

Mother-Tongue as an Instructional Medium in Nigerian Lower Primary Schools: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

Language as a means of communication is indispensable in the lives of humans, a fact that has been extended to formal educational settings as imparting knowledge in these settings also requires the use of language. In realization of this vital roles of language in education, Nigerian government place much value on the type of language to use at various levels of its educational stages. It is however a subject of debate in Nigeria on which language to choose as a medium of instruction in its foundation schools (primary schools). While some posit the use of Nigerian official language – English language, some opined the language of the immediate environment would be best suited to impart knowledge to the young ones.

Nigerian government in its educational policy stated that the language of instruction at the lower primary school should be the child's mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment. As laudable as this policy seemed, there have been both verbal and practical experiences on the suitability or otherwise of the policy. It is against this background that this paper examines the pros and cons of the policy based on the available research reports on the policy which subsequently spurred a recommendation on the need to review the policy to suit modern trend.

Keywords: *Nigerian government, Educational policy, Lower primary school, Mother-tongue, English language.*

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I. Introduction

There is a consensus among educationists that a child especially at his/her early school years learns better if instructed in his/her mother tongue. In realization of the imperativeness of this strategy, Nigerian government in its National Policy on Education stipulates that children of lower primary schools – primary one to three, should have mother tongue as their medium of instructions. There is no gainsaying the fact that language is a vital and indispensable tool in human communication. Despite the importance of language in education, there are congruent views among linguists, sociologists, educationists and other stakeholders on education that, instructions imparted in mother's tongue is better understood than the ones imparted in foreign languages. In support of this view, Okebukola, Owolabi and Okebukola (2012) citing example of science education, asserted that teaching science in the language to which the learners is most familiar will receive more attention in the quest to win more students for science. In the same vein, Vanguard (2015) posited that if the medium of instruction is not well understood; there is no way a student will comprehend the subject well enough to pass exams.

Quoting Oluwole (2008), Olagbaju and Akinosun (2014) also asserted that the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance as it categorizes a large part of the child's environment by having names of all the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on. They asserted further by citing examples of China, Japan, India, and South-Africa as some of the countries that attained development by using their indigenous languages/mother-tongues as mediums of instructions in their schools. Nigeria as an English-speaking country uses English language as a language of media, education, commerce and government. This level of importance accorded English language has the tendency of relegating indigenous languages to the background, especially, as a language of instructions in schools. While it may be harmless to educate the adults in a foreign language, having attained a level of competency in the language – in Nigerian case, English language. It may be an aberration to use English language as an instructional medium in lower primary schools. In an attempt to guide against the

use of an unfamiliar language for lower primary schools' pupils, the Nigerian government made it a policy that mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction for pupils of lower primary schools.

Aside the Nigerian National Policy on Education foregrounding the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction in lower primary schools, several researches by linguists, psychologists, sociologists and other stakeholders in education revealed that the mother-tongue is the most appropriate language to be used in teaching pupils of lower primary schools. The Ife six years primary project, Afolayan, 1976 and the Rivers minor language education, spearheaded by Professor Kay Williams are cases in point (Abijo, 2014). Quoting Adeyinka (1998) Abijo, (2014) stated that "if the Nigerian child is to be encouraged from start, to develop curiosity, manipulative ability, spontaneous flexibility, initiative and manual dexterity, he/she should acquire these skills and attributes through the mother tongue as a medium of the instruction which is the most natural way of education.

The use of mother tongue as an instructional medium has been a recurrent statement in Nigerian policies on education which even stated in its recent edition that, "As a matter of policy, mother tongue should be used as a language of instruction for pupils right from primary one to three (FRN, 2013). While it can be stated that Nigerian government meant well by this policy, researches have shown that, as laudable as it the policy appears, it still has some pros and cons which prompted this study to analyze the merits and demerits of the policy based on available research.

II. Literature Review

Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory

The Sociocultural theory guided this research theoretically. It was propounded in 1978 by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) posited that much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor. The tutor may model behaviour and /or provide verbal instructions for the child which he referred to as co-operative or collaborative dialogue. The child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (often the parent or teacher, then internalizes the information using it to guide or regulate his/her own performance). He identified MKO and ZPD as principles guiding this kind of learning.

The acronym M.K.O means "More Knowledgeable Other" which refers to someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner with respect to a particular task, process or concept. "Zone of Proximal Development" which was coded as Z.P.D relates to the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what a child can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner.

Vygotsky (1978) viewed interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills, and suggested this strategy for teachers which is also known as cooperative learning which involves exercises where less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers – within the Zone of Proximal Development. Using example of children's language acquisition, this theory can be exemplified in the child's language acquisition whereby a more knowledgeable other helps a child to pronounce words correctly. For example, a child pronouncing "Father" as "Dada" can be assisted to pronounce it correctly as father.

Berk (2008) quoting Rowe and Wertsch (2002) gave more explanation on sociocultural theory thus:

Sociocultural theory focuses on how culture, values, beliefs, customs, and skills of a social group is transmitted to the next generation with a particular aid of social interaction and co-operative dialogue with more knowledgeable member of society which is necessary for children to acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that make up a community's culture.

The sociocultural theory is considered germane to this study as the use of mother tongue, especially for young children generates better interaction. In Sociocultural theory, social interaction within the child's sociocultural setting is presented as a veritable way of aiding children's learning which is in agreement with what this study investigated.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory posited that much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor. It stated further that the tutor may model behaviour and /or provide verbal instructions for the child which was referred to as co-operative or collaborative dialogue. The theory also stated that the child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (often the parent or teacher, then internalizes the information using it to guide or regulate his/her own performance).

A close look at these statements reveal that the theory emphasized learning through interaction within the sociocultural setting of the child and that the interaction could take place within peers or with adults. The need for a better sociocultural interaction for children as enhancement of their learning must have prompted the Nigerian government to formulate the policy on the use of mother tongue as instructional language in lower primary schools, this also prompted this study to analyze the success or otherwise of the policy.

Primary School Education

A primary school, junior school (in UK) or elementary school (in US & Canada) is a school for children from about four to eleven years old, in which they receive primary or elementary education. It can refer to both the physical structure (buildings) and the organization. Typically, it comes after preschool and before secondary school. (Wikipedia, 2019). In a similar vein, Cyprus Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports and Youth (n.d) also describes primary education as the initial stage of education which has the basic aim of creating, establishing and offering opportunities to all children, regardless of age, gender or country of origin to achieve a balanced cognitive, emotional and psychomotor development. A look at this description of primary education depicts the educational programme as foundational and intended to be develop the child holistically. However, it can be noted that these descriptions do not reflect Nigerian setting focused in this research in terms of authorship and geography hence the need to give the Nigerian conception of primary education. According to the Nigerian National Policy on Education (2012):

*Primary education is the education given in institutions for children 6 to 11 plus
Since the rest of the education system is built upon it, the primary level is the key
to the success or failure of the whole system. The duration shall be six years. (FGN,
2012)*

FGN (2012) itemized the objectives of primary education as:

- *inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy, and ability to communicate effectively;*
- *lay a sound basis for scientific and reflective thinking;*
- *give citizenship education as a basis for effective participation in and contribution to the life of the society;*
- *mould the character and develop sound attitude and morals in the child;*
- *develop in the child the ability to adapt to the child's changing environment;*
- *give the child opportunities for developing manipulative skills that will enable the child function effectively in the society within the limits of the child's capacity*
- *provide the child with basic tools for further educational advancement, including preparation for trades and crafts of the locality.*

The description of primary education as stated in Nigerian national policy on education clearly spelt out what is meant by primary education and the goals targeted for the programme. Going by this definition, it means the lower primary school covers the first three years for children from six years of age to eight years. In order to achieve all these laudable goals, it can be said to be plausible using a suitable medium of instruction which is already a policy in Nigeria that the primary schools' pupils in their first three years should be taught using the language of the environment as the medium of instruction.

Scholars Views on the Use of Mother Tongue as an Instructional Medium in Nigerian Lower Primary Schools.

It is clearly stated by the Federal Republic of Nigeria (2012) that "The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years". The first three years mentioned in this citation indicates primary one to three as the first three years of pupils in primary schools. It is worthy of note that many scholars in Nigeria are in support of this policy statement. For instance, Obiegbo (2016) through a research conducted found that mother tongue medium in the lower primary school enhances English language teaching and learning at the upper level class. If this could be the effect on only one subject, though the subject subsequently serves as the medium of instruction from upper primary school to university level and therefore can be plausibly contended that an efficiency in English language as a subject impact positively on other subjects. In a similar vein, Emenanjo (1998) quoting Fafunwa (et al 1989) states that:

The Ife SYPP and "experimental" MT project in Niger republic have confirmed that those who have their total primary education in MT who had turned to technical pursuit have proved more resourceful than their counterparts from other schools when they met on the technical plane. The SYPP children have demonstrated greater manipulative ability, manual dexterity and mechanical comprehension. In their relationship to their colleagues, the project children have demonstrated a great sense of maturity, tolerance and other effective qualities that make them integrate easily and readily with those they come in contact with.

The practical experience cited above clearly depicts the overall development associated with the use of mother tongue (MT) as instructional medium. Laying credence to these assertions, Kioko (2015) also states that research findings consistently show that learners benefit from using their home language in education in early grade years. The early grade years mentioned in this citation represents lower primary school years in Nigerian setting.

All these revealed the importance of mother tongue usage especially at the lower primary school levels. To further bring to the fore the importance of the use of mother tongue as instructional medium in Nigerian

lower primary schools, the next sub-heading focuses on the experiences of countries of the world using the mother tongue as mediums of instruction in their primary schools.

Experiences of Some Countries of the World on the Use of Mother Tongue as Instructional Medium in Schools.

Currently in Nigeria, there is a dilemma on whether it is beneficial or otherwise to use the mother tongues as mediums of instruction in schools, especially in primary schools as the foundation of other educational levels. The dilemma might not be unconnected to the fear that such move might be counterproductive. It is in the light of this that a review of other nation's experience is reviewed in this research work in order to serve as experiences to learn from. Wikipedia (2019) cited examples of countries making use of their mother tongues as mediums of instruction thus:

- *In Tanzania, Swahili is used in primary schools and adult education, whereas English is used in secondary schools and universities.*
- *In Zimbabwe, use of English, Shona and Ndebele is established in education until the fourth grade, English is the medium of instruction.*
- *In South Africa, students are taught primarily in their home language from Grade Zero (Reception year) up to Grade 3. From Grade 4 onwards, English is the default language of learning and teaching, except for a minority of schools in which Afrikaans is used.*
- *In the francophone states of Africa, education has typically been in French only.*
- *In Ethiopia, English is the medium of instruction in secondary schools and universities.*

This analysis revealed the uses of indigenous and foreign languages in some countries of the world; however, the citations did not share their experiences on the use which prompts a further study of the positive or negative experiences of countries on the usage of the languages in question. Quoting Oluwole (2008), Olagbaju and Akinosun (2014) asserted that the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance as it categorizes a large part of the child's environment by having names of all the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on. They cited examples of China, Japan, India, and South-Africa as some of the countries that attained development by using their indigenous language/mother-tongue as mediums of instructions in their schools.

Some studies show that students understand more content when learning in their first language, compared to studying in English. For example, in China, many universities run parallel courses in English and Chinese. Some Chinese professors have reported that when in English, they water down curricular content, simplifying it to make up for students' language difficulties. (Galloway, 2017). This experience demonstrated the advantage in using mother tongue as against foreign language, the result is more compelling when one considers it happening even in a university, this can also arise as the result of the cited country employing its mother tongue as a medium of instruction right from primary schools.

All these cited experiences brought to the fore the benefits inherent in the use of mother tongue education. Convincing as the assertion might sound, it is worthy of note that there are some arguments against the practice which formed the next sub-topic reviewed, captioned as prospects and challenges of using mother tongue as a medium of instruction in schools especially in foundation level.

Prospects and Challenges of Mother-Tongue as a Medium of Instruction in Nigerian Lower Primary Schools.

This section reviewed the pros and cons of the use of Mother-Tongue in elementary education in Nigeria. Though, educating the child with the use of language he or she is more familiar with has been argued to be of immense benefits to the child, it is interesting to note that the other side of the coin as put forward by some scholars might also be worthy of being considered. On the prospects of the programme side, Iyamu and Ogiegbaen (2007) argued that:

It is detrimental to provide children with an education that has no bearing whatsoever in their daily lives or which does not enhance their understanding and engagement in their own environment. Thus, these teachers' use of context appropriate materials in response ways with children, at the very least, promotes children's development.

In a similar vein, Rutu Foundation (n. d) itemized the advantages in using mother tongue as a medium of instruction thus:

- *Children learn better and faster in a language they can understand (Preventing delay in learning).*
- *They enjoy school more, they feel at home.*
- *Pupils tend to show increased self-esteem.*
- *Parents' participation is increased. Parent can help with homework and participate in school activities.*

- *Studies have reported that when children take advantage of their multilingualism, they also enjoy higher economic status, including higher earnings.*
- *On average, the schools perform better, reporting less repetition.*
- *Finally, schools report children stay in school longer.*

These assertions brought to the fore the advantages inherent in the use of mother tongue or language of the environment as the medium of instructions in schools. As convincing as these assertions on the use of mother tongue may appear, there have been counter arguments by scholars. Bringing to the fore the challenges of the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, Ogbonna (2007) states that:

As already evident, MTE may not only be infeasible in many Nigerian languages, it may not be fair to all children after all. Advocates of MTE sometimes overlook the issue of what Badejo (1990) has referred to as reversed asymmetrical bilingualism, a situation where categories of Nigerians are more proficient in English than their mother tongue and use English with their children at home and send the later to schools where the medium of instruction is English. There may even be the case of Nigerian children whose home language is English and for whom MTE may constitute a liability. There may also be children with no clear-cut MT. This writer once heard of the case of a Kilba wife and an Ebira husband who interact with each other and with their children in Hausa and English. The question may be put as to what constitutes the MT of this couple's children. Will MTE not be unfair to them?

This citation is a revelation on the challenges associated with the use of mother tongue, MT as mother tongue education MTE in Nigeria posed these challenges narrated above. Corroborating this assertion, Abdullahi (n.d) stated that his respondents contend that by using English, children are being prepared for a leading role not just in their communities but also in the outside world, He contends further that some words in English language could not be found in indigenous languages citing an example of "microchip".

This citation is a corroboration on the issues with the use of indigenous language as a medium of instruction in Nigeria. However, these should be viewed as raised issues which may be supported or otherwise. It should be noted as well the advantages advance earlier are also issues which the may be supported or corroborated.

III. Conclusion

Attempts have been made in this paper to examine the pros and cons of the Nigerian policy that states that pupils in primary one to three should be taught using the mother-tongue or the language of environment as the medium of instruction. The paper reviewed the available research on the issue and discovered that different scholars and stakeholders have different stances on the policy which this paper reviewed with the aim of giving appropriate recommendations on the review of the policy.

IV. Recommendations

Based on the polemics of this paper, the following recommendations are made:

The Federal government of Nigeria should as a matter of urgency set up a review committee on the policy for a review and consider the following issues:

- Provision for children from other linguistic background different from the setting of the language of the environment.
- A need to consider mixed usages of the language of the environment and English language.
- If the language of the environment is to be used, there should be provision of textbooks written in the indigenous languages.

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