

## Research-Driven Teaching for More Effective Learning of African Languages

STEPHEN BILLY OLAJIDE  
University of Ilorin, Nigeria

**Abstract.** Research and teaching are two complementary, critical educational activities. Their synergic blend produces a progressive society. One area that should attract effective research and teaching is the mother tongue, which is vital for intellectual development. Man's mother tongue shapes his world view and moderates his activities in life. If not in adequate possession of his mother tongue, his personality may never be balanced. He may mature into an adult that would look at his society's problems with inappropriate mental frame always. Thus, Africans are getting more and more interested in the development of the indigenous languages. They hope that language education backed with appropriate teaching and research would strengthen the languages. Unfortunately, there is a wide gap between teaching and research and the development of African languages. Colonial languages have grossly disadvantaged the indigenous languages of Africa for long, relegating them in education and other spheres of public life. This situation is unacceptable. Hence, this paper examines it critically and suggests research and teaching strategies that may help in redressing it.

**Keywords:** Research-Driven; Teaching; Effective Learning; African Languages;

### 1. Introduction

Research is a serious business, an intellectual undertaking that is germane, demanding and supposed to be unending. It is the methodical

going through of what people have done on a topic, and successfully interpreting and understanding it by providing new insights in it. Most of the advances made in every aspect of life today spring from properly coordinated research. It therefore does not surprise that the world attaches great importance to research.

As observed by Abimbola (1995), "Human being engages in research several times in a single day and on a continuing basis throughout life" (p1). That man may never be able to dispense with research is because human activities never cease; they increase on daily basis and vary with amazing intensity. No single event occurs again exactly the same way except with the aid of electronic devices; man's perception on a situation, idea or thing alters as his age increases and his experiences of life ramify. His ever changing situation makes him ask questions many of which he or his co-sojourners may not be able to answer readily, but which require being addressed because the questions raise basic concerns about life. Sunderland (2010) believes that providing answers to such questions are fundamental to research in language, and as canvased by Rasinger (2010) and Denscombe (2001), effectively answering the questions may call for a combination of methods (of research) - a procedure that Angouri (2010) describes as "triangulation" (p.34).

Language is a critical feature of human interaction. It is one of man's most vital tools for

exploring the universe and for processing his finds into new, progressive understanding of his existence. Language, even when used in folkloristic renditions, is a means of associating with people and gaining astonishing intellectual advancement (Achebe, 2012). The creative and self-replenishing nature of language makes it bend, twist, align, and grow in unimaginable dimensions. Language can dominate, frustrate and ironically promote its environment, such as it does in Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda (and other parts of Africa colonized by the British), where English is second language. For example, the influence of English in Nigeria is fairly captured by Bamgbose (1995).

This is not to suggest that language is unassailable. As it grows and flourishes, language, especially an ambitious language like English, does stumble and somersault; language dies, it atrophies (political economic, socio-ethical and technological activities may exert pressure on language to the extent it would die).

African languages are numerous but interrelated. They belong in different families as explained by Olajide (2005). Much as the languages continue to increase, they are largely relegated in public life, left to be, haphazardly developed and miserably dominated by over-pampered colonialist languages, mainly English, French, Spanish, and Arabic. Even when the African mother tongue languages are given spaces in the national life of individual countries in the continent, such spaces are quite narrow: if they are permitted to be used in education, the use is hardly beyond the elementary level in most countries. They are left to be offered just as subjects in the curricula thereafter, whereas education is most effective when given in the mother tongue (Olajide, 2007).

There is growing awareness that the indigenous languages of Africa require greater ascendancy in the public life of the continent, hence greater emphasis has now been placed on researching and more effectively teaching the languages. Workshops, seminars, and conferences are being held by universities, ministries of education and professional associations on how best to empower African languages. This paper is one

attempt at emphasizing that improved scholarly and pedagogical attention to African languages would make Africa a more vibrant socio-economic, political, cultural and technological environment.

## 2. What is Research?

Research is the systematic effort at gathering information that should lead to greater knowledge. Because “search”, the root of “research”, means “look for”, research means “looking at again” or “going through again what has been done” by someone. This presupposes several things:

Research is purposive

It is focused

It is also procedural, and

Research is systemic.

Good research is theory driven, and is therefore literature-bound (Olajide, 2011), as it derives its theoretical essence from the available literature and is expected to become part of the literature or a source of topic or relevant other topics for future research; good research springs from a theory, explores the theory, and strives to amount to a theory that others can explore. That effective research in language will lead to better understanding and interpretations of the world and a development of balanced personality and enhanced communal practice has been stressed by Denscombe (2001).

Findings from language research go a long way challenging thoughts in other disciplines because of the high surrender value of linguistic phenomena. There is hardly a field of study that does not make use of language in special ways. It is through stimulating debates across disciplines, relying on the resources of language, that the frontiers of existing knowledge are expanded, and new knowledge-s are created.

Crucial as language research is, it seems not to have enjoyed priority in world scholarship. Matters related to language planning and language development are not prioritized especially in Africa, because man seems to take language for granted. He got (acquired) his mother tongue unconsciously mainly for existential reasons, and so may not see much

need for a scholarship that stresses to explain what easily came to be possessed as a common tool for communal interactions. The prestige that people attach to the study of, say Medicine or Banking and Finance, is far greater than that which is accorded the study of an African language in many places in the continent - a rather sad reality. This brings us to the concept of “African languages”, which we intend to dwell upon briefly later in this paper.

### **3. Meaning, Nature and Scope of Teaching**

Teaching is an old profession, dating back to the times of great thinkers like Plato, Aristotle and the Socrates. The two most prominent prophets - Jesus Christ of Nazareth and the Holy Mohammed (SAW) - were teachers. They taught morals, spirituality and general ways of life. However, as reported by Abimbola (2009), the first teacher to be publicly employed was Marcus Ferdinand Quintillianus, who lived between 35AD and 95AD.

Since the beginning of teaching, it has had to do with the sharing of experiences for the purpose of modifying especially the learner’s behavior. Teaching is organized and systematic, involving methodical planning and dispassionate execution of ideas.

Teaching is broader than either of training, and instruction, although all are educational processes and they greatly differ from indoctrination, another basic educational concept. While training aims the inculcation of knowledge and the fostering of the right attitude and values, and instruction targets the acquisition and development of specific skills, indoctrination targets the mind of the learner with a view to dominating it, giving no space to him to either ask question or contribute to the teaching-learning process. Of all the modes of knowledge sharing discussed here, teaching is probably the greatest relevance to language learning.

Teaching is theoretical and may drift if not well planned; hence it is usually supported on relevant lesson plan/note and draws from an

appropriate syllabus, which is in turn prepared from the curriculum. Effective learning also involves the right evaluation practice, which Chapelle and Brindley (2010) suggest may be influenced by social and physical considerations. Chapelle and Brindley’s view presents teaching-learning as a process that may be affected by certain factors.

### **4. The Concept of African Languages**

Today, there is great awareness of the need to protect and develop African languages. People seem to have realized that apart from serving as cultural markers, the languages form basis of intellectual development and promote structural growth. However, much as Africa desires the empowerment of the indigenous languages, there has been the tendency to underestimate the strength of the obfuscating foreign languages. The major foreign languages in Africa - English, French and Spanish - have been so entrenched that they are fast becoming African languages themselves. Thus, the question “What are African languages?” may be asked which would be difficult to answer in absolute terms.

Ordinarily, African languages are those that are native to the continent, marking out the different peoples as distinct ethnic units. The languages have been classified and re-classified, using Afrocentric linguistic parameters (Olajide, 2015). Thus, for a language to be described as being African, it must be spoken by an acceptable number of Africans who share a common world view and have abiding loyalty to the language. No one may be able to give the exact number of African languages (Olajide, 2015); many new ones are emerging, few others are dying. The increases in the number of people that speak the dialects of Africa are owed to growth in population. But that is as far as identifying African languages by Africity properties go.

It should not be surprising that the non-African languages of Africa (the colonialist languages) may also be viewed as African languages. The languages experience intense pressures from the indigenous languages and yield to such pressures partially, thereby changing in forms, especially their phonological forms. Olajide &

Olaniyi (2013) observe the considerable influence of the indigenous languages on the English language in Nigeria and indirectly make a case for the nativization of the language, recommending that the educated variety of English be accepted as the standard Nigeria English. The implication of the situation is that the colonial languages, powerful as they seem to be, may eventually become somehow indigenous to Africa. Conversely, if the original African languages are not properly empowered, they may be completely submerged by the colonialist languages, which would have assumed some legitimacy to loom large.

### **5. The Researching and Teaching of African Languages**

One of the ways to strengthen a language is to research it steadily. Knowledge about languages needs to be sustained and improved by the application of scientific principles. Research is the tool to apply in keeping language vibrant. Thus, research in African languages has been on for quite some time (Kaschula & Maseko, 2014; Awoniyi, 1982). The process has achieved robust scholarship, which continues to shape thoughts concerning the revitalization of the languages. Today, many of these (African) languages enjoy appropriate orthographies, and efforts have been intensified at producing meta-languages for them, which should help in the development of local art, protection of cultural heritage and the professions using the languages.

Research activities related to African languages have led to powerful conferences, seminars, round-tables and workshops, where ideas are exchanged and created for the strengthening of the mother tongues. Scholars of African languages are agreed that education is a most viable platform for the development, protection and empowerment of the indigenous languages. They are therefore keen on how policy makers provide for the languages in education in individual African nations (Kamwendo, 2010; Adeniran 1995; Awoniyi 1982).

Research has also focused on the teaching and learning of African languages, because if they are taught properly, the languages could broaden

the cultural horizon of the learners and prepare them for leadership role in a manner they would have deep understanding of national issues. The learners' knowledge of indigenous languages would also enable them appreciate the problems of the languages and work towards solving such problems when they (the learners) become accomplished later in life. In other words, learning in indigenous languages can increase the learners' patriotism.

Despite the advantages in the proper research and teaching of African languages, it would seem the languages have not received much of scholarly attention. The study of the languages is not encouraged enough as may be evident in the small numbers of people who enter the universities to specialize in the languages. In many cases, those who study indigenous language are viewed to be weak and lacking in competitive spirit. The indigenous languages are not accorded prominence in the time-tables of schools, and they mostly function only as subjects in the curriculum, whereas they should be the media of instruction. Even as school subjects, they are poorly taught and in many cases prohibited from being spoken within school compounds. The human and material resources required for the aggressive teaching of African languages are also lacking in most schools across the continent.

Cutting edge researches related to African languages are hardly properly and frequently funded; and funds in languages usually go to colonial mega languages, which not only makes them stronger but limits career opportunities for the scholars of indigenous languages. Then a situation where other disciplines could have benefited from findings from researches in the languages is made unachievable.

### **6. Towards Improved Research and Teaching of African Languages**

Research and teaching go together for meaningful education and impressive living standard; so much the world knows that it has had to continue to strive at enhancing scholarly research and efficient languages pedagogy. It is

rather paradoxical that while other disciplines are pursued with vigor for the advancement of the African continent, the researching and teaching of the peoples' languages are left to chance. Genuine, rapid advancement is hardly possible among a people whose natural languages are suppressed, maimed or killed as is happening nearly all over Africa. Africans claim to have achieved independences, however it is debatable if they have actually attained the needed mental freedom, because colonialist languages still assail their mother tongues. Language resides in the brain, where it helps to preserve (but may also be stimulated to prevent or extirpate) one's world view (Olajide, 2011; 2007). In order to totally liberate Africa, preserve its socio-cultural and economic endowments, and allow its native knowledge-s to blossom, the following steps need to be taken urgently:

- (i) African languages must be repositioned in Africa education as suggested elsewhere (Olajide, 2015). This should be possible through patriotic overhaul of national policies. Countries like Malawi, Nigeria and South Africa that are beginning to grant serious ascendancy to the indigenous languages (Kamwendo, 2014; Mkhize, Dunisa, & Chitindingu, 2014; Olajide 2007 & Adeniran, 1995) must not lose focus.
- (ii) Research in the languages needs to be intensified and funded properly. Grants should be used judiciously and findings from such research should be properly disseminated and utilized.
- (iii) African languages research must draw experiences from other disciplines, and its relevance to especially science and technology must be shown more rigorously, so that it may be seen that the research is not just to precipitate protest material and further mystify the phenomenon of human communication, but bring about impactful development
- (iv) A way to invigorate research in African languages is also to provide more of meta-languages for the languages, which would enhance the practice of local trades, arts, and professions in Africa.
- (v) The literacy and cultural components of African languages must also be researched with

great determination. A people's greatest spiritual strength is in their cosmological insights, which are probably best deduced and appreciated from their oral tradition – the body of their songs, dances, rituals, taboos, totems, flora and fauna, chants, medicines and arts (Olajide, 2010; 2006). Appropriate research in African folklore would not only promote the teaching and learning of African (and other) languages in Africa, but engender greater deterministic fervency among the peoples.

(vi) Endowed Africans must begin to support education vigorously, especially relevant to the development of indigenous languages. Instituting grants and endowing chairs for disciplines like medicine, pharmacy, law, engineering, architecture, and others to the exclusion of the humanities and social sciences in universities across Africa is of limited help, in that much as such disciplines help in national structural development, they seem to mainly protect a work force that is eventually over exploited and derided by clever imperialist investors from other climes. Besides, there cannot be a science or technology without an art that is appropriate to it. Thus, philanthropic gestures to education must be extended to research and teaching of African languages.

(vii) The teaching of African languages must be taken seriously. Curricula must reflect the genuine needs of the peoples, and classroom practices should be such that would ensure the development of cooperative spirit and respect for culture among learners. Resources and materials used for the teaching of indigenous languages need to promote multicultural awareness and cultural experiences that can lead to greater international understanding must be provided always in African languages classrooms.

(viii) Excellent researches and outstanding performances in the teaching and learning of African languages should be amply rewarded in order to motivate scholarship in the languages.

(ix) Also, legislative activities across Africa should be more critical of the role African languages play in the continent's public life. Policy makers will do well to remember always that the surest way to subjugate a people is to undermine their language. As such, legislators across the continent should strive to achieve

greater ascendancy for indigenous languages in education and other domains of national lives; policies not backed with the right political will are wasted thoughts.

### 7. Concluding Remarks

Research and teaching of African languages are two sides of the same coin. Both need to be effective, if Africa must experience genuine development and progress. Everywhere in Africa, people desire greater empowerment for the indigenous languages, but lack of good planning and policies, poor funding and coordination of research, and lack of focus in the research make the attainment of such desires impossible. Thus, schools, teachers, government officials, legislative houses and African languages experts in the continent and elsewhere must rededicate themselves to the revitalization of research and the teaching and learning of the languages, so that a cream of Africans who can use their mother tongues to cause genuine and rapid changes in the continent may emerge.

### References

- Abimbola, I. O. (1995). The Origin, Nature and Function of Educational Research. In Jimoh, S. A.(ed.), *Research Methodology in Education: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (pp. 1-12). Ilorin: University of Ilorin Library and Publications' Committee.
- Abimbola, I. O. (2009). Teaching as a Profession in Nigeria. In Abimbola I.O. & Abolade A.O. (Eds.), *Fundamental Principles and Practice of Instruction* (pp. 488-491). Ilorin: University of Ilorin, Department of Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology. ISBN: 978-35997-0-4
- Achebe, C. (2012). *There was a country: A Personal History of Biafra*. London: Penguin.
- Adeniran, A. (1995). Language Education Provisions in Nigeria's National Policy on Education: A critique. In Owolabi, K. (ed.) (1995). *Language in Nigeria. Essays in Honour of Ayo Bamgbose* (pp. 189-200). Ibadan: Group Publishers.
- Angouri, J. (2010). Qualitative, quantitative or both? Combining Methods in Linguistic Research. In Litosseliti, L.(ed.), *Research Methods in Linguistics*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Awonyi, T.A. (1982). *Teaching of African languages*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Bamgbose, A.(1995). English in the Nigeria Environment : A West African Perspective. In Bam gbose, A. Banjo, A.& Kachru, A.(eds.), *New Englishes: A West African perspective*. Ibadan: Mosuro Press.
- Chapelle, C.A. & Brindley, G. (2010). What is language assessment. In Schitt, N. (ed.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (pp. 247-267). London: Hodden Education, An Hachette UK Company.
- Denscombe,, M. (2001, Reprint). *The Good Research Guide*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Jimoh S.A. (1995). *Research Methodology in Education*. Ilorin: University of Ilorin Library and Publications Committee.
- Kamwendo, G.H. (2014). Relegating the local, glorifying the foreign: Malawian language policies in the era of African Renaissance. *International Journal of Renaissance Studies*, 5 (2), 270-282.
- Kaschula, R.H. & Maseko, P. (2014). The intellectualization of African languages, Multilingualism and Education. *Alternation (Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa, Special Edition)*, 13, 8-35.
- Litosseliti, L. (ed.) (2010). *Research Methods in Linguistics*. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Mkhize N., Dunisa,. H, & Chitindingu, E. (2014). Democratising access and success: IsiZulu terminology development and bilingual instruction in psychology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. *Alternations (Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study*

- of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa, Special Edition) 13, 128-154.
- Olajide, S.B. (2006). Language, Science and Religion: Three Mutual Factors in the Service of Humanity. In Dopamu, A. (Ed.), Science and Religion in the Service of Humanity (pp73-88). Ilorin, University of Ilorin: Local Society Initiative and the Nigerian Association for the Study of Religion.
- Olajide, S. B. (2007). Reforming the mother tongue content of Nigerian education for sustainable national empowerment. In Educational Reforms in Nigeria: Past, Present and Future Lawal, R. A., Jimoh, S. A., Olorundare, A.S. & Ijaiya, N. Y. S. (eds.) 183-197.. Ibadan: Published by Stirling Horden.
- Olajide, S. B. (2010). Folklore and culture as literacy resources for national emancipation. International Education Studies (A Publication of the Canadian Center of Science and Education in partnership with research institutions, community organizations, enterprises, and foundations), 3 (2), 200-205.  
Online: <http://ccsenet.org/index.php/ies/article/viewFile/5889/466>.
- Olajide, S.B. (2011): Ensuring Adequate Review of related Literature in Language Education: The Role of the Supervisor. In Cross Current in Language, Literature & Translation: Festschrift for Prof. J.P.A. Ukoyen. Kuupole. D.D, Bariki, I. & Yennah, R.270-278 Republique du Benin.
- Olajide, S.B. (2015). Revitalizing Language Education in Curricula and African Languages Pedagogy. Keynote/Plenary address presented to the colloquium on “Language Education in Curricula and African Languages Pedagogy” organized by the School of Education, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa in collaboration with the South African Research Foundation, 17 – 19 September 2015.
- Olajide, S.B. & Olaniyi, K.O. (2013e). Educated Nigerian English as a core of regional “RP”. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science (A Publication of Centre for Promoting Ideas, edited at the California State University, USA), 3. Online: [http://ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol\\_3\\_No\\_14\\_Special\\_Issue\\_July\\_2013/31.pdf](http://ijhssnet.com/journals/Vol_3_No_14_Special_Issue_July_2013/31.pdf)
- Sunderland, J. (2010). Research questions in linguistics. In Litosseliti, L. (ed.), Research Methods in Linguistics. London: Continuum International Publishing Group.