

THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF THE USE OF MOTHER TONGUE AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION IN NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

UNESCO has encouraged Mother Tongue (MT) instruction in primary education since 1953 and also highlights its advantages right from the start. How far has this policy been implemented in our primary schools? How many mechanisms have we put in place to make the language policy achievable? Do we as a nation continue to use foreign language as our official language of instruction when foreigners are already coming to our country purposely to learn our indigenous languages that we look down upon and never appreciated? Truly, there are some pedagogical problems associated with the use of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction at lower primary schools; the values that can be derived from its use are so enormous that we cannot afford to be careless about it. If learning in MT is possible in Cameroon, Guinea, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa and Vietnam, then it can be possible in Nigeria also. In lieu of this, the paper explores the psychological, sociological and pedagogical benefits of the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, pinpoints the problems associated with its use while suggestions are proffered on how Nigeria as a nation can pull through these problems and make the language policy practicable.

Keywords: Challenges, Medium of instruction, Mother Tongue, Prospects

Introduction

The choice of language of instruction is one of the important decisions of educational policy of any nation. Its implementation is also an issue that should be taken seriously if we are to attain quality academic performance and national development. There is a strong relationship between the language used to teach children at early years and their performance. It determines children's ability to learn and has implications for their level of literacy and verbal proficiency required for further academic achievement.

The existing language policy of Federal Government as stated in National Policy on Education (1998, 2004) specifies that primary school children should be taught in their Mother Tongue (MT) or the language of the immediate environment in the first three years while there is a transition to English medium at the fourth year of primary school. This indicates that mother tongue should be used as a medium of instruction including serving as a medium in which every other subjects is taught at lower primary classes. This language policy is always jettisoned and considered a problem too complicated to tackle and also overlooked due to a lack of understanding of the central role mother tongue plays in the learning and development of a child and national development. The quality of education continues to deteriorate because mother tongue language policy has

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not been given its rightful place in our education while the foreign languages with their decisive disadvantages continue to thrive (Lawal, 2005).

Since 1951, Linguists had resolved and recommended at the United Nation Education Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) meeting that early education should be through the medium of the mother tongue. It was argued that children are maimed emotionally and intellectually when they are taught in a language with which they are not familiar with UNESCO (1978). Afolayan (1979) submitted that this idea was further encouraged by Fafunwa who recognized that children would learn with fewer traumas and have chances to acquire a great deal of habits, attitude and skills better if they are taught in the language they are most familiar with. Fafunwa, Juliet, Macauley and Sokoya (1989) stressed that mother tongue is natural like the mother's milk and should be used to lay the foundation of teaching in order to facilitate development of curiosity, creativity and flexibility in the child's thinking. Bukoye (2008) also maintained that the mother tongue is a base for learning subsequent languages and capable of facilitating the learning of English language as a subject and when it is later used as the language of education.

Many scholars have confirmed that affording children opportunity to learn in a language they understand convenes significant advantages for the education system, teachers, parents, and children. For instance, Pomevor (2003), Bukoye (2008) and Ajepe (2014). reported that a host of research findings have shown that the child can realize his full potentials only through the mother tongue. Besides, Araromi (2005), Malone (2009) and Olaolorun (2013) confirmed that the mother tongue, if given the right impetus will go a long way in enhancing children's performance in the various school subjects. It enables children to learn effectively in the classroom, gives children clear understanding of the content and they are able to participate actively in the learning and the likelihoods of keeping them in school are high. Also, an enormous amount of time will be saved when curriculum content is presented in a familiar language. Researches have shown that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new or foreign language (Malone, 2003, Malone, 2009 & Pinnock, 2011).

The worth of mother tongue as an ideal medium of instruction at early years has been demonstrated empirically in many countries. For example, in Nigeria, the studies like the Fafunwa Six-Year Primary Project (SYPP) was an experimental project where school children were taught throughout their six years of primary education using mother tongue (Yoruba) as the language of instruction (Fafunwa, Juliet, Macauley and Sokoya, 1989). The product of this scheme did not have any difficulty in learning English and also had better adjustment and assertiveness to schooling. Bukoye (2008) also reported another experiment carried out in the Cameroon by *PROPELCA*. Children taught in the mother tongue were found to be better in reading and comprehension (of the official language) and performed generally better than the control group who were taught in the official language. In Mali, it was also reported that children taught in their mother tongue for the first two years of primary school education had better performance. In

2002, Senegal also launched a scheme to revive local languages and, so far children in 155 classes throughout the country were taught using the chosen mother tongues among the twenty-three languages spoken in Senegal. Children were taught entirely in their mother tongue at pre-school and during the first and second year of primary school and the reward was great (Bangbose, 2000; Malone, 2009; Ouane & Glanz, 2010).

The advantages of mother tongue education right from the start are clearly highlighted by UNESCO. According to UNESCO (2008), children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children's learning (Benson, 2002); girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat classes less often (Hovens, 2002; Bangkok, 2005; UNESCO, 2008 & UNICEF, 2011). Some educators argued that only those countries where the student's first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All. Research also confirmed that engaging marginalized children in school through mother-tongue based education is a successful model (Yiakoumetti, 2012; Benson & Kosonen, 2013).

The Prospects of Mother Tongue-Based Education

The benefits that can be derived from educating a child in his or her mother tongue are so enormous. Ranging from the value to the child, the teachers, the parents and the society which includes the following as confirmed from researches (Fafunwa, 1978; UNESCO Bangkok, 2005; Yiakoumetti, 2012; Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Ajepe, 2014).

Psychological Values

Learning in the mother tongue has emotional and psychological values. It enables children to make definite affective gains in terms of adjustment and attitude to school. Obanya et al (1981) reported that pupils taught entirely in Yoruba in the primary school had no problems of adjustment in secondary schools, where the medium of instruction is entirely English Language. In addition, children gain a better self-concept and have a strong sense of their own identity. Such children usually achieve better in school and life than children who are forced to learn in an unknown, strange language. Araromi (2005) also noted that children taught in MT are less repressed in the class than those taught in English Language. It was argued at UNESCO that children are maimed emotionally and intellectually when they are taught in a language with which they are not familiar with. Therefore, providing educational instructions to children in their native language rescues us from falling into this awful misdemeanor.

Sociological and Cultural Values

Mother Tongue is a means of identification among the members of the community to which the child belongs. It will also help children to become linguistically competent members of their families and communities. Peoples' languages have the ability to connect them with their cultural heritage and promotes cultural diversity

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(UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity 2001). According to Cummins (2000) and Alidou (2004), use of a familiar language for instruction encourages local culture and knowledge, creates a bridge between the formal school system and children's home and community environment. This inevitably facilitates parental involvement and strengthens community support for education, since language is not a barrier to participating in children's schooling.

Maduewesi (2000) opined that the home and the school are brought close together and both reinforce teaching done by the other. This is important because about 476 million of the world's illiterate people speak minority languages and live in countries where children are mostly not taught in their mother tongue (Batibo, 2005; Ouane & Glanz 2010). In New Zealand, a study showed that Maori children who received basic education in their own language performed better than those educated in English only (Hovens, 2002; Alidou 2004). Likewise, mother tongue based education especially benefits disadvantaged groups, including children from rural and indigenous communities. Minority pupils feel more respected when mother tongue is used (Hovens, 2002).

Educational and Pedagogical Values

UNESCO (1953) acknowledged that children learn more quickly through mother tongue than through an unfamiliar language. Kosonen (2005) recognized that children are more likely to enrol and succeed in school when given opportunities to learn in their mother tongue. There is abundant evidence from literature that when children are taught in a language they understand, it aids their reading acquisition and helps them to have good knowledge of the subjects. For example, UNESCO (2008) submitted that children's first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school. Ball (2010) concluded that for overall language and cognitive development, as well as academic achievement, literacy and fluency in one's first language is important. When children's prior communication is in the language of instruction, they already possess a repository of vocabulary and the ability to pronounce the sounds of the language and with these children learn to read faster. This prior knowledge does not only assist their learning to read but also their understanding of the text which subsequently facilitates academic learning.

All the benefits that can be derived from teaching children in their mother tongue have been empirically proved by a good number of researches. Among these was the Fafunwa Six-Year Primary Project (SYPP) where children taught in Yoruba performed better than those taught in English, Science, Mathematics, Social studies (Fafunwa, the Ife Primary Education Research Project 1970-1978). A similar mother tongue education programme in Cameroon was also reported by Walter (2011) that the children taught in mother tongue-Kom, performed significantly better in multiple subjects including Mathematics and English than a control group of peers who attended schools where English was the medium of instruction. Related result was also revealed in a programme in the Philippines, where children learning in their mother tongue showed statistically

significant improvements in all subjects compared to children who were learning only in Filipino (Walter & Dekker, 2011).

Another significant report came from Batibo (2005), who submitted that an analysis of data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups revealed that children who had access to instruction in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school, while a lack of education in a first language was a significant reason for children dropping out. Educating children in their mother tongue can have implication for access to school and also be an attraction for regular attendance in school. Children who understand the language of instruction are more likely to enter school at age-appropriate times and attend school regularly and have fewer dropout than those who receive instruction in a foreign language.

Challenges of the use of Mother Tongue as a Medium of Instruction

Despite the roles indigenous languages play particularly in education and by extension national development, there exist some technical obstacles and pedagogical barriers to their utilization. Mainly, some of these problems are associated with teaching and learning which made the implementation of the language policy a mirage. There is need for us to identify these problems so that concerted efforts would be exerted to improve the status of the indigenous language and thereby making the implementation of language policy a reality. These problems are as highlighted:

A large number of indigenous languages and lack of personnel

Nigeria is a multilingual society with over 400 languages. Bamgbose (1970) acknowledged 400, Hansford (1971) recognized 395 while Hoffman (1975) stated between 400 and 513. Giving instruction in the mother tongue becomes impossible in a classroom where a teacher has learners who are not clustered geographically in monolingual areas but from different language backgrounds. As identified by Osborn (2010), there is the challenge of required personnel to undertake the exercise. Most importantly, qualified personnel who are native speakers and can teach the languages competently are not adequately produced. The teacher cannot have competence in using all the indigenous languages of the pupils and as a result it may not be possible to meet individual needs using their linguistic background. Even, if we are to use Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba which are the three major languages, the problem may perhaps still remain because of the uncertainty and impossibility of getting a teacher that will be proficient in speaking the three major indigenous languages

Orthography and Vocabulary problems

Few Nigerian languages have developed orthography for writing them. Very many of the indigenous languages are only used orally and do not have an acceptable way of writing them. There abounds a phonemic problem. Bukoye (2008) noted that many of our indigenous languages may have sounds that have no matching symbols in the International Phonetic Alphabet due to the fact that they are not codified. Also, some

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of these indigenous languages do not have the range of vocabulary and concepts to be useful beyond the early stages of schooling.

Non availability of textbooks in indigenous languages

There are no textbooks on different school subjects written in Nigerian languages for the pre-primary and lower primary level. For example, we do not have textbooks written in indigenous languages on Basic Science, Social Studies or Mathematics to mention a few. Few textbooks written in indigenous languages are those mainly written on the language as a school subject.

Challenges of the scientific and technological terminologies

The argument in some quarters as noted by Araromi (2005) is that our indigenous languages do not possess the scientific and technological terminologies. Really, there is a problem of translating technical and scientific terms to indigenous languages which seems insoluble and has since made the implementation of the language policy in Nigeria unrealistic and impracticable.

Attitude towards the use of indigenous language

Despite the fact that it is clearly stated in the National Policy of Education that language of instruction at pre-primary and lower primary schools should be the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment, many nursery and primary schools in Nigeria use English as a medium of teaching and learning and some do not even offer any of the indigenous languages as a school subject. The proprietors of these private nursery schools argued that, it is the desire of the people that patronize them to see their wards proficient in English language and they have to satisfy them. Worse still, indigenous languages are looked down upon and nobody wants to communicate in these languages anymore as the case is in many Nigerian homes where children are not communicated with in mother tongue. The erroneous belief of most parents is that educating their children in the mother tongue will hinder their opportunity to learn a foreign or national language.

Conclusion

There is no gainsaying that education drives overall national development, therefore, the issues concerning the language policy should be appropriately considered. The use of our mother tongues to teach our children is indispensable if we must experience growth in our search for technological advancement. Evidence from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam and elsewhere also attests to the benefits of learning in the mother tongue, the language which children are familiar with. Also, the examples of nations like China, Japan, Spain, Germany and India that have experienced development and nation building as a result of the clear evidence of using indigenous languages to teach have straightforwardly deflated whatever obstacle or problem associated with its use. All we need do is to make a concerted effort to making

mother tongue a medium of instruction in our elementary schools and beyond so that we can reap the goodies it offers.

Recommendations

- The language policy of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction should be enforced with close monitoring and supervision.
- The number of available orthographies of Nigerian languages is small bearing in mind that there are above 400 languages in Nigeria. Hence, efforts should be increased to develop the orthographies of other Nigerian Languages.
- Parents' backing is essential if instructions in the mother tongue in schools will be successful. Therefore, parents need to be well informed about the benefits of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction and reassured that learning in the mother tongue will not hinder their children's opportunity to learn any foreign language.
- There should be collaboration across national borders and between publishers, education ministries, language experts, NGOs and communities to facilitate production of books in indigenous languages.
- Availability of teachers who are speakers of these indigenous languages is also a key consideration. Teachers will need to be proficient in both the L1 and L2. Teachers should be provided with skills needed to deliver effective mother tongue-based education. Therefore, stakeholders should provide quality pre- and continuous in-service training in the language(s) of instruction.
- Consideration should be given to common indigenous language that is spoken fluently by the majority of learners and teachers. This can help solve the problem of children coming from different language groups.
- Materials for both teachers and students must be available in the language of instruction. Production of textbooks on different school subjects in indigenous languages should be encouraged. The students of linguistics and African studies should be encouraged to undertake research on translation of different school subjects to indigenous languages and developing orthography of these languages. They should also be motivated with fund to attract more studies in this regards.
- Governments, donors, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) need to allow for adequate time to develop, pilot test, and evaluate mother tongue and second language materials.
- Generally, before all the recommendations given above can be effected, there is need to raise awareness of the value of promoting and making available mother tongue based early learning opportunities for young children among all stakeholders – the policy makers, educators, community-based organizations and parents.

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