ASSESSMENT OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGE COMPETENCE OF EXTENSION AGENTS IN OGUN STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract: The study was conducted to assess the indigenous language competence of extension agents and examine the influence of their personal characteristics on their indigenous language competence. A total of 84 Extension agents were randomly selected from the list of extension agents of Ogun State Agricultural Development Programme (OGADEP). Experimental procedure was adopted to assess the fluency and translation abilities of Extension agents. Data was also collected on their personal characteristics. The data was analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Results revealed that majority (64.3%) of Extension agents were highly competent in the indigenous language and the results from fluency test showed that average talking speed of extension agents was 134 words per minute (wpm), which falls in the high competence category. However, translation test to measure competence in translating English Language to Yoruba Language (indigenous language) showed that certain technical concepts were problematic for the Extension agents to correctly translate. It was also discovered that none of the personal characteristics of extension agents had any influence on their indigenous language competence. Characteristics such as: age ($r = 0.03$, $p>0.05$); experience ($r = -0.08$, $p>0.05$); sex ($\chi 2 = 0.02, p>0.05$); WAEC score in Yoruba ($r =5.62$, $P>0.5$). The study recommends that technical, complex terms and concepts utilized in agricultural messages are to be compiled in order to effect a uniform translation of such into the indigenous language. Such terms are to be taught extension agents to enhance their message delivery competence

Keywords: indigenous language, competence, extension agents

INTRODUCTION

Existence of more than one language among a people is a common phenomenon. Nigeria, a multi-ethnic nation with over 450 languages is an obvious reference (Bamgbose 1990, cited in Bodunde 2004). The focus of consideration will be on bilingualism, use of two languages. All the formally educated Nigerians are bi-lingual. They are proficient in English, the medium of learning in schools, and the indigenous language. The subjects - agricultural extension agents - whose indigenous language competence is of interest fall into this category of bilinguals. Opoku (1980) citing Ervin and Osgood (1965) classified two types of bilinguals, as the "compound" and the "co-ordinate". The compound bilingual according to Schiffman (2005) had one semantic system and two codes, whereas the co-ordinate bilingual had two semantic systems and two codes.

It will be misleading to assume that a bilingual in the Nigerian context is capable of expressing what he has learnt in the English language perfectly in the

indigenous tongue. He learnt it in a different context with a different representational system. He may have to re-learn it or find verbal equivalents before he can transmit the knowledge effectively in the indigenous language. If one of the languages in question is used sparingly by the bilingual, the level of competence might be low. Comrie (2008) alludes to the possibility of this problem by opining that bilingualism and multilingualism often involve different degrees of competence in the languages involved. A person may control one language better than another, or a person might have mastered the different languages better for different purposes, using one language for speaking, for example, and another for writing.

Any abstraction of people into a group along whatever line of common identity or interest creates new experiences, new meanings peculiar to the group. This is definitely true in the case of language. James et al (1990) support this view by mentioning that the more things the encoder and decoder have in common, that is the greater the overlap in their field of experience, the greater the chances that communication will take place between them. These experiences may well differ from those of the general populace. The group has to be able to express and share the experiences among its members, thus develops a system of symbolic representation (language) unique to the group. This phenomenon has been proven to be true along lines of age, sex and social class. According to Yule (1996), in modern studies of language variation, a great deal of care is taken to document, usually via questionnaire, certain details of the social background of the speakers. It is as a result of taking such details into account that we have been able to make a study of social dialects, which are varieties of language used by groups defined according to class, education, occupation, age, sex, and a number of other social parameters. Akanmu (2004) also identified social group and class of education as factors that lead to the development of social dialects.Bearing all these in mind, it remains valid still that assumptions of language uniformity and competence among extension agents could be highly misleading.

Agricultural extension is all about achieving effective agricultural message transfer from extension agents to farmers and vice-versa, and language competence is necessary to achieve this effective message transfer. Evenson (1979) stated that indigenous language competence is a consideration for the skill level and agricultural competence of field staff. However, cursory observation shows that in the current Nigerian agricultural extension system, this consideration appears to have been given less emphasis. At present, the best that is done in the recruitment practice with respect to indigenous language competence of extension agents, is to assign an extension agent to the locality of origin, with the assumption that natural membership of a community amounts to competent language ability in that community. It has been established by scholars (Yule 1996; Obinabo 1980) that this could be an erroneous assumption. Further, extension agents are not given on-the-job indigenous language training. Thus, the problems of indigenous language incompetence militating against effective agricultural message dissemination constitute the focus of this study.

In Ogun State, agricultural extension agents are trained on production recommendations, in the English Language, and are expected to transmit these recommendations to farmers effectively in the indigenous language. It is against this backdrop that the present study intends to provide answers to the following research questions: (a) How competent are agricultural extension agents in translating English into the indigenous language in Ogun State? (b) Do personal characteristics of extension agents have influence on their indigenous language competence?

Objectives of the study

The objectives of study were to: (a) describe the personal characteristics of extension agents in the study; (b) assess the ability of extension agents in translating text in English Language into the indigenous language; (c) examine the fluency in words per minute; and (d) determine the aggregate of language competence parameters among extension agents.

Hypothesis

Extension agents' selected personal characteristics have no influence on their indigenous language competence

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study was conducted in Ogun State, Southwest Nigeria. The State is located within latitudes 6.2^{o}N and 7.8^{o}N, and longitudes 3.0^{o}E and 5.0^{o}E. The state consists mainly of the Yoruba ethnic group, peopled predominantly by the Egba, Yewa, Awori, Egun, Ijebu and Ijebu Remo. There are other Nigerian ethnic groups and other nationals from within and outside Africa, living in various parts of the state (Oyesiku and Kojeku, 1992). According to the Ogun State Government (2006), the main languages of communication in the State are Yoruba (including its dialectical forms) and English. The former falls within the Niger-Congo language family and Benue-Congo language group (Ocrisse-Aka and Bossard 2006)

Population, Sampling Procedure, and Sample Size

The population of the study consisted of extension agents of the Ogun State Agricultural Development Programme (OGADEP). OGADEP is divided into four administrative zones: Abeokuta, Ijebu-Ode, Ikenne and Ilaro. The sample frame for extension agents was the 126 Village Extension Agents (male) and 20 Block Extension Agents (female). There was a random selection of 84 extension agents, representing 60% of the sample frame of extension agents. Fifteen male and six female extension agents were selected in each operational division.

Operationalization of Variables

Indigenous Language Competence of Extension Agents

This variable was measured along the dimensions of fluency and ease of translation.

Fluency: This was measured in words spoken per minute (wpm). The lowest acceptable talking speed for a competent language user according to Dudgale (1996) is 70 wpm. Wikipedia (2008) estimates formal speaking speed to be 100 to 120 wpm. However, Radel (2008) disagrees with this range. He estimates that conversation occurs at about 300 wpm. Parker (2001) on his part suggests normal talking pace to be between 140-160 words per minute. Drawing from these suggestions, this study adopted talking range of between 80-140 words per minute.

A standard text of agricultural message was produced from OGADEP Extension Bulletins. The extension agents were required to present the English standard text in the indigenous language. The presentation was recorded and the talking speed was rated as follows: 126–140 wpm = 3 (high competence), 111-125 wpm = 2 (moderate competence), 96-110 wpm = 1 (low competence), and 81-95 wpm = 0 (incompetence).

Ease of Translation of Words and Concepts: Support for ease of translation as a measure of language competence is obtained from the work of Opoku (1980), a study on language competence of bilingual Ghanaian school children, in the native Twi and English Languages. The children were given two separate sets of words, one in each of the two languages. They were requested to translate each set into its equivalent in the other language. Ability to achieve correct translation was a measure of competence. Certain key words and concepts (40 as utilized in the work of Opoku, 1980) were incorporated into the standard text in English. Ability for correct translation of the key words and concepts into the indigenous language was measured. Correct translation into the indigenous language equivalent attracted the following scores: 31-40 = 3 (high competence), 21-30 = 2 (moderate competence), 11-20 = 1 (low competence), and 0-10 = 0 (incompetence).

Experimentally determined language competence was thus based on an aggregation of fluency and ease of translation. Scores on the combined dimensions gave the range: 81–105 = Incompetence, 106–130 = Low Competence, 131–155 = Moderate Competence and 156–180 = High Competence.

Personal Characteristics of Extension Agents

(a) Age: the actual age of extension agents in years was assessed. (b) Sex: the sex of extension agents was assessed as male =1 and female = 2. (c) Academic qualification in the indigenous language: this was measured as indigenous language not studied = 0, Indigenous language passed = 1, Indigenous language passed at credit level =2, and Indigenous language passed at distinction level = 3. (d) Years of experience: the actual number of years of experience of extension agents was assessed.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics using measures of dispersion, frequencies and percentages were used to describe the personal characteristics of extension agents. For inferential analysis, chi square was used to test the relationship between extension agents' sex, WASC score in Yoruba, and their indigenous language competence. Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) was used to test the relationship between extension agents' age, years of extension experience, and their indigenous language competence

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Personal Characteristics of Extension Agents

Personal characteristics of extension agents as shown in Table 1 indicate that the predominant age group is made up of those in the 41 – 50 years age bracket (64.3%). While this advanced age and maturity may presently favour successful interaction with farmers, this may indicate that young sets of extension agents are not being recruited to tap from the experience of the present crop and ensure continuity of extension effort. The ratio of male to female extension agents in the study is 2:5, 71.4% are males while 28.6% are females. The modal class of respondents on WASC score in Yoruba is the Credit Pass in Yoruba group. Close to a third (32.1%) did not study Yoruba at all. On years of extension experience, the predominant group is made up of those having between eleven and twenty years experience on the job (64.3%), suggesting that the extension agents are well experienced enough on the job for efficient performance.

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by their Personal Characteristics

Age in Years	**Frequency**	**Percent**
20 – 30	06	7.1
31 -40	21	25.0
41 -50	54	64.3
51 -60	03	3.6
Total	84	100.0
Sex	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Female	24	28.6
Male	60	71.4
Total	84	100.0
Extension Agents' WASC Score	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Yoruba Not Studied	18	32.1
Ordinary Pass In Yoruba	12	14.3
Credit Pass In Yoruba	36	42.9
Distinction Pass In Yoruba	09	10.7
Total	84	100.0
Years of Extension Experience	**Frequency**	**Percent**
1 - 10	21	25.0
11 – 20	54	64.3
21- 30	06	10.7
Total	84	100.0

Table 2: Extension Agents' Translation Competence

Translation Competence	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Moderate (21 – 30)	15	17.9
High (31 – 40)	69	82.1
Total	84	100.0

Table 3: Extension Agents' Fluency Measured In Words per Minute

Fluency	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Low Competence (96 – 110 wpm)	06	7.1
Moderate Competence (111 – 125 wpm)	24	28.6
High Competence (126 – 140 wpm)	54	64.3
Total	84	100.0

Table 4: Aggregate of Extension Agents' Language Competence Parameters

Aggregate of Language Parameters	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Moderate Competence (131 – 155)	30	35.7
High Competence (156 – 180)	54	64.3
Total	84	100.0

Table 5: Personal Characteristics of Extension Agents by Their Indigenous Language Competence

Age				
	20-30 Years	31 -40 Years	41-50 Years	51-60 Years
Moderate Competence	0	12	18	0
High Competence	6	9	36	3
Sex				
	Male		Female	
Moderate Competence	21		9	
High Competence	39		15	
WASC Score in Yoruba				
	Yoruba not Studied	Ordinary Pass in Yoruba	Credit Pass in Yoruba	Distinction Pass in Yoruba
Moderate Competence	15	0	15	0
High Competence	12	12	21	9
Years of Extension Experience				
	1-10 Years	11-20 Years	21-30 Years	
Moderate Competence	9	15	6	
High Competence	12	39	3	

Table 6a: Influence of Extension Agents' Age and Years of Extension Experience on their Indigenous Language Competence

Variables	r	P	Inference	Decision
Age	0.03	0.90	NS	Accept Ho
Years of extension experience	-0.08	0.69	NS	Accept Ho

Table 6b: Influence of Extension Agents' Sex and WASCE Score in Yoruba on their Indigenous Language Competence

Variables	χ^2	df	P	Inference	Decision
Sex	0.02	1	0.90	NS	Accept Ho
WASCE score in Yoruba	5.62	3	0.13	NS	Accept Ho

Ease of Translation

Results shown in Table 2 indicates that 82.1% of extension agents are highly competent in the ability to correctly translate 40 selected words and concepts from English into the indigenous language, with an average score of 31. However, certain technical concepts proved problematic for the extension agents to correctly translate into Yoruba. An example is "100 metres". Responses of extension agents for its translation to Yoruba ranged from: *iwon ogorun mita* (with a phonetic translation of the English "metre" to *mit*a), to "*ogorun ibuso*"; 100m; and *ogorun igbonwo.* The correct response is *ese bata oodurun*, translated to mean three hundred walking strides, as three walking strides are estimated to constitute one metre distance. Another example is "specialized crates" (for transporting day old chicks). Responses for its translation to Yoruba ranged from *tiree* (phonetic translation of English "tray"), to *ile kekere* (little house); and *kireeti* (phonetic translation of English "crate"). The correct response is *awon aago akanse*.

Fluency

Table 3,shown the analysis of the talking speed (fluency) of extension agents , that 64.3% of them are highly competent, with talking speed in the region of 126 – 140 words per. On this dimension therefore, extension agents are deemed to be predominantly highly competent in the use of the indigenous language, with an average talking speed of 134 words per minute.

Aggregate of Language Competence Parameters

Table 4 shows that many extension agents, (64.3%), are highly competent in the use of the indigenous language. The average aggregate competence score is 166.12. The incidence of high competence is higher with translation (82.1%) when compared with fluency (64.3%).

Influence of Personal Characteristics of Extension Agents on Their Indigenous Language Competence

Table 5 shows results of comparisons between personal characteristics of respondents and their indigenous language competence. Comparing the age distribution of extension agents against their indigenous language competence shows that there is no predominance of a particular age group in a particular competence category. Comparison of sex with indigenous language competence shows that male and female extension agents alike have distributions in both categories of language competence. Comparison of WASC scores with

indigenous language competence shows that high competence is recorded at all levels of WASC scores, even extension agents that did not study Yoruba in the secondary school scored high on indigenous language competence scores.

Hypothesis Testing

The hypothesis states that" extension agents' selected personal characteristics have no influence on their indigenous language competence".

The selected personal characteristics are age, sex, years of experience and score in indigenous language in WASCE. Correlation results show that there is independence between age and extension agents' indigenous language competence (r= 0.03) (P>0.05). Correlation results further revealed that there is independence between years of extension experience and extension agents' indigenous language competence (r = -0.08) (P>0.05). Chi square result showed independence between sex and extension agents' indigenous language competence (χ^2 = 0.02) (P>0.05); and independence between WASC score in Yoruba and extension agents' indigenous language competence (χ^2 = 5.62) (P>0.05). The results show that in totality, all personal characteristics of extension agents have no relationship with their indigenous language competence. The results also validate the discovery that the general form of Yoruba, which the extension agents all understand and employ in agricultural message dissemination in Ogun State, is the independent language requirement for effective performance of their responsibilities. The general Yoruba is the variable that is common to all of them. They share similar societal socialization processes that teach and afford continuous use of the language. Therefore, irrespective of all personal characteristics, the more competent an extension agent is in its understanding and use, the more effective he is in agricultural message dissemination.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is established that the more competent extension agents are in the use of the indigenous language, the better positioned they are to effectively interact with their target farmers. The study concludes that extension agents in Ogun State are predominantly highly competent (64.3%) in the indigenous language. There is still room to improve upon the two-thirds (64.3%) high competence recorded among the study group, particularly certain technical concepts that proved problematic for them to correctly translate. The improvement will afford OGADEP the opportunity to develop requisite content of a language training programme to further equip the extension agents for improved performance, thereby boosting their confidence and enthusiasm. The study also concludes that personal characteristics of extension agents do not influence their indigenous language competence.

In order to further improve the chances of successful agricultural dissemination, OGADEP or any other department saddled with extension dissemination is enjoined to: (a) in-corporate language competence testing and language training into its programmes; (b) conduct comprehensive language competence testing of extension agents particularly on the two competence dimensions of fluency and translation ability as utilized in this study; (c) identify and compile technical as well as complex terms and concepts utilized in agricultural messages; and (d) effect a uniform translation of such into the indigenous language for teaching to extension agents to ensure uniform and correct transmission to farmers.

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