

USE OF MOTHER-TONGUE AS A MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: A BOOST OR HINDRANCE TO THE EDUCATION OF THE AFRICAN CHILD?

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Abstract

This paper explored some issues involved in the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction to boost the education of an African child. It provided conceptual and theoretical frameworks which showed that language choices are never made in a vacuum; rather they are influenced by a plethora of factors, including the purely educational and linguistic, which are often overwhelmed by political, social and economic expediencies. It also made reference to some relevant literature on the issues raised. The paper then examined the arguments for and against mother-tongue as a medium of instruction, especially at the early stages of education. The conclusion arrived at by the paper is that the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction is desirable and is a boost to the education of the African child. Based on the conclusion, it was recommended, among others, that Government should sponsor in-service training for pre-primary and primary school teachers on use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction; ensure that language policy is implemented in order to preserve the African culture; provide funds for the development and acquisition of culturally-relevant materials to promote culturally relevant teaching. Also, the Ministry of Education should ensure that schools comply with language of instruction policy (which states, in respect of Nigeria, that mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction in pre- primary and lower primary schools); organize workshops for writing and publication of culturally-relevant materials in all local languages; ensure that culturally-relevant learning materials are produced to promote culturally-relevant teaching-learning; and ensure that education policies are fully implemented.

Keywords: Mother-Tongue, Education, Africa, Instruction, Pedagogy.

Introduction

The language of instruction is very crucial to laying a good foundation for a child's education. Many scholars believe that it serves as a key to effective education. This is especially so at the early stages, when most children come in contact with formal education for the first time. The language the child is exposed to and made familiar with in those early years of schooling could determine whether he or she finds schooling interesting and rewarding or boring and unfulfilling. It is generally believed that the child's creativity is enhanced if he or she meets an already familiar language at school. By contrast, a child's spirit of innovation may be inhibited if he or she is confronted with an unfamiliar language at school (Olagoke, 1979).

Mother- tongue is the language that a child learns first from the family before joining school. It is also the language used by the majority of the people in a given area, culture or community. Education is meant to impart fundamental knowledge, skills, and values to children, and should take place at all times and anywhere. Some scholars believe that discouraging children from developing their mother-tongue is a violation of their right (Skutnabb-Kngas, 2000; Walter, 2010). According to UNESCO (2016:3), "Mother tongue-based bilingual (or

multilingual) education approaches, in which a child's mother-tongue is taught alongside the introduction of a second language, can improve performance in the second language as well as in other subjects".

Before the colonial period, mother tongue was a very important medium of instruction for teaching children at the family and community levels. Parents and other family members used mother-tongue to teach them basic knowledge and life skills. Also values like honesty, respect, discipline, manners, sharing, love, courage, and hard-work were inculcated in children through songs, stories, proverbs, and showing good examples by parents and elder siblings. The use of the mother-tongue in education is not a new issue in Africa. In Nigeria, for instance, the missionaries were said to have used mother-tongues for initial primary education. Even the then British colonial language policy also supported the use of the mother-tongue in early primary education. These might have influenced the policy statement on education in Nigeria, that "The medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the environment for the first three years" (*Federal Republic of Nigeria*, 2014:12). However, in today's Africa, there is an apparent neglect of the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction, with some arguing that it is a hindrance to the education of children, especially in the face of the current globalization of education, multiplication of international schools, political, economic, social and pedagogical challenges.

The concern of this paper is to ascertain whether the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction is a boost or hindrance to the education of the African child. To achieve this, the paper will explore the concepts of mother-tongue, mother-tongue as a medium of instruction, theoretical frames and references to relevant literature. It will then consider some arguments for and against the use of mother-tongue as a medium of instruction as it relates to the African context. The findings therein will determine the conclusion to be drawn, and subsequently some recommendations.

Concept of Mother-Tongue

The term 'mother-tongue' has become a subject of attraction and attention in the process of education, and has equally generated a lot of controversy therein. Its definition and explication have equally generated a lot of controversy, having been approached by philosophers, scholars, educators and groups from varying perspectives. For instance, Mills (1993) defines it as any of the following: the first language a child speaks, the language invariably spoken at home, the language in which the child is most competent and the language of the child's community. In the context of Africa, some of Mills' definitions will raise serious controversies. Taking Nigeria as an example, his definition of mother-tongue as the language in which the child is most competent would suggest that there are some Nigerian children living in Nigeria for whom English would be the mother-tongue, or some Birom children in Plateau State for whom Hausa, rather than Birom, would be the mother-tongue. This argument could also be made for the definition of mother-tongue as the language a child acquires first. Due to the exigencies of urban life and many other factors, some African children today tend to learn English or French before their native languages. Would that make English or French their mother-tongue? It is unlikely that such children would grow up to claim English or French as their mother-tongue.

According to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization - UNESCO (1963), mother-tongue is the language which a person acquires in early years and which normally becomes his natural instrument of thought and communication. It is easy to see that UNESCO's definition is competency-based, instrumentalist in conception, and divests mother-tongue of its inherent ethnic and cultural basis, since, for some reasons, mother-tongue may not be the language in which the child is most competent, for it is possible for a child not to be competent in speaking his or her mother-tongue. It may also not necessarily be the language a child acquires first. Even UNESCO (2003a&2003b) in its later publications has come to acknowledge and advocate the rights of people to learn in their native languages as a way of preserving their cultural heritage and linguistic rights.

For the purpose of this paper, mother-tongue is taken to mean the same as native language or the language spoken by members of a child's ethnic group. For example, a child is usually brought up using a particular language at home – the language spoken by the mother, father, other family members, and the community. However, mother-tongue involves much more than simply language. It includes the child's personal, social and cultural identity. This means that the language chosen as a medium of instruction should be reflected upon in relation to the child's cultural and social background before it is adopted.

Mother-Tongue Instruction

Mother-tongue instruction refers to any form of teaching that makes use of the language the child is most familiar with. This is usually the language that the child speaks at home. It also means teaching all school subjects (except English) using the child's native language as the medium. English is only taught as a subject. Even at that, mother-tongue can be used to illustrate and explain the difficult and unfamiliar aspects, for a better understanding by the child. According to UNESCO (2003a:13), "mother-tongue instruction generally refers to the use of the learner's mother-tongue as the medium of instruction. Additionally, it can refer to the mother-tongue as a subject of instruction. It is considered to be an important component of quality education, particularly in the early years". Research indicates that having a strong mother-tongue foundation and using it as a medium of instruction can lead to a much better understanding of the curriculum as well as a more positive attitude towards school programmes (UNESCO, 3016).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is premised on the assumption that decisions regarding which language or a combination of languages to be used as a medium of instruction cannot be taken in a vacuum. Such decisions are usually taken in the light of pedagogical, sociolinguistic, political and economic issues.

Pedagogical Issues

Three categories of language are identifiable with regard to choice of medium of instruction, as in the case of Nigeria and other African counties. These are the mother tongue, the language of wider communication or *lingua franca* (such as Hausa in many parts of Northern Nigeria) and the English language. Writing from a colonial mindset, Jowitt (1953), refers to these three categories of language as the language of lower culture, middle culture and higher culture respectively. In modern linguistic parlance, a triadic relationship can be said to exist among the three categories of language with the mother-tongue performing low functions,

the language of wider communication or *lingua franca* middle functions, and English high functions.

At the pedagogical plane, arguments often arise as to what constitutes the best language in which to educate a child among the three categories of language highlighted above. It is generally believed that children learn best in the language of their birth and early socialization (Olagoke, 1979). The argument is that there is a general flow of continuity if a child's home language and that of the school happen to be the same (Chumbow, 1990). Pattanayak (2003) puts it more forcefully when he argues that the best language to educate a child is that which he or she knows well and can identify with as his or her own.

A child's education is said to be undermined if he or she is given early education in and through a second language. The child cannot learn basic facts and concepts until he has understood the foreign language in which those facts and concepts are expressed. Olagoke (1979) maintains that instruction in a foreign language hampers the child's educational development because the pedagogical principle of starting from the known – first language (L₁) to the unknown – second language (L₂) is violated. Consequently, the child relies on rote learning since he or she cannot understand the facts and ideas expressed in the second language. Comparing the Nigerian child to his or her English counterpart who is taught in his or her mother-tongue, Fafunwa (1997) contends that since the English child still has problems in understanding his or her language, the Nigerian child suffers from double jeopardy because he or she has to learn the L₂ first before using it as a tool for learning, and this hampers his or her mental and social development.

Another often-cited problem of instruction in a second language is that it educates the child outside his or her culture, and fails to relate education to the child's immediate environment (Olagoke, 1979). LePage (1964) maintains that the use of a foreign language in education creates a barrier between the child and his or her home. Education that does not grow out of what is familiar to the child and his or her environment may not be effective. Jowitt (1953) reinforced this point when he noted that education for the African child must be based upon, and grow out of, his or her past to which the chief link is his or her mother-tongue. Pattanayak (2003) corroborates this by insisting that those who ignore basing children's early education on their native language and experience are guilty of robbing them of their childhood.

However, it must be understood that what is axiomatic may not always be practicable. So at the practical level, there may be a question of effectiveness as the child's mother-tongue or second language may not be effective as the language of instruction for the simple reason that it may not be developed enough for use in education. This is especially so when the mother-tongue or second language merely serves as a bridge to a more dominant second language, like English in Nigeria, which dominates most important domains of national life, including education, beyond the first three years of primary school.

Socio-Linguistic Issues:

Many social and linguistic issues affect the choice and use of language for education in bilingual societies such as we have in Africa. One of such issues is the status of the available languages. Parents, for example, may be more willing for their children to both study and learn in a language with a high status. Related to the issue of status is the attitude of some

people towards the use of the available languages as media of instruction. Attitudes, whether positive or negative, are conditioned by many factors. Parents whose motivation is economic tend to be favourably disposed to the use of such world languages as English or French for their children's education, because education in such languages is deemed better, with greater opportunities in life (Hair, 1967; Mackey, 1984). However, patriotism could lead to negative attitudes to the use of a foreign language in education. This was the case of French in the Maghreb countries in North Africa where it was perceived by the people as the language of oppression and Western domination (Benabdi, 1980).

Another important factor in the use of language is its readiness for education. This is in terms of availability of textbooks and other teaching-learning materials; metalanguage for science, mathematics and other subjects; availability of trained teachers, and whether or not the language has been standardized as well as whether or not the children already know the language to be able to learn through it. The absence of many of these relevant inputs has been claimed to be responsible for the limited use of Nigerian languages as media of instruction (Taiwo, 1976). Readiness of a language for education is important because it has to do with the economic cost of language development, and the cost could be staggering in countries with a multiplicity of languages such as those of Africa. The number of languages available and their distribution are also very important in deciding which languages to use in education. In countries marked by multilingualism, language choice may be difficult because every ethno-linguistic group may cling to its own language even when, for some pragmatic reasons (such as number of speakers, lack of teachers and materials), some of the languages cannot sustain any form of education.

To all practical intents, language choice would be easier if the speakers of the language are concentrated in the same geographical area, as in that case, a local language could easily be recognized as the medium of instruction (Mackey, 1984). This could easily work in rural communities in largely Hausa, Igbo or Yoruba speaking states in Nigeria. In multilingual/multi-ethnic states such as Rivers, Cross River, Delta, Edo, and urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, Kaduna or Jos, the choice would be more difficult because classrooms in many cases are made of pupils from diverse language backgrounds.

The above are some of the factors that are usually considered in language choice for education. The point is that while the need to grant linguistic rights to citizens, nationalistic, pedagogical and other socio-cultural considerations could favour the use of the mother-tongue for education, government decisions and actual practice could go the opposite direction due largely to economic, political and other social considerations.

Exploring Some Relevant Literature

Studies have shown evidences to suggest that mother-tongue education leads to better academic performance. The findings of a study by Taylor and Coetzee (2013) indicate that among children in schools of a similar quality and coming from similar home backgrounds, those who were taught in their home language during the first three years of primary school performed better in the English test in grades four, five and six than children who were exposed to English as the language of instruction in grades one, two and three. For Bamgbose (1982), mother-tongue education is the fastest means to eradicate illiteracy within the shortest possible time, and that its use will lead to its development and enhance its status in our public

life. As to the viability of mother-tongue education, Chumbow (1990) maintains that experiments involving the use of the mother-tongue as the medium in selected schools have recorded successes in many developing countries, including the Philippines and Mexico. This is also true in respect of Africa, as shown in the examples of Swahili in Tanzania and Arabic in North Africa, where the use of the languages in education has led to their extensive development through lexical modernization and vocabulary expansion. Other gains that have been claimed for mother-tongue education have to do with national identity and pride. It is said to reduce the feeling of alienation because it educates the child within his or her culture and makes the people feel equal with other peoples of the world (Olagoke, 1979; Chumbow, 1990).

Many African educators (for example, Fafunwa others, 1989; Bamgbose, 1992 and Chumbow, 1990) have advocated the use of mother-tongue for the whole of primary education. They cite the now famous six year 'Ife Primary Education Project' as an evidence that mother-tongue instruction is practicable in Africa. The aim of the project, started in 1970 and sponsored by the Ford Foundation of the United States of America, was to show that primary education in mother-tongue was likely to produce better results than the prevailing practice of switching from mother-tongue to English at upper primary. English and Yoruba were taught as subjects from the beginning of primary school while other subjects were taught in Yoruba in the experimental classes for the six-year period of primary schooling. In the early years of the project, English was taught as a subject only by specialist teachers of the language in the experimental classes. Pupils in the control classes were taught in mother-tongue for the first three years, and English for the last three years. According to the results, the pupils taught in Yoruba for the whole duration of primary education performed better in practically all subjects (including English) than those taught in mother-tongue for the first-three years and English for the last three. Reacting to the experiment, Bamgbose (1992) notes that its results demonstrate that many Nigerian languages could be used exclusively for primary education. Low quality and achievement in many African schools can be partially related to language. As observed by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2010), Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language. For instance, in Zambia, where English was the language of instruction (among non-English speakers), it was found that at the end of primary schooling children were unable to read or write clearly. Many failed examinations because they could not read and understand the instructions. Reading and writing skills were poor, even among secondary school students. These lapses were carried over to tertiary education where such students also performed unsatisfactorily.

Arguments for and against Mother-Tongue as a Medium of Instruction

Arguments have been advanced both for and against the use of mother-tongue language as a medium of instruction. Those in favour argue that mother-tongue makes it easier for children to learn a second language. In addition, mother-tongue plays a crucial role in developing children's personal, social and cultural identities. Using mother-tongue as a medium of instruction helps children to develop their critical thinking and literacy skills faster and more meaningfully than using second language. This is very important, since education is not for mere education alone, but for knowledge (Awoyinfa, 2013). Such knowledge has to be grounded in one's cultural, social and historical values, and critical thinking through mother-tongue is of essence here.

Skills learnt in mother-tongue do not have to be re-taught 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. Another advantage is that parents-children interaction increases as parents can assist with homework even if it is orally. As researches have shown, education in mother-tongue helps improve the academic performance of children. Using mother-tongue protects and preserves local languages. It improves reading and learning outcomes.

A recent review of research reports on language and literacy concludes that becoming literate and fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development, as well as academic achievement (Ball, 2010). All the developed countries of the world educate their children through the instrumentality of the mother-tongue. Examples include Japan, Germany, Britain, United States of America and Norway. Even among the so called developing countries, those teaching and learning through their mother-tongues are far ahead of those learning in a second or foreign language. For Example, the difference will be clear when one compares China, India, South Korea or Malaysia with Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast or Kenya.

Those who argue against the use of mother-tongue maintain that there is the problem of having textbooks with high-quality content in all the regional languages. Moreover, majority of teachers have not been trained on how to use mother-tongue as a medium of instruction, coupled with scarcity of culturally-relevant instructional materials to enhance the use mother-tongue as a medium of instruction. The opponents of mother-tongue also argue that in reality, there are usually multiple vernaculars in particular localities in which schools are located. In such situations, the issue of criteria to be used to determine which of the vernaculars to select as the medium of instruction in a particular local school becomes a challenge. The choice of a particular vernacular as the medium of instruction out of the multiple vernaculars could inadvertently lead to the risk of discrimination along ethnic or racial lines, since mother-tongues are generally specific to particular ethnic or racial groups.

Head teachers in some schools may not support the use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction because parents put a lot of pressure on them not to do so, seeing it as time wasting. Most parents prefer the use of English, believing that learning will not be effective when mother-tongue is the medium of instruction, thereby leading to poor academic achievement. Some education zonal officers do not support the use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction because they believe that it may reduce performance in national examinations in their zones.

Language policies in some schools, both pre-primary and primary, discourage the use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction. Teachers face many challenges in using mother-tongue as a medium of instruction such as parents' negative attitudes towards it, lack or inadequacy of culturally-relevant and reference materials, difficulty in translating some concepts into mother-tongue. These problems notwithstanding, Bamgbose (1982) and Chumbow (1990), maintain that mother-tongue education is worth the trouble, arguing that mass education and mobilization of the rural populace for active participation in national

development, agricultural and other worthwhile endeavours can only be realized through mother-tongue rather than English or any other second language.

Conclusion

One obvious fact emerging from the paper is that language choice for education is not as straight forward as it seems. It is a complicated decision involving a plethora of educational, political, economic, social and linguistic issues. Sometimes, the purely educational-linguistic issues and the socio-political/economic ones may point in different directions. For example, the desirability of mother-tongue education is often obviated by the pragmatics of language choice and use whereby the government easily chooses as medium of instruction a language that is ready for education at the most minimal cost; and people prefer to learn or use languages that have both cash value and prestige. This is perhaps one of the most important hurdles mother tongue education has to surmount in Africa, and partly explains the dominance of English or French in most public affairs in the continent. In spite of these apparent hitches, the conclusion of this paper, based on the content analysis, findings of related literature, and having weighed the arguments for and against mother-tongue, is that mother-tongue as a medium of instruction is a boost to the education of the African child rather than hindrance. What is required is hard work on the part of the governments and other stakeholders in the education and formation of children to overcome those challenges through well informed policy makings and implementations.

Recommendations

To improve the use of mother tongue as a language of instruction in pre-primary and lower primary schools in Africa, the following recommendations are put forth, for different stakeholders in the education of the African child:

1. The Government should sponsor in-service training for pre-primary and primary school teachers on use of mother-tongue as a language of instruction; ensure that language policy is implemented in order to preserve the African culture; provide funds for the development and acquisition of culturally-relevant materials to promote culturally relevant teaching.
2. The Ministry of Education should ensure that schools comply with language of instruction policy (which states, in respect of Nigeria, that mother-tongue should be the medium of instruction in pre- primary and lower primary schools); organize workshops for writing and publication of culturally-relevant materials in all local languages; ensure that culturally-relevant learning materials are produced to promote culturally-relevant teaching-learning; and ensure that education policies are fully implemented.
3. Quality Assurance and Standards Officers should organize seminars to sensitize parents and teachers on the importance of mother tongue as a medium of instruction; organize capacity-building and sensitization meetings for parents to help them to understand the importance of mother tongue as a medium of instruction; and organize seminars and workshops for teachers and head teachers on the benefits of mother tongue.
4. Teacher Training Institutions should help teacher trainees to understand the benefits of mother-tongue, and train teachers on how to design and develop culturally relevant instructional materials.

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