age of 18 years should not be treated like adult under the laws of Federal Republic of Nigeria. Any such treatment meted to a child constitutes an abuse of the rights of that child. Such rights are protected by Nigerian laws and conventions, and international treaties of which Nigerian is signatory.

In all societies, children are a very vulnerable human category. This is because in their early and later years of development they obligatory need the support and care of the adult members of the society for development, survival and growth. In Nigeria, from birth to the age of 18years, children need support in nutrition, health care, physical, social protection, education and training for physiological and psychological development, as well as

optimum development to their potential. The girl-child needs support in all these areas for optimum development as well as language development.

Most of the areas of support which children need from the adult members of the society have been recognized and declared as children's rights which the society owes them, through international treaties and conventions, and national laws and legislations, most of the rights of children are being enforced and implemented to ensure that the generation survive and are prepared for great national development challenges of the future.

Under the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the child (CRC) and the African Union (AU) charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child, the child should enjoy about thirty rights which can be grouped into four broad clusters. (FMWA & SD cited in Njoku:4). These include:

- Survival Rights
- Protection Rights
- Participation Rights, and
- Development Rights.

3.0 Methodology

The researcher adopted the qualitative approach using secondary sources of data from journals, textbooks and internet to determine the how to Meet the Challenges of the Girl-Child through Language Education.

4.1 Findings

Factors Militating Against the Education and Training of the Girl-Child

Although it is affirmatively stated in the world summit in Copenhagen in the year 1995 that "we will ensure full and equal access to education for girls and women recognizing that investing in women's education is the key element in achieving social equality, higher productivity and social returns in terms health, lower infant mortality and the reduced need for high fertility. Mangvwat & Abana cited in Abudulkarim (2014:47). Unfortunately, despite this commitment to female education and girl-child, there seem to be constraints militating against the girl-child educational pursuit in Nigeria. It is commonly said that for whatever happening on earth there is an underlying reason. These are internal or external reasons. It was expressed by UNICEF (2005) that children below 15years covered 45% of the country's population in Nigeria. They also said about 4.7million children of primary school age are still not in school. Observations show that a lot of girls who enrolled into school dropped out without completing. These categories of the children are likely to form the illiterate adults of tomorrow.

Scholars have identified some of these peculiar problems which amongst others include:

- **Family Abuse and Domestic Violence.**

The girl child problem starts from home and the same continues as she interacts with the general society. Fisho-Orideji cited in Alabi etal (2014:397) argued that traditionally, to born a girl in most traditional societies is almost synonymous to a curse. A girl child born and socialized into the belief of being inferior or sub human with attendant marginalization and abuse. She is often hold responsible and punished for any misfortune of her

parents. These acts affects the psycho-social and educational performance of young/learner, especially, the girl child.

- **Sexual Abuse**

Child sexual abuse especially against girl-child, has assumed a worrisome dimension in Nigeria. This is basically done by adult relatives and in some cases by the step-father of a girl or a close relative in the family. There are many reported cases where girls are regularly sexually abused, threatened never to open up to anybody or else be killed and some are forced to abort the pregnancies that might resulted from the abused in order to cover up the abuse Mwangi in Alabi etal (2014:397)

- **Rejection and Neglect**

Tongued and Carter asserted that the neglect and rejection of a girl-child normally starts from birth when the news of safe delivery is broken to the family and especially to the father. As soon as the sex gender status of a child is announced by the medical attendant during/after the delivery as a girl, some parents receive such (good) news with disappointment and dismay. Some parents reject their girl-child from the hospital, refuse to pay for hospital bills and other expenses relating to the child delivery.

- **Genital Mutilation**

According to UNICEF (2004), an estimate of one hundred million girl-child in Africa undergoes genital mutilation operation yearly. In Nigeria, most of these girls that undergo this raw and barbaric practice are under a year. Female circumcision is a violent traditional way of removing the clitoral prepuces and tip of the clitoris for no just cause. This custom is generally perpetuated against girl-child with a belief of protecting her chastity and reducing her sexual enjoyment. This however, posses a great risk to a girl-child because in most cases, the operation is performed by old and unqualified persons with unsterilized knives and razors. Alabi etal (2014: p.398) contended that this singular ill treatment against the girl-child has lead to many unimaginable health hazards, emotional and psychological strains.

- **Forced and Early Marriage**

Another disturbing issue of girl-child challenges in Nigeria is the incidence and complexity of child marriage and forced marriage. Aderinto cited in Alabi etal (2014:398) asserted that a girl-child before twelve or at her early teen years is benefactors, visitors, strangers and bathrobes to local hero or cleric. In some cases she is forced to marry an older man in his 50s or 60s. The tendency for her is to aggressive towards him which in most cases would be sent packing often after pregnancy. Many of the Nigerian girl mothers in this category have met their untimely death through the practice of early marriage. Some when they pack out of their matrimonial homes while carrying babies, they have no place to go because they are equally rejected and abandoned by their parents. When they give birth to their children under uncompleted building or bridge, they abandon the children especially if they are girls.

Other factors why girls are not sent to school are deliberated on this essay, some of them include the following:

- Victims of suspicious of witchcraft.
- Girl-child homicide.
- Inducement top prostitution
- Child labour.

At home front the girl-child is also faced with cultural and poor socio-economic challenges, such as fear, ignorance, and belief system that education can make girls rebellious and difficult to handle. Low socio-economic status denies parents economic strength to give their girls education; added to it preference is given to boys in educational assessment in our society. Enjoying the benefits of hawking which is usually done by girls as a simple way of getting money to fund marriages and other domestic financial challenges constitute factors affecting the girl-child educational opportunities in Nigeria.

The Importance of Language Education in Meeting the Challenges of the Girl-Child Through Language Education.

The National Policy on Education (1998:9) appreciates the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction and national cohesion; and preserving cultures. It encourages every child in Nigeria to learn any of the three major languages of Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba in addition, to the child's mother tongue. We cannot talk of national development without taking individual development into consideration. Individual development, in turn, cannot take place without language and that is why we have languages for the deaf and dumb and also for the computer. Butter cited in Uguru (2007:104) emphasized that: "Linguistic communication is without doubt one of the most important features of human life".

This paper shows how we can employ language, a major tool for meeting the challenges of the girl-child, human development, in the inculcation of foreign and indigenous technology in Nigerian citizens. A child needs language to learn about his/her environment from her family members. At a later stage, during the acquisition of formal education, language is employed by his or her teachers. Language is one of the disciplines (subjects) a child is exposed to in the course of acquiring formal education. Language (foreign or indigenous) should be taught in such a way that the challenges of the girl-child (which is already embedded in the language) is imparted properly to the girl-child. This is a good way of meeting the challenges of the girl-child through language education in the contemporary society and ensuring rapid and easily attained national development. Thus, as the child's language learning enables her to know things around her, so also should adult language study or learning enable her to identify practical solutions to the problems in her environment. Strevens cited in Uguru, (2007:104-105 sums up the relationship between language, science and technology in this way:

'If the girl-child is well exposed to the knowledge of being a scientist or technologists, it entails learning several habits of thought which directly affect her use of language, and that the scientist can only function as scientist if he learns how to use language appropriate to these habits of thought. The girl-child also learnt informal education through stories, poems, songs, drama and folktales. These stories are usually given by elderly people in the family during moonlight which is done through language. Language education makes the girl-child a better core-taker and increases her efficiency in literary exercise to the development of communicative competence, prepares equips the girl-child for her role in the society as wife and a mother. Language is as necessary to the society as society is necessary to language. A study of language devoid of society is "like studying anatomy without a body'.

It is doubtful if a language can exist without people. It is equally doubtful if an individual or a girl-child, no matter how intelligent, can speak except in company of other speakers Osuagwu,etal (1997:99). Furthermore, we can state unequivocally that languages are not just vehicles of development but are among one of the

components of development. It is through language that radio, TV. And magazines or plays, social gatherings and nursery rhymes are actualized. In short, language is an index of development itself. According to Osuagwu et al (1997:110) these are communicated through language. From the above clarification, the involvement of the girl-child in language education would greatly enhance meeting the challenges of the girl-child and when a girl-child is not adequately educated half of the society is paralyzed economically. Girl children are said to make up about fifty percent of the Nigerian population Ogbu (2013:8) There is a popular saying that if you educate a man, you educate an “individual” but if you educate a woman, you educate a nation.

Farb, cited in Iheakaram (2001:20) said that it has been scientifically proved that no child is capable of speech until he has heard other human beings speak; a child growing up anywhere on earth will speak the tongue she/he hears in his speech community, regardless of the race, nationality or language of his parents. It is true that the ability to transform thought into language depends on one’s language competence. This is why the acquisition of language skills should form a fundamental background in the education process of the girl-child. The use of language in formal education begins from the nursery school where listening and speaking which started informally all at home are continued. It is however evident that:

Children tend to do much better educationally when there is no sharp break or division between the language of the home and the language of the school, so that language “growth” ...can be continuous rather than discontinuous (Iheakaram:22).

Language (in its verbal or written form) is the only vehicle for the management and transmission of the information, explosion of the 21st century and the future as well as the way in which the challenges of the girl-child in the contemporary society should be met.

Language Education helps to sharpen the thoughts of the girl-child & her mode of expression which will be of great importance that will ridicule her out of the challenges from her family and the society at large. It will help the girl-child to co-operate, share her views to the world, discuss, agree or even disagree with one another and finally reach a consensus or decision that will be favourable for her future.

The primacy of language in education is not in contention. It is the only subject that arts across the curriculum, as every other subject must be taught in a language. Language is as important as our interest in it because our culture, society, and the future of our children’s speaking, reading and writing abilities depend on it. It is based on this that Ezeme, (2011:3) asserts that: English is also the language for creative art and literature and in other social communication situations. The foregoing implies therefore, that those who cannot speak write and understand English and its literature have no hope of educational advancement, good job opportunities and further participation in other social activities. Consequently, knowledge of English is not only desirable for academic attainment but also for status symbol in society.

Language is like Air and Time (LAT) in the life of humans. It is invisible, more or less silent and yet indispensable. It has far reached impacts on our lives. These are the reasons why there is no substitute for language in the education process and so it is the rational for meeting the challenges of the girl-child in the contemporary society and the World at large. It is therefore the most important factor in education at all levels and in all forms since without it there can be no education.

The Way Forward

The issue of seeking to widen the educational opportunities of girls in Nigeria is of paramount importance especially, it is viewed from the perspective of the overall goals of education in Nigeria.

According to the National Policy on Education (1998:8), the goals of education are:

- Physical efficiency.
- Intellectual efficiency
- Moral and spiritual efficiency.

In the context of Adult and Non formal Education, it was spelt out in section 51 of National Policy on Education in Nigeria (36) that the mandate of youth education outside the school system belong to the institution. While in section 52, sub section (b) provides functional and remedial education for those young people who did not complete secondary education or pre-maturely dropped out of the formal school system.

Educating the girl-child helps to make communities and societies healthier, wealthier and safe and can also help to reduce child deaths, improve maternal health and tackle the spread of HIV and AIDS.

The introduction of the Universal Primary Education (U.P.E) programme in the whole Nigeria in (1976) was a significant milestone in widening access to education particularly for the poor and rural dwellers, while eliminating gender disparity in education and training Njoku (2012:13).

It was concluded by Alabi et al (2014:49) that if the government and the entire populace want to widen the girl-child educational opportunities the following should be looked into:

- Lowering direct cost of education for the girl-child by ensuring free education in reality.
- Expanding the number of school places and single sex schools to cater for those in rural areas who may not afford to live out of their homes due to economic hardship.
- Child minding/care should not be placed on the girls in the family to help them read at home.
- Community participation in school management.
- Paying allowances to girls from less privilege homes in schools.

Encouraging the girl-child as stipulated in the National Policy on Education (1998:9), the importance of language as a means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preserving cultures. It maintains that every child shall learn the language of his immediate environment for the interest of national unity, or learn one of the three major Nigerian languages; Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba which will pave a way for meeting the challenges of the girl-child in our contemporary society.

Recommendations

- ❖ The language policy of multilingual countries like Nigeria should be broad-based so as to accommodate both the major and the so called minor languages. Such policy should encourage the planning of major and minor languages for use in formal education and for literacy from primary to the tertiary levels of education.
- ❖ Language as the pillar of education should be kept under constant review; it should absorb criticisms and changes, by evolving new words, structures and idioms.

Conclusion

Education is very essential in today's society and the girl-child must be well educated in languages in order to have a bright future. More efforts should be made to ensure full participation of the girl-child in language education, because language is Like Air and Time (LAT) in the life of humans. It is invisible, more or less silent and yet indispensable. It has far reached impacts on our lives. These are the reasons why there is no substitute for language in the education process and the vehicle for meeting the challenges of the girl-child in our contemporary society like Nigeria. It is therefore the most important factor in education at all levels and in all forms since without it there can be no education.

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