



Mother Tongue As Effective Tool Of Educational Instruction

Nneka Emeka Duru

English and Communication Art
Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria
nnekaduru1974@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the prospects in the use of mother tongue as an effective tool for educational instruction. With the multilingual nature of Nigeria, many scholars have continued to clamour for the use of indigenous languages as a medium of instruction in Nigeria's schools. Mother tongue is valuable due to several reasons. Mother tongue is vital in framing the thinking and emotions of people. A child first comprehends what is around them through the language they hear their mother communicating in from before they are born and thought their lives. Many children across the developing world are learning very little in school, a reality that can be linked to teaching that is in a language they do not fully understand. It is a practice that leads to limited or non-existent learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills, alienating experiences, and high drop-out and repetition rates. Some researchers have found out that mother tongue can enhance the cognitive development of a child. In the 1970s, when pupils were taught in mother tongue, they were able to think deeply and produced some products in arts and crafts that were useful to their local environment such as bird cages, local aquariums, bamboo chairs etc. which if developed can compete with the global world. There is therefore need to reposition the language of instruction in early childhood education to mother tongue. To improve the quality of education, language policies need to take account of teaching through mother tongue.

Keywords: mother tongue, communication, educational instruction, multilingual

INTRODUCTION

The importance of language as a tool for communication cannot be over emphasized particularly in teaching and learning process. Communication is most effective when instructions, messages or concepts are well understood by the learners. It is normal for a child to expect to hear the same language spoken at home in school, however when the teacher begins to speak in an entirely different language, there will be confusion and tumult in the young brain. This may lead to distrust and unwillingness in the child to learn. 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. 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.

Language is one of the valuable gifts which has been passed to children. Mother tongue can often be referred to as your first language or native language. It is the language that you most commonly speak. Mother tongue for a child involves more than just language and includes the child's personal, social and cultural identity. It maintains that teachers should start where the students are and build new knowledge

from what they already know. When students are taught in their mother tongue, they think more effectively and perform better (Thomas & Collier, 2013). This type of education also prevents marginalization of speakers of minority languages. The first language is significant and builds the basis for all later communication progresses. Parents, family members, and early childhood professionals have very important role in the development and maintenance of the first language. Study of UNESCO (2005) found that knowing one language can assist the child to comprehend how other languages work. First or home language is particularly important for the child's development of a positive self-concept and well-being. Children who have the chance to maintain their first language can extend their cognitive development while learning English as a second language. Their level of competence in the second language has relationship to the level of skill they have achieved in their first language (Garcia & Baker, 2007).

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).

Many linguistic groups are becoming vocal about the need to ensure that the youngest members of their communities keep their linguistic heritage. Some governments, such as in the Philippines, have recently established language-in-education policies that embrace children's first languages. A compendium of examples produced by UNESCO (2008) attests to growing interest in promoting mother tongue-based education, and to the wide variety of models, tools, and resources now being developed and piloted to promote learning programs in the mother tongue.

UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue instruction in primary education since 1953 (UNESCO, 1953) and UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education right from the start: 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; girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often; and children in multilingual education tend to develop better thinking skills compared to their monolingual peers (Cummins, 2000). Some educators argue 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.

Concept of Mother Tongue

Mother tongue (first language, native language, or L1) is essential for learning as a part of intellectual ability. Mother tongue is the language human beings acquire from birth. It helps the child in his/her mental, moral, and emotional development. Mother tongue education refers to any form of schooling that makes use of the language or languages that children are most familiar with. This is usually the language that children speak at home with their family. The 'mother tongue' does not have to be the language spoken by the mother. Children can and often do speak more than one or even two languages at home. For example, they may speak one language with their mother, another with their father and a third with their grandparents.

Encarta DVD (2009) refers to mother tongue as the first language a child learns at home before learning any other language. This may not necessarily include his/her parents' language, but in most cases it is the language of the parents. In most developing countries, the language spoken by their colonial masters are accepted as a medium of instructions in their schools. This explain why English which is barely understood by some Nigerians is generally used in Nigerian schools for teaching and learning.

The mother language is noted as "first" because it is regarded as the most important language spoken by anyone due to its hereditary value as well as its cultural impact on the concerned individuals. Mother tongue is always referencing the language that the child has used from birth and in important and impacting times in the child's life. For example, there are instances where a child is brought up until school age using a particular language at home spoken by their mother, father or other family members, but due to living in another country begins to adopt the language spoken in their interactions in groups or school. But if the child comes back home continually to another language, this is impact can be lessened. Mother tongue for a child involves more than just language and includes the child's personal, social and

cultural identity. The choice of words and expression carry different meaning across cultures and where in one language asking direct questions is considered intrusive, in another it is inquisitive. This means that the language chosen when speaking is thought about before it is delivered.

Importance of Mother Tongue

The importance of mother tongue is studied because when children develop their mother tongue, they are simultaneously fostering a whole host of other essential skills, such as critical thinking and literacy skills. It is these skills that they take with them into formal education, and research tells us that any skills and concepts gained in the learner's home language don't have to be re-taught when they transfer to a second language.

For example, if a child has developed the ability to guess the meaning of a word through its context, or to infer meaning by reading between the lines, these skills are easily transferred when they begin studying in a second language (Nwaozor, 2015). It is much harder, however, to teach these abstract skills directly through a second language

It's also well known that a strong mother tongue foundation equips children with the skills they need to learn additional languages, allowing them to transfer their understanding of the structure of language to several new languages. The intuitive understanding of grammar that develops when children learn their first language can easily be passed on to other languages.

Language and mother tongue also play a huge role in the development of personal, social and cultural identity. Children with a strong foundation in their first language often display a deeper understanding of themselves and their place within society, along with an increased sense of wellbeing and confidence. Naturally, this flows down into every aspect of their lives, including their academic achievement.

There are, however, many benefits to a child learning in their mother tongue language in the classroom:

- Mother tongue makes it easier for children to pick up and learn other languages. If one has a strong understanding of their mother tongue, it is easier for him or her to master a new language. When a child reads out in their mother tongue since childhood, he or she would have stronger literacy skills in additional languages. Mother tongue advances a strong basis for learning additional tongues. Children are capable of learning numerous languages while young. Hence, having a strong basis in their mother's language equips them the skills to learn extra languages. Children achieve this by transferring the different structure of language to other languages. Grammar that advances when a child learns their native language is easily transferable, whereby a child can easily guess the meaning or read between the meanings of words in different languages.
- Mother tongue develops a child's personal, social and cultural identity. Personal identity emerges out of a person's understanding of themselves, their surroundings and their history. An individual hears their native language first when in the womb, and it subconsciously begins determining their views and emotions. Thus, it develops the foundation of instance connection with family, society, culture, and identity. Its strong foundation makes a strong accepting of oneself through an understanding of social origin and character in the most basic and natural manner.
- Using mother tongue helps a child develop their critical thinking and literacy skills.
- Research shows that children learning in mother tongue adopt a better understanding of the curriculum.
- Skills learnt in mother tongue do not have to be re-taught when when the child transfers to a second language.
- Children learning in mother tongue enjoy school more and learn faster due to feeling comfortable in their environment. Studies have shown that cognitive development as well as intellectual improvement is relatively faster in those who are fluent in their mother tongue. It has also been noted that if a student is educated in his/her mother tongue, the proportion of his or her educational achievement is greater than someone who is taught in a different medium other than their mother tongue.
- Self-esteem is higher for children learning in mother tongue. Knowing your mother tongue well is a matter of pride. It boosts one's confidence and creates awareness in the individual's mind while

also helping them connect with their cultural identity in a better manner. Mother tongue has a huge positive influence in defining the personality of an individual; however, the medium of education which is usually English also encourages parents to speak to their children in their second language. Thus, this leads to confusion in the minds of the children and hence, they face difficulties in mastering both first and second language.

- Parent child interaction increases as the parent can assist with homework.
- Studies show that children that capitalise on learning through multilingualism enjoy a higher socioeconomic status earn higher earnings.
- Languages are the greatest significant way of keeping our culture alive. Repeatedly the direct translation of one language to additional might not carry the same essence as it is in the source language. Thus, the best way to thoroughly recognize about a culture is to know the language. Mother tongue benefits us stay associated to our culture and our roots.

Mother Tongue as an Effective Tool of Educational Instruction

Children learn best when the first language of instruction is their mother tongue (Benson, 2004). Results of learning assessments show that when home and school languages differ there is a negative impact on test scores (UNESCO, 2016). According to an analysis of SACMEQ III data in 2010, there is a positive correlation between speaking the language of instruction and pupil achievement, especially in reading (Trudell, 2016). Using the mother tongue in the classroom has been found to enhance classroom participation, decrease attrition, and increase the likelihood of family and community engagement in the child's learning. In order to enhance their learning, students also need access to inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum and learning materials in a language with which they are familiar (UNESCO, 2016).

Most research now concludes that learning achievement is enhanced when children are taught in their mother tongue for at least the first six years of primary school before the second language, the main language of instruction, is introduced (Ball, 2011; UNESCO, 2016). Bilingual and/or multilingual education has been found to increase a student's self confidence and self-esteem. In bilingual models, students continue to use both mother tongue and second language as languages of instruction for a range of academic subjects throughout primary and secondary schooling (Ball, 2011). If the transition from mother tongue to second language is too rapid, the risk is that students will not attain full mastery of either language. Mother tongue-based bilingual education – the use of the child's mother tongue alongside a second language – is now the recommended strategy (UNESCO, 2016).

The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction during one's early years of schooling, results in improved acquisition of knowledge by pupils (Byram & Fleming, 2008). It has also been established that the use of the mother tongue as language of instruction is effective in helping with the acquisition of second language (Heugh, 2006). Experiences in Africa and many parts of the world have shown that cognitive development is achieved faster by using the mother tongue as language of instruction in primary education (Bunyi, 2009). The use of indigenous language for instruction promotes culture and identity of the people. It facilitates the integration of African culture into the school curriculum thus creating a culturally sensitive curriculum and develops a positive perception of culture (Alidou, 2006). This will also ensure that the parents are involved in school activities hence making the school part of the community. It is through indigenous languages that education can best perform the role of cultural transmission. Alidou further note that use of imperial languages as the media of instruction leads to differential educational treatments and consequently to the maintenance of socioeconomic inequalities. It excludes the common man from participating fully in development activities.

The benefits of mother tongue in the education of the child, especially at primary school level cannot be overemphasized. Psychologically, the proper development of the child is closely bound with the uninterrupted use of the language in which he has acquired his first experience of life, the one in which he dreams and thinks and in which he can effortlessly express his feelings and emotions (Cummins, 2000). To ignore this familiar language and begin to teach him a foreign and unfamiliar language as soon as he comes to school, says Ogunnowo (2006), is like taking the child away from his home and putting him among strangers. Educationally, instruction in the mother tongue will help the child to understand

concepts easily, because he is familiar with their vocabularies. Thinking in his mother tongue and expressing himself in the same will enhance his academic achievement. This implies that, if the medium of instruction at the early stages is the language that the learner understands very well, he/she can understand instructions and fully participate in the educational processes. Findings of that report stated:” ...the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue” (Pflepson, 2011). It is also pointed out according to Ande (2010) that use of the first language is a factor in educational achievement and that the educational process in any society ought to be conducted through a language that both learner and teacher command well.

Nolasco (2012) found that when pupils use and master their first language used in their immediate environment or the entire country. Pupils are able to develop critical, reasoning and problem-solving skills that they can use for life-long learning. The National Policy on Education (FRN, 2013) affirmed that Government recognizes the importance of language as means of promoting social interaction, national cohesion and preservation of our culture. The policy endorsed the need for every child to learn the language of the immediate environment, which is the first language (FL), home language, native language or vernacular used by every individual at home (Sumbalan, Caterial, Jimeno & Balane, 2017). In the interest of national unity, it is expedient that every child shall be required to learn one of the three major Nigerian languages Hausa, Ibo or Yoruba. It is not surprising that many children cannot speak any of the indigenous languages including their Mother tongue. World Bank (2005) estimated that half of the out-of-school children globally do not have access to the language of school in their home lives, indicating the significance of language barriers in education. The use of indigenous language as a means of instruction in all subjects alongside with English Language at any level of education will not only overturn a long held dismissive attitude towards Nigerian Languages, but immensely strengthen the status of indigenous languages across in the by providing a positive result in the performance of every learner. It provides an opportunity for the children to exercise their right to learn in their first language (Sumbalan et al., 2017). It will enforce additive bilingualism, address the goal of social equity as well as forge equal access to education and equal language rights for all citizens of the democratic country. In this 21st century, Nigeria should place emphasis on right policies that promotes not only access but inclusion and quality.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) stated that language and culture are inseparable. Hence, a child who has been in contact with the mother tongue will imbibe cultural values that will guide him to respect basic values of the society where he lives. Although English language usage is relevant to our modern living and Nigerian children must learn it in schools, the point still remains that the best medium for starting off the child's education is the mother tongue, and it is after a sound linguistic foundation has been laid, that there can be a change to use a foreign language (English) as a medium of instruction at later stages. However, the reverse is the case as many parents take delight in sending their children to nursery schools to learn English language so that their dreams of wanting them to become doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers will be realized as fast as possible. Results have shown that professionals in the various fields of life who are fluent in English language but can hardly express themselves in their mother tongue (Musa & Musa, 2007). Education wise, students who learn a second language and continue to develop their native language would have chances of higher academic achievement in later years than those who learn their second language at the expense of their first language. More so, economically, there are available better employment or job opportunities in Nigeria and in the diaspora for individuals who are conversant with official language as well as another language probably a native (Nwaozor, 2015). Nigerian's philosophy of education is hinged on the premise that education is an instrument for national development. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), education fosters the worth and development of the individual, for each individuals sake and for the general development of the society, it is also believed that there is need for quality educational opportunities for all Nigerian children, as well as the need for functional education for the promotion of a progressive and united Nigeria. To this end, school programmes need to be relevant, practical and comprehensive for the full integration of the individual into the community (Musa & Musa, 2007). The realization of the National Education goals of inculcating national unity, right type of values and attitudes for the survival of the individual for the Nigeria society

for instance, depends on a variable like the mother tongue. The destruction of language and culture in schools is highly counterproductive for any society (Adediran & Adu, 2013). Mother tongue and other indigenous languages will enhance national development. The challenge therefore is for educators and policy makers to shape the evolution of national identity in such a way that the right of the school children are respected, the culture, linguistic and economic resources of the nation maximized.

Challenges Militating Against the Use of Mother Tongue in Nigerian schools

There are various factors militating against the achievement of mother tongue usage in Nigerian schools. Some of these factors are discussed below:

Perception of English Language as a Global Language

The world has shrunk, but without any physical evidence of contraction. This explains the assertion of Tomlison (1999) that the time necessary to connect distinct geographical locations is reduced; distance or space undergoes psychological and cultural compression. In other words, the technological progress man has recorded over the years has shrunk the once-a-very-big-world to the extent that when one country sneezes, others will catch cold. One must note that coupled with technology, language has played a vital role in this compression. In the case of Nigeria, it is English language that is sneezing and all indigenous languages are catching cold, there is no other reason for this, other the perception by most Nigerians that English language is most suitable for formal education because it is widely spoken in the global scene.

Lack of Trained Teachers

Ngu (2004) conducted an assessment of teacher training institutions in Africa on behalf of UNESCO. He submitted that teacher training programmes were developed before most African countries got their political independence. This implies that student-teachers are being prepared to teach in languages which are unfamiliar to children (English, French, Spanish and Portuguese) (Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2006). In other words, the problem in Africa and Nigeria in particular is the lack of pedagogical competence in the use of mother tongue. As a matter of fact, it poses a great danger to the teaching learning process, as explained by Benson (2004) that when teachers “lack sufficient training on how to carry out mother tongue-based teaching, they avoid the ‘unknown good’ and regress to the ‘known bad’.

Lack of Political Will

Functionalists have described the society as a complex whole with interconnected parts which function independently to maintain a state of balance and social equilibrium for the whole (society). To them, whether simple or complex, developed or underdeveloped, societies share a common feature, which is the presence of social institutions such as family, economy, religion, politics and education. These social institutions serve as parts keeping the society whole. In particular, politics is the machinery responsible for the day to day administration of the society; meaning that other social institutions are at the mercy of its decision and will. In Nigeria, education can be best described as a victim of politics. The use of mother tongue was first championed in 1953 by UNESCO; it could be said that Nigeria accepted the idea when it included the use of mother tongue instruction in the 1977 policy, which was revised in 1981, 1998, 2004, 2007 and 2013. Yet, the language of instruction in many primary schools remains English language. A visit to some of these schools will confirm this observation. The reason for this is not far-fetched - it is the absence of will on the side of the political machinery to enforce the written laws.

CONCLUSION

Many children from corner to corner the developing world are learning very little in school, a truth that can be connected to teaching that is in a language they do not completely understand. It is a practice that leads to inadequate or non-existent learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills, alienating experiences, and high drop out and repetition rates. To develop the quality of education, language policies need to take account of mother-tongue learning. Models of education which ignore the mother tongue in the early years can be unproductive, ineffective and have a negative effect on children’s learning. Mother tongue teaching at least in early years can enable teachers to teach, and learners to learn further effectively. It is significant that mother tongue plays an important role as medium of instruction for effective teaching and learning. This is because native languages are part of our culture that can help in

the development of the society. This is telling us that we should imbibe our cultural heritage and make sure that our children become familiar with the indigenous languages in the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based the discussions of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- Nigerian language policy should be revisited; and to actualize this, the researcher recommends that teacher education in Nigeria be revitalised, while adequate training is given to teachers, so as to enable them to comfortably and conveniently teach their subjects in the indigenous languages.
- Efforts should also be made to enlighten members of the public on the relevance and benefits of use of mother tongue in education.
- Government, on his part, should not adopt the lips-service approach, as many policies have been victims. Monitoring agencies should be setup to ensure that schools, private and public, adhere strictly to the policy.

REFERENCES

- Adediran, A. A. & Adu, O. T. (2013). Language, culture and society: A study of sociolinguistic. *The National Journal of Contemporary Issues*, 12 (1&2) 254-261.
- Alidou, H. (2006). Optimizing learning and education in Africa – the language factor. A stock-taking research on mother tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) UNESCO Institute for Education (UIE), and Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). Paper presented in Biennial meeting held in Libreville, Gabon, March 27- 31 (2006).
- Ande, I.I. (2010). Effects of language of instruction on the learning of conservation of weight and continuous quantity by primary two pupils. Unpublished Ph.D thesis, department of teacher education, University of Ibadan.
- Baker, C. (2000). *A parents and teachers guide to bilingualis, 2nd edition*. Clevedon, England: Oxford University Press.
- Ball, J. (2011). *Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: Mother tongue based bilingual or multilingual education in early childhood and early primary school years*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Benson, C. (2004). *The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality*. Retrieved March 10, 2022 from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/0014/001466/146632e.pdf>
- Bunyi, G. (2009). Rethinking the place of African indigenous languages in African education. *International journal of educational development*, 19, 337-350
- Byram, M. & Fleming, M. (2008). *Language learning from an intercultural perspective*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, England: Oxford University Press
- Encarta (2009): [DVD] *Redmon*. WA: Micro cooperation.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy on education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2013). *National Policy on Education (6th Edition)*. Abuja: NERDC.
- Garcia, O., & Baker, C. (2007). *Bilingual education: An introductory reading*. USA: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- Heugh, K. (2006). Theory and practice language education models in Africa: Research, design, decision making, and outcomes in H. Alidou et al. (Eds.) *Optimizing learning and education in Africa – the language factor: A stock-taking research on mother tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Paris: ADEA.
- Musa, R. J. and Musa, C. N. (2000). *The role of mother tongue education (ed.) Social Studies and integrated national development in Nigeria*. Ibadan: Kraft Books Limited

- Nwaozor, F. (2015). Towards promotion of mother tongue. *Punch newspaper of Thursday February 25, 2015*.
- Obod, M.M., Ramirez, M.N.V., Satria, E., Asmoni, A., & Indriani, D.E. (2019). Effectiveness on the Use of Mother Tongue in teaching concepts of fraction Among Second Grade of Elementary School Pupils. *Journal for the Education of Gifted Young Scientists*, 8(1), 291-304.
- Ogunnowo, A. (2006). The study of the degree interference between L1 and L2 in the learning of oral English. Unpublished B.Ed. thesis, University of Benin, Benin City.
- Okebukola P.A, Owolabi O, and Okebukola, F.O, (2012) *Mother-tongue as default language of instruction in lower primary science classes: Tension between policy prescription and practice in Nigeria*.
- Pflepson, A. (2011). *Improving learning outcomes through mother tongue-based education*. RTI International. USA. MTB-MLE Network. Retrieved March 9, 2022 from: www.mlenetwork.org.
- Skutnabb-Kangar, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education*. London. New York Press.
- Sumbalan, E. B., Caterial, D., Jimeno, N., & Balane, C. T. (2017). The utilization of mother tongue in teaching young learners: Its implications to pre-service teachers. *Journal of Educational and Human Resource Development*, 5, 15-22 .
- The World Bank (2005). *Education notes: In their own language*. Retrieved March 9, 2022, from <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/EDUCATION/>
- Thomas, W., & Collier, V. S. (2013). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students' long-term academic achievement*. CA: Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence.
- Tomlison, J. (1999). *Globalization and culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Trudell, B. (2016). *The Impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*. Nairobi: UNICEF ESARO.
- UNESCO (1953). *The use of the vernacular languages in education. Monographs on Foundations of Education, No 8*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO (2008). *Mother Tongue Matters: Local Language as a Key to Effective Learning*. Paris: UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2005). *Education in a multilingual world*. UNESCO Education Position Paper.
- UNESCO. (2016). *If you don't understand, how can you learn? Policy paper 24 of Global Education Monitoring Report* . Paris: UNESCO.
- Vanguard Media Ltd, (2015) Mother-tongue as a medium of instruction in Nigerian lower primary schools. *Vanguard Newspaper, Thursday, Oct, 9, 2015*.