

**MOTHER TONGUE EDUCATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH IN THE
NIGERIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL**

BY

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the use of mother tongue in primary education in Nigeria was investigated. The national policy on education provides for the use of mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the lower primary education. Against this provision, a survey was conducted to examine the implications of the policy in two states and for the conducted to examine the implications of the policy in two states and also for the teaching and learning of English at the upper primary level. Ten primary schools were randomly selected in urban and semi-urban areas of Oyo and Ondo States respectively. One Hundred (100) teachers, on whom questionnaire was administered, were also randomly selected from the schools investigated. It was found that implementation of mother tongue policy enhances the teaching and learning of English language at the upper primary level. Findings also revealed that government has not provided mechanism and commitment to check implementation of policy. The implication of this is that if policy is not monitored and religiously implemented, the alienation of tomorrow's generation from indigenous language and culture as well as frustration of indigenous language development could result. There is, therefore, need to bridge the gap between government policy provision and policy implementation.

INTRODUCTION

The question of the language of instruction in schools is a very crucial one and often controversial in many parts of the world especially in developing countries. It is even more complex in previously colonized multilingual countries where the official colonial language is different from the indigenous languages. There are often linguistic conflicts and rivalry between the colonial language and the indigenous languages occasioned by the choice of official communication medium. Education sector is one of the areas that share in the crisis of language choice. Ouadraogo (2000:89) cited in Owu-Ewie (2006) noted that Education and language issues are very complex in Africa because of the multi-ethnic, multilingual situation". The situation in Ghana from the missionary era till date is a good example of inconsistencies and in ability in language policy. Implementation according to Owu-Ewie (2006). In Nigeria, the language situation has

This study is based on the premise that MT plays a crucial role in the learning and achievement of bilingual children during the early years of schooling. Research evidence also tended to show that adequate training in the MT is not in conflict with adequate training in the non MT such as English (Awoniyi (1974). This paper, therefore, examined the implication of NPE language policy implementation on the teaching and learning of English language in the upper primary school considering that a great many primary school leavers could hardly express themselves in English language.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME WORK

One of the linguistic problems of public interest in education is the use of foreign language in teaching. But, it is generally accepted that in teaching and learning processes, the MT of the learner is of utmost importance. MT education is the idea that a learner is taught the fundamental concepts of a topic in familiar first language. Once the concepts are learnt, they can easily be reapplied to an L2 education stream. Awoniyi (1974) defined mother tongue as the language which a group of people that are considered to be inhabitants of an area acquired in the early years and which eventually become their natural instrument of thoughts and communication. MT is the first language of expression that a person learnt. Thus, a person may be described as a native speaker of the first language, although he/she may also be a native speaker of more than one language if all of the languages were learnt without formal education, such as through cultural immersion before puberty.

For one thing, MT categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names for most of the objects, actions, ideas, attributes of expression and so on, that are important to him and society. David (2008) noted that the MT is the child's environment and is also the natural basis on which verbal skills can be built.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The implementation of mother tongue (MT) policy in the Nigerian primary school is aimed at developing the first language (LI) skills and enhancing the learning potentials of the Nigerian child. However, the extent which the MT medium has contributed to the effective teaching and learning of English language becomes important in view of the poor English language output of primary school graduates. To this end, this study examined the implication of use of MT medium in the lower primary school for effective teaching and learning of English language at the upper primary school.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- a. Are teachers in the upper primary class aware of the MT policy on primary education?
- b. How does the use of MT in the lower primary school affect the teaching and learning of English language in the upper primary school?
- c. How does the use of MT in the lower primary should affect the learning of other subjects in English language?
- d. Does government or its agency monitor the implementation of language policy in the primary school?

MOTHER TONGUE IN EDUCATION

The principle of mother tongue medium in education is closely linked to the educational objective of cognitive development and provokes concerns over learners' difficulties in developing cognitive skills when they are taught through the medium of a second language especially if the language is unrelated to the learner's mother tongue (Isyaku, 2000). The use of child's first language in education has been shown to enhance the academic, linguistic and cognitive achievement of learners (Baker, 2001). This is in line with UNESCO (1953) statement that "given that the child is fit and well, the grave handicap that he can suffer... is to be unfamiliar with the language of instruction". For Lewelling (1991), the level of first language proficiency has a direct influence on second

language development and cognitive academic growth. Similarly, Saville-Troike (1988) stated that L1 serves as background knowledge, pre-existing knowledge upon which inferences and predictions can be made to facilitate transfer to L₂. In a study on second language learning, Saville-Troike (1988) asserted that in almost all cases, a student's relative competence in the L₁ coincided with the students' relative achievement in English (L₂). Krashen (1990) noted that when schools provide children with quality education in their first language, they give them knowledge and literacy, and the knowledge they have gained in the L₁ helps them make the English they hear and read more comprehensible. Owu-Ewie (2006) pointed out that L₁ is learners' language rights and part of their fundamental rights. Hacuta (1990), therefore asserted that native language proficiency is a strong indicator of second language development.

Also, in the mother tongue medium experience in Yoruba language conducted at the then University of Ife, Fafunwa et al (1989) demonstrated the great advantages of mother tongue in primary education for scholastic attainment and also in the successful mastery of English as a second language. Hence, mother tongue education in the primary years offers the best introduction to literacy that eventually becomes useful in the acquisition of English as a second language (Hawes, 1979).

However, the cases recorded in most parts of Africa on MT use is discouraging. McNab (1989) in Isyaku (2000) reported that of the 39 countries listed in a World Bank report (1988) on education in sub-saharan Africa, only 19 were recorded to be using African languages as media in formal education. Of these 19, only Chad, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe were using African languages as instruction media at senior primary level and only in.

Sudan and Tanzania were mother tongue languages used for instruction above the primary level.

Research on second language acquisition shows that if a child masters the first language, then learning another language becomes less problematic. Language skills like listening, reading and writing can be transferred to the learning of the L₂ (Cummins, 1981; Hawes, 1979; Obanya 1985; Dawes, 1988; Mac Laughlin, 1987). In Zimbabwe, teachers are discouraged from introducing English very early until they acquire

necessary L1 skills to transfer to L2 leanings (Ndamba, 2008). Similarly, Cummins, 1981 in Krol (1990) claims there is an "underlying cognitive/academic proficiency" common to languages that enables transfers of literacy related skills across languages.

METHODOLOGY

This is a descriptive survey that employed questionnaire to collect data. The sample for the study was drawn from selected Ondo urban and sub-urban primary schools in Ondo State and also in selected Ibadan urban and sub-urban primary schools in Oyo State. Ten primary schools were randomly selected from each state. Teachers in the upper primary schools were randomly selected and studied because they teach learners who have supposedly passed through the mother tongue medium classes. In all, fifty teachers were sampled in each state. Also studied were teachers who have taught at the upper primary level in the selected schools. A 4 – point Likert-type rating scale containing 10 items was structured and validated, designed to elicit responses to the statement items. Respondents were requested to tick (√) the option that best suits their responses. Item statements sought responses to mother tongue education and the implications of the implementation of the MT policy for effective teaching and learning at the upper primary level. Analysis of data was by frequency counts and simple percentages.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings from investigations that sought answers to the research statements are provided on Tables I and II below:

Demographic information on teachers showed that out of one hundred teachers that responded to the questionnaire, 25 (25%) are males while 75 (75%) are females as shown in Table 1.

Table I: Mother Tongue Education and Implications of Implementation

S/N	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1.	I am aware of the MT policy for the early primary education	02 (2%)	02 (2%)	53 (53%)	43 (43%)
2.	My pupils were taught in the MT in the early primary school.	03 (15%)	54 (54%)	28 (28%)	
3.	The MT language skills acquired in the lower primary is of help to pupils in learning English language.	04 (4%)	15 (15%)	49 (49%)	32 (32%)
4.	Pupils who were taught in the MT at the lower level do not find it difficult to learn and use English language at the upper level.	06 (6%)	24 (24%)	49 (49%)	21 (21%)
5.	MT implementation at the lower level is negatively affecting effective teaching and learning of English language at the upper level.	31 (%)	46 (46%)	19 (19%)	4 (4%)
6.	MT implementation at the lower level is negatively affecting the learning of English language at the upper level.	25 (25%)	48 (48%)	20 (20%)	8 (8%)
7.	I sometimes explain lessons in MT before pupils understand.	07 (7%)	16 (16%)	49 (49%)	28 (28%)
8.	Pupils score highly in English language as a result of MT foundation.	06 (6%)	14 (14%)	51 (51%)	29 (29%)
9.	Government agencies visit my school to monitor implementation of MT policy.	28 (28%)	56 (56%)	13 (13%)	03 (3%)
10.	The use of MT is helping a lot students in understanding other subjects.	30 (30%)	26 (26%)	29 (29%)	15 (15%)

Table I gives a summary of the ten research statements examined in this study. From the table I, it could be found out that 53% of teacher "agree", 43% of them "strongly

agree" on their awareness of the policy as on statement 1. Only 2% respectively, "disagree" and "strongly disagree" showing that they are aware of the policy. The table also shows that, out of the 100 teachers studied, 54% "agree" that their pupils were taught in the MT at the lower primary school. 28% "strongly agree" while 15% "disagree" and 3% "strongly disagree" as in statement 2 on the Table 49% of respondents "agree" that the MT language skills acquired in the lower primary is of great help in pupils learning of English. 32% "strongly agree", 15 "disagree" and 4% "strongly disagree". Response to statement 4 shows that 49% of respondents "agree" that pupils who were taught in the MT do not find it difficult to learn and use English language. 24% "disagree" with this statement while 21% "strongly agree". However 6% of them "strongly disagree". On whether MT implementation at the lower level negatively affects effective teaching of English, response to statement 5 shows that 46% of respondents "disagree", 31% "strongly disagree", 19% "agree" while 4% "strongly agree". On statement 6, 48% of respondents "disagree" that MT implementation is negatively affecting the learning of English language by students and 25% "strongly disagree" with the statement. 20% of respondents "agree" while 18% "strongly agree" with that. Result also shows that 49% of respondents "agree" that they sometimes explain lessons in MT before pupils understand, while 28% "strongly agree". Only 16% "disagree" while 7% "strongly disagree" with that statement.

On whether pupils score highly in English language as a result of MT foundation, response to statement 8 shows that 51% "agree, 29% "strongly agree", 14% "disagree" and 6% "strongly disagree". 56% of respondents "disagree" with the statement that government agencies visit their schools to monitor the implementation of MT policy, 28% "strongly disagree", 13% "agree" while 3% strongly agree", as shown in statement 9 on the Table. On the other hand, 30% of respondents "strongly disagree" that MT policy helps pupils understand other subject areas while 26% "disagree". Only 29% and 15% of respondents "agree" and "strongly agree" respectively. The opinion of these respondents may only represent a small number of stakeholders in education policy issues and it is only when a larger population is studied that generalization can be made on a larger dimension.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study show that MT medium in the lower primary school is not a hindrance but enhances English language teaching and learning at the upper level class. If that is the case, to what might we attribute the poor performance in English of primary school leavers? Might it be attributed to the number of years spent in the MT medium class which this paper believes is insufficient to fully equip learners with the necessary cognitive maturity, knowledge and experience in the L1 for effective L2 skills transfer? Could it be attributed to this premature transition L2 medium or to the transition process itself which is rather abrupt? Still could it be attributed to this premature transition to L2 medium or to the transition process itself which is rather abrupt?

It is strongly believed that prolonged use of L1 in schools will enhance the learning of L2. Thomas and Collier (2002) observed that the more the number of years of primary language schooling a learner has received, the greater his/her English achievement is shown to be. This suggests that if the child is prematurely transitioned into L2, detrimental consequences may be experienced. This probably could explain the situation of the Nigerian child who is transitioned to L2 at a rather very early period. This abrupt linguistic disconnect could lead to alienation of future Nigerian leaders from indigenous language and culture as well as to frustration of indigenous language development.

Another implication is that the same government which provided for the MT education should monitor and ensure full implementation by providing necessary materials that would enable the realization of the provision.

In some of the schools which the researcher visited, pupils in the lower primary class study sitting on the bare dusty floors with leaky and half blown roofs and unplastered walls. Even the door and window/opening have no frames or shutters. The type of teaching and learning that could take place in such a place can better be imagined, yet, teachers in the schools studied are well trained and experienced. A lot needs to be done to improve the language education environment in Nigeria.

In view of the above outcome, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need to reposition the education sector by reassessing the early-exit policy to avoid alienating learners from the native language and culture.
2. Remuneration, motivation and regular workshop should be put in place for teachers and stakeholders in education on language policy issues to demonstrate government commitment.
3. In some states where multiple languages are spoken, a language planning policy statement should be made on a common L1 to be adopted. In such a case, government agencies should begin corpus planning activities like standardization, writing of books and dictionaries.
4. Late-exit transitional bilingual education programme that allows for a longer period of mother tongue use is recommended. This is to ensure that the child would have had enough L1 foundation to help gradual transfer to English medium. This paper recommends mother tongue use up to the 5th year in the primary school while the 6th year is used to gradually transit to English language in the secondary school where both L1 and L2 would be used.
5. Government of Nigeria whose duty it is to oversee the production and provision of language textbooks and other materials to school should live up to her responsibility and create conducive language learning environment, including training and employing MT language teachers.

CONCLUSION

UNESCO (1953) stated that the use of L1 in education is psychologically, sociologically and educationally beneficial to learners and that every effort should be made to provide education in the L1. Therefore, that the Nigerian child does not do well in English language despite bilingual education practice suggests that the child's foundation in the local language is not well laid for transfer to the L2.

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