

The Nigerian Covid-19 Experience and Rural Enlightenment: The Language Factor

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ABSTRACT: As Language has been recognized as a vital communication tool, this study examined its significance as a factor for sustained rural enlightenment during COVID-19 pandemic, considering the fact that language is critical in promoting awareness, knowledge and compliance of the people with the messages of the pandemic. This conceptual paper reviewed the related literature on COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, how the pandemic was experienced, and factors that affect Language Dissemination, which encompass the Economic Challenges, Personal Beliefs, Popular culture, Parental Influence, Scarcity of Language Teachers and Technological Advancements. The paper identified the various functions of language as pointed out in the literature, include: expressing thoughts, viewpoints and ideas, communication of information, different from sign language, linguistic and communicative competence, expressive function, generating awareness in terms of other cultures, augmenting morality and ethics, augmenting socialization, implementation of tasks and activities appropriately and creation of sociable terms and relationships with others. Based on the literature, it was established in this paper that Language remains a critical factor in communicating the message of any government, Institution or agent to the people, especially during pandemics and that Language is an effective communication tool for rural enlightenment. This paper concludes that Language of the target community should be considered as a factor that will promote understanding, awareness, and compliance of the target community with any development message. The paper also concludes that rural enlightenment programmes can be effective in communicating messages during pandemics especially when the appropriate language is used. It is therefore recommended that the government, development agents or facilitators should convey messages using the language of the target community, especially during health pandemics; traditional Communication systems to be heavily used in championing the message for a positive behaviour change, such as the popular community theatre, town criers, markets, churches, schools and village squares.

Keywords: Language, Enlightenment Programmes: COVID-19 Experience: Rural Enlightenment

I. INTRODUCTION

Language has been recognized as a vital communication tool (Chaman, 2015). Communication is also an integral component of human existence (Isaac-Nnadimele, Benson, Nnadimele, & Anyira, 2021). With effective language use, communication on any pandemic can promote more awareness, knowledge and compliance of the people with the message and help to eliminate doubts, misconceptions, disinformation and misinformation, which may result in negative cognitions as well as several other kinds of effects, especially among the poor, illiterate and vulnerable groups. Access to quality information would help rural dwellers fight against

superstitious beliefs and help them become better citizens (Sharma & Fatima, 2004). World Bank (2011) also maintains that policymakers should see rural dwellers as citizens equally entitled to amenities (information on measures against the spread of COVID-19, inclusive), like their urban counterparts. The most important factor in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 is to empower the people with the right information (Reddy, & Gupta, 2020). In the process, language becomes indispensable for conveying meanings, values, traditions, norms, cultures and principles guiding the Society. Language provides the avenue for social, political, religious and intellectual interactions among the users (Ezenwa-Ohaeto & Akujobi, 2013). Accordingly, Kapur (2021) identified the functions of Language as follows: Expressing Thoughts, Viewpoints and Ideas; Communication of Information; Different from Sign Language; Linguistic and Communicative Competence; Expressive Function; Generating Awareness in terms of Other Cultures; Augmenting Morality and Ethics; Augmenting Socialization; Implementation of Tasks and Activities Appropriately and Creation of Sociable Terms and Relationships with Others. Therefore, using the Language of the people in sharing the message of safety protocols such as regular hand washing, isolation, wearing of masks, social distancing and so on is a more effective of securing the audience understanding and compliance with the health messages on COVID-19 pandemic. This is in view of the fact that the pandemic called for awareness creation, knowledge and compliance of the people with the safety measures introduced by the government.

However, the rural dwellers in various parts of Nigeria, do not easily obtain information from the media unlike their counterparts in urban cities, and they encounter a number of challengers such as poor infrastructural developments, other environmental and social constraints. Rural people often lack access to basic needs such as water food, education, healthcare, sanitation and security, leading to low life expectancy and high infant mortality (Bakare, 2011). They are also characterised by people with high level of illiteracy, low level of education (Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012), and several health related challenges (Sokey, Adjei & Ankrah, 2018). Many of them live their lives on subsistence agriculture (Moemeka, 1985) and are mostly disabled at various levels by inaccessibility, seclusion, underdevelopment, extreme poverty, ignorance, depopulation, hunger and all types of incapacities (Johnson, & Ukonze, 2018). People in rural communities are at higher risk than those in urban communities at contracting diseases and ailments (Ezeah, Ogechi, Ohia, & Celestine, 2020).

Although there are mass and modern media of communication, millions of people in rural areas have no regular access to them due to poverty, illiteracy (Otah & Umar, n.d.) and other factors. The rural population should always be communicated during pandemics using the appropriate language and channels of communication. According to Bucur (2000), good health communication must use known advertising and marketing strategies to get the message across; focus on specific population groups after careful research about the knowledge and practices of these groups; be tested on audiences to make sure the message is clearly understood and does not create confusion; and be designed to meet some measureable health objectives. In view of these, this paper focuses on the significance of language in rural enlightenment, with focus on COVID-19 experience in Nigeria.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The outbreak of COVID-19 was first discovered in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 by Chinese researchers (Shereen, Khan, Kazim, Bashir and Siddique, 2020). The virus was named 'SARS-CoV-2' and its disease, named 'COVID-19' by the International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses (ICTV) (Cui, Li, & Shi, 2019). The first confirmed case of the virus in Nigeria, was on 27th February 2020, when an Italian citizen in Lagos tested positive for the virus, known as SARS-CoV-2 and a second case of the virus was reported on 9th March 2020, in Ewekoro, Ogun State, of a Nigerian citizen who had contact with the Italian citizen (Ehanire, 2020). These resulted in a number of crises and challenges, thus necessitating the need for a better understanding of the link between public health information, language and culture (Onwukwe, Emezue, & Nwizu (2023). However, these rural dwellers are more disposed to activities that may promote the spread of COVID-19 and other diseases. For instance, they easily converge for village meetings, town hall meetings, engage in buying and selling at market squares and participate in several other socio-cultural activities. These further necessitate the

need for prompt enlightenment programmes for these rural dwellers especially those with lower levels of education.

Given the perceived knowledge gap between the urban and communities in terms of information spread, appropriate use of language becomes imperative during any enlightenment programme. The language of the people is fundamental for achieving a positive behaviour change especially during pandemics. In an instance of COVID-19, this change of behaviour may be brought about by accurate, reliable and accessible information on COVID-19 and a good understanding of risks associated with the virus among members of the community (Onwukwe, Emezue, & Nwizu, 2023). Okunna & Omunugha (2012) had explained that the development of language was a turning point in the evolution of communication.

This re-echoes the observations of McBride (1980), that the development of language is important because it gave scope and depth to the content of communication; and allowed for precision and detail of expression. Therefore, language remains a critical factor in championing the spread of any development message. Over time, development programmes targeting the rural communities seem ineffective as intended messages are given using the inappropriate language and medium of communication.

As these rural dwellers are more disposed to disease pandemics, and are dominated by people with low level of literacy in English Language, they should not merely be 'talked at' but should be made to understand and participate in any development programme. Arguably, communication constitutes mere 'noise' and becomes ineffective when the target audience do not understand or comprehend the content. Therefore, idea of rural enlightenment must involve efficient use of language of the target audience or communities, which should be a strategic way of improving audience behaviour change. It is instructive to also note that rural dwellers are often marginalized and vulnerable to social, physical and institutional infrastructure, such as quality education, health facilities, good communication network, good water supply, electricity, transportation (Haruna & Liman, 2015).

As COVID-19 pandemic and other health pandemics are life threatening, especially for rural dwellers, they are also challenged by technological and environmental constraints which include: poverty, illiteracy, lack of basic infrastructure such as poor road infrastructure, lack of power supply, poor mobile networks, and others. The poor environmental conditions characterizing rural communities make them lag behind in terms of information flow and other life enriching factors. Sometimes, they do not own access to information sources and do not take part in the spread of the development message. Given the existence of these technological and environmental barriers, the need arises for the appropriate use of language, preferably the local dialects and the traditional communication systems. Despite the advent of the modern day media in Africa, the use of traditional African communication cues is still very much common, adaptable, acceptable and recognisable (Wefwafwa 2014).

Apparently, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic led to the over abundance of information on the virus. There were series of both genuine and controversial information about COVID-19. In fact, during pandemics or during a health crisis of this nature, the rural dwellers often get more challenged by the negative effects of the problems. A number of complicated cases were reported about COVID-19, especially on rural communities. The reason for this could be tied to lack of adequate information by these rural dwellers alongside other factors. These also explain that even when the communication message may be spread using multiple channels of communication, without considering the language of the target audience, the message could constitute mere 'noise' to the people and without any effect.

Accordingly, the WHO (2020) outlined six crucial principles for effective communication during pandemics as follows: accessibility, actionability, credibility, relevance, promptness, and understandability. Therefore, the use indigenous languages should be promoted to aid people's understanding of the situation and then promote their compliance with such messages. The enlightenment of the rural communities using the appropriate language determines the level of their involvement in government activities and in requesting the government to become

responsive to their needs. When people are enlightened and are knowledgeable in the handling of development issues in their communities, they develop the required impetus to participate and hold the government or local authority accountable (Amakihe, Ako, & Fasanu, 2017). These can only be sustainable when the government and development agents utilize the appropriate language of communication as targeted groups or persons, especially the rural dwellers who may encounter some difficulties locating and having access to the needed information during pandemics.

III. NIGERIA COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

The corona virus disease of 2019 (COVID-19) shocked the world, overwhelming the health systems of even high-income countries (Amzat, Aminu, Kolo, Akinyele, Ogundairo, & Danjibo, 2020). The term ‘coronavirus’ refers to a large group of viruses that affect birds and mammals including human beings (Vandergriendt, 2020). Some coronaviruses are common human coronaviruses that only cause mild cold or flu-like symptoms to humans and they include HCoV- 229E, HCoV- NL63, HCoV -OC43, and HCoV-HKU1 (Ojobor & Babarinde, 2021). During the era, the existence of controversies and conflicting information, regarding the COVID-19 constitute part of the problems encountered by people. However, some of the indigenous languages of communication among the people were ignored, abused and violated, leading to some kinds of misinformation, misconceptions, and doubts regarding the virus and the vaccine. Rural communities in Nigeria were supposed to obtain quality information on the virus as well as the preventive measures, as basis for controlling the spread of the disease.

However, research has shown that the virus can cause severe acute respiratory problem which results in several fatalities and deaths as its consequences (Ojobor & Babarinde, 2021). The virus triggers respiratory difficulties; wreaks havoc in different countries across the world, claims thousands of lives, increases morbidity and disrupts lifestyles (WHO, 2020). The rapid spread of this heinous disease is due to the length of its incubation period - the time period between when an infected person catches the virus and when the symptoms starts manifestations (Ojobor & Babarinde, 2021). WHO (2020) revealed that COVID-19 incubation period is on the average of 5-6 days or up to 14 days, after which the victim observes some primary symptoms like cough, fever, shortness of breath and fatigue; or sore throat, diarrhea, nasal congestion, muscle aches and pains, headache, loss of taste or smell, rash on skin, or discolouration of fingers or toes which are other less common symptoms (Vandergriendt, 2020). Although during the incubation period i.e. the “pre-symptomatic” period, the disease is unknown to the victim and people around him yet, some infected persons can be contagious (Ojobor & Babarinde, 2021). Therefore, transmission from a pre-symptomatic victim can occur before symptom starts (WHO, 2020) especially in the rural communities where poverty, ignorance, and limited access to mass media and orthodox medicine prevail (Wogu, 2018) and also among women. WHO (2020) reports that a disproportionately high number of women are formal or informal primary caregivers to the young, the old and the sick, and therefore may be at greater risk of COVID-19 exposure. In the rural communities, many people share communal taps, rely on open defecation without access to functioning toilets; and there are raw sewerage and open drains, congestion and lack of solid waste management, and several others. Also, person-to-person contact within these poor communities is at high rates. Consequently, they have limited resilience to shocks from economic and health threats which make the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 high in the area (World Health Organization, 2020).

During the outbreak of COVID-19, substantial attention was devoted to combating the infodemic that has come to characterize it. This became a herculean task especially within the Nigerian rural communities, often characterized by severe lack of the requisite facilities, and compounded by high illiteracy and poverty rates (Lucas, Targema, Jibril, Sambo, & Istifanus, 2020). There was an overabundance of information on COVID-19 during the period, leading to the culture of ‘infodemic’ but the fight against COVID-19 infodemic can be more effective if stakeholders recognize and optimize the opportunities offered by traditional communication systems and channel them towards mobilizing and sensitizing rural dwellers to disregard the myriad conspiracy theories and myths about the pandemic, and instead adopt positive behaviors that would help to curtail its spread (Lucas,

Targema, Jibril, Sambo, & Istifanus, 2020). Therefore, in every community, informed knowledge that stimulates activities that are transformative in nature is apposite (Ako & Ojo, 2021), and should be communicated using the appropriate language of communication. Given the peculiarities of the country's rural settlements, traditional communication systems present suitable alternatives that could be harnessed and leveraged upon to carry everyone along in the fight against the pandemic (Lucas, Targema, Jibril, Sambo, & Istifanus, 2020) and help mobilize the people to fight against the pandemic.

IV. NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

During the COVID-19 era, there were series of intervention mechanisms introduced by the Nigerian Government. For instance, travel restriction was announced on the 18th of March, 2020. On the 23rd of April, the Inter-state lockdown was declared across all the States of Nigeria (The Punch, 2020c). There was a prohibition of large gatherings, issuance of mandatory stay-at-home order, shut down of schools, markets, churches and then, social distancing, made compulsory with a minimum of two meters in physical distance between two individuals (NCDC2020c). The popular safety protocols also introduced which include: wearing face masks, proper hand washing with soap and water or hand hygiene, use of alcohol-based sanitizer, and respiratory hygiene when coughing or sneezing (NCDC2020d). People who had a confirmed case, or contact with infected persons, or were recently discharged from hospitals were admonished to self-isolate themselves from others (NCDC 2020e). There were also quarantine or isolation centers, where confirmed patients were obliged to go to.

In view of these, there were misguided notions regarding the existence or otherwise of COVID-19 Virus. A lot of controversies trailed the information released by the NCDC on the virus. There were also myths that Africans including Nigerians are immune to the virus and that COVID-19 is a mere fiction (Aiyewumi & Okeke, 2020), a manufactured ailment, associated with 5G internet network, and so on. As part of measures to sensitize the public, the government, through the NCDC released series of commercials and publicity, including radio and Television jingles, documentaries, editorials, press releases, pamphlets, videos, written words, and leaflets for robust public awareness campaigns. They often utilised the televisions, radio, newspapers and social media in championing the awareness campaigns. While information on the virus can be argued to have gone viral, many people especially those in rural communities may not have been adequately informed. The argument is that with improper language use and inadequate media strategy, certain vital and first hand information on the virus elude certain categories of persons especially the rural dwellers with low level of English Language Literacy and who may have been bombarded with myths and controversies surrounding the virus.

V. SOME PUBLIC ENLIGHTENMENT PROGRAMMES IN NIGERIA

Through enlightenment programmes, people are taught how to use some mechanisms and make the government and other service providers, deliver quality services in alignment with citizens' needs (Babajanian, 2014; Chukwuemeka, Ugwuanyi, Ndubuisi-Okolo, & Onuoha, 2014). It can be argued that the degree of enlightenment of the citizens or community members in a democratic setting determines the level of their involvement in carrying out some actives that can make the government become responsive to communities' needs. Enlightenment is very important because it provides an avenue through which the citizens are acquainted with the use of media, community action plan, and writings that can put pressure on the local authorities to respond to the demand and preferences of the people (Fashola, 2017). Therefore, when citizens are unaware of their rights, and equally do not have the capacity and prerequisite knowledge to participate in governmental activities relating to their communities, they remain docile and suffer the consequences (Ako & Ojo 2021). Some previous enlightenment programmes in Nigeria are discussed hereunder:

VI. The Nigerian Public Health Enlightenment Programme

The Public health enlightenment has been recognized as one of the enlightenment programmes in Nigeria and among the measures of managing and controlling public health challenges during pandemics and epidemics

(Amzat, & Lawal, 2020) For instance in 2014, Rapid Public Health Enlightenment (RPHE) was deployed in the fight against Ebola. Scholars have also argued that Rapid Public Health Enlightenment (RPHE) is also a very useful and reliable strategy in times of public health emergencies because the messages can be easily infused into existing national public health campaigns, to reinforce why people need to practice basic public health hygiene (Amzat, & Lawal, 2020). This is because public panic, anxiety and misconceptions about issues can easily be addressed using the public health enlightenment programmes, as its nature will depend largely on the commitment of the government, an understanding of the complex nature of many African societies, and the need to be dynamic and innovative in the approach or use (Amzat, & Lawal, 2020).

During outbreaks, Enlightenment programmes can provide leverage for all people regardless of educational or social status, to have first-hand information on the pandemic. This can only be attainable using the appropriate language including the right choice of words, proverbs, phrases and idioms. These measures are presumed to have some kinds of positive effects which can encompass the exposure, awareness and compliance of the people with the messages of the Programme. The use of appropriate language becomes inevitable in a country like Nigeria where there are diverse languages and dialects as enlightenment programmes are usually packaged in Nigeria using a number of channels. These enlightenment programmes may have been more effective during the COVID era, if the communication involved the language of the people. There were casualties and confusion by the people regarding the pandemic which led to increase in the number of COVID-19 cases as well as other health complications, as many were disinformed, misinformed, and deceived. These would have also been curtailed if the development agents and facilitators used the indigenous languages of the communities in their advocacies, campaigns and rural enlightenment programmes targeted at the people. There were efforts by the people, government, health agencies and NGOs to crusade, share and champion some enlightenment programmes aimed at convincing the people on compliance with the COVID-19 safety protocols. Up till date, it is worrisome that some of these programmes do not achieve intended results, thereby necessitating the need to consider the use of language as a critical factor. There are other forms of enlightenment programmes previously carried out in Nigerian. Some of them are summarized hereunder:

A. The Enlightenment Initiative on Viral Hepatitis (EIVH)

This is another prominent enlightenment programme in Nigeria, sponsored by a non governmental organization (NGO) which bears the exact name of their functions ‘The Enlightenment Initiative on Viral Hepatitis (EIVH). The NGO is registered in Nigeria and aimed at reducing the spread of hepatitis in Nigeria by creating awareness about viral hepatitis among Nigerians. The organization is comprised of health professionals and with members across the geopolitical zones of Nigeria. The organization usually conduct public health outreaches on Viral Hepatitis among different communities in Nigeria.

B. The Better Life Programme

In order to overcome some developmental impediments and uplift the living standard of rural women, Mrs. Maryam Babangida, the wife of the then head of state, General Ibrahim Babangida initiated the Better Life Programme, launched in 1987 to uplift the status of women in general and those in the rural areas in particular. Its main focus included the improvement of earning opportunities, and the alleviation of poverty and ignorance among rural women. The Better Life Programme was one of the measures introduced to ease the pain of economic restructuring and enhance the well-being of rural women. The overall objective of the Better Life Programme was to enhance the productive capacity and living standards of rural women by inculcating in them the spirit of self-development through the promotion of education and business management skills (CBN, 1990). According to the Better Life Programme document (CBN, 1990), the specific objectives were to:

- i. raise social consciousness about women’s rights and their social, political and economic responsibilities;
- ii. bring women closer together for the better understanding and resolution of their problems through collective action;

- iii. mobilize women for concrete activities towards achieving specific objectives, including assuming leadership roles in all spheres of national life;
- iv. stimulate and motivate women in the rural areas towards achieving a better and higher standard of life and to sensitize the general populace to the plight of rural women;
- v. educate women in simple hygiene practices, family planning and the importance of child care;
- vi. enlighten women in the rural areas on the opportunities and facilities available to them at the local government level;
- vii. improve and enrich family life; and
- viii. encourage and institutionalize recreation

C. National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS)

This was also one of the enlightenment programmes by the federal government aimed at poverty reduction, and value re-orientation. It was a national programme but with State government and Local Government collaborations as well as other relevant stakeholders. The programme was aimed at consolidating on the achievements of the federal government to encourage development among the people. While these Programmes had some challenges, the argument of this paper is that effective use of language would have helped to achieve some reasonable results.

VII. FACTORS THAT AFFECT LANGUAGE DISSEMINATION

A number of factors can affect language dissemination, giving room for inconsistencies and discrepancies in language use. The factors are identified hereunder:

- i. Economic Challenges
- ii. Personal Beliefs
- iii. Popular Culture
- iv. Parental Influence
- v. Scarcity of Language Teachers
- vi. Technological Advancements

Economic Challenges

This can be recognized as one of the major factors that affect language dissemination in Nigeria. For instance, the level of infrastructural developments in a certain locality may affect how the people access information from other people or media of communication. Infrastructural deficits such as dilapidated roads, seasonal flooding, erosion and others, could jeopardize the ability of certain people in a rural community to obtain and use relevant information from any sources, especially during pandemics. These negative environmental conditions can also prevent the adoption and use of the most appropriate media of communication to reach out to the people especially the use of traditional communication systems for spreading a given message and for effective language dissemination. These will affect their compliance with the safety measure of a particular health condition. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people living in rural river-rine communities could hardly obtain or access information on COVID-19 safety protocols as they were ravaged by excessive flooding which claimed lives, valuables, agricultural products as well as other negative environmental conditions.

Personal Beliefs

One major factor that can affect language spread is the Personal Belief of the people. Some persons may harbour the notion that some languages are more important than others. It is also very common to find people who feel ashamed of speaking their indigenous languages in official gatherings and among people with similar demographic characteristics. However, some persons may hold strongly the idea that other languages are inferior to theirs, thereby promoting the concept of ethnocentrism.

Popular Culture

Popular culture can be regarded as one of the factors that hinder language dissemination. According to McQuails (2010), the expression, 'popular culture' is now generally preferred because it simply denotes what many or even most people like; meaning essentially the culture which is popular and much engaged by many people. These can occur when there is belief among the people that use of 'English Language' is the 'popular' and therefore more acceptable for official communication regardless of the situational contingencies. This belief may have led to the failure of some development and enlightenment programmes as the target audience may not understand and participate in the programmes

Parental Influence

Parental Influence can be seen as a major challenge affecting the spread of language. It is not unusual to find parents who do not support or encourage their children to speak and learn their indigenous languages as well as other local languages, apart from the conventional English Language. Many of these children are already approaching adulthood and could hardly speak or understand their indigenous languages. There is a fundamental problem when a development message, targeted at these young ones are not communicated using their indigenous languages. The implication is that the message will likely be ignored and the society suffers the negative effects.

Scarcity of Language Teachers

This is another prominent factor, hampering the spread of language in Nigerian society. Evidence abound in secondary and tertiary Institutions where there are scarcity of language teachers and where unqualified teachers handle language studies. It is also disheartening that some private schools do not attach importance to indigenous language studies, thereby discouraging the children from cultivating interests in Language learning. Schools or Institutions in Nigeria should be equipped with competent teachers who should help train the children on appropriate use of language, including the syntactical, morphological and phonological rules guiding the use of the Language, taking into account some factors such as grammar, pronunciation, punctuation, spellings, diction and others. The students and other learners of any language should explore further avenues of mastering the written and spoken aspects of the language. Traditional media can be used to create awareness and sensitize people on various social issues (Ottah & Umar 2016). The combination of songs, drama, and music makes messages on social issues like child labour, individual differences, environment and health issues, women etc., to motivate viewers and this leaves an unforgettable impact (Infospace, 2017).

Technological Advancements

It is a truism that recent advancements and innovations in New Information and Communication Technologies (NICTs) is one of the prominent factors affecting the spread of language in recent times. For instance, internet enabled devices such as ipads, laptops, desktop, notepads and sophisticated mobile phones with social media platforms abound in recent times through which information on COVID-19 Pandemic was more heavily spread. The use of these facilities are quite predominant in the urban areas but cannot be quite an easy trend among those in rural communities where there may be limited internet facility, low income level and several environmental constraints.

It also appears that development facilitators overtime, spread development message using the new media, consisting of websites, social media, online forums, mobile telephony, virtual communications, and the mass media which in recent times, have migrated online, often neglecting the power of the indigenous languages and traditional communication systems in promoting a favourable action. It is equally understood that advanced technologies can generate traffic among the global audience, disregarding the use of indigenous languages and traditional media can be quite damaging on the culture of the people. When appropriately applied, the new media

and multi-media strategy may be used to promote the spread of language, as against the consistent use of English Language. However, development messages, targeting a behaviour change among people in the rural areas using merely the new media and English language can be adjudged ineffective as the audience is constrained by several environmental and developmental factors.

While it is safe to argue that research and innovations had rapidly enhanced teaching and learning, and currently expanding the scope of language to accommodate new terms, words, ideas or concepts in various fields of learning, all these changes should always be integrated into the various indigenous languages. This will help motivate any change agent, development facilitator, teachers and learners of languages to write and speak indigenous languages more fluently, at all times.

VIII. SUMMARY

Language remains a critical factor in communicating the messages of any government or Institution to the people, especially during pandemics. Language can be argued to be an effective communication tool as already observed by scholars (see Chaman, 2015), especially during the packaging and spread of enlightenment programmes. This is because enlightenment programme does not only reduce the pre-conditions that preclude community participation, but help to create an enabling environment for easy collaboration between the stakeholders and government in the deliberations and execution of community affairs (Yang, Xu & Shi, 2017). Similarly, Language is also fundamentally a system of communication, where sound or signs transfers articles, activities, conceptions or thoughts (Kapur, 2021). The various functions of language as pointed out in the literature, include: expressing thoughts, viewpoints and ideas, communication of information, different from sign language, linguistic and communicative competence, expressive function, generating awareness in terms of other cultures, augmenting morality and ethics, augmenting socialization, implementation of tasks and activities appropriately and creation of sociable terms and relationships with others. Apart from these functions, the central function of language is to aid Communication. The factors that affect language dissemination as discussed in this paper, further includes: Economic Challenges, Personal Beliefs, Popular Culture, Parental Influence, Scarcity of Language Teachers and technological advancements.

As language remains a dominating factor in promoting a behaviour change effect among the people, especially during pandemic, the indigenous language of the people and traditional communication systems should be utilized. These will enhance an efficient communication of the messages and then help to make the people respond accordingly. The literature has shown that there is an information gap in rural communities in terms of obtaining relevant information during pandemics.

As communication processes involve practices through which people arrive at their own understanding of issues at both the community, local, regional or national levels, development of rural areas to a large extent is dependent on the availability, accessibility and communication of information (Isaac-Nnadimele, Benson, Nnadimele, & Anyira, 2021). As aptly captured by Rasila & Mudau, (2012), the importance of effective communication in promoting successful implementation of developmental initiatives need not be overemphasized. No doubt, rural life cannot exist without communication and information. Every activity carried out in rural communities by rural dwellers is anchored on the hinges of communication and information provision and utilization as it is in the urban settings. The channels of communication that are currently used by various agents to disseminate information to farmers are elitist and urban-centred (Ogidi, 2015). Ayobolu (2019) contends that the various channels of communication should also be highly considered viable vehicles and tools in disseminating information about the sustainable development among rural communities

Therefore, apart from the focus on language, this paper further argues that the traditional modes of communication can help improve the spread of language and the development message. Traditional communication systems can also be viewed as one of the strongest avenues to achieving positive behaviour

change. These traditional communication systems often utilize the face-to-face interpersonal communication which remains very important in rural areas where old habits are prevalent and influential (Ors, 2008).

IX. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that Language of the target community should be considered as a critical factor in promoting understanding, awareness, and compliance of the target community with any development message. The study also concludes that rural enlightenment programmes can be effective in communicating messages during pandemics especially when the appropriate language is used.

During the period of the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria, it can be said that language utilised by the change agents or development facilitators were basically the English Language, thereby leading to doubts, controversies, poor awareness, and low level of compliance with COVID-19 safety protocols among some persons.

X. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is therefore recommended that:

- i. The government, development agents or facilitators should convey messages using the language of the target community, especially during health pandemics;
- ii. The use of traditional Communication systems can be more efficient in championing the spread of any development message among rural dwellers and this can result in a positive behaviour change;
- iii. The use of popular community theatre, town criers, markets, churches, schools and village squares may add more effects towards improving the content of the development message within the rural communities.

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