Full Length Research Paper

Language deficit in English and lack of creative education as impediments to Nigeria’s breakthrough into the knowledge era

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This essay discusses the linguistic and cultural factor that has acted as impediments to Nigeria’s breakthrough into the knowledge era. It identifies language deficit in English by most Nigerians, under-developed state of most Nigerian languages, absence of creative education and the presence of certain cultural taboos which stifles the flourishing of creative thinking as barriers to sustainable development in Nigeria. The essay observes that a paradigm shift from the present rote system of education, transparency in government, drawing up a road map for cultural change as barrier breakers to Nigeria’s inability to break through into the knowledge era.

Key words: Language deficit, knowledge era, sustainable development, creativity and innovation skills, modern, knowledge, economy.

INTRODUCTION

This essay discusses the linguistic and cultural factors that have acted as impediments to Nigeria’s breakthrough into the knowledge era. It identifies language deficit in English by most Nigerians, under-developed state of most Nigerian languages, absence of creative education and the presence of certain cultural taboos which stifles the flourishing of creative thinking as barriers to sustainable development in Nigeria. The essay observes that a paradigm shift from the present rote system of education, transparency in government, drawing up a road map for cultural change as barrier breakers to Nigeria’s inability to break through into the knowledge era.

Beginning from the discovery of fire during the pre-historic period to the present era of globalisation which is being facilitated by the internet, human development has been premised on innovative and creative thinking. Creative and innovative ideas impact on various sectors of human life like health, agriculture, technology and transportation in order to make life more comfortable and to alleviate poverty.

A few years ago, the information technology era gave way to a new one known as the era of knowledge. In this new era, knowledge is the primary source of economic productivity. The most valuable resource of any country is its inherent intellectual assets which can be exploited through creativity and innovation. (Akinboye, 2003)

Due to the pulling down of walls bifurcating nations, the world of the knowledge era is now flat although its surface is not smooth. Countries are no more categorized as developed, developing and underdeveloped but as smartest, smarter, smart; the parameter used for the grouping is the number of creative and innovative people in each country. While the smartest countries in the World like the United States, Japan, South Korea and Great Britain and the smarter countries like the Asian Tigers, Brazil, and China are churning out brains from their tertiary institutions and attracting brains from other parts of the World, Nigeria as well as most African countries is experiencing brain drain. The theme of this

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The essay focuses on measures that can be adopted in Nigeria to enable the country join the league of smarter countries through embarking on the race for ideas.

**CREATIVITY AND SUSTAINABLE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

Before the last decade of the 21st century, human development was equated with economic development based on various economic models. During the 1990’s, the term human development shifted from the narrow precepts of economic development to include all aspects of human life regardless of the social class, race, religion and nationality of the person or persons. It focuses on the human organism and his efforts to develop; so, the main focus of sustainable development is creativity and innovation skills rather than economic models. Akinboye (2003) further notes that, creativity and innovation skills now create conducive conditions for the take-off of economic growth, prosperity and modernization since it narrows the gap between the rich and the poor nations.

United Nations Development Programme Report (UNDP, 1999) also endorsed this broader conceptualization of development when it states that sustainable human development promotes job growth rather than unemployment growth. It is development that stresses empowerment, employment, equity and environmental preservation.

The United Nations (UN, 1992) outlined additional principles of sustainable development and they include:

i. Sensible economic and social policies.
ii. Democratic decision-making.
iii. Financial accountability and measures design to combat corruption.
iv. Respect for human right.

Sustainable human development and good governance are, however, premised on the abundance of creativity and innovation skills in a country. Knowledge is the primary source of sustainable development and good governance. So, in the knowledge era a country’s intellectual property which is exploited for the sustainable development of the country constitutes the key strategic asset of that nation. The world economy now revolves around the emerging global knowledge economy. Nigeria is not a player of the global knowledge economy because it lacks the key strategic asset - brains. The exclusion of Nigeria from membership of this new era can be attributed to absence of creativity and innovation skills in the nation’s educational system, obsolete cultural patterns, corruption and lack of transparency and absence of rule of law. Once these barriers that exclude Nigeria from membership of this new era are broken, the country will become one of the players of the global knowledge economy and will then experience sustainable development.

Akinboye (2003) observes that creativity is an inter-disciplinary topic and it cuts across all fields of human and intellectual endeavour. Sub-types of creativity include entrepreneurial creativity and expressive creativity which manifest in creative writing. However scientific creativity, inventive creativity and innovative creativity are the types of creativity that constitute the engine room for technological and economic “take-off” of a nation. These are the types of creativity that the nation’s education system should focus on churning out from its educational institutions.

**IMPEDIMENTS TO CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION SKILLS IN NIGERIA**

The factors that impede the flourishing of creative and innovative minds in Nigeria include: language deficit, rote system of education, horizontal cultural patterns and absence of transparency in government. Impediments are obstacles, barriers and hindrances that exclude a people from the attainment of certain goals. Impediments can be economic, social, political or linguistic. In Nigeria, linguistic impediment will be discussed from two perspectives; firstly, language deficit in English by the large army of semi literates and illiterates. Secondly, the under development of Nigerian languages also constitutes barriers to Nigeria’s breakthrough into the knowledge era.

**Language deficit in English**

Language deficit in English which is the language of education can be attributed to lack of qualified English teachers in most of the nation’s primary and secondary schools as well as lack of good instructional materials like teaching aids and textbooks. “English mainly” or “English only” as the language of education in Nigeria introduces pupils, from pre-primary to primary 1, to English as the language of instruction despite the fact that some of these pupils are being introduced to English for the first time. The national policy on education (1971 revised 1981), states that pupils should be taught in their mother tongue from primary 1 - 3. However, introducing English as the language of instruction from primary 1 has increased semi literacy and illiteracy rate in Nigeria. The effect of the language deficit on most children from rural areas and urban slums manifests itself in truancy, poor performance in examinations, examination malpractices and high drop-out rate among this class of children. This is the concomitant of language deficit in English cognitively. The few children exempted from the problem of language deficit in English are those of elite who are exposed to English in their homes before they enroll in primary schools. They constitute a minority among Nigerian children.

Egbokhare (2004) grimly observes the adverse effect of “English mainly” as language of instruction to the nation’s educational system thus an English only or even an English mainly policy necessarily condemns most people,
and thus the country as a whole, to a permanent state of mediocrity, since people are unable to be spontaneous, creative and self confident if they cannot use their first language.

Incompetence by most Nigerian children in the language of instruction serves as a barrier to the acquisition of creativity and innovation skills because this incompetence adversely affects cognitive processes like positive operative thought, formal languages and elaborated code. Competence in English is imperative for Nigerian children since it is the nation’s official language and the default language of science and technology. If properly introduced to primary school pupils as a second language, English would serve as a catalyst for the churning out of young creative and innovative Nigerians; thereby, launching the nation into the knowledge era.

Underdeveloped state of Nigerian languages

Nigerian languages also constitute linguistic impediment to her youths’ ability to acquire innovation and creativity skills that would launch the nation into the knowledge era. This barrier is due to the fact that most of these languages, except Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo, have not kept pace with global development since they are not information and communication technology (ICT) sensitive. The large army of illiterates and semi-literates in Nigeria are therefore excluded from the global scheme of technological development since they cannot access information in this era of globalisation. Inability of many Nigerians to engage in cross fertilization of ideas through accessing the internet have excluded Nigeria from the knowledge era where brains have become the single most important asset of a nation. Since these languages are far behind human experience, conscious efforts must be made to modernize them if they are to find any use, (Egbokhare, 2004). Endangerment and eventual extinction of most Nigerian languages in the nearest future are mainly attributable to the inability of these languages to satisfy their users.

Faulty education system

Another factor that acted as a barrier to the flourishing of creative and innovative minds in Nigeria is lack of creativity and innovation in the system of education. Over a hundred years after education was introduced into Nigeria by the missionaries, the nation’s educational system, from primary to tertiary levels, still focuses on producing administrative staff for government ministries, parastatal and the private sector just as it produced catechists and interpreters for missionaries and clerks and administrative officers for colonial administrators about a century ago. The nation’s system of education can, therefore, be aptly described as “certificated education” since it focuses on rote learning where students cram and struggle to pass. The bottom line of this system of education is the acquisition of certificate and not knowledge. This is the main reason for the spate of examination malpractice and certificate racketeering. This system of education encourages the production of arts and social sciences graduates at the expense of science education. Modern knowledge economy is a technological driven economy and the inability of the educational system to encourage students to apply for basic and applied sciences has impeded the nation’s ability to join the league of knowledge economy countries. Obsolete science equipment in the nation’s educational institutions does not expose the few science students to the modern scientific gadgets of a technological driven economy. This obsolete, uncreative and non-innovative educational system has accentuated graduate unemployment since most Nigerian graduates have been shut out of the globalized labour market by the increasing demand of modern technological driven economy. Until our educational system conforms to the 1990 world declaration on education which outlined the salient qualities of good, innovative and creative education, Nigeria will remain shut out of modern knowledge economy.

Member countries at the vanguard of knowledge economy are now termed the smartest countries since they have the highest number of innovative and creative scientists who invent, innovate, produce patents and solve complex problems. Some of these nations include the United States of America, Japan, the Asian Tigers, Israel, Taiwan and Northern Ireland. These countries now enjoy higher standards of living than Nigeria despite the fact that they lack natural resources like crude oil. Lack of creativity and innovation skills in the nation’s system of education has also encouraged brain drain.

Culture of conformity and humility

Certain cultural factors and lack of transparency by the various arms of Nigerian government also impede the nation’s ability to break into the knowledge era. Although a multilingual and multicultural speech community, most Nigerian indigenous cultures have been aptly described by Adekunle as having horizontal cultural pattern and the centrifugal force of this type of cultural patterns have certain characteristics which are antithetical to the acquisition of creative and innovation skills. Some of them include the insistence on conformity and humility. The concomitant of conformity and humility on an individual is timidity. This cultural pattern discourages the ability to dream and challenge the tyranny of convention. It also discourages free, critical and sophisticated thought due to it’s over emphasis on co-operation. Any enlightened individual who imbibes vertical cultural patterns with its centripetal force which insists on individualization and encourages lateral thinking is castigated as either a non conformist or deviant. This minority group who is supposed to constitute the core of creative and innovative people in the country always emigrates. This unfortunate castigation is the cause of brain drain that Nigeria is experiencing. Egbokhare (2004)
aptly describes the adverse effect of intellectual timidity and the merit of lateral thinking to a nation thus, “Timidity is the undoing of creative and scientific pursuit because intellectual timidity tends at best to promote vertical thinking - the kind that produces little laboured steps. Great scientific advances and social changes are the products of lateral thinking. This is the kind of thinking that leads to a shift in paradigm; a break with an old order. It is a thinking that challenges conventions and creates a new consciousness.”

Corruption and lack of transparency

Corruption within government also impedes Nigeria’s ability to break through into the knowledge economy. Oil production is vital to the world’s economy. Nigeria is in the 6th position of oil production. Unfortunately, the country is not a part of the governing elite because of corruption and lack of transparency. Billions of dollars realized from the sale of crude oil have been siphoned into private accounts while the nation’s infrastructures like electricity, educational institutions and roads are in shambles. What is more, the Niger Delta region, which is the goose that lays the golden egg, has remained underdeveloped and environmentally polluted.

The recent spate of hostage taking in this region is a fall out of the government’s refusal to plough back part of the revenue realized from the sale of crude oil into the development of the Niger Delta region. The ruling elite of the Niger Delta region has accentuated the militancy of the region because the 13% derivation fund remitted to the respective state and local government areas has been diverted into private pockets. So political instability, social unrest, lack of infrastructural development caused mainly by corruption have shut Nigeria out of the booming knowledge economy. Due to corruption, life in Nigeria still conforms to Thomas Hobbes description of life in 1651 as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short (Zakaria 2005 - 2006). Nigerians live in the world of losers because they are locked outside the global market; unfortunately, corruption is one of the reasons. The countries that control the global market now has exploding knowledge centers which Bill Gates called “Intelligence quotient magnets” (IQ magnets). They include Balgalore in India, San Francisco in the U.S, Shangail in China and Dublin in Northern Ireland.

NEED FOR A PARADIGM SHIFT TO BREAK BARRIERS TO CREATIVITY AND INNOVATIVE SKILLS IN NIGERIA

The absence of creative and innovative individuals in Nigeria through brain drain, and the emigration of the few brains produced in the country can be addressed if the nation engages in paradigm shifts from linguistic, educational and cultural perspectives. In this modern knowledge economy, any country that does not want to be shut out of the global knowledge economy must create an enabling environment for creative, innovative and scientific skills to flourish among her people. This flourishing emanates mainly from paradigm shifts in education and culture.

In education, the first way of breaking through will be through the instrumentality of language. Mother tongue should be adopted for education during the first three years of primary education. This will increase the nation’s literacy rate which is now roughly 20% (Egbokhare 2004). Anderson (1966) observes that a society requires 40% literacy rate for economic ‘take off’. Sustainable development will continue to elude Nigeria until the country attains a minimum of 40 per cent literacy rate. ‘English mainly’ model of education is one of the paradigm in education that has run its course. Researches in Philippines, Mexico and Nigeria have shown that a child learns faster in his or her mother tongue rather than a foreign language (Chumbow 1998, Bamgbose 1992).

Literacy is a prerequisite for access to information in this era of ICT revolution; information facilitates the acquisition of creative, innovative and scientific skills. With her large army of illiterates, semi literate and non functional literates, the nation cannot produce many creative, innovative and scientific individuals. The argument against the adoption of mother tongue for teaching and learning in the first three years of primary education in Nigeria is the complexly multi lingual and multicultural state of the country as a speech community. However, about 360 or 90% of the indigenous languages in Nigeria are spoken within just two out of the nation’s six geopolitical zones, (Eghokhare, 2001). While 260 or 65% of the languages are spoken in the North Central geo-political zone or Middle Belt, 100 or 25% are spoken in the South South geo-political zone or Niger Delta region. Since, Hausa and Nigerian pidgin language are used in these two regions as lingua franca, these two languages can be adopted for mother tongue education for the very small languages. Researches have shown that children in these two geo-political zones are competent speakers of Hausa and Nigerian pidgin respectively before they attain the age of 4 years. This will reduce the number of indigenous languages that will be required for mother tongue education. Mother tongue education will breed functional literates who will live in the consciousness of reading and writing and not the present ones who cannot. Adopting mother tongue for the first three years of primary education will encourage intergenerational transmission of the language from parents to children and reverse the spate of endangerment and eventual extinction of these languages.

Secondly, deliberate effort should be made to introduce creative education in the nation’s educational institutions from primary to tertiary levels. The system of teaching in the nation’s institutions of learning needs a massive overhaul. Nigeria still adheres to the stuffed - duck system of education where education is a chore and students are forced to memorize materials and are compelled to mainly swallow ideas imparted by their teachers.
The resulting lack of creativity, curiosity and lack of adventure among Nigerian students can be attributed to the obsolete learning system. This type of education cannot create top class innovative and inventive scientists. A shift to a model of education that emphasizes the acquisition of creative and innovative skills will launch Nigeria into the global knowledge economy in the nearest future and enable her vie for a piece of the global outsourcing market which is expected to total $85 billion in 2007” (Arias, 2005 - 2006).

The nation should embark on sustained investment in science and technology by encouraging Nigerian students to develop interest in the learning of mathematics and science skills. Since the present knowledge economy is scientific and technology driven, there is the need for science teachers to introduce into the culture of Nigerian students, the learning of basic and applied sciences as an object of intense interest which they engage in with gusto and not as a chore that is embarked upon with the main aim of acquiring a certificate. Apart from massive investment in science and technology by the government, functional literate Nigerians should be encouraged to engage in life long learning in order to maximize their creative and innovative skills and increase their talents. This will de-emphasize the present craze for certificates. Our present crop of university graduates are either ill-literates (Egbokhare 2004) or illiterates of 21st century. International Labour Organization document (ILO 1997). The ILO document of 1997 observed “the illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”

China, India, Brazil, South Africa and the Asian Tigers are now transforming the world through their growing scientific and technological prowess. They now constitute a node in the global knowledge network because they have a pool of creative and innovative scientists. With the introduction of creativity in the nation’s educational system advocated above, Nigeria will produce a large crop of curious, innovative and creative scientists who will leverage technology through ICT and launch the country into the lucrative outsourcing market where the world is now flat. In this flat world, more people move, compete, connect and collaborate than ever before and the key players are the creative and innovative individuals. The smartest countries are those with the largest number of creative and innovative individuals. The more knowledge workers your country has who are able to author their own content and innovations in digital forms, the more productive your economy and therefore, the more powerful your country. (Friedman, 2006)

So, the cutting edge of modern knowledge economy is not natural resources like crude oil and gas but brains. Once this model of education that produces creative and innovative individuals is implemented and Nigeria produces a large number of them in the nearest future, commercial centers like Alaba and Idumagbo in Lagos, Onitsha, Aba and Kano will be replaced by intellectual Islands which Bill Gates calls “I.Q Magnets”. In the envisaged intellectual Islands in Nigeria, every pair of hands will not be a pair of buying and selling hands but a pair of thinking hands. At this time, Nigeria will now have a place in the sun as a very node in the global knowledge network. The nation’s schools also need a massive upgrade because most of their infrastructure is dilapidated. The nation’s science laboratories need to be well equipped and computer education should not be the exclusive preserve of children of elites.

Upgrading of the nation’s educational institution is, however, premised on minimizing corruption. Countries like Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Brazil, India and South Africa which were classic third world countries about 20 years ago are now members of the elite nations partly because their respective governments were transparent. Egbokhare (2004) illustrates the problem of corruption on the nation thus Nigeria is the 13th poorest nation on earth. It is the second most corrupt nation and has over 120 million people with over 70% living below poverty lines. 54% of Nigerians are stark illiterates.

Due to corruption, Nigeria is like a rotten boat with leaking holes. As one hole is patched, two more holes emerge. For a new boat to emerge, transparency must replace corruption. With transparency, millions of dollars been siphoned away monthly by corrupt government officials will be channeled into overhauling the nation’s educational institutions.

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the foregoing that countries all over the world, apart from Nigeria and most African countries, are working hard to position themselves for the growing competition in the knowledge economy. The leapfrog of countries like China, India, Brazil, South Africa and the Asian Tigers from classic third world economies a few decades ago into the high-tech ranks of developed or smartest countries is mainly due to these countries emphasis on science and technology. They have also evolved meritocratic and egalitarian societies.

What is holding Nigeria back from leapfrogging into the high-tech ranks of smartest or smarter nations is not the lack of resources but lack of properties. Since only reforms will trigger the high-tech boom in Nigeria, the nation needs to engage in paradigm shifts in culture, economy and education by restructuring her economy and embarking on reforms in her educational sector. Loong (2006) observes the effects of globalization thus: Globalization has moved beyond industry and is now penetrating the knowledge economy. New technologies allow us to embed knowledge processing in every object and link people and organizations in network that are always on, always connected … countries all over the world are working hard to position themselves for the growing competition in the knowledge economy. Since Nigeria cannot turn back the tide of globalisation, she should cope with it by imbibing its opportunities and avoiding its dangers. Nigeria should seize the opportunities that are transforming the emerging economies.
in Asia, South America and the Scandinavian countries by identifying her best and brightest minds and giving them quality, creative and innovative education.

REFERENCES


