Identity Crisis of the Ghanaian Learner of English as a Second Language

James Nsoh Adogpa *

Department of Languages Education, College of Technology Education, Kumasi, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Rebecca Arthur

Department of English, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Charles Baba Campion

Academic Affairs Department, College of Technology Education, Kumasi, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

Abstract

The culture of every nation carries some influence on its education, language being the key. The language policy in Ghana's education, however, gives limited space to the development of the indigenous languages which have influence on the personality of the learner. The language policy has created identity crisis for learners. This crisis comes as a result of parents' expectation, pedagogical issues and a mixture of British Standard English and that of American Standard English. The lack of political will to assign roles to the indigenous languages and improper supervision of the language policy in education has led to the linguistic identity crisis: national identity crisis, cultural identity crisis and professional identity crisis. There is a need for linguists to find a way out to solve the Ghanaian learner of English as a second language identity crisis for better academic performance.

Keywords: linguistic identity crisis, Ghanaian, learner of English

INTRODUCTION

Ghana as a nation is one geographically, but linguistically diverse. Due to its linguistic diversity governments see English to be a unifier and have failed to settle on a single Ghanaian language for the nation (Gbedemah, 1975). Sefa Die and Opini (2007) state; "English language has capital and many Ghanaians see English as a neutral language that should be used as a medium of instruction. This will avoid linguistic discrimination."

On what medium of instruction to use in schools, government after government keeps on changing the policy. During the colonial era, the Sixteen Principles of Governor Guggisberg prescribed the use of mother tongue (L1) as a medium of instruction from primary one to primary three. From primary four upwards English became the medium of instruction. The aim was geared towards alienating learners of English as a second

language and uprooting them from their culture as indicated by AndohKumah (1999) and other researchers. AndohKumah (1999) argues:

> Traditional programmes are often concerned with assimilation. He (the Ghanaian) is a dominant bilingual as well as compound one. His bilingualism is exogenous and may be considered as subtractive. This may be disadvantageous since the devalued L1 is not very much used as a medium of instruction and the L2 is acquired when the child has not had an appreciable progress in cognitive development in his L1 (P 3).

The Ghanaian learner of English as a second language is trapped in the context depicted above. This context results in identity crisis. The learner's identity crisis is akin to the case of double consciousness as portrayed by Frances Mensah Williams in his novel, "From pasta to pigfoot" which is likened to Du Bois' work, "Soul of the Black Folk". The condition the black folk face is "double consciousness". He is looking at himself through the eyes of others, of measuring his soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. The Ghanaian learner tries to act in ways that he believes will gain approval of accepted standards of English instead of being honest and true to his own linguistic terrain. In effect, a Ghanaian learner of English in his/her own land feels lost and desperate in a foreign culture. The communicative behavior, tradition for his/her own culture is no longer effective enough. This happens not only to people with poor knowledge and mastering of a foreign language, but to those who have mastered it, but are not familiar with the rules and norms of functioning in different contexts.

Leontovinch (2003) demonstrates the above situation of the Ghanaian learner of English as follows:

> People speaking a foreign language well often experience an intense identity crisis abroad. Which tone of communication to acquire? Which genre to choose? How to express one's own individuality by means of a foreign language? Which cultural features to sacrifice and at the same time how to retain one's own self.

As the Ghanaian learner of English engages in the use of English as a second language, there is L1 intrusion in terms of phonology, syntax (sometimes), choice of lexical items: the whole of the linguistic corps (Gyasi, 1990; Koranteng, 2005; Sey, 1973; Hubert and Dako, 2003). This, undoubtedly, gives rise to identity crisis. Should the learner divorce his or her accent? How will he or she be perceived by his people, the culture through which he or she was raised, his or her ideas emanate? How will he or she be perceived by people who have a standard yardstick as a measure? This is really an identity in crisis.

The ambits of identity crisis extend beyond the learner. Creative writers in Ghana are equally caught in the web. As much as they desire to be in touch with their own culture they equally think of the language in which their ideas are expressed.

Yanka, a columnist in a Ghanaian newspaper and a lecturer at University of Ghana, writes in the preface to Kirby (1998) "A North American's Guide to Ghanaian English" as follows:

> Being myself a linguist, and a newspaper columnist well known for the liberal use of Ghanaian use of English, I have grown to appreciate its efficacy for satire and humour in literary works, and do wonder how my two columns: Kwatriot and Abonsam Fireman would have fared without slashes of Ghanaian English.

The Ghanaian learner has to learn the second language using the literary work of Ghanaians, Africans, and the world at large. The rules of grammar are given to him or her using Standard English as a yard of measure. Which way should the Ghanaian learner go? Standard English is usually the preferred one by educated Ghanaians as indicated by Sey (1973). The Ghanaian learner is actually in a dilemma.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The socio-linguistic invasion of Ghana began in the days of colonialism that used the establishment of schools as an agent of civilization and finally barring learners from speaking their home languages. Even today, it is not uncommon to find inscriptions such as "No Vernacular;" "Speak English;" in many classrooms in Ghanaian schools. These acts are aimed at making learners, especially in secondary schools in Ghana, despise their cultures to uphold to the foreign culture. These learners are separated and uprooted from their families and communities at ages that they have not adequately grasped their own cultural values.

The use of English as a medium of instruction solves the inequality that would have arisen if a particular Ghanaian language out of the over sixty Ghanaian languages had been used. A level playing field is created for all learners as well as those seeking employment. It seems true that Akan is widely spoken in Ghana but any choice of that will equally create superiority – inferiority complex and will further complicate the identity crisis of some Ghanaian learners whose mother tongues are marginalized.

The inability of political leaders to settle on a Ghanaian language for the nation is not indicative of the fact that they are uninterested. In 1971, the Parliament of Ghana in an attempt to settle on a Ghanaian language for the nation invited the public to present their opinions and suggestions on the language policy and one of such opinions is depicted below:

The Tongue

Cursed be the tongue

When they shall say:

Enough, Enough of Ewe or Ga or Fante;

All of Ghana can speak one language,

The Queen's language like the Queen,

Who must hear the sermon?

> In Nzema or Ewe or Dagbani on the radio
>
> In Twi or Ewe or Adangbe?
>
> All of Ghana can speak one language,
>
> The Queen's language, like the queen
>
> Cursed be the day!
>
> If we lose our tongue,
>
> We lose our souls.
>
> Gbedemah (1975)

The poet above depicts that the people of Ghana are not oblivious about the fact that their L1 is the soul of their existence. They acknowledge that Ghanaians can also use the English language like its owners. They have forgotten that no two cultures are the same as indicated by some linguists and that every society views the world differently as indicated by Whorf.

This gives rise to the dilemma of the Ghanaian learner of English as a second language. Gbedemah (1975) in supporting the use of English as a medium of instruction suggests that there is the need to remain in touch with the L1 through the instructional methods of teachers. But one must not forget that not all teachers can speak the L1 of their learners.

The marketability of the English language in the world over makes parents to prefer their wards being instructed in the foreign language. However, the problem of identity crisis is not considered in most cases. Quest (2001) interviewed students in Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire and found that most of them preferred to be taught in English or French and only35% could speak their native language. He describes this as indicative of cultural alienation, serving to exacerbate the gap with parents, home and community. The cultural gap mainly in terms of linguistic marker of identity widens more and more. The individual's identity is torn between two cultures. In extreme cases learners become 'déracinés' as indicated by Barres (2010). Déracinés are extreme cases of having been removed from the culture.

In the quest for unity in a nation as well as equality in terms of opportunities, policy makers in Ghana and researchers have tried workable measures to the language situation in Ghana. It seems little or no attention is given to the identity crisis created for our learners of English as a second language especially those in secondary school. Students at this level are normally taken away from their parents and at times far away from their L1 environment. How do teachers in secondary schools in a multilingual context help bridge the yawning linguistic gap that creates identity crisis in our young learners? Should government as well as Ghanaians and policy makers make policies with little regard if any at all to the well-being of the nation?

We need to realize that learners at all levels in the educational ladder of Ghana is in crisis linguistically – a tool to our identity, the crux of our soul.

"The day we lose our tongue

We lose our soul".

We do not have to lose our soul so we need to research into how the identity crisis of the learner of English as a second language could be solved at the secondary school level.

Education policy, language reality and torn identity

If a leader, or government, is not approaching policy from an informed, equitable, responsive, appropriate standpoint, then the results will never yield benefits for the maximum (Ayee 5). The problem of Ghana regarding language policy is not about its non-existence but the will of governments to clearly take a stance in the implementation of the policy in education as indicated by Essien (2017) and GILLBT (2016). Essien (2017) declares: "Ghanaians are quick in making policies which are often not implemented as they should be and the mother tongue (11) policy is not exempted."

All calls from many stakeholders are not indications of Ghana not having a national language but the dissatisfaction of the national language that seems to create identity crisis in our educational system. Learners as well as their teachers are straddled. Parents are interested in their wards need for a major world language for access to higher education, science and technology; and this same language will serve as their window to the outside world" (Bamgboşe, *Language and the Nation* 5). But what identity is created for this nation? It is an unhappy state that stands to soliloquize about its torn identity.

The first president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, was so much aware of the unfavourable policies formulated by the colonial masters for our schools. He said "…our existing schools were fed on imperialist pap, completely unrelated to our background and our needs." If this were the case, what have been created in the learner of English as a second language? Though Kwame Nkrumah identified this earlier and had policies to remove what was considered alien from our educational system the fact still remains that many African nations have not moved away from the colonial policies. This is confirmed by Bamgbose as follows:

> … while it would seem that African nations make policy in education, what they actually do is carry on the logic of the policies of the past. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the very languages selected, the roles assigned to them, the level at which languages are introduced and the difficulty of changing any of these. (Bamgboşe, Language and the Nation, 69)

What identity is created? A linguistic identity in crisis is created for the Ghanaian learner. Which language for education should be enforced in Ghana without identity crisis? The linguistic crisis is crucial but it seems no political will seems to come from any leader.

The identity crisis is not only an issue of political leaders, it has been stretched to African creative writers. For the sake of identity for works done by Africans there crisis have emerged. The linguistic creed crisis created by the two groups; one calling for African languages to be used in the writing of African literature and the other maintaining that European languages should be used, finds its way into the language for education in the African continent. The language reality takes a greater confusion in the school system for learners; for, they are faced with Standard English being demanded by formal setting and another demanded by the community of creative writers. The learner of English as a second language has to use works of African creative writers who have their own way of modifying the language to suit their identity needs. A torn identity is created in our language for education. The learner of English as a second language in Ghana is perpetually in identity crisis.

Ngugi (1981) in his article "Decolonising the mind" vividly depicts how the identity crisis has been created in the African learner as follows:

> The language of an African Child's formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was foreign. Thought, in him, took the visible form of a foreign language. So the written language of a child's upbringing in the school became divorced from his spoken language at home (p. 391)

The conflicting ambience created through the school language and the home language has a telling effect in creating inferiority complex in learners about their own languages through which they view the world. Restoration of self-esteemed is necessary through language policy reinforcement and implementation. It is not just the learner in crisis but a nation, a continent in linguistic identity crisis.

Language and Culture

Language mirrors culture and they are inextricably linked to each other (Yule, 1996). There is a strong relationship between language and culture and this bond has influenced theories and practice of language teaching and learning in the second and foreign language setting. Language is culturally transmitted as language learning is seen as entailing the learning of the culture of the target language, but a conscious teaching and learning of the culture of the native speakers is seen as important for success in the acquisition of the target language. The target language cannot be studied separately from the culture in which it is spoken. The reason being that culture is needed for a full internalization of the linguistic conventions of the target language and also for the acquisition of communicative competence. It is therefore not possible to teach language without culture (Rajabi, 2009). One can easily be identified by one's culture through the language one speaks. The Ghanaian learner finds himself/herself in a crisis where he/she cannot say that he can be identified with foreign culture through the speaking of the English language or his/her Ghanaian culture through the use of any of the Ghanaian languages. Although the learner has the right to use his/her mother tongue (L1) at the early stages of his/her education, per the educational policy of Ghana, this is not enforced especially, at the private schools. The policy is that the mother tongue of the learner must

be used to teach all subjects across the curriculum with the exception of the English language as a subject. Even with that, the mother tongue of the learner could be used alongside. The problem with this policy is that, has the teacher who is supposed to teach the learner been considered when it comes to the implementation of the policy? How well is the teacher prepared to use the learner's L1 in teaching him/her? Can the learner be identified by his/her culture through the L1 or the L2? As reiterated by Ngugi (1981) in his article, the Ghanaian learner is made to speak in a foreign language, write in a foreign language, sing in a foreign language and read in a foreign language. So the question is: can the Ghanaian learner be identified as more foreign than a Ghanaian? The problem here is that he/she is not recognized by the people whose language the learner is using as one of them, so also, he/she looks more alien to his/her own culture.

Language in terms of communication (speech) is used by its speakers through its tonal and sound systems, which present particular style of speaking. This may elude the Ghanaian speaker/learner who uses the English Language as his official language, may have different sound systems and style of speaking and writing. Introduction of a foreign language into the cultural composition of the learner at a tender age as it pertains in most Ghanaian homes, where children are forced to speak English (foreign language), in itself is the beginning of the crisis the learner is faced with. The Ghanaian learner who finds himself/herself in such a situation is made to face a crisis based on the structure and systems of the English language which may not help so much the learner in terms of competence and standard as it pertains to the native-speaker of English.

Every language has its systems, rules and application of the language in different ways in terms of expression and what such rules and applications mean in the society. Speakers of foreign language may not explicitly and competently use language to express themselves in their culture since such expressions may break rules and moral values so cherished in the Ghanaian set up. Such situations breed identity crises; it projects the learner as disrespectful and without morals in his own cultural home. The Ghanaian learner by virtue of his/her birth place and culture has some values that are transmitted to him through culture/language. These values are cherished by the society. However, foreign language learning and acquisition also presents its own values and such situations may present a lot of challenges to the Ghanaian learner.

Culture impinges on what the people believe in and their attitudes towards such values. As a foreign language learner who has come into contact with the act and social organizations embedded in the language, it is highly possible that his indigenous beliefs and attitudes pertaining to his/her culture would be compromised, thus the crisis.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Pedagogical issues are very critical in educational success of learners. One must not be oblivious of the fact that teachers in Ghana themselves are *bilincultural* or *multilinculral* (terms basically mine to show the level of identity crisis). At one time or the other you will find teachers switching from one language to the other in classroom situations in order to explain concepts they think the English have no expressions for or cannot have

the emotional feeling as they (Africans) do as indicated by Aidoo (1991). This straddled individual who is half-cultured in the formative period of his/her education absorbs school language poorly. Poor performance by students in schools continuous to fall as a result of lack of supervision for the implementation of policies as indicated by Essien (2017). Do teachers go by the language policy of Ghana for education? What do authorities who are to supervise the implementation of the policy do? The teacher is equally left in identity crisis as a result of lack of clear policies by government to define the roles of our local languages as indicated by Gillbt (2016).

The Ghanaian learner of English as a second language is constantly bombarded with teaching/learning materials mixed with different Standards of English. Take a formal document and you will be shocked to find both British English and American English on it. One will see spellings such as *programme* and *while* in learning materials being used by teachers and learners in the classroom. In many cases you will see Ghanaianisms mixed in the same material. Instead of **whilst** which is British English, you see the Ghanaian version as **whiles.** This mixture of usages of different Englishes further increases the linguistic crisis of the learner. Who supervises the commercialization of educational materials? How are sub-standard materials, not authorized by government, find themselves in our schools and even imposed on learners? The issue of identity crisis is a compound-complex one as demonstrated by Zeleza (2006) that the proponents of African languages invoke ontological and epistemological arguments.

Stakeholders cannot be left out in the creation of the identity crisis in the educational system of Africa. Parents are interested in their wards speaking the foreign language which they consider equips their wards with 'wings' that can enable them cross international boundaries without barriers. Rugemalira (2005) found out that the objectives of parents in Tanzanian was for the children to be enrolled in English medium schools because they see English to be tantamount to education. The issue in Ghana is not different. Parent ignore government schools that have trained and qualified professionals and take their wards to private schools that hardly have professionals. The basic issue is parents want their children to speak English at a tender age. However, the attended consequences of learners being alienated from their culture, a granary of their memories and imaginations are not known by parents. Stakeholders are actually contributors to the linguistic identity crisis in Ghana and Africa as a whole.

On the phonological aspect of the Ghanaian, it was found out that many are not so much bordered about the L1 intrusion but very much allergic to the construction of grammar which is in line with Sey (1973) findings. Though Ghanaians are not so much worried about pronunciation, they are still cautious and strive to attain native-like accent which is also in line with Koranteng (2005) findings. The result of these findings means that the Ghanaian faces crisis: professional identity crisis, national identity crisis, linguistic identity crisis; all in his own land. The Ghanaian, in formal education right from the early days of his life, has one language for the home and another for the school. This dual linguistic identity plays a subtractive role in the Ghanaian child as he/she struggles to

imbibe an imposed language and culture in his/her own nation. It is not only the learner who faces identity crisis but the nation in general.

CONCLUSION

A person in crisis thinks more of the crisis and how to overcome the crisis. The identity crisis that the Ghanaian in formal education faces through the English medium of instruction plays a subtractive role. Academic performance will continue to fall and school drop-outs will continue to increase if stakeholders in education, policy makers and politicians do not change their attitude towards the local languages in Ghana. Our tongue is our identity and the day we lose our tongue, we lose our identity, we lose our soul.

REFERENCES

Aidoo, A. A. (1991). *Changes.* London: Heinemann.

Andoh-Kumi, K. (1998). Medium of instruction at the basic education level: Does it matter?. *Legon Journal of the Humanities*, *11*, 119-146.

Ayee, Joseph R. A. (2000). *Saints, Wizards, Demons and Systems: Explaining the Success or Failure of Public Policies and Programmes.* Ghana: UP

Bamgboşe, Ayo. *Language and the Nation: The Language Question in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Edinburgh UP, 1991. Print.

Bamgboşe, Ayo. *Mother Tongue Education: The West African Experience*. n.p.: 1976. *ERIC*. Web. 11 Nov. 2013.

Essien, J. (2017). Mother tongue language policy in Ghana needs supervision. Ghana News Agency.

Frances Mensah Williams (2016). *From Pasta to Pigfoot.* London: Jacaranda Book Art and Music Ltd.

Gbedemah, F. 1975. *Alternative Language Policies for Education in Ghana*. New York: Vantage Press.

Gillbt (2016). The Mother Tongue in National. Ghanaweb

Kirby, Fr. Jon P. (1998). A North American's Guide to Ghanaian English. Tamale, Ghana: Tamale Institute for Cross-Cultural Studies.

Koranteng, L.A. (2005). Ghanaian English: A Description of its Sound Systems and / Phonological Features. Ph.D. Thesis, Legon: Unpublish.

NgugiwaThiogo (1982). *Decolonising the Mind*. London: Heinemann

Quist, H. O. (2001). Cultural Issues in Secondary Education: Away from Colonial Survival towards Neo-Colonial Influences. *Comparative Education, 37 (3), 297 – 314.*

Rajabi, P. (2009). 'Cultural orientation and reading comprehension models: The case of Iranian rural and urban students'. *Novista Royal: Research on Youth and Language* 3(1): 75-82.

Rugemalira, J. M. (2005). "Theoretical and practical challenges in a Tanzanian English medium primary school." *African and Asia, No 5, 2005, pp. 66 – 84.*

Sefa Dei, *G.* and Opini, B. M. (2007). Schooling in the context of difference: the challenge of postcolonial education in Ghana. In D. Thiessen and A. Cook-Sather (Eds.). *International Handbook of Student experiences in Elementary and Secondary Schools,* 463 – 491, Rottedam: Springer.

Sey, K. (1973). Ghanaian *English: An Exploratory Survey.* London: MacMillan.

Yule, G. (1996). *The Study of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zeleza, P. T. (2006). The Inventions of African Identities and Languages: The Discursive and Developmental Implications. *Selected Proceedings of the 36th Annual Conference on African Linguistics,* 14 – 26.