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**MOTHER-TONGUE AS A MEDIUM OF
INSTRUCTION IN SCHOOLS:
A CASE STUDY OF YORÙBÁ**

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Introduction

Several scholars and government agents have written in favour of the need to adopt the child's mother tongue as a medium of instruction in our schools. Among them are: Fafunwa 1974, Majasan 1975, Awoniyi 1978, Omotoye 1996, Federal Government of Nigeria 1998, Odetokun 2010, to mention just a few.. This paper examines the prospects and problems of the use of the child's mother-tongue language for instruction in schools using the Nigeria situation and the Yorùbá mother-tongue as the yardstick. At the end, a number of solutions are proffered. The Universal Primary Education programme was launched in September, 1976 by General Olusegun Obasanjo, the then Military Head of State of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The implementation came as a result of the recommendations of the National Curriculum Conference of 1989 which as well gave birth to the evolution of the 6-3-3-4 system of education, which states that: Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the Primary School is initially the mother-tongue or the language of the immediate community and at a later stage, English (N.P.E.1981). 2

In its review of 1998, the policy states that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years. During this period, English language shall be taught as a subject. From the fourth year, English shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of the immediate environment and French shall be taught as subjects. From the above, it is evident that the National Policy on Education recognizes the teaching of the three major Nigerian Languages even at the Secondary School level. Unfortunately however, competence in speaking, reading and writing of English Language is crucial and fundamental to the Nigerian education system. It is the dominant language used in the classroom especially after the first two years of primary education of a child. It is the sole medium of expression.

On school walls, trees and even on the roads, it is boldly written in simple sentences such as "English is our language", "do not speak in vernacular" and so on. The setting of examination questions and instructions are done in English Language. These are the kind of peculiar problems facing Nigeria's Indigenous languages. Ironically enough, despite the high premium placed on English Language, most Nigerian students still record a high percentage of failure in the subject. In the Nigerian Curriculum policy, one of the goals set for education is "the inculcation of right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual and the Nigerian society". This we feel cannot be achieved in a situation where most educated people and school children today have a mixed culture-traditional and modern. As rightly observed by Yoyoye (2009:45). Formal Western education and modernization have imposed the Western mode of thought, values and culture in them. Various conflicts in individuals' personalities result from this mixing of traditional with Western. This is to say that the interference on foreign languages in the child's mother-tongue has adversely affected the learning, reasoning and the thinking faculties of the child. All efforts towards realizing a change by all stakeholders, proved abortive.

As time went on, people began to see reason with the advocates of the use of the child's mother-tongue language (the child's indigenous language) as the medium for instructions in our schools. The focus of this paper therefore is to highlight the advantages the use of a child's mother-tongue will bring to the Nigerian nation as a whole.

What is Mother-Tongue? Language no doubt is an indispensable tool that man needs to facilitate his daily interaction with fellow human beings, whether in face-to-face exchange or in other social contexts. Language is an integral aspect of culture, as it cannot be separated from the culture of its people. It is the most important possession that distinguishes man from other creatures. It is the life wire of the society since the most important functions it performs are that: it guides, directs, and as well, structures the society. The occurrence of policy statements on Nigerian languages in education emphasizes the level of seriousness the Federal Government of Nigeria exhibits attaches to the teaching, learning and use of Nigerian languages in our schools. (Chijioke 2000). Homby (1974) sees a language as "human and non instinctive method of communicating ideas by means of a system of sounds and sound symbols". This is to say that language is a universal concept, an accepted mode of conversation among any group of people. Before you are said to be speaking a language, you must have followed the rules guiding the speaking of the language especially the one relating to syntactic arrangement of words. For instance,

(1). Mo pa eja nlá (Subj. Noun) (Verb) (obj. Noun) (adj.) (Yorùbá Lang) (2). I caught a big fish (subj. noun) (verb) (article) (adj.) (obj. noun) (English Lang) The two sentences above cannot be arranged otherwise within the context of their different languages. If this is done, then the speaker will not be speaking the language he or she intends to speak. Language brings about good relationship among people because they can understand each other better. Wherever and whenever there is a language barrier, there is bound to be communication gap which may in turn breed problems, confusion and disunity.

Nwogu (2000:22) says that: Language is man's unique accomplishment. More than anything else, it sets man apart from the animal world. It is the basis of all creative thoughts. Without language, there would be no progress, no civilization, no culture. The acquisition of language is of particular importance for the process of humanization and socialization. It may be argued that animals do speak. This is to say that animals have a language. This, to us, is not acceptable for the following reasons (among others):

- a. the said animal language(s) cannot be broken into components.
- b. no one can give meanings to such language(s).
- c. no other creature is endowed with a language according to creation stories.

All these can be found in the language of man. Therefore, the said language is nothing but sounds and signs. It is not better than the one produced by the beating of the drum. Mother tongue on the other hand, can be described as one's native language or the language spoken within the child's environment. Homby (1974) describes it as a common sense, the intelligence with which one is born. Mother tongue can be described as a child's in-born language. It is the language a child knows how to speak best, understand best, expresses himself/herself best with. It is acquired from the infant stage of life and this differentiates it from the language a child acquires at school age. (Fafunwa 1974 Ogunlola and Ale 1998, Awoniyi 1998). Fafunwa (1974) asserts that the child learns the mother tongue by imitating the mother with whom he stays most of the time. The mother does not take cognizance of this process until the child makes simple sentences which are strange to the mother. This confirms the claim that mother tongue is the language the child understands best, and can use best. This brings us to the argument that the child learns better in his/her mother tongue. This claim is supported by Bruner (1972:14) who argues that it is universally agreed that a child learns best in his/her mother tongue. Emphasizing the importance of mother-tongue, he remarks that: man has the capacity to receive and translate knowledge in a linguistic form.

This permits man to convert knowledge into a form that renders it highly transformable. Language not only permits an economic condensation of knowledge, it also permits us to turn knowledge into hypothetical forms so that we may consider alternatives without having to act them in the form of trial and error. What Bruner is saying here is that the use of mother tongue would help the child to be able to give free reins of his thoughts and express it in creative language, thereby paving way for a meaningful education. Chinua Achebe (1995) in a speech titled: "The African Writer and the English Language" questions: Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me, there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. This is to suggest that the laborious enterprise of enriching the foreign language by subjecting the mother tongue to such a grueling process of transformation is considered as a viable option of creating new English which carries "the weight of African experience and reflecting African culture". Omolewa (1975:107) opines that: native tongue is immensely more vital than it is one of the chief means of preserving what is good in native customs, ideas, ideals... All people have inherent right to their own personality, however primitive they may be... No greater injustice can be committed against a people than to deprive them of their own language. This points to the importance of the child's native language in teaching and learning. There is no doubt that the teacher will be proficient in the language, learners will learn better and faster because the language is either theirs or is widely spoken in their immediate community. An added advantage will be the promotion of indigenous literary texts which will also be of benefit to the nation economically, politically and culturally too. 6

Mother tongue and the Child's Learning As earlier said, our focus will be on the Yorùbá mother tongue. The Yorùbá people of Nigeria cherish people of good character and they do everything possible to instill it in their children. One undisputable fact is that when a child is trained in good character acquisition, he becomes useful to himself, his family, community and the nation at large. This forms the main idea of the Yorùbá Traditional Education System. i.e. to foster good character in the individual and to make him a useful member of his community. The best tool for achieving this objective, no doubt, is through the use of the child's mother tongue. Record has it that at the introduction of the formal (school) education system, the Federal Ministry of Education of Nigeria allowed the use of mother tongue (Yorùbá) as a medium for instruction in all government-owned schools. A few missions such as the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S) allowed its use at the

elementary classes. This was aimed at making people to acknowledge the usefulness of the Yorùbá language just as in the case of the English Language. For instance, Bamgbose (1969:98) asserts that : A study of the dialects will not only be useful in language studies, it will be an advantage for literary studies. The oral literature which is now being collected comes from different dialectal areas. Each collection bears the stamp of the dialect of the chanter, and it is futile to think that one can really carry out a proper analysis of the poetry without first understanding the dialect in which it is chanted. Dialect will also throw some light on the history of the language. Furthermore, an Ibàdàn-based Newspaper, *The Yorùbá News* of February 9th, 1926, in her editorial has this to say: "the best arrangement for the present, will be the teaching of Yorùbá or its employment as the basis of instruction in all schools, up to Standard III and side-by-side from Standard IV upwards to the highest classes of secondary schools and colleges".

In like manner, Adétùgbó (1997) opines that: language learning by imposition or force has been found to be not as successful as language acquired by choice. The imposition of language on an unwilling populace also tends to create tension. In the same vein, Isola (1995:312) asserts that socializing a child into his culture involves the use of his indigenous language which is the life blood of any culture. Isola (2009:103) also asserts that: A good grounding in the mother-tongue (language) helps the child to acquire other languages faster. The references above point to the importance of the mother-tongue in the education and upbringing of a child. This implies that emphasis should be laid more on the teaching and learning of the child's language. This opinion is in line with Isola's (2009:96-97) view that: colonialism completely took over the African mind through an unsuitable system of education. In school, the Yorùbá child was not allowed to speak the mother tongue, the poor children were made to learn lullabies like: "Bah, bah, black sheep, have you any work?" This lack of competence in the mother tongue has led to the loss of some valuable literary genres and other precious "souvenirs" of language. The mother tongue was enthusiastically degraded and English was moved to the centre stage. It became the pride of anyone who could stammer some innocuous phrases to the envy of the stupefied illiterates. On this view, Bamgbose (1969:p86) is of the view that the linguistic problems involved were beyond the missionaries and that many of these problems were not peculiar to the Yorùbá language but were typical of all languages being reduced to writing.

In our own opinion, the use of mother tongue (Yorùbá) in a classroom situation is capable of bringing tremendous improvement in most if not in all areas of the people's life.

These include:

(i) Knowledge Acquisition: When a school child is being instructed in his/her mother tongue, he understands better, thus more knowledge is acquired. This is because the mother tongue is the language a child understands most. It is a language he acquires before going into the classroom. The child feels free with his instructor. He is able and very willing to ask questions on areas of difficulty. This results in increase in student/teacher relationship. In a class where mother tongue is used, students are not dormant; the teacher does not do the talking alone. This is essential because teaching should not be teacher-dominated. (Farrant 1964, Adeyemo 1965). The experiment carried out by Professor Fafunwa and others on the Ifè six year Primary Yorùbá Project at the University of Ife (now Obafemi Awolowo University Ile-Ife) is a living testimony and shall long be remembered. In the experiment, two groups of Primary School children were taught the same subjects but in different languages. At the end of the exercise, the group taught in their mother tongue (Yorùbá) performed better than those taught in English Language. Quoting Professor Bamgbose on the project, Odetokun (2010:6) says: From what we have seen of this programme, the pupils of this school are very clever in their studies and they also speak the English language well because they teach them this language like a subject itself.... In the near future, Yorùbá can become the medium of instruction for our primary school children in all their subjects like mathematics, sciences, physical or human geography. Bamgbose, further observes that most parents especially those who live in cities and urban areas are those mostly opposed to the use of mother-tongue as the mode of instruction in schools. According to him, a visit to the rural areas reveals that school pupils are being taught lessons in their mother tongue with ease and most of them enter into secondary schools without problem.

This is to affirm our claim that the Yorùbá language can be used to teach all other subjects including the sciences. The experiment cited above has proved this. The argument that the method is not practicable for subjects such as Chemistry is not tenable because chemical materials used in teaching chemistry can be given Yorùbá names. For example, sodium can be named "iyò", Calcium "èédú". Since the composition does not change, the resultant combination is not likely to change. It is very easy for the child to remember "iyò" and "èédú" (which they are familiar with), than names they are not familiar with. In other words, the use of mother tongue for learning helps in retention of knowledge and according to Odetokun, "all concerned cannot claim ignorance of the success of the six year

Primary Yorùbá Project of the Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife.

(ii) Technological Development: The role of the mother tongue in the training of manpower in the area of technological development cannot be underestimated. We have said it that whatever is learnt in one's language is better understood and easily remembered. A closer look at the road side mechanics who were instructed as apprentices in their mother tongue reveals that they are more resourceful and know the inside and outside of their trade. No wonder why the so-called "educated engineers" rush to them for assistance whenever they have mechanical problems with their engines. Fafunwa (1967:14) confirms this when he opines that: "a local watch repairer with very little education or none at all, learns his trade well by practical experience". This is to say that the use of mother-tongue in education widens the child's knowledge and his thinking ability.

(iii) Political Stability: The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in schools will no doubt raise the political standard of the citizens. When the child's mother tongue is used in the teaching of subjects like Government, History and Political Science, the content is better understood and better applied to life situations. Language misunderstanding may cause rancor, disaffection and even civil unrest.

(iv) Economic Advancement: Business transaction of any form involves very close interaction. In the process of interacting with our business partners, the use of language is inevitable and paramount. The best language to use is the mother tongue, especially at the local level. If the art of trading or subjects such as Economics, Business Studies and Commerce are taught in the child's mother tongue, it is certain that such a child would be well versed in the art of trading. He would be useful to himself, his community and the nation at large. This is because they remember better things learnt in their mother tongue. It is certain that government policy on the teaching of foreign language such as the English language as L2 to non-English speakers such as the Yorùbá is not strictly adhered to. If properly and adequately implemented, such policy will serve a better purpose. Yorùbá say "ilé ni a ti n kó èsò rode" (charity begins at home). Other nations do transact business in English language internationally, but at home, they use their respective local languages. Before the coming of the Europeans, there had been trading activities among the Yorùbá people. They count numbers "ení"(one), "èjì"(two), "èta"(three), "èrin"(four), and so on. They also make marks on walls with the charcoal to explain events such as daily contributions (àjo), which was in form of the present day thrift and credit societies, yet they did not forget or muddle things up. This has far reaching effect on the people's trading

policies than the “book Economics and Business Studies” which we now emphasize.

(v) Social Interaction: At the school level, especially in their early years of their primary education, school children benefit a lot from interacting with their peers. It is disheartening, however, to note that the several unguided rules and regulations in our schools today which forbid the use of the child’s mother tongue within the school premises and campuses alike have denied school children and students alike the opportunity to master their mother tongue. Yoloje, (2009:41) says that: most educated people and school children today, have a mixed culture- traditional and Western. Formal Western education and modernization have imposed the Western mode of thought, values and culture on them. Isola (2009:100), states that: the cultural education of the child cannot succeed in a culturally hostile environment. We must therefore adopt a holistic approach to cultural reorientation in the society to create a friendly atmosphere for the child to internalize the humane virtues in our cultural heritage. A child who is not fluent in speaking English language may prefer to remain dormant and inactive to avoid being punished either through fines or the strokes of the cane. School children need integration and this is best done through their mother tongue. Through interaction, the child’s cultural heritage is best transmitted and if actually this is one of the objectives of education, then the mother tongue will best serve the purpose.

(vi) Development of good moral values and the training of good character : To the Yorùbá, and in fact the whole world, a good child must possess good morals. Moral values are taught through the people’s religion, and literature such as poems, tales, story telling, songs, plays, myths and taboos, proverbs and so on. The best medium for this is the child’s mother tongue. For instance, there are taboos which are formulated to ensure good hygiene and for the smooth running of the society. Example is the one that says one must not sit on the mortar. This in actual sense is to maintain the rule of hygiene. Mortar being an instrument used in preparing meals, it is not good to discharge one’s anus into it. In like manner, to avoid contacting a disease or cutting one’s hand with a sharp object, the Yorùbá forbid using one’s finger to draw a line on the ground. The effectiveness of Yorùbá *ofò* (incantations), is assured only when they are rendered in the mother tongue. What we are saying in essence is that the role of mother tongue in the upbringing of the child cannot be undermined. The child is best taught in the language he/she understands best.

Problems and Solutions

(A). The problem of a National Language: Taiwo (1980:1) says that Nigeria is a vast and diverse country with nineteen (19) states now thirty-six (36) states and a Federal Capital Territory. Nigeria has over two hundred and fifty (250) cultural and linguistic groups, the largest being Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá. The official language is the English language. The government realizing the need to adopt a native language for use in schools, was faced with the problem of which of the native languages to adopt. The Federal Government has approved the use of the three major Nigerian languages namely: Hausa, Igbo and Yorùbá but other linguistic groups are struggling to develop their native languages too so that such languages will be approved for use in schools. The government should evolve a programme to develop the Nigerian Indigenous languages (already evolved) to a standard that would be acceptable and make them core subjects, leaving the foreign languages to be taught as second language (L2) in Nigerian schools. Such programme should continue until most Nigerian Indigenous languages are fully developed. The population of people speaking such Nigerian languages to be developed should however be considered.

(b). Skilled Manpower : In the application of a mother tongue to a classroom situation, availability of skilled manpower should be adequately addressed. These include: teachers to teach the languages. For most Nigerian languages in general and the Yorùbá language in particular, teachers are quite inadequate. This is one of the problems identified by Bamgbose (1969:94) that "the number of persons who have the technical training to engage in the kind of study are few". In his opening address at the 1990 National conference of the Egbé Akómolédè àti Àsà Yorùbá, Nàìjíríà, he states as follow: that anybody who wants to teach Yorùbá language must be acquainted with the following: (a). he must have little knowledge about the grammar, literature and culture of the language.

(b). he must know the best method for the teaching of a language.

(c). he must be fluent in the speaking of the Yorùbá language

(not only his dialect but the standard Yorùbá) used in teaching and reading. It is doubtful if the few that are available have these attributes. They are neither recognized nor encouraged. Instead, the government and other stakeholders in the education industry lay more emphasis on teaching and learning of the English language and the sciences. This situation as we have stressed earlier cannot help the society in general.

(c). Availability/Provision of Appropriate Teaching Materials: By this we mean the provision of enough textbooks for both teachers' and pupils' use. Any language that would

be taught must have enough textbooks available for use. This means that such languages must have been developed. Government should encourage the book industry by ensuring a drastic reduction in the cost of production of books. This will help the purchasing power of the common man.

(d). Government Policies: Yorùbá as a language is intelligent and full of wisdom. Yorùbá people measure the intelligence of a person by what he says, when and how he says it. The mother tongue is the best tool for training this intelligence. The parent (especially the mother) is the child's first school. They teach the child to think and speak in his mother tongue or the language of his immediate environment. This language is used to translate what is around him into meaningful experience. Where and when this is not done, the child cannot learn effectively. The child's mother tongue therefore, is a part of the child's life. As the child grows into maturity, his language develops with him. It is evident that the Federal Government has evolved a policy (the National Policy On Education) stating that a child's mother tongue or the language of his immediate environment must be used as the medium of instruction in pre-primary and the first two years of the primary school (NPE sections 2:3 and 3:4). In the same vein, the policy states that a child must study one other indigenous language as L2 apart from the child's mother tongue. The policy further states that this should be a condition for obtaining the Senior Secondary School Certificate.

A careful examination of the school curriculum coupled with visits to schools, confirms that the proposals above are made only on paper. It does not appear as if the education planners are sincere with their proposals especially in the areas of implementation. It also appears as if the said policy was being interpreted differently by the various stakeholders. This makes it look like the government does not understand its own programme. For instance, at one time, it was publicized that the study of Yorùbá language was compulsory for all students who have Yorùbá as their mother tongue while Yorùbá literature was made optional. Our findings have revealed that even now, there are several schools where neither the Yorùbá language nor the Yorùbá literature is being studied. The examination bodies namely The West African Examinations Council and the National Examinations Council have pushed the said policy aside. This, according to Odetokun (2010:5) "is as a result of the unfounded reservations they have in the potentialities of Yorùbá, Hausa, Igbo, Ibibio, Efik, Fulfude etc. to carry international messages". It is high time Nigerian government stood by its policies concerning the teaching and learning of the mother tongue languages in our schools. This step is necessary realizing the roles such

action could play in nation building. The idea of learning Nigerian Indigenous languages as L2 in our schools is unprogressive, unpatriotic and therefore it should be discontinued.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have tried to examine what a mother tongue is, its impact on teaching and learning. We used Nigeria and the Yorùbá language as our yardstick. We are however aware of the fact that other countries which experienced colonial rule are facing the same problem and so, the solutions proffered are not for Nigeria alone but also for such other countries in the same situation as Nigeria.

In countries such as Japan, India, Russia, to mention just a few, they have long realized the need for the use of their indigenous languages in their schools. Anyone going to study in these countries is compelled to first study their native languages.

This we believe accounts for why these countries advance everyday technologically, economically, socially, educationally, and even politically too. The problems posed by the adoption of a foreign language (English language) as a national language for the development of this nation are many. Unless this system is reversed and we go back to the drawing board, the situation may not be better. The Yorùbá says “bí a so abèbè sókè nígbà igba, ibi pelebe ni yóó fi lélè. (lit. “if a hand fan is thrown up two hundred times, it lands flat on the ground”). In conclusion, we want to stress that for this nation to achieve a meaningful development in all spheres, there is the need to formulate a policy that will make the use of our indigenous languages as mediums of instruction in schools mandatory. This is what can bring us to the forefront as other world powers such as Japan, China, France, Russia etc. where the use of their local languages for learning is taken as a matter of priority. Let the government evolve a programme that will help to develop most Nigerian indigenous languages to cater for the multilingual problem of this nation.

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